Impact of A Grade Contract Model in A College Composition Course: A Multiple Case Study

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IMPACT OF A GRADE CONTRACT MODEL IN A BASIC WRITING COLLEGE COMPOSITION COURSE: A QUALITATIVE MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy - Curriculum and Instruction

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The Graduate College

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December 2014
ABSTRACT

Impact of a Grade Contract Model in a Basic Writing College Composition Course: A Qualitative Multiple Case Study

By

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Due to the complex nature of assessment in critical pedagogy practices, continued research is necessary in order to investigate the constantly evolving nature of education and the way we come to know how people learn. To research assessment in the critical classroom requires both instructor and students. This qualitative multiple case study investigated impacts of a grading contract as a form of assessment on student writing in a Basic Writing composition course. This study examined the impacts of a grade contract on students’ writing, motivation for writing, revision practices, authorship and expectations of a Basic Writing composition course. Through a critical pedagogy framework, this study also investigated the power relations of common standards of grading through the process of negotiation. Data sources included student essays, interviews, reflection letters, and online negotiation dialogue. Results from this study
suggests that by using a grade contract, students demonstrated higher levels of revision practices as well as levels of frequency. Furthermore, the results indicated that students perceived an increase in motivation as well as an increased sense of authorship. By engaging in a negotiation protocol, students perceived a higher level of control over their learning and role in the course. Based on the analysis, a sample model of employing a grade contract in a Basic Writing course using a negotiation protocol developed. This study has implications for using a grade contract model as a form of assessment in college composition courses or writing intensive courses as a way to increase motivation for writing and revision practices as a way to improve writing level.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would not have survived this journey with my sanity and humor in tact without the support from the friends that I made along the way. To my doctoral partners in crime and now lifelong friends—Amanda, Kyle, Zaid, Abby, and Piper, thank you for the laughs,
cries, library days, writing days, eating days, and drinking days. Mostly, thank you for being who you are and being people who I will always admire and look up to.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my father and mother.

I hope I made you proud

*Para mi padre, yo soy lo que soy gracias a ti.*

*Pour ma mère, sans votre amour et de sacrifice, je ne serais pas où je suis aujourd'hui.*
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CHAPTER ONE: THE RATIONALE

Introduction

“Through all my experiences with people struggling to learn, the one thing that strikes me most is the ease with which we misperceive failed performance and the degree to which this misperception both reflects and reinforces the social order” (Rose, 1989, p. 205).

As the semester began, newly enrolled freshman students filled the seats of my Basic Writing composition course. These students carried a timid countenance as they already recognized their place in the Basic Writing course, or in the case of this class, remedial writing. They appear familiar with the term remedial, and they recognized they did not meet a standard level of writing. When I asked my students about their attitudes on writing as well as how they perceive themselves as writers, without reservation, almost all students described their high school writing experiences- ones filled with memories of instructor criticism and a sense of failure. For the students who sat in front of me, and those who will come after them, the perception of themselves as writers is damaging and their perceived ability ever to be good at writing is almost nonexistent. For many, their experiences are chockfull of countless standardized assessments, writing formulas, and a false sense of what it means to be a writer. Unfortunately, much of the same is true in college.

As instructors of writing, we continuously face challenges of designing curriculum and assessing students in our writing courses in a way that does not take into
consideration the diversity of our students or their histories. In larger conversations such as reform initiatives and policy, we find ourselves in similar situations. Without taking into account the inequalities that exist in current contexts of education, the democratic space that should be present in higher education fails to exist. As Katz and Rose (2013) argued,

> Without a rich conceptualization of teaching and learning, without an understanding of the origins and maintenance of inequality, without an appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity, and without a knowledge of history, school reform limits itself to technology and management systems—necessary but hardly sufficient to achieve its grand aims, and certainly insufficient to address the educational inequality that is at the center of its efforts. (p. 2)

While few of these educational inequalities are recognizable on a larger scale, instructors continue to find themselves engaging in practices that contribute to these inequalities, and one of those practices is assessment. While the practice of assessment relates directly to letter grades, we often fail to recognize the ramifications of certain forms of assessment and letter grades. When we question grades, grading systems, and their impact on student learning, we uncover powerful constructs within the structural and systemic foundations of higher education. These constructs can inhibit and compromise effective teaching and learning, particularly in highly vulnerable spaces such as a remedial course, more specifically, an introductory Basic Writing college course. A Basic Writing college course, like almost all introductory college courses, is based on a unilateral subjective grading system commonly found in a traditional grading model. This model assigns letter grades to represent how well students are doing in a class and their position within a
grading hierarchy in the class. Additionally, in the case of a Basic Writing course, students often perceive their composition ability and writing level based on an subjective letter grade given by the instructor; as a result, students place emphasis on their ability to achieve the highest letter grade rather than focusing on improving writing.

A majority of composition instructors will agree, including myself, that improving student writing rests with many opportunities for revision and practice as well as spaces that allow students to feel a sense of full authorship over their own writing. For this reason, I decided to investigate my own grading practices in my composition courses. This particular study investigated the use of a grading contract model and its impact on student writing in a Basic Writing college composition course. Furthermore, this study investigated the process of negotiation between student and instructor in the grading process, its impact on students’ writing, and students’ perceptions of power and power sharing. I first discuss a background of grades and grading within higher education in order to situate the need for such a study.

**Background of the Study**

Grading constructs have a long history in the educational landscape and are familiar to students, educators, and scholars. Grading constructs and the notion of grades as summative assessment continue to be debated, particularly in higher education. While traditional linear grading systems are not new to newly enrolled college students, the impact of these traditional grading structures on student learning and the intersection of power, politics, and ethics often go undetected by students and instructors. After many years of conforming to traditional grading, college students have learned how to navigate through these linear grading models with unclear connections of letter grades to
knowledge and learning outcomes. This process often results in a superficial understanding of learning; moreover, the question of how one actually acquires knowledge remains. For many college students, learning and knowledge become something achieved in a class by simply participating in a series of exercises and exams. For students, learning becomes a process in which knowledge is not concrete until a letter grade is received indicating the completion. This process results in what Paulo Freire (1970) described as the “banking” concept of education: knowledge becomes “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves more knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 58). When we connect letter grades with assessment, a definition gap between what it means to achieve a certain letter grade and what it means to learn is blurred.

By the time students enroll in college, they have had a long-standing relationship with traditional grading models in which students demonstrate what some researchers have called grade orientation (Janzow & Eison, 1990; Svinicki, 1998) which affects their motivations for learning. Svinicki (1998) stated that grade orientation produces students who want to avoid making “public” mistakes in order to maintain their image of competence. Students who identify with grade orientation often equate success with giving a high quality performance or outperforming others rather than learning content and acquiring knowledge. In the case of a writing classroom, when students receive low marks on their writing, what often results is a lack of motivation to improve their writing. These students may view errors as reflecting poorly on their writing abilities, which can cause perceived failure.
Grade orientation through traditional grading is widespread in the composition classroom and frequently criticized by scholars in the field. Inoue (2012) reminded us of three primary issues with traditional grading in the writing classroom. While not new, these issues permeate the writing courses today. First, grades are deceptive in that they more often than not replace authentic feedback on student writing and are ultimately a one-dimensional arbitrary symbol which students interpret as not only an indicator of how well they are doing in the class but also of their perceived writing skill level and ability. Second, Inoue (2012) pointed out that false hierarchies are created and are counterproductive to a “collaborative and educative learning environment, making students feel bad about themselves as writers when they should not and prematurely halting revision in other students” (p. 78). Lastly, traditional grading can sometimes create a need for grades and a reliance on grades, which often lead to “an ill-fitting kind of motivation for the writing classroom, one based on extrinsic rewards that keep students from learning” (Inoue, 2012, p. 78).

This superficial understanding of learning and knowledge is especially problematic in the Basic Writing course. One problem is that students enrolled in these courses have been identified as not proficient or not up to standard for college level writing. Basic Writing students are especially susceptible to a superficial understanding of learning in order to belong in the academy. The goal of many Basic Writing students is to achieve high marks rather than to improve writing and fully grasp what it means to have “authorship” as a student and what it actually means to write in academia. Issues of grading often affect Basic Writing students the most in that traditional grading reinforces the notion of correction and error rather than improved writing skill, which is typically
indicative of more experienced writers. A key aspect in improving writing for basic writers is the revision process where much of learning to write takes place. As Horning and Robertson (2006) pointed out, since basic writers are not strong writers to start, they find the process of revision challenging. Traditional grading models often limit the process for revision, while alternatives such as grading contracts may have a stronger impact in allowing for more writing practice and improved writing.

While there may be a place for performance-based grading models in some aspects of education, the Basic Writing composition classroom is especially ripe for the benefits of more mastery orientation models. Svinicki (1998) argued that students with mastery orientations tend to be more intrinsically motivated and interested in learning than those who gravitate toward grade orientation. Students with mastery orientations often focus on “mastering new content, skills, and ways of learning; exhibit greater curiosity, creativity, innovativeness, and intellectual risk taking; make fewer errors; use more effective problem-solving strategies; do higher quality work; and perform better under challenging conditions than their extrinsically motivated peers” (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001, p. 41). These aspects are critical for basic writers. Since basic writers are often novices when it comes to writing, language, reading, and revision (Horning & Robertson, 2006), a mastery orientation is necessary to move beyond error and correction.

Svinicki (1998) pointed out that many students exhibit both performance (grade orientation) and mastery orientations; however, the effective orientation depends on the classroom context. Crucial parts of the classroom context include conscious or unconscious ideologies held by the instructor. These ideologies include an instructor’s
views of grading, how grades inform their structures of the grading process, how they communicate grading, and what they communicate about grading—all of which affect performance and mastery orientations. These critical aspects of context lend themselves to a pedagogy which Giroux (2004) argued “must always be contextually defined, allowing it to respond specifically to the conditions, formations, and problems that arise in various sites in which education takes place” (p. 37). Traditional grading models make it easier for students to interpret instructor pedagogical practices as a fixed structure in which instructors hold all the power. Unfortunately, this power often inhibits any opportunity for students to deliberate cooperatively on the terms of their experience in the classroom as well as to develop democratic agency (Shor, 2009). The framework of critical pedagogy can be used to challenge grading structures through examining an alternative grading model such as the grade contract.

The goal of the grade contract through a critical pedagogy framework is that students become more aware of power dynamics that exist in the classroom. Ideally, they will be empowered and motivated to construct and endorse alternate, more equitable social realities. While we as instructors recognize and often discuss the issues of inequitable power structures that exist in the classroom, we often do not move forward with practices that help empower students and prepare them to become agents for themselves. Traditional grading practices limit students and perpetuate the status quo. For students, this means reverting to grade orientation and a focus on traditional grade models. Critical pedagogy allows for the questioning of traditional and dominant pedagogy, which often embeds itself in traditional grading practices. Giroux (2004) argued that
critical pedagogy must address the challenge of providing students with the competencies they need to cultivate the capacity for critical judgment, thoughtfully connect politics to social responsibility, expand their own sense of agency in order to curb the excesses of dominant power, revitalize a sense of public commitment, and expand democratic relations. Animated by a sense of critique and possibility, critical pedagogy at its best attempts to provoke students to deliberate, resist, and cultivate a range of capacities that enable them to move beyond the world they already know without insisting on a fixed set of meanings.
(p. 39)

A critical pedagogy allows students to move beyond pre-existing fixed power structures. Designing and using grading contracts by employing them allow instructors to create and establish a context for students that not only generates and fosters a democratic classroom but also meets the learning needs of the students. Grading contracts have the potential to liberate students from grade orientation and the fixation on grades in order to develop more of a focus on their own learning.

**Problem Statement**

Much of my college-level teaching experience has involved teaching the first-year composition course (FYC) and the Basic Writing course (BW). It is in the Basic Writing course (sometimes synonymous with remedial writing) that I have often self-reflected and experimented with pedagogical practices that would best fit the needs of the students that enroll in my classes. Like many other instructors of the FYC and Basic Writing, I try to provide the best instruction and practice for my students while battling sometimes pre-existing power structures in higher education that limit the power of the students who
take my courses. These power structures often come in the form of standardization of curriculum and standardized assessments. Since state-mandated standards and assessments have expanded to include post-secondary education, the pressures of data and statistics make their way into the academy (Gallagher, 2002) and thus place a focus on grades rather than the improvement and teaching of writing. As Gallagher (2002) pointed out, “Standardized testing is a numbers game in which the objective is to generate a set of numbers that validates what the testing industry has done” (p. 45). In postsecondary education, traditional grading models are a form of standardization and provide institutions with the numbers they need, especially when it involves funding. Traditional grades are vital for institutions as they provide data on whether a crisis exists and how poorly students are performing in any given course.

Traditional grading structures are complex, subjective systems that establish a student’s place within a perceived hierarchy in a given classroom and an institution e.g. GPA. They are complex because grades determine performance, status, financial aid, graduation, graduate college, as well as institutional politics. They are subjective because instructors use different criteria for grading. While there is no simple solution to issues that revolve around grades, many have experimented with alternative tools for grading in order to address some of these complex issues (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009). Although experimenting with the use of a pass/fail system was prominent during the Sixties and Seventies, societal, political, community, and institutional pressures have led to a return to traditional grading practices (Shor, 2009). Despite this emphasis, alternative grading systems continue to be developed, revised, and experimented with in various educational platforms.
One of the more prominent alternative tools for assessment is the grading contract. A grading contract is a contract-based letter grade system that may or may not be co-developed, through a process of negotiation, between the instructor and students. While the literature on grading contracts has produced some positive results, educators and instructors must be cautious of transforming grading contracts into an over-simplified method of pedagogy and assessment. As Giroux (2013) pointed out, pedagogy is not neutral and is always political because of its connection to the acquisition of agency. Since grading is not neutral, educators must be cautious of this even with grading contracts. Giroux (2013) argued “critical pedagogy is the outcome of particular struggles and is always related to the specificity of particular contexts, students, communities, available resources, the histories that students bring with them to the classroom and diverse experiences and identities they inhabit” (par. 3). When implementing a grading contract, instructors must be aware of the different dimensions and contexts presented in any given class, in the case of this study, a Basic Writing college course.

As Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) pointed out, grading contracts have had a “subterranean presence in the composition field” (p. 245). Shor (2009) mentioned that many instructors experiment with contracts but few write about their experiences. While grading contracts have had some prominence because of their association with critical pedagogy (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009), further examination of grading contracts is needed in order to determine the impact on student performance and writing. Furthermore, continued investigation of grading contracts adds to the body of limited, current research. The research on grading contracts commonly focus on student perceptions but is limited when it comes to the impact it has on writing, power issues, and
negotiating practices in the classroom. While this study investigated the role of a grading contract and its impact on student writing, it also investigated *negotiation* as a form of open, dialogical discussion and decision making about the practices and policies of the course as well as the impact it had on students’ perceptions of power and authority.

**Research Questions**

This study reports the impact of a grading contract on student writing in a Basic Writing college composition course. Specifically, this study investigated the following main and ancillary questions: How does a grading contract affect students’ writing in a Basic Writing course? Ancillary Questions:

a) How, if at all, does a grading contract model yield increased motivation for writing?

b) How, if at all, does a grading contract model impact revision in student writing?

c) How, if at all, does a grading contract model affect “authorship” over students’ own writing?

d) What are students’ perceptions of the *negotiation* process for a grade contract model?

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to investigate potential impacts of a grading contract on student writing in a Basic Writing composition course at a state college located in the southwest United States. This study examined how a grading contract affected students’ writing, motivation for writing, revision practices, and expectations of a Basic Writing composition course. Using a critical pedagogy
framework, this study investigated a grading contract model as a form of power sharing through negotiation, a critical pedagogy framework.

**Rationale for the Study**

**Personal Rationale**

Prior to my studies in education and critical pedagogy, I was not aware what critical pedagogy was and the impact it could have on students, particularly students like me: a marginalized “Other.” Growing up, I never realized I was classified as “Other” until I went to primary school and was placed in “special education” because I was the child of parents who were from two different countries and did not speak English well. Fortunately, my father quickly realized the system that was in place and made every effort to ensure that I conformed to the powers of the dominant culture in order to “fit in” and be “accepted” as a traditional American student. What that meant was ensuring that I did what I was told, not questioning practices and activities, and making sure I received all “A’s” in my classes. In the early 1980’s, there simply was no place for my cultures within the educational landscape. I was forced to read books about characters and stories who were not like me, I was forced to ignore the languages of my parents, French, Arabic, and Spanish, and I was forced to “sound” like the dominant culture through my reading and writing. Unfortunately, I was not aware that what was occurring was the manipulation of my “reading the word and the world” from that of the status quo.

Fortunately, for me, I gained access to higher education. It was in higher education that I became aware of the existent tensions in education. In my own experiences as a writing instructor, I experienced déjà vu and witnessed yet again a curriculum that called for acceptance of the status quo. Because of my own experiences
in my upbringing, I could not imagine teaching students in a way that would result
oppressive experiences. Students today are now more aware of the alienating education
that exists and with this awareness, students respond in ways that unconsciously promote
passivity. Shor (1996) pointed out that students who act out the internalization of the
alienation by “moving to ‘Siberia’ (the back of the room) physically and/or mentally” are
not necessarily withdrawing for “mere passivity” but as a way to “construct oneself
socially in relation to authority” (p. 25).

Critical pedagogy plays an important role in writing education, and in my position
as a writing instructor, I believe that having students engage in critical pedagogy in the
writing classroom is likely to serve students not just in their academic lives but as
citizens. As James Berlin (1987) argued:

Writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming
their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply as active participants.
[. . .] [T]he writing course empowers students as it advises in ways to experience
themselves, others, and the material conditions of their existence—in methods of
order and making sense of these relationships. (p. 189)

Berlin’s (1987) position is at the core of the research presented here. I present a research
study situated within critical pedagogy.

Now that I am more informed about the nature and politics of education, I realize
that rather than simply conforming to the status quo, a critical approach would have
benefitted others and me. Critical pedagogy is a powerful tool for understanding the
sociopolitical systems in which we live and for considering the relationship between
language and power (Janks, 1993). Work that is conducted in the name of critical
pedagogy must focus on sociocultural issues such as gender, race, and class and the ways in which we use practices that shape or alter how we come to understand and perceive these issues. The language that we use within this discourse determines how people are able or limited in the ways in which they live their lives. Being aware of my own experiences as not only a student but also an instructor of writing, I recognize the research presented is laced with ideological and political motivations. I am seeking to create an environment that will help empower not only students but also instructors as agents to pursue humanization, which is continuously “thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors” (Freire, 1970, p. 44).

**Professional Rationale**

As Rose (1987) argued, college composition holds a strange position in the American curriculum and is constantly the basis of debate on pedagogical practice. Those in the field argue that the purpose of the composition course is to prepare students for other academic course work or for future careers. Some argue the writing course prepares students in mastering general conventions of academic discourse or specific disciplines. Some claim that it should simply refine writing skills. However defined, it is crucial that instructors understand the purpose of composition and the role that it serves within academia and the larger world. Instructors of composition courses must continuously analyze and adapt pedagogical practice as it relates to the continuously changing contexts and educational landscape much in the same way critical pedagogy functions. While we must not ignore the role of critical pedagogy in any educational situation, examining the role critical pedagogy plays in the Basic Writing college course
is important because every student who enrolls in college must enroll in a writing course or one classified as an introductory writing course.

With current changes in the educational landscape, one that discourages remedial writing programs (Rose, 1987), it becomes even more necessary to argue for a more critical approach to the Basic Writing composition course. Because the Basic Writing composition course is often one of simplistic hegemonic literacy learning, this view strips the course of the integrity that validates academic disciplines. Not only will employing critical pedagogy practices promote the validity of composition as an academic discipline but one that will act as an open space for questioning the status quo, considering most composition courses are designed to teach students to work in and not with academia. Because critical pedagogy promotes alternatives to the dominant curriculum and policies currently in place, it becomes risky. A critical pedagogy approach is devoted to questions of reading, writing, the canon, and power structures. In order to engage in transformative critical pedagogy, I decided to investigate grading contracts as a form of critical pedagogy in the writing classroom by conducting a pilot study in my own classroom.

**Pilot study.** Since I had decided to dedicate my dissertation to grading contracts, I elected to conduct a formal pilot study in the spring of 2013 in order to help inform my dissertation. I chose to work with my colleagues Amanda VandeHei and Kyle Kaalberg in conducting the pilot study because they shared a similar interest in investigating grading contract models as a promising form of alternative assessment. For the pilot study, I decided to experiment with a grading contract with more advanced writers and as such, the study took place in my advanced composition course. Because I incorporated a significant amount of digital writing in the curriculum, I decided to implement a grading
contract model as a way to assess both academic and digital writing more fairly. The purpose of this pilot study was to examine students’ perceptions of a grading contract model in an advanced composition course. The pilot study also focused on whether or not a grading contract could act as a tool for motivating advanced writers to move beyond traditional expectations of academic writing. The findings of the pilot study inform the current study as a way further to investigate grading contract models and to investigate its impact in a Basic Writing course.

After analyzing the data of the pilot study, we identified four themes that emerged from the findings: student motivation, authorship, time, and habits of a point system. According to interview data, the participants expressed a sense of improved motivation because they perceived less pressure for their writing to meet a particular or unknown standard when using the grading contract. Participants also stated they were motivated to write because they did not have to be afraid of what they wrote because they believed with a grading contract the professor could not penalize them for writing ideas that were different from those of the professor. Participants indicated a perceived sense of “authorship” because the grading contract allowed them to focus on their writing first before the grade.

Unlike a traditional grading system where due dates were for final copies only, the participants perceived that the contract provided them more time to complete assignments. Because they were able to revise assignments as they chose, there was a professed feeling of “more time” to complete assignments when using the grading contract compared to the traditional grading system. Nevertheless, there was some resistance to the grade contract. We found that students still expressed a desire for a
traditional point system. In a previous study of grading contracts, Spidell and Thelin (2006) referred to this finding as “habits of a point system.” Our data supported this notion that students long for a traditional point system because it is what they have been accustomed to. One student articulated that in the beginning of the semester, she missed the satisfaction of getting an A on each assignment. In addition, while the instructor did not weight particular writing assignments, one student indicated her desire for a weighted system in which some writing assignments were deemed more important and therefore she believed should be worth more of the final grade. The findings of the study indicated that when implementing a grading contract, there is a need to be aware of students’ desire to stick to traditional grading models because of their familiarity with these models and their ability to identify their standing within a course.

Communicating the intricacy of a grading contract and engaging in continuous discussions about the contract throughout the course of the semester are necessary in order for students to fully embrace it. Regarding the contract itself and its connection to student writing, the contract can serve as an assessment that engages students in the writing process as well as the revision process. Furthermore, through the contract system, students have more opportunity to regain authority over their own writing and remove pressures of traditional grading and instructor expectations. Taking these implications into consideration, the current study investigated a grading contract model that engaged students in continuous discussions about the grade contract. Furthermore, the grade contract model allowed for multiple revisions for writing in order to aid students in focusing on writing. Recognizing that there may be resistance to the grade contract, I
included opportunities for students to discuss issues presented with grade contracts compared to traditional grade models.

**Significance of the Study**

The grading contract for this study began in the critical classroom and attempted to move into the larger public sphere of higher education. With increasing social and political issues continuing to infiltrate higher education, the need for a grading contract as a mode for democratic practice is vital as it functions as an intervention against undermining of “…public spheres of deliberation, information, cooperation, and education” (Shor, 2009, p. 17). As an act of intervention, the grading contract serves as a form of transformation that begins in the critical classroom and permeates the institution. The grading contract for this study acted as a catalyst for rewriting institutional discourses. For this revision to take place, there must be an understanding of institutional discourses and how the transformative intellectual (Gallagher, 2002) can function in a way that defends higher education as a democratic public space. As Giroux (2011) argued, “Higher education should be defended as a crucial democratic public sphere where instructors and students have the chance to resist and rewrite those modes of pedagogy, time, and rationality that refuse to include questions of judgment and issues of responsibility” (p. 120). To accomplish this, educators need to engage in modes of critical pedagogy that will allow students to become critical of issues of power, exclusion, and citizenship.
Operational Definitions

Grading Contract

The term “grading contract” varies across disciplines. For this study, “grading contract” took on a hybrid form of Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) grading contract system that aimed to improve instructor and student relations and improve student writing and Shor’s (2009) critical pedagogical grading contract system for the Basic Writing composition classroom. The “grading contract” for this study then refers to a system of grading in which students did not receive grades on individual assignments, but received a “completed” mark that indicated that they have met the agreed upon quality of work established by a combination of course outcomes, instructor and students’ agreements and negotiations. The grading contract did employ a letter system in which certain specifications were attached to each letter grade in order to adhere to the institution’s grading policy (see Appendix A). Based on student performance, attendance, participation, collaboration, revisions, and completion of assignments, students fell into one of the letter grade categories. Instructor feedback was the main form of evaluation for individual assignments; therefore, students had some opportunities and control to achieve their desired grade. For this study, the “grading contract” was not a fixed contract established at the beginning of the course unlike a syllabus that is often nonnegotiable. The instructor and the students took an instructor prepared, tentative version of the contract through a negotiation process, which reflected the critical pedagogy that Shor (2009) described. At the beginning of the semester, the students and the instructor negotiated and voted on various aspects of the contract. Students also had the opportunity to renegotiate the contract prior to the institution’s official withdrawal date of the
semester. Furthermore, students had the opportunity to defend “incomplete” assignments for extenuating circumstances.

**First-Year Composition**

The term “first-year composition” (FYC) for this study was used to differentiate between Basic Writing and first-year composition. For this study, it refers to the very first English composition college course, which every student who enrolls in college must take after completing a placement exam or a college entrance exam. While there are variations in pedagogy and content for FYC courses, almost all FYC courses typically prepare students to write across disciplines at the university, which assumes that what students learn in FYC can be transferred from one writing situation to another (Downs & Wardle, 2007). For most higher education institutions, students have to place into the first-year composition course either through a school mandated written placement exam or through college entrance exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT). Because all students are required to enroll into the FYC, an assumption exists that the FYC requires “a universal educated discourse” (Russell, 1995). Despite what the literature indicates about the purpose of FYC, writing studies as a field continues to reassure “its publics that FYC can do what non-specialists have always assumed it can: teach, in one or two early courses, ‘college writing’ as a set of basic, fundamental skills that will apply in other college courses and in business and public spheres after college” (Downs & Wardle, 2007). Throughout the study, the term “first-year composition” was used through this historically framed format.
Basic Writing

The term “Basic Writing” (Basic Writing) for this study was defined by Mina Shaughnessy (1977):

those [students] that had been left so far behind the others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up, students whose difficulty with the written language seemed of a different order from those of the other groups, as if they had come, you might say, from a different country, or at least through different schools, where even modest standards of high-school literacy had not been met. (p. 2)

Through this definition, Basic Writing then is often associated with “remedial” or “developmental” writing. Basic Writing courses are designed to assist students who possess a basic understanding of Standard American English (SAE). Basic Writing students can be categorized two ways: first, students who enroll in college directly from high school who are considered deficient in formal written English and who placed below average on a college writing placement test or college entrance exam, and two, non-traditional students who are older than average college freshman and who are either attending college for the first time or who have been out of college for about five years or more and are returning in hopes of gaining the skills necessary for better employment, earning more money, career change, or personal interest.

Negotiation

The term “negotiation” for this study was modified from Ira Shor’s (1996) work in that negotiating the contract is the process of “questioning the status quo, experimenting with new relationships, and socially engineering a new process for
decision making” (p. 75). The status quo in this setting is the instructor’s “right” to make the syllabus, set the assignments and deadlines, and to evaluate students with grades (Shor, 1996). The negotiation process is a departure from this in which students have a say in establishing the rules and deciding on the grading policy, evaluations, and requirements. Ultimately, students had a large role in making important decisions and evaluations about how their work was assessed and evaluated.

Authorship

Many first-year students are dubious of their writing abilities as new participants in academic discourse and often do not label themselves as having control over their own writing. According to Horner (1997), these perceptions may stem from the prestige that published authors gain in the academy; thus, these students often seek out ways in which to produce more complete and coherent products that aim to mirror published authors. Furthermore, students’ control over their own writing is limited because the instructor chooses and enforces his or her choice about writing and how to write, and the students merely comply (Friere, 1970). As a result, students often see two choices for meeting the demands set forth by the instructor. Some students turn to plagiarism as a way to produce “good work.” Others learn the expectations not of academic discourse but of their professors. In the latter case, students learn what it is that will earn them “high marks” by the professor and seek to produce such a product. For the purpose of this study, the term “authorship” was used to describe students having ownership of their own writing by making their own rhetorical decisions, taking risks about writing and viewing their own writing as valuable for themselves and for both inside and outside of the academy.
Critical Pedagogy

The term “critical pedagogy” for this study was used as a form of “political intervention.” Giroux (2004) argued that

Rather than viewing teaching as technical practice, radical pedagogy in the broadest terms is a moral and political practice premised on the assumption that learning is not about processing received knowledge but actually transforming it as part of a more expansive struggle for individual rights and social justice. This implies that any viable notion of pedagogy and resistance should illustrate how knowledge, values, desire, and social relations are always implicated in relations of power, and how such an understanding can be used pedagogically and politically by students to further expand and deepen the imperatives of economic and political democracy. (p. 35)

This definition of critical pedagogy is fitting for this study in that it claims a “strong” notion of the contract, which requires mutual negotiation and public deliberation to position students as rhetorical agents, that is, as enfranchised constituents of a democratic public sphere (the classroom)” (Shor, 2009).

Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is the theoretical framework for this study. Leistyna and Woodrum (1999) stated that critical pedagogy “challenges us to recognize, engage, and critique (so as to transform) any existing undemocratic social practices and institutional structures that produce and sustain inequalities and oppressive social identities and relations” (p. 2). For this study, I argue that traditional grading models used in basic
composition courses are undemocratic and inequitable; therefore, using critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework for this study is fitting.

Critical pedagogy must involve a firm commitment to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices (McLaren, 1988). Critical pedagogy applies principles of critical theory to approaches in teaching and learning which aim to analyze and transform educational contexts (Giroux, 1997). Critical pedagogy aims to transform existent oppressive educational environments into spaces of liberation and equality. Education spheres are identified as crucial spaces in which power dynamics exist and those that advocate for critical pedagogy seek to examine impacts of dominant ideologies of education, and aim to create a more democratic and socially responsible arrangement (McLaren, 2003). One example of this is encouraging educators to participate in reflective practices, which allows for interrogating and revising current practices and beliefs that may be oppressive in nature. This type of reflective act becomes transformative in nature. Using critical pedagogy for this study allowed me to reflect on my practices and beliefs and investigate how it affected students. Moreover, using critical pedagogy as a framework for investigating grading contracts allowed students the opportunity to become more aware and critical of power structures and to learn to navigate them.

Critical pedagogy draws on the work of Paulo Freire (1970) who emphasized the development of conscienticizao, often translated as the "critical consciousness" (p. 119). Freire contended that freedom starts with recognizing systems of oppressive relations and identifying how one is situated within these systems. According to Freire, educational processes are not neutral- they can either domesticate or liberate. They can
teach students to accept dominant ideologies and accept the status quo, or they can raise students’ consciousness by identifying and challenging those ideologies; thus, making a liberatory education essential to developing students’ and educators’ critical consciousness of how power can serve some groups more than others. The process of negotiation allows for students and instructors to engage in discussions about possible instructor and student held ideologies that exist in the classroom. Moreover, these discussions allow students to identify and challenge the status quo, in this case traditional grading practices, and allow them to participate in changing the status quo that fits ir needs. For Freire, the world in which we live is vulnerable to natural evolution and an historical evolution in which people have a strong influence. Thus, the role of critical pedagogy is to empower people as agents to pursue humanization, which is continuously “thwarted by injustice, exploration, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors” (p. 44). If this is ignored, particularly in the classroom, we perpetuate the dominant ideology, employing a “banking” concept of education that enables us, through our instruction, to confer the knowledge we have to those less knowledgeable disavowing the funds of knowledge that our students bring with them (Freire, 1970). This study allowed me to determine how grading contracts helped empower students as agents in exploring and taking action regarding the imbalance of power between students and instructors that exists in the classroom.

Scope and Impact

Assumptions

Through this study, I make a few assumptions. First, I assume using the standard model for grading devalues writing and the teaching of writing as a mere mechanistic
skill. Another assumption is that the perceptions held by administrators and sometimes instructors are that students who are enrolled in the Basic Writing class are “remedial,” “beginners,” “the illiterate,” “foreigners,” and “outsiders” (Rose, 1985). The last assumption recognizes that contracts and the process of negotiating the contracts are important for the Basic Writing class because they act as an intervention potentially to disrupt power structures that exist with increasing attempts to eliminate remedial programs. I also assume that grading contracts allow educators to resist attempts to reduce classroom teaching exclusively to matters of technique and method.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter served as the rationale for a multiple-case study of a grading contract in a Basic Writing college course. The purpose of this multiple-case study was to investigate the impact of a grading contract on student writing in a Basic Writing composition course at a state college in the southwest United States. Specifically, this study examined how a grading contract influences students’ motivation for writing, revision practices, and expectations of a Basic Writing composition course. This chapter outlined a theoretical framework used in the analysis of the grading contract determining that it is a way of sharing power, redistributing authority, and negotiating through dialogue (Shor, 1996).
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter discusses historical and current understandings of grading contracts, Basic Writing (Basic Writing) courses, and critical pedagogy in the composition classroom. This chapter provides a critical analysis of the benefits and challenges of implementing a grading contract system in a Basic Writing course and a consideration of the failures of grading contract implementation and the implications of this study.

Grading Contract

A grading contract model and components of a grading contract as a tool for assessment have been used for over 50 years. Much of the research that examines grading contracts is often analyzed by comparing the effects of contract grading to traditional grading approaches (see Inoue, 2012; Lindemann & Harbke, 2011; Taylor, 1971). Few studies have been conducted that actually examine overall effects of a grading contract in a writing classroom and while the data from these studies support grading contracts over traditional grading practices, few instructors use grading contracts today. While ample research exists regarding the use and examination of grading contracts during the 1970’s, very little research has examined grading contracts within the 21st century classrooms and current education reform platforms.

Issues surrounding the validity and reliability of grades for communicating information about students’ academic standing and progress have been raised and addressed for a long time (see Starch and Elliot 1912; Adams, 1932). Suggestions for helping instructors to understand the purpose and effective functions of grades in a traditional evaluation system have been addressed repeatedly in the literature (Brookhart
1993; Guskey 1996; O’Connor 1995; and Stiggins 2001). Despite issues raised and addressed, there seems to be little progress in this area in actual classroom practice. Both educators and colleges that tackle the improvement of the evaluative process and procedures have made several adaptations. Some of these adaptations included pass-fail systems and/or evaluations that point to the range of students’ strengths and weaknesses in mastery of knowledge, powers of criticism, and philosophical maturity (Taylor, 1971). Unfortunately, while these adaptations of the evaluative process attempted to address the controversial issues that occur with grading, they fall short of addressing the recurring issues that surround the evaluative process. Much of what resulted from these adaptations are, yet again, a one-sided relationship between instructor and student rather than a one-to-one relationship in which traditional linear grading models often promote. One innovative approach to assessment is the grading contract. The grading contract is based on an underlying premise of individual freedom, a condition of commitment, and personal responsibility all while establishing improved communication between instructor and students establishing a one-to-one relationship (Taylor, 1971; Yarber, 1974).

The use of a grading contract is not new. In fact, it has been one of the most widely adopted adaptations of grading since the 1960’s. A typical definition of contract grading during this time period is presented by Harvey (1972) who described it as a business-like arrangement whereby the instructor defines the performance required for each grade, the student defines the performance level to which he will work, and signs a contract in which the instructor is committed to awarding this predetermined grade if the student attains the appropriate
While this description is a very rigid and limiting definition of a grading contract, Riegle (1978) pointed out that many articles have been published praising the virtues of this approach to the evaluative process. While grading contracts appear to be the solution to linear grading models, a need to re-examine the various types of contracts used as well as the ways in which they depart from traditional grading practices must take place. Moreover, it is important to examine how the use of grading contracts today departs from its initial use 50 years ago. This portion of the literature review will examine various models of a grading contract in addition to a review of empirical studies that involve grading contracts. Additionally, this review of the literature will include criticisms of grading contracts and their implications for this study.

**Effectiveness of Grading Contracts**

Various forms of grading contracts exist, as does the rationale for the use of them. However, while rationales for grading contracts have existed and have evolved over time, Taylor (1980) made a vital point in that little theory about grading contracts is apparent. Looking into the early uses of grading contracts, Riegle (1978) conducted a review of various articles dealing with grading contracts and their various positions as to the purpose of grading contracts. He concluded that there appears to be a minimum of four different reasons for contracting which include: clear objectives, individualization, self-evaluation, and negotiation. While identifying these variables and their place within contracts, examining the effectiveness based on these variables is essential. The research presented here attempts to identify how these variables promote overall effectiveness in across disciplines.
Poppen and Thompson (1971) conducted a study examining effectiveness of grading contracts versus traditional grading on student performance in an educational psychology class. Poppen and Thompson were attempting to extend beyond a contract that only utilized a pass/fail system citing that “a need existed for a system of student evaluation which did not impede learning or motivation and still provides accurate feedback to the student” (p. 420). The variables described by Riegle (1978) are clearly employed in this study. Poppen and Thompson (1971) provided a description of the contract used in the study that emphasized student choices, individualization, and negotiation. Predetermined learning objectives as well as clearly stated learning objectives were thought to be a positive aspect to the grading contract. In addition, the assumption that students would increase motivation was anticipated.

The contract designed in Poppen and Thompson’s (1971) study gave students choices in selecting learning activities as well as the grade level in which the student wished to achieve. The contract provided a structural continuum from complete structure to complete freedom for the student in selecting learning activities. The student was able to choose to meet suggested grade level requirements, or they were able to substitute individual or independent learning activities for any or all of the suggested course requirements. The negotiation process included substitution value of learning activities. The contract was allowed to be renegotiated at any time during the quarter if the student felt they were unable to meet contract terms. Failure to meet contract terms simply meant that the student qualified for the grade representing the level achieved whether this be above or below the contracted level.

The results of the Poppen and Thompson’s (1971) study proved to show no
significant difference between the controlled group and the experimental group. While no
significant difference was concluded, some evaluative thoughts provided by the
participants showed possibility for contracts. Students cited a need to help “build
communication between instructor and student,” “provide for individual differences,” and
allow students to “help the instructor to clarify course objectives” (p. 422).

Building on the notion of clear and explicit course and assignment objectives is
the idea that these pre-established clear objectives will contribute to an increase in
student motivation and a decrease in anxiety about receiving a good grade. These clear
objectives are accomplished by requiring the instructor to state in advance what will be
required, the manner in which it will be completed, and the level in which assignments
should be completed all while still providing students with some opportunity for
negotiation as cited by Riegle (1978).

Polczynski and Shirland (1977) conducted a study of grading contracts from an
expectancy theory perspective, which argued that if a person is given a desired goal (in
the case of a student, a certain grade), and is shown a distinct and clear path leading to
that goal (again, in the case of a student, a certain performance level on clear specified
requirements) that student will become motivated to increase goal-oriented effort. The
emphasis here was the clear path to the desired goal. Polczynski and Shirland (1977)
stated that “expectancy theory argued that to induce motivation, not only must a desired
goal be presented and a path to that goal explained, but the person must believe that the
performance level reached through effort on his/her part will result in the attainment of
the goal” (p. 238). This study was an attempt to increase the performance/reward
relationship through a grading contract with the student. The contract clearly pointed out the performance levels and objectives necessary in order to attain a desired grade.

The participants were 280 students from a Midwest state university enrolled in nine business administration classes. The subject matter was basic business law in four classes and basic business management in five classes. Contracts were distributed and explained to the seven experimental classes during the first session of class. No contracts were administered to the two control classes. Instead, traditional syllabi, including reading assignments, topics for discussion, examination dates, etc., were distributed and explained during the first class period. The contract arrangement set up a criterion path to a performance level for each grade in clear, quantifiable terms, with requirements moving up through the grades. For instance, the requirements for a grade of D had to be fulfilled before a grade of C could be completed, etc. The contract permitted each student to "contract out" for a final grade, cognizant of what would be required in order to reach that grade. However, a student was allowed to renegotiate for either a lower or higher grade at specified times during the semester.

In order to determine if the contract system did raise the instrumentality levels of the students, a questionnaire was administered three times during the semester: on the first day of class (pre-contract), after the contract or syllabus was administered at the end of the first day of class (post-contract) and at the end of the semester (post-semester). The results of this study were encouraging in that the contract arrangement indicated a willingness on the part of students to expend considerable effort in course related activities. From the difference found between the control and experimental classes, it appeared that the contract arrangement was a vehicle that could be used to increase the
relationship between performance and reward, which in turn could lead to an increase of effort on the part of the student.

Taylor (1971) conducted a study that assessed opinions of students who enrolled in a senior educational measurement and evaluation course who experienced the grading contract technique. Taylor (1971) grounded his research on the predication that the objectives of the course have been clearly stated and ordered in terms of quantity and quality. The grade contract system was initiated in an educational measurement and evaluation course during the 1968 fall semester at Washington State University. The grade contract used in this course was structured in a way where a student chose a grade he or she desired and then worked out a series of agreements on how the grade was to be attained. If the student completed the agreement, he received his grade. However, if the student met only part of the agreement, only that level of the contract was binding.

Grades are cumulative in the contract. The quantity and quality of the work increased as the grade levels change from D to A. If the student did unsatisfactory work on any part of the contract, he or she was allowed to try again. The students were judged on a pass-fail or satisfactory-unsatisfactory basis. Thus, the emphasis was on learning and succeeding with a definite de-emphasis on testing and failing.

One of the findings of the study indicated students were not motivated to work at an optimum level under the contract system. According to Taylor (1971), this reaction was one that might have been predicted in that students are conditioned throughout their school lives to expect that the highest grades should be given to those who obtain the highest scores on tests. In many courses, particularly those with large enrollments, test results from the sole basis for determining the letter grades students receive. With a
background of experiences, which emphasize comparative achievement testing, it is reasonable to expect students to feel a lack of motivation. This study suggested students felt the grade contract emphasized quantity rather than quality, which could have been a factor in the lack of motivation students felt. However, despite this lack of motivation, the study found that students were not entirely opposed to using contracts.

A more current study was conducted by Lindemann and Harbke (2011) in which the purpose was to compare a behaviorally based contract grading approach with a traditional point-based system. Lindemann and Harbke assigned 40 freshmen introductory psychology students to a traditional or an experimental contract grading system. The experimental group signed individual contracts at the beginning of the semester. Terms of the contract included choosing their coursework from a variety of assignments, grading their exams and assignments as pass or fail, requiring that each student master 85 percent of the material to receive a passing grade and allowing students to correct and resubmit their assignments one time in order to earn a passing grade. Based on the results, Lindemann and Harbke argued for the use of contract grading in contemporary college classrooms. Contract graded students were one-third as likely to fail or withdraw from the course, three times more likely to earn an "A" grade and were more likely to perceive a high degree of control over their grade. The notion of self-evaluation as indicated by Riegle (1978) is supported in this study. Lindemann and Harbke (2011) stated, "Students indicated higher ratings for working hard for their grade, enjoying the course format and for enhancing independent thinking" (p. 5). Furthermore, their study also included the motivational aspect as addressed in Poppen and Thompson’s (1971) study. Lindemann and Harbke (2011) pointed out that "Contract graded students
may be more motivated to perform well.” Because the assignments were graded on a pass-fail basis, there was more emphasis on a full understanding of the material instead of just partial understanding. Minimal changes to the pre-existing material were required to implement contract grading.

While these studies attempted to determine whether clear objectives in grading contracts led to increased motivation, these studies did not touch on the possible drawbacks of clear and specific objectives in that rigidity might ensue and may be a downfall to grading contracts. If students delineate from these specific objectives, it may lead to students perceiving grading contracts as overly structured and uncompromising. Equally, instructors using grading contracts may be too vague in establishing and distinguishing between grades as concluded in Polczynski and Shirland’s (1977) study. The issue of giving the instructor the power to establish these objectives without negotiation negates the entire process of the grading contract. While all of the aforementioned studies indicate some form of a negotiation between instructor and student with regards to the grade contract, they do not provide a clear description of the actual negotiation process nor do they describe drawbacks or benefits to the negotiation process. This current study includes the negotiation process as a key feature of the grading contract and will be discussed further in the literature review.

**Grading Contracts in the Composition Course**

The idea held by many composition instructors is that all students who are enrolled in a composition course will, at the end, undoubtedly become better writers and illustrate improved writing skills. While at times improvement in student writing is not always apparent, progress is observed through final products and conventional grading.
For those enrolled in Basic Writing, it becomes essential to rely on more than just conventional linear grading; evaluative feedback becomes critical in order to promote the process of revision. The space to provide evaluative feedback for more effective learning becomes complex within traditional grading practices. As a result, other measures are necessary to provide a framework that will produce a space for more effective learning. For the purpose of this study, the grading contract assumed a non-traditional grading structure for the purpose of a more authentic approach to grading.

The use of grading contracts in the composition classroom is not new. However, as indicated earlier, Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) pointed out, grading contracts have had a “subterranean presence” in the field of composition. Shor (2009) mentioned that many instructors experiment with contract but few write about their experiences possibly due to the complex nature of grade contracts. Contract grading has gained a reputation in the composition field through the foundational theoretical and practical work of Ira Shor and Peter Elbow. While Shor (2009) and Elbow (2009) held two differing viewpoints on employing contract grading, both aimed to achieve similar goals, the chief goal being to enable instructors and students to place emphasis on writing and the improvement of writing rather than grades. While Shor (2009) and Elbow’s (2009) work focused on how contract grading is used and employed in the Basic Writing course, there is little evidence in their work and the research of others of how it affects student writing. A review of the literature of grading contracts in writing courses, including Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) work is necessary in order to understand the ways in which grading contracts are used in writing classrooms, their perceived effectiveness by students in writing courses, and empirical research of grading contracts in writing courses.
Contracts to focus on writing. One possible reason for experimenting with grading contracts is to find an alternative approach of promoting the improvement of a focus on learning and writing. The ultimate goal for grading contracts in the composition context is to allow instructors and students to pay as much attention to writing and far less attention to grades. Unfortunately, traditional grading practices often diminish any processes that focus on writing over grades. As with any academic scenario, the focus on grades often takes precedence when it comes to students’ goals for any given course. In the case of a writing course, students often equate earning a high grade as being a good writer and therefore the focus becomes more on how they can achieve an “A” as oppose to how they can improve their writing.

In order to find ways in which to find alternatives for the teaching of writing, Knapp (1976) argued that instructors must first ask themselves why they are teaching writing and what they want their students to know or to do at the end of the course that they did not know or could not do at the beginning. In the end, Knapp (1976) stated that students should “learn to express themselves in a prose style containing coherence, economy, and hopefully, a certain amount of grace” (p. 648). As indicated, the road to this goal takes time to develop, substantial practice, and a willingness to take risks, which includes the need to alleviate intimidation factors held by students. Knapp (1976) pointed out that the process we use to teach these skills “actually discourages trial-and-error, represses communication between craftsman and apprentice and diminishes rather than elevates the chances of the novice attempting anything personal, or risky, or even craftsmanlike in the original sense of that word” (p. 648). The process that Knapp described is often found in many Basic Writing courses. Because the foundation of the
Basic Writing course is to allow for trial-and-error type structures, Knapp (1976) described his grading contract approach as a system that embodied a “close tutorial atmosphere where the instructor directly and immediately involves himself, his student, and the piece of writing” (p. 649). In order to do this, Knapp employs a version of a Contract/Conference/Mastery system.

Knapp (1976) presented his contract approach in which he argued has worked for his writing classroom. While he ensured to revise this structure based on the needs of each class, it has worked for him far better than any traditional method. Knapp (1976) has described a typical contract grade model that includes one described by Knapp (1976):

one hands in a paper, and at some later date, receives it back. If the student agrees with the grade, she tends to file the paper away with minimal attention. If she disagrees with the grade, our by now angry writer scrutinizes the evaluated paper intensely, looking not so much for her own mistakes, but for those, if any, of her instructor hoping against hope that she’ll find one, (or at the very least ambiguity” which will help raise her grade-every little bit helps. Not the least of the student’s problems is merely translating the instructor’s handwriting, and, at times, if the expectation and the grade are reasonably close, the student gives up, and places paper, vaguely written corrections and all, into the circular file of her undergraduate experience. (p. 684)

Knapp (1976) used the Contract/Conference/Mastery system in a freshman composition course. While Knapp only provided a description of how he employed his system rather than the impacts of his system on student writing, it provided an understanding of how contracts can be used within freshman composition courses.
In Knapp’s (1976) use of the grading contract, the emphasis was on the act of communication between the student and instructor of both expectations and areas of improvement for the students’ writing. Through this process, the student focused his or her attention on the improvement of writing and not the subjective letter grade. Furthermore, the grade contract allowed students to know where he or she stood when it came to not only their level of writing but also where they stood in the course. This allowed the student to monitor their motivation as well as their attitude toward writing experiences. While there are some indications of negotiation between instructor and students, Knapp did not provide much description on how much students had a say in aspects of constructing the course and expectations of the writing assignments, which still resulted in some ambiguity. Moreover, Knapp’s system did not take into account behavioral aspects of the course, which included class participation, attendance, and overall student performance. It is clear Knapp’s emphasis was on the focus of writing, but it is important to consider how other factors might have influenced student writing.

Looking to other implementations of grading contracts, Leahy (1980) also argued to the limitations of traditional grade systems when it comes to student writing. Leahy (1980) argued that instructors are limited in responding to student writing efficiently because of issues of time. He also argued that grading contracts provide a solution to issues of time as well as a process that allows instructors to assign written work and respond to that work in an effective way so that students will learn from these writing experiences. Like many other instructors of writing, Leahy was aware of the little attention paid by the student to a written assignment after the instructor has graded it. Writing assignments, according to Leahy (1980), cannot just be graded, they must have
commentary on them that might include strong points of the paper, constructive criticism for the weak points, and sometimes a stern comment for careless work. While grades are easy to assign and comments can be written so freely and carelessly, neither of these options provide much help to the students. Because letter grades and comments provide a commentary about the paper itself, more often than not it is too arbitrary for students to decipher what it means about their paper. As Leahy (1980) pointed out, the grade and comments brings problems of its own in that they turn into an attempt to justify the grade, typically explaining why it is not higher than it is. In order to address this, Leahy implemented a grading contract system in his sophomore English class as a way to mitigate issues of time and grading. While his work provided a description of his approach and his perceptions of how it improves overall student writing, it is limited empirically in exactly how he was able to determine overall improved writing; therefore, his descriptions are a matter of observation.

For Leahy (1980), his process of employing a grading contract began by including in his syllabus a section under "grading." Although none of the written assignments received a letter grade, it did need to meet the standards for “acceptable college work.” Leahy (1980) defined this as each paper having a clearly defined and workable thesis, taking all important questions into account, being organized effectively, showing a certain sense of style (sentence variety and emphasis, word choice), in grammar and mechanics. If a paper fell short of these aspects, it was returned for rewriting and/or re-editing. Students were allowed to submit two rewrites of any paper; if it was still not acceptable after two rewrites, it had to settle for a lower contract grade, or if the student
was working for a B, he or she could write one of the other four possible papers as a substitute.

In order to aid students in the writing process, students planning to write a paper were required to meet with Leahy while in the pre-writing stage, bringing along a completed form on which they indicated their topic, a list of questions they needed to address in the paper, a statement about why they were interested in the topic, and a trial thesis statement.

In Leahy’s (1980) use of the grading contract, he focused on student writing itself and its adherence to specific categories of writing established by the instructor. Through this process, the student focused his or her attention on the improvement of writing through the established rubric and not so much achieving a letter grade, although expectations for these letter grades were clear. Furthermore, Leahy’s (1980) established grade contract allowed students to engage in the process of revision in order to improve on writing. There are some limitations particularly as it relates to the negotiation process. Leahy’s (1980) pre-established rubric provided most of the power to the instructor. When employing contracts, instructors must be cautious in pre-established rubrics as they communicate a message as to what constitutes a “right” way of writing which can discourage students and lead to decreased motivation for writing. Furthermore, students not having a say in the construction of the grading contract still invokes limited power to students enrolled in the course. Moreover, while Leahy’s (1980) system did take into account some behavior aspects of the course that include attendance and participation, it did not provide leeway, as he required students to attend class everyday as well as participate every day. The limitation here is that there is no description as to what it
means to participate every day nor does it take into account outside factors as to why students might be unable to attend class every day. It is clear Leahy’s (1980) emphasis was on the focus of writing, but it is important to consider the process of negotiation as well as outside factors that might influence writing as well as factors that may hinder students’ ability to achieve an “A” that is not related to writing and the improvement of writing.

Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) approach to contract grading is different from those discussed so far. Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) employed a hybrid contract grade model in which students could earn a course grade of a “B” based on completion of specific activities and not on the evaluation of student writing quality. Within this contract, students were required to complete activities in a portfolio type format that included assignments in which Danielewicz and Elbow felt were most reliable in determining whether students achieved the outcomes for a composition course. Those students producing a higher quality portfolio earned the “A’s” in the course. The scope of this type of contract also heavily emphasized a focus on writing and evaluative feedback over grades. While Danielewicz and Elbow’s grading contract included some level of feedback from students as to what should constitute a high-scoring portfolio, Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) indicated students were not given power over the high-scoring grade decisions. What is distinct about Danielewicz and Elbow’s grading contract is that they ignored level of writing quality as ignored for grades up to “B” but focused rather on writing quality of grades higher than a “B.”

Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) made it very clear that the goal of the grading contract is not political or ideological in nature. The purpose, for them, was to create an
environment in which “instructors and students get to give as much time and attention as possible to writing” (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009, p. 248). Ideally, the purpose of the grade contract in this context was to make writing more pleasurable for students rather than having the pressures of the act of writing itself in addition to the pressures of high grades. While this grading contract system still grants letter grades, the focus here was on completing tasks, which made achieving a high grade far more possible than the traditional system of grading. Therefore, as emphasized through Danielewicz and Elbow’s contract, the process counted more than the product. Through this dimension, instructors are able to highlight activities and assignments that best fit the needs of students for any given composition course. In other words, instructors can emphasize processes that are more valuable and useful and then allowing specific commitments to be built into the classroom experience; for example, processes like review and peer editing, which typically are not accounted for in traditional grading practices, can now be considered valuable and important. Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) grading contract system is important and allows for more of a focus on writing. Nevertheless, while admittedly Danielewicz and Elbow had little emphasis on issues of politics and ideology, it cannot be ignored that negotiation is a crucial component of grading contract models. It is not to say Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) grade contract model is not effective. In fact, as far as effectiveness is concerned, Inoue (2012) described three features in which grading contracts are judged: “the quantity of work produced, the quality of writing produced in class, and student reactions to and acceptance of the contract itself” (p. 89), all of which Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) contract included. However, by including the process of negotiation within their model or an adapted version of their model, it
raises question of whether it produces results that are more effective.

Questions of “effectiveness” start with determining what it means to be “effective.” Comparing grading contracts to traditional grading as well as comparing them to other grading models can bring about blurred lines of its definition. Inoue (2012) argued that measuring effectiveness of a grade contract versus a traditional grading model is unfair due to the varying types of grade contracts within different settings. While much of the research focuses on employing contracts and describing their use within different classroom settings, this body of research is truly limited when determining “effectiveness” from a quantitative standpoint. While there are limited quantitative studies that investigate effectiveness of grading contracts, Inoue’s (2012) study of effectiveness of grading contracts on different racial formations provides further insight on effectiveness of grade contracts in a composition course.

**Studies of race and resistance.** Inoue’s (2012) study of grading contracts investigated effectiveness of grading contracts in a composition classroom and its impact on different races: American Pacific Islander (API), African American, and white. Inoue’s (2012) grading contract is one that is implemented departmentally and is a hybrid of Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) contract model and Shor’s (1996) contract model (discussed later in the literature review). These models were chosen because they provided better chances for the diverse population in which the study took place. The essence of the contract model provided in this study included both a focus on quantity and quality of work which emphasized the improvement of writing as indicated in Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) model as well as a focus of negotiation which emphasizes power sharing and a redistribution of authority as cited in Shor’s (1996)
model. The demographics in Inoue’s (2012) study, Asian Pacific Islanders and African Americans, are fitting for this hybrid form of a contract system in that the contracts direct critique of conventional grading obscures any “structures of unfairness” which historically this population have had in first-year composition programs.

The contracts used in Inoue’s (2012) study were used by the Fresno State’s First-Year writing program and are negotiated in the first week or two of classes. The contracts justified grades, typically a “B,” by the amount of work done, and paid little attention to the quality of writing, except in scenarios in which writings were distinctively subpar, which is similar to Knapp’s (1976) binary distinction of “acceptable” or “not acceptable.” The contract language described meeting the contract’s expectations as students turning in writing “in the manner and spirit it is asked” of them. The contract also attempted to reduce the instructor’s power over student writing and revising by limiting the nature of judgments possible that affected student course grades. The rationale being that fewer instructor judgments of quality of writing and fewer distinctions of quality in writing will provide students opportunities to make and articulate decisions as writers, including decisions in which instructors do not agree with. Discussion of those decisions in portfolio reflection letters is then conducted. Ultimately, all assignments are typically acceptable or not acceptable, meaning either they have met basic assignment requirements or they have not (e.g., due time and date, word count, addressing particular texts or questions, etc.).

In order to address the effectiveness of grading contracts, Inoue (2012) gathered data from three sources: (1) anonymous exit surveys of FYW students in the writing program; (2) final portfolio ratings from the same group of students; and (3) course grade
distributions of the same students. All three data sources came from English 5B students from the spring 2009 and spring 2010 semesters in Fresno State’s FYW program. The findings of this study indicated that the grading contracts at Fresno State were most effective for the Asian Pacific Islanders (API), somewhat effective for African Americans, and marginally effective for whites. The grade contracts were most effective for the API group who mostly has low parental education levels, who speak little English at home, and mostly identified as remedial. Similar results were produced in somewhat the same dimensions in writing for the African American group who have higher levels of parental education, speak English at home and have a high rate of remedial status. The African Americans had more difficulty meeting all the contractual obligations than any other group that may account for the low number of preference rate. For those in the white group, grade contracts were least effective despite meeting all the contractual obligations. In terms of writing quality, they met the expectations but showed low scores in the portfolio assessment and showed little improved writing over time. While those in the white group had the highest completion rate, they preferred the grading contract the least and had responses that were more negative in the survey.

Based on the results of this study, grading contracts appear to be most effective for students who are predisposed to seeing, or can be convinced to view grades as unhelpful, destructive, or harmful to learning. For those who are at Fresno State, and historically speaking, these students are often of color, speak other languages at home, and come from homes where the parents have not attended college; the majority of them needing remediation. While this study indicated some level of effectiveness for a specific demographic, it becomes difficult to determine how the negotiation process factored into
the results, despite the students having the opportunity to negotiate the contract at the beginning of the semester. This study attempts to address this issue. As indicated in the results of this study, there were some tensions and negative feedback about the use of the grading contracts particularly those who identified as white. Despite the racial factors that came into play, other issues, such as power and perceptions of grading do come into play concerning resistance of grading contracts. Spidell and Thelin’s (2006) study provided an example of student resistance to grading contracts through student perceptions.

While there is a body of literature that looks at contract grading and approaches to contract grading, Spidell and Thelin (2006) identified a gap of negative students’ perceptions of a grading contract in a writing course. Based on general descriptions and few studies, much of the literature on grading contracts have been in favor of contracts. However, the focus of Spidell and Thelin’s (2006) work was to include student perceptions by privileging the voices of the students and including them in the study in order to determine how well their concerns reflected those that were generalized in the grading contract literature. Additionally, Spidell and Thelin (2006) included student input to investigate “efficacy of the contract system, its fairness, its clarity, and its relevance to their educational background and goals” (p. 37).

Spidell and Thelin’s (2006) study took place at a mid-western four-year university where the demographics consist of middle-to working-class students. The data collected for this study included a collection of student feedback throughout a semester from three sections (n=74) of a general education writing course. The purpose was to gain an overall picture of student reaction to grading contracts. Toward the end of the semester, the teacher-researcher asked the students to write honest feedback about particular aspects of
the course, including the grading contracts so that the researcher could use student comments to construct interview questions. Some of the questions revolved around students being able to participate in the construction of the contracts, and students’ previous educational experiences with grading. During the last week of the semester, 12 students were identified to participate through purposeful sampling in order to balance the demographics of the students. The participants were videotaped and interviewed, and the analysis of the data included written feedback and the interview transcripts.

Spidell and Thelin’s (2006) study found a considerable amount of resistance to the grading contracts. The analysis of the study indicated that the students had a difficult time letting go of previous educational conditioning, which has disempowered them. While the grading contract disrupted the grading norm, Spidell and Thelin (2006) found student voices that indicated the implementation of the grading contracts were not enough to change the educational atmosphere. Several factors attributed to the resistance of the contracts. First, students’ habituation to a point system of evaluation caused tension in that many of the participants preferred a point system because they were used to this form of grading and it allowed them to track their grade easily. Furthermore, issues with how much each assignment weighed in comparison to each other. Unfortunately, the grading contract was unable to move students away from the traditional point system of grading. Second, perception of increased responsibility led to anxiety and resistance in that students felt too much responsibility was pushed onto them. Some students indicated that they preferred to be told what to do rather than having to constantly worry about what was happening in the course and always having to “worry” about everything. Essentially, the perception was that students preferred the instructor to act as manager and
coordinator of the course. Third, high performing students resented a perceived leveling effect which to a certain degree, represented an obedience to an oppressive nature, one that adhered to the status quo which had little to no tolerance for those viewed as subservient or undeserving of the chance to better themselves. Participants in this study expressed a zero tolerance stance toward students who initially aim to achieve a “C” grade could still have an opportunity to achieve an “A” grade. In essence, some students did not feel “low achievers” deserved a chance at a high grade. Fourth, participants indicated that more input into contract construction would have ameliorated tensions. Students reported that they did not feel like they participated enough in the making of the contracts. Like with most of the research on contracts, many of them were not built from scratch (see Danielweicz & Elbow, 2009; Knapp, 1976; and Shor, 2009) and therefore, only permitted addition to the contract or other stipulations i.e. more time for revision. Fifth, students felt the contract made the course more difficult than necessary. The students reported that because the course was an introductory English course, the standards should not have been set so high; they added that it “forced students to work harder than they had to” (p. 49.) Additionally, students reported that they felt like failures because they did not meet their initial agreed upon contracted grade, which in essence, pushes them in the opposite effect of the purpose of the contract.

Based on the results of the study, much of the student reported information indicated that they failed to distinguish between the contract grading and traditional grading system and felt the contracts were not necessary to achieve the desired goal. While the results suggest tensions to the grading contract, the process of employing the contract and contextualizing the contract is essential. While the teacher-researcher
employed a version of a hybrid model of Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) and Shor’s (2009) model, the contract took on more of the Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) where little discussion took place about the idea of power sharing and negotiation. Spidell and Thelin’s (2006) study suggests that the results of the study demonstrate a need for grading contracts to be constructed within a democratic, critical classroom, as advocated by Shor (1996) as well as including more provisions for the varying levels of grading i.e. higher standards for higher grades etc.

Spidell and Thelin (2006) suggested that the grading contracts are more complex and require contextualization. Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) and Shor’s (2009) work established a solid foundation for the implementation of grading contracts. While there is a need for using contracts for the sole improvement of writing, it is also necessary to ground the grading contracts for including dialogue and discussion about power sharing and negotiation. However, there is still lacking evidence on how the negotiation process affects student motivation and improvement of writing.

Despite the need for contextualization, many factors should be taken into consideration prior to the implementation of contracts. As highlighted in Inoue’s (2012) study, race and class play a large role in the acceptance and performance using the grading contract system. This is beneficial considering the demographics that are found within a given entry level English course. Nevertheless, further investigation must be conducted to determine the resistance from those that are not classified as “low performing” or “first generation” students as indicated in Spidell and Thelin’s (2006) study.
The review of grading contract literature leaves gaps that this study attempted to address. The issue of an instructor generated structured grading contract without negotiation reverts to a traditional grading model. The grading contract model presented in this study places heavy emphasis on negotiation and discussion with students about grading and assignments. The lack of evidence on the impact of a grading contract model on student writing presents a need to investigate how a grading contract model affects student writing.

**Basic Writing**

The population this study investigates is basic writers. This study makes the assumption that basic writers are a marginalized group for which the purpose of this study is to investigate how a grading contract would be appropriate as a means to redistribute power and mitigate issues of hegemony that are found within this particular group and context. Investigating the broader issues of Basic Writing would require an analysis of Basic Writing as a field in itself. As far as academic fields go, the field of Basic Writing has always been relatively new, vulnerable, and always confronted to justify itself. In a sense, the field of Basic Writing is unique. Historically, Basic Writing is framed by the university and college open admissions movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s through to the attacks on remediation that expanded it in the 1990’s to present day. Basic Writing, very much like composition studies, is to a certain extent, shaped by its research and because of its marginalization of itself as a field in English studies alongside its marginalization of the students who find themselves classified within Basic Writing, it is a field that often finds its teaching practices as unusually isolated from its field of research. Basic Writing is a field that holds strong political and pedagogical
undertakings that seems more rooted by political forces than it is by achieving political change.

Because of important historical and current movements in higher education, particularly in the field of composition and Basic Writing, an overview of Basic Writing allows for an understanding of its complex place as a subfield within composition studies and higher education. A review of Basic Writing research will be included in this review of the literature. Also included in this review is Basic Writing theory that helps inform the needs of those labeled as Basic Writing students and the political and pedagogical implications of these studies.

Basic Writing and Exclusion

Many composition instructors and scholars are familiar with Mina Shaughnessy’s (1976) seminal work, Errors and Expectations. It is through this body of work the term Basic Writing (Basic Writing) was coined. The catalyst for her work began as an attempt to determine what to call a field that was relatively “new,” one in which “the teaching of writing to severely underprepared freshman is yet but the frontier of a profession lacking even an agreed upon name” (Shaughnessy, 1976, p. 177). While Shaughnessy herself and others would reject the most notable label for these underprepared freshmen, “remedial English,” it continues to be called as such despite hers and others’ strong arguments against remediation, stating that basic writers are only basic because these writers are beginners, not remedial (Shaughnessy, 1976).

The problem with the term remediation is its impact on politics, pedagogy and the exclusion it brings to those students labeled as remedial. Colleges and universities continue to maintain this notion of remediation by establishing remedial programs and
remedial courses, a large part of which is an attempt to retain students as well as bring
those students identified as remedial up to academic par. However, despite perhaps their
“good” intentions, this notion of remediation is more about marginalization than it is
about preparing the “underprepared.” Historically, this notion was perpetuated during the
Ronald Regan years where instead of attempting to treat remediation as a way of closing
the gaps in training between poor and the affluent, the minority and majority, it coined
the term “permanent underclass” and idea that like the poor, the “underprepared” would
always be present (Otte & Mlynarczyk., 2010). Although institutions will argue this is no
longer the case, many institutions and faculty continue to use the term “remedial” in
order to identify those students who are “underprepared,” and perhaps in some cases,
poor. Rose (1985) argued that the continued use of the term “remediation” possible stem
from the uncertainty of its definition. Rose (1985) argued:

To remediate seems to mean to correct errors or fill in gaps in a person’s
knowledge. The implication is that the material being studied should have been
learned during prior education but was not. Now the reasons why it was not could
vary tremendously: they could rest with the student (physical impairment,
motivational problems, intelligence), the family (socio-economic status, stability,
the support of reading-writing activities), the school (location, sophistication of
the curriculum, adequacy of elementary or secondary instruction), the culture or
subculture (priority of schooling, competing expectations and demands), or some
combination of such factors. (p. 349)

The inability fully to define remedial is problematic because of its impact on curriculum
and pedagogy. In a sense, being classified as remedial is to be excluded and labeled as
inadequate. From a political dimension then, remediation results in excluding those labeled as remedial from that of the academic community and in turn branded as one who is faulty. As Rose (1985) argued, students labeled as remedial “sit in scholastic quarantine until their disease can be diagnosed and remedied” (p. 349). Through a composition context, these students who are labeled as such will perceive themselves as such.

Arguably, much of the research on Basic Writing suggests that Basic Writing is not about exclusion but more about addressing the issues at hand, errors that reflect the misapplication of discourse and the rules guiding the construction of text. This notion stems from Mina Shaughnessy’s (1977) *Errors and Expectations* in which she argued that there is a group of writers she defines as basic writers who only stand out from other writers because of the number of errors they produce. According to the findings of her study, basic writers often produce small numbers of words with large numbers of errors (roughly from 15 to 35 errors per 300 words). Because many instructors of Basic Writing often find these patterns in the writings of the Basic Writing course, many of them accept error as the defining characteristic of basic writers and emphasize errors as though it is the entire enterprise of Basic Writing. And while this characteristic may provide a starting point, unfortunately, many instructors continue to approach teaching basic writers as simply a “fix-it” station to improve writing (Shaughnessy, 1976). In addition, this idea of Basic Writing is treated by institutions as “fix-it” stations; Shaughnessy (1976) illustrated a clear picture and argument of the treatment of the “underprepared”:

Colleges must be prepared to make more than a graceless and begrudging accommodation to this under-preparedness, opening their doors with one hand
and then leading students into an endless corridor of remedial anterooms with the other. (p. 293)

While Shaughnessy’s (1976) work focuses on the errors of basic writers, she moves beyond the “fix-it” model of students who are deemed underprepared and provides some suggestions for the teaching of writing. Through her work, she addresses the confrontation of inexperienced basic writers with the complex linguistic and rhetorical, sometimes confusing, expectations of academia. It is not to say then that basic writers are in need to be “fixed,” but rather, basic writers, like all writers, must learn the language of discourse; this is where the problem lies. Bartholomae (1986) argued this point:

The students have to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and they have to do this as though they were easily and comfortably one with their audience, as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; they have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is "learned." And this, understandably, causes problems. (p. 403)

To teach writing to these inexperienced students then is to understand “the intelligence of their mistakes” (Shaughnessy, 1976, p. 20). In essence, interpreting the errors and understanding why they are made within the context of discourse rather than circling them and providing a low grade is vital. Moreover, guiding students rather than telling them is more of what they need in order to be able participants within the world of these
academic conventions and expectations. As Rose (1985) suggested, a need to define Basic Writing as transitional or initiatory, orienting, or socializing to the academic discourse community (see Bartholomae, 1986; Bizzell, 1986) is vital in order truly to acknowledge the rightful place of all freshman in the academy. As such, accepting Shaughnessy’s (1976) and Rose’s (1985) arguments of basic writers will allow the field to move from a mechanistic emphasis of error toward an appropriate, demanding curriculum that encourages opportunity through language and access to an academic community rather than be ostracized from it.

**Process and Basic Writing**

An attempt to move away from a focus on error in the Basic Writing classroom becomes difficult because of its dominant defining characteristic. Nevertheless, a fundamental in the teaching of basic writers is to focus more attention to the process of basic writers rather than that of error. Research in the field that focuses on process is highlighted through the seminal works of Sondra Perl (1979) and Janet Emig (1971). Pioneering the research on the writing processes of basic writers was done by Janet Emig’s (1971) work, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*, which provided groundwork on the ways in which students actually behave as writers versus the assumptions made by instructors and textbooks on the ways in which basic writers should behave. By having students talk through their process of composing, Emig (1979) was able to illustrate how students’ thinking got translated into writing and how their thoughts about that process was tedious on the process itself. Through her study, Emig also discovered not just how the thought process influenced basic student writing processes but also how writing influenced thought arguing that writing supported analytical and
relational thinking that is important to academic discourse. The point being that the focus on process is not just on the writing process itself but also on thought processes. For teaching basic writers then, a dual approach emerged: teaching students how to think was just as important as teaching them how to write. These findings support pedagogies that allow Basic Writing students not to just learn how to write but also how they think about writing, particularly within an academic discourse.

Further research on basic writers and their writing processes were conducted as a way to inform the instructors of Basic Writing. Sondra Perl (1979) expanded on Emig’s (1971) work further to investigate basic writers and their processes. Her study revealed that Basic Writing students had more complex writing processes than that of more advanced writers. She argued that while error is in fact a large issue, Basic Writing students often disrupted the composing process with concerns about editing, which often resulted in increased errors as well as hypercorrections. Through Perl’s (1979) “composing aloud” protocol, she discovered that error control could be difficult when considering issues of the composing process. Perl (1979) argued that instructors have not sufficiently taken into account issues of error control:

These unskilled college writers are not beginners in a tabula rasa sense, and instructors err in assuming they are. The results of this study suggest that instructors may first need to identify which characteristic components of each student’s process facilitate writing and which inhibit it before further teaching takes place. If they do not, instructors of unskilled writers may continue to place themselves in a defeating position: imposing another method of writing instruction upon the students’ already internalized processes without first helping
students to extricate themselves from the knots and tangles in those processes. (p. 436)

Approaching the teaching of beginning writers with attention paid to what helps or hinders students’ writing processes is one that is fundamental because it dismisses the constant myth that Basic Writing students are illiterate or unable to write. An analysis of Perl’s work indicated that what makes basic writers in fact basic are self-imposed restrictions and damaging strategies that limited their writing and interrupts their flow for the purpose of correction. From this perspective then, teaching basic writers should emphasize more opportunity rather than restriction. Issues of opportunity, unfortunately, create tension when dealing with issues of traditional methods of teaching basic writers. Political and policy factors such as grading continue to place strain on the very opportunities that basic writers need to improve their writing and as a result, reconstitutes the “banking model” as argued by Freire (1970). How then can instructors of Basic Writing navigate through teaching writing that embraces process and the needs of basic writers while addressing political factors such as grading that place constraints on pedagogy? In order to address this question, turning to critical pedagogy can provide possible solutions.

**Critical Pedagogy and Contracts**

**Institutional Literacy**

To engage in critical pedagogy is to engage in an act of transformation. In order to do so, it is important to understand the relationships and hierarchies that exist within any institutional structure. While many have posited discussions regarding the relationships within critical pedagogy between instructors and students and between theorists and
instructors, Gallagher (2002) argued a need to reimagine these relationships and rethink the relationship between “the transformative intellectual” and “the institution.” In the discourse of critical pedagogy, the transformative intellectual is often positioned as the commonly opposing force to institutional structures and hierarchies that conspire against him or her, Hurlbert and Blitz (1992) contended that the institution is understood as a soulless, fundamentally conservative, self-perpetuating mechanism intended to appropriate all activities performed under it auspices. In this sense, institutions attempt to protect themselves from critique through its complex discourses. Since instructors and students function under these discourses, the only transformative processes in which a transformative intellectual can operate are ones that create counter scenarios that shed light on the universities and proposition others to do so as well. Gallagher (2002), on the other hand, argued that rather than positioning the transformative intellectual as one who “reforms” by opposing all institutional constraints, it would be more profitable to rethink positions available to those working within and against institutional constraints and possibilities; thus, to develop an institutional literacy is fundamental to reframing and reclaiming pedagogical progressivism. In order to be institutionally literate, one must be “able to read institutional discourses (and their resultant arrangements and structures) so as to speak and write back to them, thereby participating in their revision” (Gallagher, 2002, p. 79). As a transformative intellectual, one must understand that institutional structures can, in fact, be revised. While immediate changes are not visible instantaneously, it is important to recognize that institutions are in fact created and recreated through daily human interaction.
Through critical pedagogy, we are able to understand better these institutional literacies and how they can be revised; it is then that we can think about more effective ways in which transformative intellectuals might act and function in more progressive ways. As Gallagher (2002) argued, much in the same way literacy is not learned and practiced in isolated, discrete steps, so too institutional literacy is not developed in a linear process; institutional literacy is recursive and transformative action does not need to happen in isolation.

Transformative intellectuals must rid the notion that transformation must happen in singular, extreme and immediate moments that produce instant institutional change. The perceptions of institutions as structures that are mechanistic and unchanging are problematic because often we believe that these institutions function beyond our control. However, these institutions operate through multiple dimensions that include administrative, curricular, and pedagogical functions. Rather than assuming transformation works through transmitting critical knowledge in insulated moments, Gallagher (2002) argued that transformation must be thought of as “developing the collective ability-with our colleagues and our students - to read and write, and re-vision, institutional discourses” (p. 81). A significant aspect of this collective effort is the potential roles students can take to challenge these, at times, oppressive institutional structures. In direct line with critical pedagogy, an effective way to promote a large-scale institutional literacy transformation would be to offer power and opportunity of transformative intellectualism to students. Recognizing that students are included in these institutional oppressions, students too have much to gain from being familiar with the constraints with which they work and live. Students absent from institutional literacy are
problematic because they are at risk of accepting the notion that these institutions are impenetrable.

The grading contracts in this study attempts to act as a starting point in understanding institutional literacy that revolves around traditional grading practices. Allowing students to engage in the design and negotiation of a grading contract allows them to become transformative intellectuals engaging in the rewriting of institutional discourses. Instructors sharing power with students breaks down the idea that institutions cannot be changed. While the use of a grading contract will not necessarily produce immediate transformation with one sweeping gesture, it will undoubtedly act as a point for reclaiming pedagogical progressivism.

**Grading Contract, Negotiation, and Critical Pedagogy**

The grading contract used in this study is considered a form of critical pedagogy in which the grading contract system is designed to establish a power-sharing process between the instructor and the students. In traditional educational spheres, the instructor typically carries the power in which he or she establishes a set curriculum that all students must abide by in order to complete a course successfully. This structure does not grant students any power or say in the creation of their situation. If an instructor declares the rules and expectations which students are required to follow, then the rhetorical context is not one that is contractual but rather one that is non-negotiable. Grading contracts that include the process of negotiation provide the opportunity for students to engage in creating or recreating how they learn within this space. This process of power-sharing is informed by the work of Ira Shor (2006) in which he argued that an important difference between his method of the grading contract system compared to others is the
emphasis on power-sharing and one that constitutes a “constitutional assembly” within the classroom (p. 13). Shor (1996) maintained a critical approach to his classroom in that students negotiated grading contracts, wrote classroom bylaws, and chose reading materials and paper topics. While the purpose of this study was solely a focus on grading contracts, Shor’s approach to negotiation highlights the importance of students engaging in a democratic participatory environment.

Unlike many of the contracts discussed in the literature review, Shor’s (2009) use of a grading contract was one grounded with the idea of sharing power with students and collectively negotiating grading and the syllabus. For Shor (2009), he contested that a “‘contract’ requires a ‘meeting of the minds,’ that is to say a covenant of explicit understandings between all parties affected by the terms” (p. 13). In other words, a contract cannot exist if only one party establishes the terms and conditions to which they require the other party to oblige. To say that obligation without any form of a negotiation process is in a sense not a contract. As Shor (2009) pointed out negotiation matters because it involves the co-authoring of mutual obligations in which he claims that “co-authoring underlies a ‘meetings of the minds’ and is not expendable because it is a civic foundation of strong democracy” (p. 13).

Shor (2009) contended that the “strong” notion of the contract “requires mutual negotiation and public deliberation to position students as rhetorical agents, that is, as enfranchised constituents of a democratic public sphere (the classroom)” (p. 14). It is through this type of participatory deliberation that is vital for democracy to function within education. Mutual negotiation through contracts extends the democratic ideas of John Dewey (1938) regarding progressive education:
There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying. (p. 67)

While the use of negotiated contracts through deliberation is in a way a strong form of democratic practice, it does not call for controversy or radical action in the classroom. Like much of the criticism about critical pedagogy, the use of a grading contract is not meant for an instructor to abuse power and create a revolution to urge all students to resist capitalism as Shor (1992) indicated; this would result in the opposite effect by silencing students who refuse to resist. As Shor (1992) argued:

Cultural action in a classroom is not like political action in an organization or a movement. A classroom in a school or college is rarely a self-selected group seeking social change. The mainstream classroom is a mélange of students with various motives in an institution structured against their empowerment. Most often, students do not come to class with a transformative agenda. Few are looking for empowering education. Some welcome a challenging democratic process while others resent it; some welcome an unsettling critical dialogue while others reject it…Instructors who treat the classroom as a political meeting can expect stiffened resistance from students as well as more vigilant policing from administration…Dialogic, democratic teaching rejects sectarian posturing.
Students cannot be commanded to take action and cannot be graded on their consciousness. (p. 196-197)

Through this understanding then, instructors cannot assume students grant them the authority simply because they are the instructor of the course. However, should students exercise their right to question the power structures that exist within the classroom, critical instructors then must serve as a model for demonstrating how, through the process of negotiation, promotes a more liberatory education that will serve both the instructor and the students’ best interests.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the theoretical and empirical background necessary to inform this study and help to illustrate how this study was situated. This chapter discussed the background of grading contracts across disciplines and descriptions of how they were employed in these classes. In addition, limitations were identified regarding the lack of instructor and student negotiation of the grading contracts prompting a need to further investigate the impact of a grading contract model on student performance and perceptions of a grading contract model. This chapter also addressed grading contract models in the composition courses that range from a discussion of learning centered models to the impact on race. Implications of these studies suggest those students who are identified as “at-risk” or low-performing favor grading contract models. The evidence of the impact of grading contracts on student writing is lacking, however, and further investigation is needed.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Approach to Study

This study is an explanatory multiple-case study of grading contracts in a Basic Writing course. This study is grounded in a constructivist philosophical and an epistemological perspective. The purpose of the explanatory approach to the multiple-case study is “to identify plausible relationships shaping the phenomenon” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The explanatory approach focuses on answering the following question: how do these forces interact to result in the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2006)? As it relates to this study, the explanatory approach allowed me to identify how using a contract grade model affected student writing by establishing an environment that provided students with an opportunity to gain power through negotiation of assignments, evaluation, and opportunities for revision practices in the Basic Writing course.

According to Creswell (1997), case study research “is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system, or multiple bounded systems over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case-based themes” (p. 73). Specifically, the participants in the study represent the cases and are bounded by each participant being enrolled in the Basic Writing course. I used a multiple-case study design because there were multiple cases (nine) examined which included students enrolled in the Basic Writing course. Yin (2003) contends that the multiple-case study uses the logic of replication, in which I replicated the procedures for each individual case. The multiple-case study design investigates multiple cases to gain insight into a central phenomenon [Basic Writing students on a grading contract system] (Creswell, 2002; Yin, 2003).
According to Stake (1995), case studies specifically seek out the multiple perspectives of participants involved in the case in which it aims to gather agreed upon and diverse notions of what occurs in the study. I attempted to reduce the “distance” (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p.94) between participants being researched and myself.

**Role of the Researcher**

Instructors who conduct research on their own students, or as Creswell (2013) puts it, researching one’s own “backyard,” must navigate through the roles of instructor and researcher, which, at times, may be at odds with one another (Bell & Nutt, 1999). Because research that is conducted in the classroom tends to study those of a lower social status (i.e. recognizing the hierarchy that exists between instructor and student) (Erickson, 2006), students can then be considered a somewhat “captive population” (Moreno, 1998). The issue of authority over those who are powerless (students) can then become problematic and questions of ethics arise. One example of these types of issues is the possibility that students might feel obligated to participate in the study that may make them feel uncomfortable (Taber, 2007). In order to address this concern, I brought a third party to consent the participants. This allowed the students to feel less pressure to participate in the study. Additionally, informing the participants that I was not aware of who the participants were until final grades were submitted guaranteed the participants’ that their grades were not affected by the study. Another issue is that of transparency to “gatekeepers,” which can sometimes be difficult. The combination of personal connections and various social roles, statuses, and purposes in teacher-research can make it challenging for the instructor/researcher to communicate motivations clearly or to circumvent conflicts of interest or unforeseen consequences that may reverberate long-
term in context-rich educational research. In order to provide transparency to “gatekeepers,” I clearly articulated the purpose of the study as well as how it benefited both the institution as well as the students.

I served as the instructor of the Basic Writing course for this study and served as the sole researcher of the study. Because of my unique role as researcher, I took on an emic position in which I participated as an insider who was a full participant in the phenomenon (Punch, 1998). A third party, however, was included in the consenting process. I created the interview questions, discussion boards, reflective letter prompts, negotiation protocol, and all writing prompts. I conducted all interviews and was responsible for the analysis and safe storage of all data sources. All participant information was de-identified and I ensured all participants full anonymity and that all their information and data gathered were kept confidential.

**Teacher-Research**

When I initially proposed this study, it was essential to prepare for conducting research as an instructor by understanding the definition of teacher-research, the associated ethical issues, and the advantages and disadvantages that were involved when conducting research as an instructor. MacLean and Mohr (1999) provided the differences between traditional educational research and teacher-research. They explained that traditional educational teacher-researchers who develop questions and design studies around those questions and conduct research within the schools are considered objective outside observers of classroom interaction, but when instructors become teacher-researchers, the traditional descriptions of both instructors and researchers change. Teacher-researchers raise questions about
what they think and observe about their teaching and their students' learning. They collect student work in order to evaluate performance, but they also see student work as data to analyze in order to examine the teaching and learning that produced it. (p. x)

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) defined teacher-research as a “systematic and intentional inquiry carried out by instructors” (p. 7). Furthermore, they added that teacher-research is often qualitative and interpretive as it is in the case of this study. While there may be some differences between teacher-research and traditional educational research, teacher-research must deal with the same and some additional ethical issues undertaken by other social sciences (Thorne, 1980).

Despite some of the challenges found in teacher-research, teacher-research is advantageous as it can provide valuable data that can inform education scholarship in a way traditional research cannot. Mitchell (2004) asserted that teacher-researchers are sometimes in the best position to conduct research on their own students, and outside researchers who are often unknown to the students and seemingly present as observers cannot be assumed to be more ethically situated. In some ways, teacher-research acts within the same vein of critical pedagogy. It can be easier for teacher-researcher to share with students the construction process of the research experience, empowering students to engage in the development of the learning process, and empowering instructors to act “rather than being acted upon” and to “become something other than consumers of educational dictums” (Sikes & Potts, 2008). This is fitting as it falls in line with the theoretical framework of the study, critical pedagogy, in that it gives students the opportunity to feel empowered and engage in a process that could potentially produce
change; thus, becoming transformative intellectuals who engage in the transformative process.

**Research Questions**

This study had one major research question and additional guiding questions for the data collection and analysis process in order to investigate and explore a grading contract and its impact on student writing. This research study is explanatory in nature and the questions presented here supported this effort by allowing the possibility of multiple outcomes. Main research question: How does a grading contract affect students’ writing in a Basic Writing course? Ancillary Questions:

a) How, if at all, does a grading contract model yield increased motivation for writing?

b) How, if at all, does a grading contract model impact revision in student writing?

c) How, if at all, does a grading contract model affect “authorship” over students’ own writing?

d) What are students’ perceptions of the *negotiation* process for a grade contract model?

By answering these questions, my goal is to help instructors of composition and composition scholars to more specifically discuss and acknowledge the use of the grading contract as a form of a more responsible social practice within a public educational sphere. Moreover, answering these questions counteracts hegemonic classroom teaching practices and places students’ attention on writing and the improvement of writing and not a biased unilateral grade.
Outline of Methodology

Setting

This study took place in a Basic Writing composition course at an open enrollment state college in the southwest United States from August 2013 to December 2013. Because I was the instructor, I recruited participants from my assigned Basic Writing course. According to the institution’s website, nearly half of the students are of non-Caucasian descent, which historically lends itself to increased remedial rates. Furthermore, the website boasts a high number of adult learners and career changers (non-traditional students) who are not accustomed to traditional college atmospheres. I also chose this site because the setting is fitting for this study due to the relatively high remediation rates. In the fall of 2012, the institution reported 51.5% of students enrolled in either an English or math remedial course (NSHE, 2013). Based on the reported data, students first enrolling in remedial English are less likely to complete a college-level English course (53.7 % versus 87.9 %). Because of the need for remediation, many of these students are often placed in a Basic Writing course (English 100) due to their low placement exam scores or low college entrance exam scores including the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT). Moreover, many of the students who enroll in this four-year college are local and either graduating from the local school district, which ranked low in student achievement (NSHE, 2013). Furthermore, the non-traditional students who have been away from college for more than five years also placed in these remedial courses. Since this institution identifies the Basic Writing course as “remedial,” the setting of this study was fitting because it investigated the
impact of contract grading in the Basic Writing course as a possible approach to improve writing to those labeled as not proficient college level writers.

**Participants and Rationale for Participant Sample**

Participants for the study were recruited through my Basic Writing course (English 100) utilizing a convenience sampling procedure at the site level (Creswell, 2013). Since the study investigated the impact of a grading contract in a Basic Writing course, it was logical to recruit participants from my assigned Basic Writing class. Therefore, criterion sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) was used in that all participants met the criterion of being enrolled in a Basic Writing course (English 100). Basic Writing courses, where the study took place, have a maximum enrollment of thirty students; therefore, I could have recruited anywhere between one and thirty participants of any age, race, and gender for the study. The actual participants in this study were nine students who enrolled in the English 100 basic writing course. Initially ten participants were recruited, but one of the participants opted out of the study.

Students were placed in English 100 based on the placement process established by the admissions office of the college, which indicated students enrolling at the college must take a placement test unless a student submits an ACT score of 18 or SAT critical reading score of 440 (NSHE, 2013) or transfers English credits. If a student submits test scores and places in a lower level English, then the student can opt to take a placement test generated by the institution to increase his or her chances of placing into a higher-level English course. Those students who take the institution generated placement exam and receive a low score place into the English 100 course. Each of the participants of this study was classified as a newly enrolled freshman at that college.
The nine participants in the study were all females ages 18-35. The participant who opted out would have been the only male participant. A breakdown of the participants including age, gender, race, and program is listed in Table 1.

*Table 1*

Participant Profile Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RoseMarie</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Philipina</td>
<td>Speech Pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>History/Pre-Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emelee</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of the participants were recent graduates of the local school district. Only two of the participants were returning students who were enrolled at a college before but were returning to obtain a different degree or finish their initial degree program after an absence. These two participants were also from different states: one from a state on the west coast and one from a state in the Midwest. A majority of the participants were enrolled in a degree program within the sciences whereas two of the participants were enrolled in programs from the social sciences. The Basic Writing course in which this study took place was one of the initial courses taken at the start of their college career. While two of the participants were enrolled in college before, this Basic Writing course was one of their first courses at this particular institution.

Prior to the start of the study, I recognized possible ethical issues that could have potentially come into play. One ethical concern was that students might have been
uncomfortable in deciding to participate in the study. While students might have appeared to be willing to engage in the study, they might actually have participated out of worry over how they would have been graded in the course if they did not consent. Appleman (2009) argued that “the concept of informed consent is compromised in classroom research by the power differentials that already exist between instructor and students and by the question of whether our students/subjects are really informed about what they are consenting to” (p. 55). In order to address this possible issue, I had a third party consent the students for participation in the study toward the end of the semester. I did not know who the participants of the study were until I submitted and officially posted the students’ grades at the culmination of the semester. It is at that point, I received the participant list and I pulled all the data from the online course portal that included all student work, discussions, and activities. Because all students who were enrolled in the class completed all tasks and assignments, those who participated in the study did not complete any extra activities or assignments.

Access

Qualitative research requires gaining access to a research site(s) and gaining permission to study the site that allows for easy collection of data (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I gained access to the research site, an open enrollment state college in the southwest United States, through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university as well as the site in which the study took place. For this case study research, the gatekeeper required information about the study. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggested the researcher provide the gatekeeper answers to the following questions in which I provided the institution through the IRB process:
1. Why was the site chosen for the study?

2. What will be done at the site during the research study?

3. How much time will be spent at the site by the teacher-researcher?

4. Will the teacher-researcher presence be disruptive?

5. How will the results be reported?

6. What will the gatekeeper, the participants, and the site gain from the study?

**Reciprocity, Trust, and Rapport**

Providing reciprocity for the participants is essential. Given the scope of the study, the participants gained an opportunity to contribute to alternative methods of grading. Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to negotiate assignments and grading in their class, which for all of the participants was new and inviting. I gained trust and rapport through dialogue and discussions over the course of the semester. Angrosino (2007) stated that researchers who take on the complete participant position help establish greater rapport with the participants (as cited in Creswell, 2013).

**Ethical Considerations**

This is a research study that had human participants; therefore, this study abided by all rules, regulations, and policies guided by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my research university as well as the site location where the study took place. All participants were informed of their rights through the informed consenting process conducted by the third party. I protected identities of the participants by providing alternative identifiers given to each record used in data collection, analysis, and reporting. While there are not any identifiable risks associated with this study, I was aware that there was a potential for minimal risk dealing with participants not feeling comfortable
with the interview process. I was also aware that there could have been pressures to answer all the questions in the interviews given that I was in an authoritative role. All these considerations informed the research design and I made every effort to mitigate any of these risks. I took every possible caution to ensure that all the participants felt comfortable. Furthermore, I informed all participants that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

**Data Sources, Collection, and Timeline**

According to Creswell (2013), case study research relies on “in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g. interviews, audiovisual material, documents and reports)” (p. 97). The data sources for this study included the following: Online discussion of the negotiation process, essays, reflective letter, and semi-structured interviews. All the data, with the exception of the semi-structured interviews, were all integrated as part of the Basic Writing course. Those who participated in the study were not aware at the time of completing the assignments and activities that these items would be included in the study because introduction of the study and the consenting process did not take place until the end of the semester.

**The Data Collection Process**

At the beginning of the semester, I discussed with the class the overall structure of the course, learning outcomes, course expectations, assignments, and the grading contract. While this was not the first time that I used grading contracts in my college courses, I was confident that most of the students enrolled in this course were not familiar with this type of grading system. Therefore, I spent two class meetings discussing the grade contract in depth. I ensured that students were not aware that the use of a grading
contract was also going to be part of a study until the end of the semester as not to compromise the nature of the data. The first day, I introduced the pre-established grade contract (see Table 2) and explained my purpose and rationale for employing it in my classroom, which was to try to implement other assessment approaches that could promote a focus on learning rather than grades. Since I place heavy emphasis on feedback and revision practices, I wanted to employ a grading model that helped promote this process. While I typically explain to students enrolled in my courses the concept of critical pedagogy and the role of power in the classroom as it relates to the grade contract, I refrained from doing so for this course because I did not want to influence the findings of the data. Since I knew that I would be interviewing participants and asking questions regarding their perceptions of power and negotiation as it related to the grading contract, I did not want my explanation of critical pedagogy to interfere with participants’ authentic responses to the interview questions.

On the first day, I also discussed with students the breakdown of the grading contract as well as how they would have an opportunity to negotiate changes to the initial contract. While I did not go into detail about the negotiation process on the first day, I did let students know that we would further discuss the contract break down in depth and the negotiation process the next class meeting. Prior to the end of the first class meeting, I instructed students to review the syllabus again, the assignments and their descriptions, the expectations of the course, and the grade contract and that if they had any questions to bring them to the next class meeting. The following is a description of the grade contract and negotiation process presented to the students during the class’s second meeting as well as a discussion and description of the findings from the data that include the
interviews, online discussion board, and course reflections as they relate to the grade contract and negotiation process.

**The Grade Contract**

The grade contract framework used for the Basic Writing course and this study stemmed from a hybrid model of Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) and Shor (2009). I pulled the overall structure for the grade model from Danielewicz and Elbows (2009) that focused on the improvement of writing and pulled the negotiation aspect of implementing the contract from Shor (2009). More specifically, I used part of Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) structure that included a contract grade model in which students could earn a course grade of a “B” based on completion of specific activities and not on overly strict, rigid evaluation of student writing quality. Students were required to complete activities that included assignments in which I felt were most reliable in determining whether students achieved the outcomes for a composition course. Some of these assignments included formal essays, digital writing, Twitter, and reading responses using blogs. While Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) evaluated a writing portfolio, I focused on each assignment individually rather than in a portfolio format. While Danielewicz and Elbow contract allowed for students producing a higher quality portfolio earned “A’s” in the course, the participants in the study earned “A’s” based on behavioral components such as absences and submitting assignments in a timely manner as well as higher quality work. Much like Danielewicz and Elbow, the scope of this contract also heavily emphasized a focus on writing and evaluative feedback over grades. What is distinct about Danielewicz and Elbow’s grading contract is that they ignored level of writing quality as ignored for grades up to “B” but focused rather on writing quality of grades.
higher than a “B.” Despite this, the grade contract for my course focused on having to meet a level of work that represented English 100 level of writing. The portion of Shor’s (2009) grading contract that I employed in my grade contract focused on incorporating a process of negotiation that included students negotiation a grade contract that I adapted (see Table 2) from a Creative Commons share document established by James Schirmer (2012). I used this grade contract framework to establish the basic behavioral components that were required by the institution. Although I was using a different method of assessment, I still had to ensure that I navigated within the institution’s policies, procedures, and outcomes for the course. Students were then able to re-negotiate the grade contract at the midpoint of the semester.

I introduced the initial adapted grade contract to the students on the first day. The original grade contract presented to the students prior to the negotiation was broken down into several sections. First, the students were introduced to a chart that I adapted, which had a breakdown of number of absences, late assignments, missed assignments and ignored assignments as they translated into a letter grade as previously described (see Table 2). After the class and I discussed the original contract, students would have an opportunity to negotiate the numbers as well as add or change the structure of the course or make any additional suggestions, expectations, changes, assignment suggestions, or any general remarks regarding the evaluative process. The description presented here is based on the original contract. However, the description of each category applied to both the original and negotiated contract. The definition of the items was non-negotiable to maintain the minimum requirements set forth by the institution.
Table 2

Original Grade Contract

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th># of absences</th>
<th># of late assignments</th>
<th># of missed assignments</th>
<th># of ignored assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>2 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I based these initial numbers on the number of times the class met per week as well as how many assignments that were assigned for the course. Ultimately, as the professor, I felt these numbers were about average for the respective letter grades. Once I introduced the grade chart to the students, I explained that all students would receive an automatic B, with no questions asked, should they complete all the assignments and meet the bare minimum requirements of the course as highlighted in the grade contract. I further explained the definition of each category in more detail. The entire contract is provided in Appendix A.

Data Sources

**Online discussion boards.** The online discussion boards were used solely for the purpose of dialoguing and tracking the contract negotiation within the class. This data source was naturally part of the course. As part of the negotiation process, I asked all students, including non-participants of the study, to participate in posting their discussions, questions, and suggestions for revisions regarding the grading contract. As the instructor, I did not engage in the discussion as not to affect the authenticity of the
posts or influence students. On the first day of class, I introduced students to the basic grading contract I adapted (see Appendix A). Once I reviewed the contract, students had one week to post their questions, concerns, discussions, and contributions or requested changes to the grading contract. This was a voluntary, online discussion over the course of the week in which all students engaged in discussion. At the midpoint of the semester, prior to the official college withdrawal date, this same process took place and followed the same procedures. This process was identified as the “re-negotiation process.” I informed students that they had an opportunity to re-negotiate the contract. I encouraged students to re-evaluate the contract set in place at the beginning of the semester and to offer any changes, concerns, or questions about the contract, policies, and/or assignments. All re-negotiation discussions took place in the online discussion board and was available for one week. All contents of the discussion board were only viewable by those enrolled in the course, including myself. Once the course was completed and I received the list of participants, I analyzed the contents of the online discussion board using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Essays.** I assigned essays to all students as part of coursework throughout the course of the semester. All essay prompts were themed (see Appendix B) but all students had a choice of the topic of their essay. For instance, the first essay was themed “ironies and oddities”: students had to explore and writing about a topic they felt was odd or ironic. The students could choose to write about anything as long as it fell under the theme of odd or ironic. In addition, a reflection on their process and any information they felt was relevant for my grading of their essays accompanied the submission of their essays. Only the essays were evaluated and graded per the course outcomes as well as the
negotiated upon evaluative process discussed at the beginning of the semester via the negotiation protocol (see Appendix C). This data source was naturally part of the course. All students submitted their essays digitally. I evaluated the essays and sent them back to the students. Through this process, I obtained all copies of all student essays including original drafts, revisions, and final drafts. Once the course was completed and I posted the final grades, I received the list of participants and used three essays from each of the participants as data for this study. I conducted a document analysis of assigned essays for each of the participants’ essays. Three essays of each participant were gathered and analyzed from three specific times of the semester: beginning of the semester, the middle of the semester, and the end of the semester. I used the data gathered from the content analysis of the essays to examine students’ level of revision and to determine how a grade contract system affected student writing.

**Final reflective letter.** As part of the course, the participants generated final reflections in the form of a reflective letter (see Appendix D). The participants had the option to write their reflection that addressed specific questions given by the instructor or they had the option of writing a format-free reflection letter. All students, including the participants, were requested to email me a reflection letter that addressed their thoughts about their experience in the course, perceptions of their writing over the course of the semester, the overall structure of the course including the grading contract and the negotiation protocol (see Appendix C). The participants submitted a digital reflection letter to me on the last day of the semester via the online class portal. Upon posting of final grades, I received the list of participants and then gathered the letters from the participants for the study. I conducted a content analysis to analyze the reflective letters.
**Interviews.** After the fall semester, I conducted a majority of the semi-structured interviews at the site of the study, the college campus. For some participants, I conducted interviews at a more convenient location in order to accommodate them. I conducted the interviews and transcribed them myself. I interviewed each participant once. The interview questions (see Appendix E) focused on the following themes: 1) participants’ perception of the advantages and disadvantages of the grade contract 2) participants’ perceptions of their revision practices and motivation for writing and 3) participants’ perceptions on how the grading contract and negotiation process affected their writing and their perceptions of power. I conducted member checks by emailing each participant a copy of the transcription of their interview. All participants emailed me confirming and granting me permission to use the interview transcriptions without any requested revisions or changes. Once I completed the member checks, I conducted a content analysis of the transcript data and open coded.

**Research timeline.** Table 1 provides a basic timeline of the completion of this study. As indicated in the research timeline, the consenting process took place toward the end of the semester. Delaying the consenting process was intentional as not to compromise the data. Since the negotiation data (discussion boards) and essays were going to be part of the data collection, I wanted to ensure they were an authentic representation of the students’ attitudes and actual writing. By delaying the consenting process, I could ensure that any student who had elected to participate had produced data that were not influenced by being participants of the study.
Table 3

Research Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week of August 26, 2013</td>
<td>• Develop interview questions, and reflection letter prompts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Week of September 2, 2013     | • Deploy initial negotiation of grading contract via the online discussion portal.  
                                 | • Ongoing course practices that include essay assignments.             |
| Week of October 14, 2013      | • Engage in re-negotiation of contracts via the online discussion board.|
| Week of November 25, 2013     | • Third party consent of participants                                  |
| Week of December 2, 2013      | • Collect end of the semester reflection letters.                      |
| Week of December 9, 2013      | • Submit final grades.                                                 |
| Week of December 30, 2013     | • Received list of participants                                       
                                 | • Gathered all data from identified participants                      
                                 | • Contacted all participants to schedule interviews.                  |
| Week of January 20 – Week of January 27, 2014 | • Conduct and transcribe interviews. |

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Creswell (2002) indicated the importance of data management. I transcribed all interviews, printed out all online discussions, and collected all necessary participant documents, which included participant essays, and reflective letters. I created digital documents using Microsoft Word to turn any hard copies into digital copies. Digital files included interview transcriptions, discussion board transcripts, participant essays, and participant reflective letters.

I did not use any qualitative software specialty programs for data management and analysis. I analyzed all participant essays, letters, and online discussions and interviews for each case using data analysis that was fitting for the methodological approach, which included data charts, coding charts, and tables created by me on Microsoft Word (see Appendix F). I conducted data analysis for the case studies by
“analyzing data through description of the case and themes of the case as well as cross-case themes” (Creswell, 2007). According to Stake (1995), the researcher whose priority is to merge the findings across cases should use this particular method. This method allowed me to generalize the cases. Table 2 provides detailed information about how each data set answers the research questions. What follows is in depth description of the process I took to analyze my data for each data set.

Table 4

Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does a grading contract model affect basic composition student writing?</td>
<td>• Reflective Letter</td>
<td>Week 16</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Semi-structured interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Essay</td>
<td>Week 2, 6, 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How, if at all, does a grading contract model yield increased motivation for writing?</td>
<td>• Reflective letter</td>
<td>Week 16</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Semi-structured interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Essay</td>
<td>Week 2, 6, 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How, if at all, does a grading contract model impact revision in student writing?</td>
<td>• Reflective letter</td>
<td>Week 16</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Semi-structured interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Essay</td>
<td>Week 2, 6, 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How, if at all, does a grading contract model affect “authorship” over students’ own writing?</td>
<td>• Reflective letter</td>
<td>Week 16</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Essay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Weeks 1-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Online Discussion Board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are students’ perceptions of the negotiation process for a grade contract model?</td>
<td>• Reflective Letter</td>
<td>Week 16</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Semi-structured interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Online Discussion Board</td>
<td>Weeks 1-6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Online discussion board.** In order to analyze the data from the online discussion boards, I conducted a constant comparative method of analysis. Using the constant
comparative method comprises of taking the data and breaking it down into discrete ‘incidents’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or ‘units’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and coding these units of data into categories. Using this method of analysis, I printed all the discussions and negotiation information from the discussion boards. Once I did this, I analyzed the language as a way to look for specific language of the participants. The purpose for analyzing the language was to “reconstruct the categories used by subjects to conceptualize their own experiences and world view (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 334-341); in the case of this study, the participants’ experiences and view of the grade contract negotiation. By using the constant comparison method of analysis, I was able to develop thought that led to both descriptive and explanatory categories (see Appendix F) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After analyzing the language, I established codes based on the similarities and differences of the language used in the discussion boards. Through the constant comparison method of analysis, as I coded, I also analyzed and re-analyzed the data simultaneously. Once I established the various codes that seemed relevant for the scope of the study, I assigned categories to specific content from the discussion board data. Table 5 provides an example of my coding process for the discussion boards.
Prior to establishing the final categories, I changed and redefined certain codes as I revisited the data for further analysis. In order to make clear the process I undertook for the analyzing process, I provided the coding and category charts for this data set in the appendix (see Appendix G). After refining, identifying, and exploring the relationships with this data set, I supported and added to the exploratory model in which this study takes on for the methodology.

**Interview and reflective letter data.** In order to analyze the interview and reflective letter data, I conducted a content analysis for both data sets. First, I transcribed the interview data and printed the reflective letters for each participant. Second, I carefully read the data several times and began determining the data answered the research question and ancillary questions. Next, I established a coding schedule, which

### Table 5
**Discussion Board Coding Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Data Excerpt</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Code for Excerpt</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Regarding the feedback expectations, I personally would like to hear how I could improve on not only grammar, word choice, spelling, and punctuation (especially comma splice and proper citation for sources), but also diction, voice, and organization, and staying within the same tense which I have had troubles with in the past.”</td>
<td>Demonstrates some level of understanding of expectations of college level writing. Specifies high school proficiency expectations. Freshman as beginners.</td>
<td>Evaluative – Feedback/ Grammar and Style. Demands for Instructor.</td>
<td>Students: Expectations of Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&quot;I agree -&gt; I think that blogs shouldn’t be held up to the essay standard&quot;</td>
<td>Agreed with other students. Addresses the difference between serious writing and fun writing.</td>
<td>Evaluative – Grading. Evaluative – Purpose. Evaluative – Purpose/ Genre.</td>
<td>Students: Expectations of Instructor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
consisted of tables for each unit of analysis. Upon establishing tables, I created rows for which each unit data was prepared for additional coding. Each column was a dimension or theme for analysis, in this case, the research questions for the study as well as the name of the participant (see Appendix G). There were no overlap in dimensions because each column represented a research question or ancillary questions.

Once I had initially established the tables, I created a coding manual along with the coding schedule. Table 6 provides an example of coding for the reflective letters.

Table 6

**Reflective Letters Coding Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Data Excerpt</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Code for Excerpt</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>My overall feelings about the contract are positive. I actually learned more in this class than I actually learned in high school, that’s sad to say but I actually did</td>
<td>Repeats ‘actually’</td>
<td>Perceived level of learning</td>
<td>Learning About Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I feel like I wrote way better as a writer</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Improved Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I feel like writing is my worst subject, personally, but I felt like having you telling me what I was doing and to get the feedback for our essays and know that we have a chance to fix our essays...that’s what helped</td>
<td>Feedback as part of writing process</td>
<td>Perceived level of learning</td>
<td>Writing and Reading Processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I felt like I was able to learn more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning about writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This manual contains the list of codes for each category that relate and are valid for each dimension in order to provide reliability and consistency (see Appendix G). I did not use any software for the analysis of this data set as I used Microsoft Word and conducted the analysis manually. Once the categories were established, I provided further analysis by comparing the data to the other data sets in order to gain insight into the relationship and trends of each data set. I provide a thick and rich description of the findings that emerged from these data in Chapter 4.
Essays. I provide a description of the data analysis process for this data set in Chapter 4 in order to clarify the analysis process and findings without confusion.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

While there are various terms and strategies to document the “accuracy” of qualitative studies, Crewsell (2013) pointed to the term validation as a process for adding value and accuracy of a study. Furthermore, Creswell and Miller (2000) focused on eight various validation strategies to make research studies credible and rigorous. I aimed to achieve credibility for this study by using two of Creswell and Miller’s (2000) validation strategies: triangulation and thick, rich description. The data were triangulated with the data that were collected in this study (i.e., interviews, documents, and student work).

As the instructor of the Basic Writing course and researcher, I provided a section in Chapter 1 describing my use of the grading contract in a pilot study and my position on grading contracts in the Basic Writing class as well as any biases associated with these descriptions.

I achieved thick, rich description by describing the complete data analysis process and findings as well as describing and presenting the voices of the participants under each and by providing detailed descriptions of each of the cases.

Chapter Summary

This study used a multiple-case study design that consisted of gathering data that included online discussion boards, participant essays, participant reflective letters, and participant interviews in order to determine the impact of grading contracts in a Basic Writing college course. This study aimed to provide a pedagogy that empower students and improve the writing of basic writers.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

“To change the world through work, to ‘proclaim’ the world, to express it, and to express oneself are the unique qualities of human beings. Education at any level will be more rewarding if it stimulates the development of this radical, human need for expression” (Freire, 1985, p. 21).

While change in educational contexts take on many forms and is often complex, the way we go about educational change can be as simple as working collectively with those who matter most—the students. The findings from this study demonstrate how a grade contract serves as a form of change in order positively to affect student writing, particularly that of basic writers.

The primary research question for this study asks whether a grade contract had an overall impact on student writing in a basic writing course. Based on the findings from the data, a grade contract has a positive impact on the overall writing of basic writers. By implementing a grade contract in a basic writing course, participants were able to negotiate with the instructor the overall grade structure, evaluative feedback, and behavioral expectations that outlined the course. In order to determine whether the grade contract and all that it entailed had an impact on overall student writing, I analyzed data and determined there were factors contributing to the overall positive impacts on writing. Through this process, I was able to determine that having a grade contract as a form of assessment increased participants’ level of writing, authorship, and revision practices. In addition, through the negotiation process, participants’ perceived level of shared control
with the instructor provided a level of motivation that directly affected the positive results of participant writing, authorship and revision.

The key findings obtained from nine in-depth interviews, five course reflection letters, two negotiation processes from an online discussion board, and nine participants’ essays including first drafts and final drafts (total of 27 essays) in order to answer each research question provides support and evidence that a grade contract has a positive impact on basic writing students’ overall writing. Through detailed description, I first aim to answer the major research question, which asks how students’ writing was affected by the grade contract model by presenting the analysis of the participants’ essays as well as the findings from the overall perceptions the participants had about their writing after having experienced the grade contract model. Then, I present the findings from the other data sources that answered the questions of how the grade contract model affected participants’ motivation, revision, and authorship. Next, I describe in detail the process of negotiation as well as the findings from the students’ perception of power through the process of negotiation and how it directly affected motivation for writing, authorship, and revision. While multiple findings were derived from each data set, I present the findings here for each research question through narrative and description and present details from the data that support and explain each finding.

The Class

This study took place in a Basic Writing college course at a state college in the Southwest United States in the fall of 2013. Students who were enrolled in this course either were placed in this course by their college entrance exam scores (SAT or ACT) or by an approved institution-generated English placement exam. Two professors in the
department of English scored each placement exam the summer prior to the fall semester by assigning a number between one and four. Those students who received a score of three or below enrolled in the Basic Writing course. The Basic Writing course was 16 weeks and took place between August and December 2013. The class met every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. While some basic writing or remedial courses do not count for college credit, this course did because it was five college credits, which meant students who successfully passed the course would then be enrolled in English 102 for the next semester. Ultimately, the Basic Writing course only differed from the First-Year course in that it required two additional credits. A majority of students, except for two, who enrolled in this course, were freshman who recently graduated from high school in the local school district. At the start of the semester, 30 students enrolled in the course. By the midpoint of the semester, eight students had withdrawn from the course, leaving 22 students enrolled. Of the 22 students, nine students were participants of the study.

**Impact on Writing**

In order to answer the major research question and to determine how a grade contract model affected the participants’ overall writing during the course of the semester, I gathered and analyzed three sets of essays for each participant. While there are many ways in which to determine improvement of writing over time, I decided to analyze the writing by examining the revision practices for each student. I chose this form of analysis based on Nancy Sommers’s (1980) study of the revision strategies of student writers and experienced writers. Since this was a basic writing course, I wanted to determine growth based on the participants’ revision practices of formal essays in order to conclude whether they were demonstrating writing and revision strategies of more
experienced writers as described by Sommers’s (1980) study. While the participants engaged in a variety of writing exercises including blogs, in-class writing practices, and free writing activities, I chose to analyze the formal essays, as those would be the essays found in formal composition courses as well as across academic disciplines.

According to Sommers (1980), basic writers, or as she indicated “student writers,” rarely use the term revision to indicate changes to their writing. Specifically, she discusses how the term revision is a term heard by student writers but used by instructors. Sommers stated that student writers see revision as a process of simply “cleaning up their paper” by eliminating or “scratching out” words or sentences they feel are repetitious or do not sound right, indicating that student writers often worry about cleaning up speech over any other aspect of revision. Student writers are accustomed to a linear process of writing, which, as Sommers (1980) found, restricts students’ development of ideas and their ability to make changes to these ideas later in their writing process. While Sommers did not claim students are not able to revise or are unwilling to revise, students have been accustomed to a restricted and narrow way of revising that simply portrays revision as a clean-up process that ends when they feel no errors have been made. In short, student writers attempt to eliminate errors rather than engage in an evolving, recursive epistemic process that is part of writing and thinking about writing.

In order to conclude whether the participants improved in writing through their revision, I analyzed the participants’ essays by determining the types and frequency of revisions made. I conducted this form of analysis in order to determine whether the participants (basic writing students) were practicing revision strategies that resembled that of more experienced writers as shown by Sommers’s (1980) study. According to
Sommers (1980), experienced writers used the term rewriting and revision, which focus on more global and rhetorical revisions. The goal of revision for some experienced writers is finding the form and shape of the topic or argument of the essay. By analyzing the participants’ revisions of the draft to final paper, I hoped to be able to determine whether the participants made changes based on patterns and development of their draft in preparation for the final draft. Ultimately, an important difference between the student writer and experienced writer is that student writers attempt to make their writing fit a pre-structured understanding of writing while experienced writers attempt to make meaning through their writing.

**Writing Samples**

For the writing samples, I chose to gather participants’ first, third, and final assigned essays in order to determine growth over the course of the semester via level of revision. The first essay (essay A) was assigned at the start of the semester, the third essay (essay C) was assigned at the midpoint of the semester, and the final essay (essay E) was their very last assigned essay. Each essay was themed differently and asked students to generate their own topic for writing under each theme. For instance, for the first essay, students were asked to write about something they felt was ironic or odd and explore the topic using any writing pattern (see Appendix B). While essay A and B did not take on a certain format, essay C had but one requirement, to persuade. For the purpose of this study, I did not require students to submit a rough draft prior to submitting the final essay as a way to observe student effort in the course. However, students were encouraged to submit as many drafts as possible to receive extensive feedback from me prior to submitting a final draft. Furthermore, students underwent two
writing workshops, which consisted of both peer review and instructor feedback. Therefore, prior to submitting the final version of each essay, students would have had the opportunity to receive feedback multiple times during the writing process. Once the students submitted their final drafts of each essay, I provided feedback for students using the track changes and comment tool on Microsoft Word, and granted them a “complete” mark or a “needs revision” mark. If a student received a “complete” mark, he or she was no longer required to resubmit but had the option to make changes in order to gain more practice in revision and improve writing. If a student received a “needs revision” mark, the student had one week either to make changes taking the suggestions I made or to make changes on his or her own. Once the student resubmitted a revised essay, I would engage in the same process all over again. If a student still needed revision changes, then I would conference with the student to discuss in more depth his or her essay and possible suggestions for revision. Since I focused solely on essays A, C, and E, it is important to point out that students had the opportunity to revise final copies for both essay A and C. However, students did not have an opportunity to revise essay E after submitting a final copy because it was at the end of the semester and I treated it as a final assessment in lieu of students having to take a final exam.

**Coding Participant Revisions**

In order to gather data on revisions, I coded the students’ essays for the number of revisions and the types of revisions that took place. In order to code these revisions, I used an initial rough draft submitted voluntarily by the student and the absolute final version of each essay. If the student did not submit a rough draft, I used a version of an essay that was marked as “needed revision” and the absolute final version of the essay.
The drafts used for the coding were ones submitted after two writing workshops and/or received some feedback from me. After gathering the essays, I examined a total of twenty drafts and final copies (n=20); seven were missing due to either not submitting a draft or not completing the assignment. While my goal was not to examine types and frequency of revision as they related to the type of essay written or feedback, findings indicated that the students submitted the least number of drafts for the persuasive essay, which they submitted at the end of the semester and did not have an opportunity to revise.

**Coding Scheme**

I coded the very first draft and absolute final draft of each essay (if drafts were provided) submitted based on a scheme that I slightly adapted (see Appendix H) from Yagelski (1995) who developed his scheme for revisions by adapting schemes from Bridwell (1980), and Faigley and Witte (1981). While Yagelski’s (1995) coding scheme was used to allow for broad comparisons between the findings of his study and previous studies of revision, my adaptation to this scheme used Yagelski’s (1995) four classification of revisions (surface, structural, content, and stylistic) in addition to putting these classifications into two categories: lower level and higher level. I added these levels of revisions to determine whether basic writing students were using experienced writer revision strategies (Sommers, 1980) as well as how frequently they were using them. My intended goal for this scheme was to classify the types of revisions students were doing and to determine whether students were conducting more high-level revisions than low-level revisions. The lower level changes in the coding scheme included only surface level changes that included a focus on mechanics (Faigley & Witte, 1981) and what is commonly known as editing by advanced writers (Sommers, 1980). The high-level
changes included content, structural, and stylistic changes. I categorized these classifications as high-level changes because these types of revisions are not typical of basic writers as indicated in Sommers’s (1980) study of student writers. Furthermore, I classified these as high-level revisions because of the nature of the revisions made within the structural, content, and stylistic categories. In a sense, basic writing students engaging in high-level revision practices are demonstrating skills beyond the commonly classified definition of basic writers. While the goal of this coding scheme was not to provide an exact definition or establish a definitive definition of revision types, I did want to provide descriptions of what each classification and category meant in the context of revision.

**Essay Analysis**

In order to track all the changes made from the draft and final copies of each essay, I used the Microsoft Word comparison tool. I wanted to ensure that I did not miss any revision changes. Once the comparison was complete, I created a new document that included every single change made from the draft to the final copy (see Figure 1).
Figure 1. Example essay of tracked revisions using Microsoft Word merge tool, Student Rosemarie.

Using the coding scheme, I coded each change and created a tally chart to indicate the number of changes and the specific type of change (see Table 7).
Once I established a tally of the frequency and type of revisions made according to the coding scheme, I then examined the data from the essay revision analysis with the data from the interviews and reflective letters in order to identify, if any, potential connections between the results of the coded essays and the participants’ perception of the impacts of their writing at it related to the grade contract.

Findings of Essay Analysis

In order to add depth to the study about the impact of a grade contract on student writing, I analyzed all the essays from the nine cases and presented these cases in two different groups. While I did not initially anticipate classifying the participants in two groups, I decided present the findings of the participants in the two groups based on the distinct differences between the participants. Based on the findings that emerged from the
data, I classified the participants in the first group, Group 1, as those demonstrating higher number of revisions and higher level of revisions as well as those who submitted drafts for all three essays. I classified the participants in the second group, Group 2, as those who did not fully submit drafts as well as those who demonstrated decreased number of revisions and lower level of revisions for all three essays. Table 8 provides a breakdown of types of revision and frequency for Group 1.

Table 8

**Group 1 Revisions and Frequency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Rosemary</td>
<td>Rosemary submitted a half-finished draft.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Emily</td>
<td>Emily deleted entire draft of essay and revised the entire essay. Her marks are for new paragraphs and new content.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 provides a breakdown of types of revision and frequency for Group 2.

Table 9

**Group 2 Revisions and Frequency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 2</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Amanda</td>
<td>Amanda did not submit a draft but only a final copy. Amanda did not complete assignment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britni</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Amber</td>
<td>Amber submitted a half-finished draft but completed the essay for final copy. Amber submitted the essay for final copy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Stephanie</td>
<td>Stephanie submitted a completed draft but made only surface level changes for final copy. She was asked to revise in order to receive a &quot;completed&quot; mark but made no changes and received an &quot;incomplete&quot; grade for this assignment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings indicate that there were more occurrences of revision within Group 1 than Group 2. In addition, the types of revision and the level in which the participants executed them were noticeable within Group 1. Table 10 contains a comparison chart of the average number of revisions within each of the two groups.

Table 10

Comparison Chart of Average Number of Revisions Across Group 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Type</th>
<th>Essay 1</th>
<th>Essay 3</th>
<th>Essay 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Lower Level</td>
<td>Higher Level</td>
<td>Lower Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>8.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group 1 averaged the most number of revisions for all three essays. The highest number of revisions in this group took place at the higher level, particularly within the stylistic changes. Of the total percentage of revisions from Group 1, 24% were surface changes, 8% were structural, 31% were content and 37% were stylistic changes indicating that more than 50% of all revisions were “high-level” changes. The most number of revisions for Group 1 took place for essay three. It is important to note that essay three was an essay in which students had more time to work with because the class negotiated to remove essay four, which immediately would have followed the third essay.

Group 2 averaged the least number of revisions for all three essays. After the initial essay, the average number of revisions decreased. Although there were not many revisions for this group, 21% of total revisions from Group 2 were surface changes, while 11%, 31% and 37% were structural, content and stylistic changes indicating that there
were still more high-level changes made even within this group. The most number of revisions for Group 2 took place for essay one versus essay three as demonstrated with Group 1. As indicated, the average number of revisions for Group 2 took place within the structural, content and stylistic revision types. In order to compare the revision types between the two groups, I provide a description and example of each classification for Group 2. Group 1 demonstrated more high-level changes than Group 2, particularly within the content and stylistic categories. While there were no data for Group 2 concerning revisions for Essay 5, Group 1 still maintained some level of consistency with revisions they made.

In the following section, I present the findings and provide an analysis of the similarities and differences in revision types between the two groups.

**Group One Revision Types**

Group 1 consisted of four participants – Rosemarie, Janine, Silvia, and Emelee - who demonstrated consistent revisions for all three essays as well as a high number of revisions within both the low and high level of revisions category. While there were indications of low-level revisions, higher numbers occurred within the high-level category.

Table 11

*Group 1 Average Number of Revisions*
As indicated, the greatest number of revisions for Group 1 took place within the structural, content and stylistic revision types. Although I present all of the classifications in the writing samples below, my goal here was to portray the specific classifications in order to feature the types of revisions the participants made. A more descriptive definition of each classification is located in the coding scheme chart (see Appendix H).

Revisions classified under the “structural” category were revisions that focused on the organization and paragraphing of an essay. For instance, Figure 2 highlights a structural change made by Silvia.

"Starbucks represents something beyond a cup of coffee." –said Howard Mark Schultz—a
American businessman and writer best known as the chairman and CEO of Starbucks great.
Starbucks represents something beyond a cup of coffee showing a sense of importance towards
the company image itself aside from the coffee and quality coffee or of the beverages and food
they sell.

Today, Starbucks has it become more of an than 16,000 stores globally including about
11,000 in a style trend. Are people the United States. The expansion of this company has been
incredibly large now being influenced available almost anywhere. Not only in Starbucks coffee
shops but in local Grocery stores and gas stations where convenient quick mix packs are sold that
can be prepared at home or on the go by celebrities that drink this coffee? anyone at any time.

*Figure 2.* Example of structural revision, student Silvia.

In this writing sample, Silvia altered the first part of her initial introductory paragraph by adding lines to her first paragraph, which only included a single quote. For some basic writers, starting an essay with a quote is a typical strategy for catching the reader’s attention. In this sample, she added information that enhances the paragraph as a whole. In her second paragraph, Silvia deleted a majority of her writing and replaced it with additional information combining both structural and content changes. Nevertheless,
more structural changes took place at this level while adding some content. In Figure 3, Silvia also executed a structural change by adding a new paragraph between pre-existing paragraphs from her first draft.

Figure 3. Example of structural revision adding paragraphs, student Silvia.

Silvia’s addition of the paragraph between pre-existing paragraphs from her draft highlights reflects the process of a more experienced writer. Silvia was aware that information or a paragraph enhances the order and depth of the essay in order to create a more logical flow.

In Figure 4, Rosemarie demonstrated the “content” category, which included revisions that focused on the adding or deleting of content in order to establish
understanding of a subject by clarifying, enhancing, or extending ideas of the subject matter.

Figure 4. Example of content revisions, student Rosemarie.

Rosemarie focused her revisions on adding specific content in order to support her claim regarding why men could not understand the feelings of women during menstruation because they do not have the organs in order to understand these feelings. By adding this additional information, Rosemarie was able to provide justification for the question she posed in the sentence prior to the added content. Janine’s writing sample provided another example of adding content in the form of extending the issue that was being discussed. For instance, in Figure 5, Janine provided her opinion of the opposite side of the issue as to why she felt people get married for the wrong reasons.
Why do people put such an emphasis on wedding rings? I think it is a hope that someone will actually take the commitment seriously. Maybe hoping that their spouse would think twice about breaking the commitment, if they saw the wedding ring on their hand. Maybe hoping others will see the wedding, and turn away knowing that the person is in a committed marriage. In today’s society, we are so likely to say divorce if things don’t work, so they can divorce. Maybe that is the way they were raised, or maybe they came from a broken home. Some I think just do not care if the person is wearing a wedding ring. Whatever the case is, I have a strict belief that marriage is a one time thing. It is something that takes work every single day. If I think some people get married for many wrong reasons such as; for the sake of saving I am married, thinking it is the right thing to do, or even just to have the big wedding. What I have come to understand, is that there is a big difference in having a wedding and getting married. Anyone can have a wedding, but it takes someone who really wants a marriage for them to understand the value, and commitment a wedding ring represents. If I have to come across any of these situations in

Figure 5. Example of content revision, student Janine.

In this sample, Janine provided content in the form of defining what it means to get married for the wrong reasons, which balances her own definition of what marriage means to her in the sentence prior to her adding the new content.

The “stylistic” revisions included lexical and phrase changes that added rhetorical changes that affected voice and style. In previous studies (see Bridwell & Faigley, 1980; Sommers, 1980; Yagelski, 1995), stylistic revisions were classified as low-level changes. However, for this study, I classified stylistic revisions as a high-level revision change because the analysis of the participants’ essays demonstrated stylistic changes that directly affected voice and personal style, which is often limited in the revision strategies of basic writers. In one instance, Janine made a stylistic change that lent a more serious tone to her paragraph (see Figure 6).
A marriage is something very sacred that is a part of our culture and religious beliefs. That marriage is stated as "till death do us part as stated" in our wedding vows. Although not everyone may share the same cultural or religious beliefs, I still believe that every marriage, especially those with children, should be attempted to be saved, especially if children are involved. Of course, I am not talking about if there is some sort of physical abuse or some other kind of safety issues on one’s life then it may be best to move on. I really believe that most married couples "at the crossroads of divorce sometimes struggle with a false choice: Do I divorce so that I can find happiness again, or do I stay together for the family’s sake and remain unhappy?" (Hawkins, & Eckrell, 2009, ppg. 10). Married couples need to remember that marriages are not always perfect. They have up’s, down’s, and the true test of one’s commitment is willingness to stay and work through the hard times.

**Figure 6.** Example of stylistic revision, student Janine.

In the first line, Janine removed the article “a” as a way to define marriage on a grander scale. In the next line, Janine restructured her sentence to include a subordinate clause at the beginning of her sentence. While many instructors would flag such a sentence as not appropriate, although grammatically correct when she added the last part to the sentence, Janine felt comfortable enough to make this stylistic change. In the middle of the paragraph, Janine also eliminated the line “I am not talking about,” demonstrating she recognized the perceived informal tone it portrayed.

In Figure 7, Emeelee executed stylistic changes by eliminating several lines from her beginning paragraph in order to take on a tone that was more formal. Emeelee’s initial draft served more as a brainstorm in order to get her ideas down. The revisions made demonstrated her deeper understanding of the concept of time by adding her observations.
rather than just a string of ideas. Moreover, she rearranged words for some of the sentences to make her ideas more clear.

```
It’s ironic that in our culture everyone’s biggest complaint is about not having enough time; yet nothing terrifies us more than the thought of eternity.” by Dennis Miller. In American society today the aspect of time is taken for granted. When looking around myself I observed that the people I came in contact with want more time to be able to do more in their life. However, when a person is given more time they don’t know what they want to do with it. I asked myself why eternity is such a scary factor in life. I never truly understood why people did that to themselves. I found that religion, life style, and death affect American society views. (personal communication). In my essay Dennis Miller’s quote helps me expand on the argument that people are scared of the unknown because of what influences them. When I focus on the world around me other people have a tendency to make comments about wanting to have more time. However, when a person is given an unlimited amount of time, all they do is get stressed out and become terrified. I never understood how the notion of eternity can terrify a person. However, when examining eternity I found that religion, lifestyle, and death each play a different role. Religion lays down the foundation of how a person is taught to see the notion of eternity. This allows a person’s lifestyle to influence them on how the interpretation of eternity can be
```

Figure 7. Example of stylistic revision, student Emelee.

**Group 2 Revision Types**

Group 2 consisted of five participants – Amanda, Brittni, Amber, Stephanie, and Alicia - who performed few revisions for the first two essays. For the final essay, none of the participants submitted a draft at any point during the writing process; therefore, there are no indications of number and types of revisions. The most numbers of revisions for this group was within the high-level category, specifically under the stylistic classification.
In Brittni’s writing sample, she demonstrated a structural change that included moving a paragraph in order to reorganize her essay. For instance, in Figures 8 and 9, Brittni executed the structural change in a way that did not add new content but deleted sections in order to reorganize her paragraphs.

Figure 8. Example structural revision part 1, student Brittni.
Figure 9. Example structural revision part 2, student Brittni

Amber performed a similar structural change by deleting a large portion of her paragraph. While she did not move any paragraphs for reorganizing purposes, she did make the choice to remove text that she felt did not fit the organization of the essay (see Figure 10).
Figure 10. Example structural revision, student Amber.

In Amber’s writing sample, she removed the first part of the paragraph that included something similar to brainstorming her ideas using her voice as well as the middle portion that included statistics as a way to support her opinion. Amber replaced this portion by discussing the topic, a specific television show, and a description of the show to demonstrate her awareness and understanding of the show and then goes on to discuss her perception of the show from a personal point of view.

There were minimal, but some revisions made in the content classification. While Group 1 demonstrated higher frequency of content changes, Group 2 revealed there was some awareness of what it meant to add content to support ideas. In Alicia’s writing
sample (see Figure 11), she showed her understanding for the need to support evidence by indicating sources and readings in which she supported her claim. At the beginning, she replaced the words “a reading” with the actual reading in which she was referencing. In the middle section, she added additional content to enhance and extend her ideas as well as add specificity to her ideas.

In a reading, there was an article "Scarcity and Choices," author Robert Schenk explains how U.S. citizens are limited to resources such as manpower, machinery and natural resources in which the government ceases us from receiving as much as we can. Schenk gathered a group of classmates what had a debate on economic ideas/choices. They were asked, and whether people in the U.S. should have a say on actions taken place in the world, or if people were given a voice in society’s laws, could there be equality, and how would the outcome be. It was one student who said they should rely on a president to take the lead of our nation. In the survey, 60% percent of the students agreed that people should have a desire in making an effort in society/government choices such as to them being satisfied for the amount of goodfood and services that can be produced. Also another student another 40% argued that if people would

Figure 11. Example content revisions, student Alicia.

For Group 2, a majority of the revisions for content were simply finishing the remainder of the essay by adding paragraphs in order to complete the assignment.

While the stylistic changes within Group 2 were not as high as Group 1, changes at the word level were more prominent than at the phrase level in some instances.
Overall, many people believe it’s normal to be controlled by the system of things in which they say choose to abide by. Both of these things are issues that we don’t address so often and we tend to decide to leave them as is. Neither side is right nor wrong, but there are ways to always work around this social life we are living in today. I believe that for once we should at least take a stand and bring up the facts in this lifestyle society that is not properly established. Seeking through struggles are what we Americans go through every day, and sometimes that it often takes time, and patience. We have a voice so, but in order to have a resolution we must speak now.

Figure 12. Example word level revision, student Alicia.

Although this can be a predominantly low-level revision (as seen in the changing of the coordinating conjunctions), the changes in Alicia’s writing sample were not changes to avoid any awkward constructions but to enhance the tone and purpose of her writing that highlights her voice and adds to her style.

**Impact on Writing: Participants’ Perceptions**

As a way to determine whether the participants perceived the grade contract had an impact on their writing, I gathered and analyzed the data from the interviews and reflective letters as a way to provide more depth to the findings from the essay analysis. In this section, I present the findings from the data of the two groups in order to capture the participants’ general perceptions of their writing over the course of the semester. Overall, the findings indicated that participants perceived the grade contract had a positive impact on their writing from four dimensions: learning about writing, improvement of writing, writing and reading processes, and overall attitudes about writing.
Learning About Writing

Although participants from both groups articulated a positive experience from the grade contract that led to increased understanding of writing, those participants in Group 1 emphasized an increased motivation for learning about writing whereas those in Group 2 focused on what they learned by comparing their experiences with high school and their current college English experiences.

From Group 1, for instance, Rosemarie articulated, “she was able to learn more” through the contract system. Silvia went on to describe how the grade contract motivated her to want to learn about writing because of her perceived new way of learning.

My overall feeling, I liked it a lot. I wish that all my classes had that. You just get bored of the regular A, B, C grades then you just don’t try enough or try hard because it’s just the same thing and the grading contract is a whole new experience. You actually want to try and you actually want to. It’s just learning in a whole new way.

Silvia described her familiarity with a traditional grading system, which she argued decreases the motivation to learn, in this case, about writing. While she stated that she was able to learn in a new way, she also added specifics about what she was able to learn. Silvia described these specifics, “The knowledge I’ve learned has been very helpful now being able to distinguish little parts in writing that can completely change the whole tone and meaning of the pieces of writing being extremely helpful to better understand the author’s point of view.” Through Silvia’s process of revision, she was able to determine how even minor changes to a piece of writing can alter writing significantly. This
awareness is important, particularly to basic writing students and their process of revision.

Some participants from Group 2 articulated their perceptions of their learning as it related to writing and the grade contract. Alicia described her perceptions of the grade contract and its overall impact on her learning about writing by making a comparison to high school. She stated, “My overall feelings about the contract are positive. I actually learned more in this class than I actually learned in high school, that’s sad to say but I actually did.” Although Alicia is limited in her experience with college writing, she based her comparison on what she had come to know about writing from her experiences in high school.

While Alicia did not go into detail about what she specifically learned, Amanda and Brittni, also in Group 2, both described what they learned from the course. Amanda stated “This semester, my eyes were opened about the stuff I did wrong when writing. I’ve always had a problem with comma splicing and I’m still getting used to all the comma rules you taught. I still have to work on that.” Amanda’s sentiment extends the notion of the basic writer who focuses on error and mistakes rather than learning about the possibilities of writing. Her need to learn the “rules” of commas places her focus on removing error rather than revision as a more experienced writer would. Brittni describes what she learned about writing stating:

There are so many small words that can change a whole sentence and the meaning it has to the person reading it. The result of that is papers that are unclear. The importance of understanding small grammatical errors was underestimated but
after seeing it, it has changed the perspective of how I read and that was exercise in the times we had workshops and in our homework readings.

While Brittni described an emphasis on learning about grammatical errors, she also highlighted how the goal was not to simply fix the error but also to understand how these errors have an impact on the way a reader reads and understands the writing.

**Improvement of Writing**

Based on the findings, improvements in writing for participants from Group 1 highlight specific aspects of writing improvements. While those participants from Group 2 discuss overall improvements, they do so by comparing their current writing level to that of their level of writing from high school. In this regard, the participants from Group 2 measure their level of writing from their high school assessments whereas those from Group 1 measured their improved level of writing from their actual writings from the course.

Emelee, who was part of group 1, described how the grade contract motivated her to write, “It made me want to write because I am not a very good writer but with the grading contract, I actually improved.” Emelee was able to recognize her own improvements in her writing. She later added her perceived overall improvements, “I saw the huge improvements that I made in my writing and just discussions and just everything.” Silvia, also in Group 1, saw improvements with her writing. She specified exactly where she saw the most improvements.

Overall, I have grown so much as a writer. I’ve improved on organizing my essays properly and learning how to write intro paragraphs and create good thesis statements which I didn’t know how to do. What I continue to struggle with
would be expanding my vocabulary more and being able to use different transition words to begin my sentences.

Silvia not only discussed the areas in which she improved but also the areas where she felt she needed still to improve. Recognizing these areas of improvement shows her awareness of her writing strengths and weaknesses.

Some participants from Group 2 like Stephanie stated that under the grade contract model that she “wrote better as a writer.” While she did not discuss specifics of her improvement, Amanda and Brittni both discussed in some detail their perceived improvements. Brittni went on to describe her perceived improvements:

One of the areas in which I have seen the most improvement has been in my sentence structure and avoiding the fact of repeating myself. The area in which I still struggle and that is my biggest challenge is trying to not sound boring or write like I did in high school, I am slowly growing out of that old high school English class mentality.

Brittni made the comparison of her improved learning regarding sentence structure and style with how she wrote in high school. Her sentiments about the high school English class mentality underlines an awareness of the different demands of writing in specific education spaces. While Amanda did not get into a lot of detail about her improvements, she did articulate that overall she felt like she improved stating, “At this point, I believe I have improved. I wasn’t used to writing somewhat lengthy papers since I was used to 1-2 pages of writing only.” While Amanda did not state specific improvements, her ability to write longer papers was evidence of improvement for her. Ultimately, having a grade
contract in place allowed for the participants to engage in high-level revision, which led to, improved writing.

**Writing Process**

Through the grade contract, students had multiple opportunities to revise and opportunities to improve on their writing as well as establish their process of writing for the course. Two of the participants, one from each group, discussed the perceived impact the grade contract had on their writing processes. While only two participants discussed their views on the impact of a grade contract on their writing process, there is a difference between the groups in how the grade contract had an impact on their writing process. Rosemarie, who was in Group 1, used my feedback as part of her writing process, which indicates that the revision process was of importance during her writing process. While Britni, who was in Group 2, emphasized a fear of having to revise signifying that her writing process treated revision as something she wanted to avoid having to include in her writing process.

Rosemarie articulated her perception stating, “I will continue to struggle with grammar in my writing, but I think that after this class I have a better writing process.” While Rosemarie recognizes areas in which she struggled, she did recognize that she established a better process of writing for herself. She later added how the process of feedback worked for her. Rosemarie stated, “I feel like writing is my worst subject, personally, but I felt like having you telling me what I was doing and to get the feedback for our essays and know that we have a chance to fix our essays…that’s what helped.” Having the opportunity to revise was key for Rosemarie’s writing process. Her feeling of having a second chance also played a role.
Brittni discussed her writing process as it related to the grade contract. She discussed the grade contract having an impact on her process of writing as it associated with a fear of receiving a low grade. She stated, “When I wanted to slack, the contract didn’t let me because it was something that was always in the back of my mind.” While her view of the contract and her writing process might be viewed as a way to keep students on track, it could also be perceived as something that re-establishes the notion of grade orientation. In either case, she did not make it clear whether it was a positive or negative trait.

**Attitudes About Writing**

The participants discussed how the grade contract had an impact on their overall attitudes about writing in the course. In discussing whether there was an advantage or disadvantage to the grade contract, only those from Group 1 expressed the perceptions they held about writing. Janine articulated, “I don’t think there was a disadvantage, the contract motivated me to do my work. For the first time, I actually got something besides a C in the class.” For Janine, having the contract in place motivated her to write for the class as well as improve her writing. Emelee shared similar thoughts by saying, “At first, I wasn’t sure about the grade contract because I have never done it and to me it was a little confusing but as the course progressed, I started to really like it. It makes me want to write more.” Emelee expressed her views of the contract providing a motivation for her to write more than she typically would. Silvia added her change of mentality about writing in general by describing her shift of how she used to view subjects for writing, “This course has changed my mentality towards different subjects in different forms such as understanding what information given is credible and which isn’t.”
Authorship, Revision, Negotiation and the Grade Contract

In this section, I attempt to explore further if there were connections between the findings of the essay analysis and findings from data of the perceptions held by the participants. Through this analysis, I was able to glean additional evidence of how the grade contract had an impact on overall student writing. I present the perceptions findings of the data from the interview, reflective letters, and online negotiation that provides more in depth analysis of the role of the overall perceptions of revision, motivation, and negotiation within the realm of the grade contract and how it impacted the participants’ writing as found in the essay analysis.

Authorship

In analyzing whether the grade contract had an impact on authorship, the findings indicate that those participants who showed increased revision in the essay analysis demonstrated a sense of authorship as a way to improve writing. In a writing course, students faced different types of writing and topics for writing. Between the informal styles of writing and the more formal styles of writing, students had to make choices about the ways they wrote and what they wrote. In order to answer the ancillary research question, “How, if at all, does a grading contract model affect authorship over students’ writing?” I gathered and coded the data from the interviews and reflective letters. The findings underlined aspects of authorship as an advantage of the grade contract. Within these aspects, the most notable finding that tied them together was this idea of having freedom and the ability to “breathe” when it came to making choices, at times difficult choices, about their writing. Table 13 provides a comparison of the cases relating to attitudes about authorship.
Table 13

*Attitudes of Authorship*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Attitude About The Contract and Authorship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Having a choice on how she could write. There is no authority on “right” or “wrong” writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>None Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Trusts her own ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoid the stress of writing for instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Her ideas do not equate to a letter grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emelee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ability to communicate ideas freely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasis on subject and not grade by professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Write for self and readers not professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Freedom to write about controversial topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not worried about how instructor will perceive her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ability to write ideas freely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>None Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>None Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>None Provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of participants from Group 1 held the attitude that authorship that stemmed from having the contract in place allowed them choices in what they could write about without feeling a grade repercussion from the instructor. Rosemarie, Silvia, and Emelee all felt they could express their ideas freely and trust their ideas were suitable for academic writing. Two participants in Group 2, Amanda and Brittni, also felt they had the freedom to write about controversial topics as well as freely write their ideas. Four of the participants, Janine, Amber, Stephanie, and Alicia did not offer their attitudes of authorship. Overall, the findings indicated that a grade contract in place provided a sense of authorship in four ways: freedom to act, controversial writing, student authority of knowledge, and writing to learn.
Freedom to act. For some of the participants, an advantage of the grade contract was gaining authorship by having the freedom to act on the choices they made about their writing. In addition, they felt they had the freedom to go against what they were typically accustomed. From Group 1, Rosemarie described her feelings about this freedom:

This class was different from other past English classes I have taken in the sense that I wasn’t forced to write about a certain subject. I enjoyed being able to choose what I wanted to write about which allowed me to present a better piece of work than if I was forced to write about something that wasn’t interesting to me.

While Rosemarie felt that she had authority to choose the topics for writing, Amanda on the other hand, who was from the second group, discussed having a freedom to act by choosing to write for herself rather than for an instructor and his or her strict guidelines.

When I write, before, it was like very strict and like the grading contract gave more like freedom and it was like you could ‘breathe’…because there was no percentages or points, sometimes before when I wrote id be like thinking what is the instructor asking for so I am trying to fulfill those requirements like to the T and during your class, I felt more freedom and I can do what I wanted to do, more freedom, my style.

Amanda’s feelings about gaining freedom by being able to trust and choose her own style of writing underscores the notion that students often feel they have to write for the instructor or academia – anyone but themselves. Gaining freedom by trusting herself was a challenge Silvia faced regarding her writing. Silvia, also from Group 2, stated, “My biggest challenge throughout the course was trusting my ideas and being able to freely write and get out of the habit of strict academic writing that I was accustomed to.” Silvia
detailed her experience with freedom by emphasizing what is commonly a habit taken on by beginning writers, the habit of conforming and losing the ability to trust one’s self as a writer.

**Controversial writing.** Since I aimed for my class to be one that is a critical classroom, it becomes a bit more demanding for students to challenge traditional forms to which they have grown accustomed. Shor (1992) discussed various reasons as to why students would be resistant to engage in controversial writing. Shor (1992) stated that students often lack experience in critical dialogue and typically do not feel comfortable exploring challenging themes. This is often the case for Basic Writing students as they have been treated as those who do not have the capability of engaging in critical dialogue. Shor also pointed to students’ unwillingness to take on more difficult, challenging work. Shor adds that students often do not want to appear to be on the side of the instructor or lose ranks with their peers, so they opt to stay silent and conform.

The findings gained through the interviews and reflective letters indicated that the grade contract reinforced the critical classroom, which allowed some of the participants to gain authorship in the sense of having freedom to write about controversial topics. Table 14 provides a list of topics for Essay 1 that demonstrates students’ choices of writing within the theme of “Ironic or Odd.”
Table 14

List of Topics for Essay 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Title of Essay</th>
<th>Topic Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RoseMarie</td>
<td>Menstruation and Misconceptions</td>
<td>An essay discussing how the media portrays a misconception of women during menstruation and the impact it has on the perception of how women should behave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Female Means Iron Man</td>
<td>An essay discussing how powerful and strong women are in many roles they play but are continued to be portrayed as less than equal to men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>Cheap Now, Expensive Later</td>
<td>An essay discussing how the food industry provides and markets cheap and affordable food but fails to take responsibility in reporting the negative, expensive effects these foods have on human’s i.e. costly health issues and obesity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>Teen Mom</td>
<td>An essay discussing the misconceptions of being a teen mom by analyzing and discussing the impact of the MTV show “16 and Pregnant.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>Societies’ Perfect Outlook</td>
<td>An essay discussing the irony of how society encourages individuality, but corporations and marketing encourages “belonging.” She explores the paper from an historical perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>Becoming Friends</td>
<td>An essay exploring how people become good friends. She discusses this phenomenon from a perspective that touches on people’s inclination to be judgmental without truly knowing someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>We...This Day and Society</td>
<td>An essay exploring the Constitution of the United States by analyzing the phrase “We the People,” and analyzing whom the Constitution really serves. An essay making the claim that not all people are included, even in modern times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>Ideal Image</td>
<td>An essay exploring how one aesthetically perceives themselves in society and how one navigates themselves to aim to be “perfect” according to the standards set forth by marketing and the barrage of images people are exposed through via movies, television, and print ads. The essay explores the double standard of being told to feel comfortable in one’s own skin, but only to feel comfortable when it fits society’s ideal image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emelee</td>
<td>What is Eternity?</td>
<td>An essay exploring the concept of eternity, and how people view eternity and dying as something in which to be afraid. She explores these concepts from different dimensions, particularly from a religious perspective.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two of the participants, Emelee (Group 1) and Amanda (Group 2), described how the grade contract allowed them to be more comfortable with topics labeled as controversial. Amanda highlighted her views about being more comfortable to write about these topics, “Writing this semester has broadened my range of topics. I am not constricted to book reports, or the themes of one of Shakespeare’s plays. I am now more comfortable than I was writing about more controversial topics and that it’s okay to write about them and state personal opinions.” Amanda’s position emphasized an awareness of the limitations put into place by some instructors of writing that there is no place for controversial
writing or that student opinion is not credible enough for their writing in academic settings. While Amanda’s statement addressed controversial writing by the topic chosen, Emelee shared her feelings about controversial writing not always being about the topic but more of having an understanding that controversial writing rests within any topic. Emelee pointed to her awareness that controversial writing is more about recognizing that not all readers of writing will agree with points made about a topic. Emelee expressed, “My writing process has allowed me to understand that everyone will see my writing differently. No one person is automatically going to agree with me.”

**Student authority of knowledge.** Paulo Freire’s (1970) banking concept describes how students often acquire knowledge in the classroom. In essence, the instructor is the holder and authority of the knowledge and that knowledge becomes a gift bestowed upon passive students. Through this process, students can perceive knowledge as fixed, predetermined knowledge held only by authorities and therefore, students do not question the knowledge they receive. Through their interviews and reflective letters, two of the participants, one from each group, articulated a sense of gaining authority by questioning or reclaiming authority of their knowledge. Brittni (Group 2) discussed how this process happened for her:

Throughout high school, we were taught the “right” way to write. I remember sitting in class the first week and being blown away with some of the questions that you asked. One of those questions that I think about, as soon as someone says English or something in relation to the course, is ‘who are they?’ speaking about who really says what’s perfect or not because everything is written by people just like us and also because there is no right or wrong way to write. Most college
students come out of high school with the mentality set to write the specific way taught at that time. Not only does that have an impact with being able to freely write but also in being able to understand what they read and the way it is being understood.

Brittni’s articulation of her process of questioning how knowledge is acquired demonstrated a common issue that exists in the way knowledge is passed down to students. For Brittni, this authority of her knowledge created another sense of freedom in the way she learned and wrote. She added later, “Now, I can write freely and express myself more without thinking constantly about a certain format I have to follow or a specific way I have to make my writing sound.” The notion of students feeling like they have to write a certain way is also similar to Silvia’s awareness of the inhibiting attitudes that students have about writing and authorities of writing.

The process of writing I have learned throughout this course has really changed my view on academic writing because I learned to not get intimidated by the high demand of instructors. I used to look at academic writing as just structured writing to please instructors but I now know one’s own voice should never be lost in one’s own writing.

Silvia’s views highlighted her awareness of how instructors often hold students to expectations that resemble the kind of knowledge that they themselves hold. These types of expectations often create unnecessary stress that limit students’ abilities to gain authority of their own knowledge and how they go about understanding it. Silvia continued to articulate this idea, “I’ve learned more in this short period of time than I probably learned in high school. The course has not only helped me prepare in my
Writing but also mentally as well to not let the high demand of my professors stress me out because we are all human and we will make mistakes.”

**Writing to learn.** Writing to learn for students in a basic writing course can be difficult because this notion is often confused with learning to write. Two of the participants, Emelee and Silvia, both from Group 1, described instances in which they gained authorship by using writing as a way to learn and acquire knowledge. Emelee articulated how the process of writing allowed her to communicate her ideas as well as learn the intricacies of reading and how it relates to writing, “Writing has helped me communicate my ideas in different ways. I have learned that one cannot just put a quote in their writing and not explain what the quote means. Writing has taught me that what I read and interpret can affect how the audience will see my writing.” For Emelee, her writing to learn carried into her process of writing where writing became far more than just putting words on a page. She later detailed, “When looking at my writing process, I focus more on the subject by looking more into it than just throwing random thoughts together.” Emelee described a process common in basic writing courses where beginning writers focus on the writing as product over writing as a mode of learning. Silvia highlighted this idea in her reflective letter where she described her transition from focusing on a letter grade, or writing as a final product, to writing as a form of communicating ideas and thoughts, “Now, rather than striving for a good grade, I put my best foot forward to get my point across and thoughts down which ends up benefiting me the best at the end.”
Revision

Under the grade contract system, students who did not receive a complete mark on a written assignment were required to revise their essays until they met the expectations established and negotiated at the beginning of the semester. In order to answer the following ancillary question, “How, if at all, does a grading contract model impact revision in student writing?” I coded the data from the interviews and reflective letters.

In examining the findings for how the contract affected revision, all the participants in Group 1, Rosemarie, Janine, Silvia, and Emelee perceived the impact of the grade contract as positive. Rosemarie and Emelee engaged in revision more frequently and a more process oriented way. Janine and Silvia both maintained that revision improved their overall writing. All four demonstrated that they engaged and maintained steady, high-level revision practices. Participants Amanda, Brittni, and Stephanie (Group 2) viewed revision as a way to fix errors and mistakes rather than to improve writing. However, Brittni felt that revision helped slowly improve her writing. Stephanie felt that revision was a process in order to improve her grade rather than writing. The participants in the second group, who viewed revisions as merely a process to fix errors rather than ideas, support the findings of the essay analysis of low number of revisions as well as low-level revision types. Table 15 provides a comparison of the cases relating to attitudes about revision.
Table 15

*Attitudes About The Contract and Revision*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Attitude About The Contract and Revision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Revision as a process engaging in multiple revisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Revision as a process to improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Revision as a process to improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emelee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Increased revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Revision as a way to fix errors and mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Revision as a way to fix errors and mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Revision as a way to slowly improve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>None provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Revision in order to improve grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Revision as a way to fix errors and mistakes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the data suggested that there were instances in which students felt having a grade contract in place allowed for them to have what they perceived as a second chance. Participants articulated that when producing a final version of a written assignment, they were not stressed knowing they had to produce a perfect product. They felt comfort knowing that if they did make mistakes, they would have multiple opportunities not only to fix the mistakes but also to improve on their writing. The grade contract had an impact on revision from two dimensions: 1) increased revision practices, and 2) revision and improved writing.

**Increased revision practices.** Some beginning writers perceive writing as a linear process that occurs once from the start of an assignment to the final product. A few of the participants described how the grading contract provided an opportunity for them to rethink their revision processes. Rosemarie who was in the first group stated the following about her revision process changing her views on revision:
I am feeling very confident going into my next class because I know like the writing was more laid out as a process of what needed to happen rather than just a rough draft and final copy and that’s it, like you go back and it taught me how to break apart each paragraph like sentence by sentence which is what I did for my final essay, so it became more of a process rather than just –you write this draft, turn your paper in, and you are done.

Rosemarie highlighted the notion of how many beginning writers perceive the writing process – one that lacks multiple revisions and multidimensional aspects of revision.

Alicia who was in the second group echoed Rosemarie’s views regarding revision by adding the instructor’s role within the revision process. Alicia described the helpful aspect for her personally:

The personal process of revision was actually something very helpful again, we would bring our essays back in class and you would explain to us what was needed. The grading contract fit in to where you would give us feedback, say we messed up a little bit on our essay, you would give us that week span so that we can go back and fix the revisions or anything that needed to be fixed, that was pretty helpful.

Alicia stressed a point that emphasized the role that feedback plays in the revision process of students. Students receive feedback as a way to help them improve for future papers; however, feedback goes only as far as students are willing to take it or remember to apply it. For instance, Amber, who was from the same group, articulated how having the opportunity to revise was helpful because she would either forget parts of her paper or not conduct revision at all, “The contract helped out a lot with things I missed and
forgot…it helped me with the revision especially, so yeah, I liked that part.” While much of the revision processes stemmed from my feedback, this process also allowed one participant to gain insight on her own thought processes about revision through her own volition, much like an advanced writer. Emelee (Group 1) made this evident, “It [revision] gave me more insight on what I was doing wrong, so when I am revising on my own now, I pick up on those mistakes a lot better than I was before.” Having the opportunities to revise allowed the participants to reflect about their own revision processes not defined by what they have come to know as revision – first draft and final draft. Stephanie (Group 2) described this idea, “Usually, I just like turn in my paper, I don’t even revise my drafts, so I just usually turn in the first one. But then like with the contract, I had to go back and revise it and change things and make it better.” Through these increased revision practices, students have the potential to improve their writing.

**Revision and improved writing.** For some of the participants, having the opportunity to revise multiple times provided a clear sense of improved writing over the course of the semester. While it is sometimes difficult for students to detect improvement in their own writing, a few of the participants were able to determine their improvements from the revisions that took place for each written assignment. Brittni (Group 2) described how the structure and curriculum in the course helped improve her writing:

The curriculum in this course not only helped me think outside the box, but also sparked an interest in reading and actually finding sources to support whatever it was that I had to write about. Even though I got overwhelmed when we got told all the requirements for this class, it was beneficial and motivated me to push myself to change and slowly allowed me to improve the way I write.
Having to write multiple drafts is often overwhelming for many beginning writers, but as Brittni stated, this overwhelming feeling transitioned into a motivation to push herself to improve on her writing. A few of the participants from Group 1 shared related views. Rosemarie, for instance, shared similar views regarding how multiple drafts helped her improve her writing, “I have written multiple drafts for all of my essays in this class, and many of them had made no sense at first. Allowing myself to brainstorm in the form of an essay draft seemed to help me succeed in getting completes on my essays.” Rosemarie’s description of her reflection of improved writing pointed to her awareness that for her, writing multiple drafts also became a form of brainstorming and invention. Her process of revision came in the form of multiple drafts as whole rather than error correction.

Revision was evident as a desire to improve writing during the writing process. Silvia and Janine described how having the contract in place allowed them to revise in a way that motivated them to revise as they wrote rather than revising after they received feedback. Silvia described her revision process:

The contract affected me positively because it made me want to improve my papers more so that way I won’t get more revisions. When you get the revisions back you have to like re-do everything based on the feedback you gave. I just wanted to get a perfect paper so I wouldn’t have to revise. Because the first paper I got a revision needed. The second paper I got a revision needed. After the third one, I didn’t want to get a revision anymore, so then I tried to do better.

For Silvia, revisions was a process that motivated her to improve her writing through a recursive process in order to produce a complete paper. Janine, however, described a motivation for improving writing through revision based on the desire to get the grade for
which she was aiming, “For the process [revision], it was more of a… I had to do it because if I didn’t, I knew I would drop down a grade and I definitely didn’t want that so it kept me motivated very much throughout the whole class.”

Negotiation

A key aspect to this study was the negotiation. In order to determine whether the negotiation processes played a role in the overall grade contract and its impact on student writing, I analyzed the data from the online discussion board in order to gain the perceptions of the participants regarding the process of negotiation. Typically, the process of negotiation takes place in a “class meeting” of sorts or as Shor (2009) labels it “a meeting of the minds.” However, since I knew that I had to collect data for the negotiation process for the study, I decided to have the negotiation process via the online discussion board within the online student portal. Students were not required to participate, but I strongly urged them to voice their thoughts and opinions. I explained to them in detail the negotiation protocol (see Appendix C) and informed them they would have a week to engage in the contract negotiation. Once the week was completed, I presented the findings in class and we made the final decision on the contract and policies.

The negotiation process took place two times during the semester. Students engaged in negotiation and adhered to the protocol the second week of the semester as well as a re-negotiation following the same protocol the week prior to the official institution withdrawal date. The re-negotiation provided students with an opportunity to reflect on their efforts and standing in class and offer suggestions for changes to the contract for the second half of the semester. By allowing this re-negotiation prior to the
official withdrawal date, students who felt they could not meet the expectations of the contract could still “opt-out” by withdrawing from the course with a “W” on his or her transcript.

As indicated, students had one week to engage in an online discussion negotiation regarding the grade contract. While students were free to add their own opinions and suggestions, I developed a negotiation protocol that would address specific aspects of assessment, evaluation, and behavioral components of the class in order to ensure these aspects were addressed. Also, having a protocol helped facilitate the negotiation in a focused manner. I created separate discussion threads that posed the following prompts (see Table 16).

Table 16

*Topics for Negotiation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics for Negotiation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Board 1: <em>General Grade Contract</em></td>
<td>This section will provide negotiation and discussion of the numbers indicated in the grade chart that includes absences, late assignments, ignored assignments, and missed assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Board 2: <em>Assignments</em></td>
<td>This section will provide negotiation and discussion of the number of official assignments that should be counted toward the grading contract.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Board 3: <em>Expectations and Evaluations</em></td>
<td>This section will provide a negotiation and discussion of assignment expectations, class expectations, and evaluative feedback expectations. This section will determine what will be marked as “Complete” or “Revise.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All students had the opportunity to provide their input in any or all of the discussion boards. Students were encouraged to engage in discussion or raise questions if they needed additional clarification regarding any aspect of the grade contract and/or protocol.
I urged students during each class meeting leading up to the culmination of the one-week negotiation period to keep voicing their opinions and engage in the negotiation. Furthermore, I reminded students that there would be a re-negotiation period prior to the official withdrawal date for the institution should they feel the need to make changes to the agreed upon contract.

As part of the negotiation process, I asked students to submit an email to me at the end of the semester stating what grade they felt they deserved for the course and their rationale for the grade. This process allowed me to gain insight into their perceived efforts and completion of work in the course compared to how I perceived their efforts and completion rates in the course. Students who met all the requirements for a “B” in the course petitioned and made their argument for the “A,” as their final grade. If students rationale for the “A” aligned with efforts and demonstrated work beyond a “B,” they were given an “A” pending the final paper. If the student fell short, a potential agreement for a “B+” was negotiated. Ultimately, the student and I came to an agreement based on all factors influencing the final letter grade.

**Negotiation findings.** Using the negotiation data from the online discussion board, I attempted to answer the ancillary research question: what are students’ perceptions of the negotiation process of a grade contract model? I pulled the negotiation data from the online discussion board for the two periods of negotiation: one initial negotiation at the beginning of the semester and one re-negotiation at the midpoint of the semester. I printed the discussion from the discussion board and coded the discussion for each section. I provide further description of the analysis process and data in Chapter 3. While not all participants of the study engaged in the actual negotiation process, four of
the nine participants did. Nevertheless, through the participant interviews and reflection letters, I was able to gain insights about the negotiation process for the other participants. The description of the data provides findings for the actual negotiation process and perceptions of the negotiation process. Table 17 provides a comparison of each case at it related to the negotiation.

Table 17

*Comparison of Cases in Relation to Negotiation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Attitude About the Negotiation Process</th>
<th>Role or Emphasis of Negotiation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Did not provide perceptions of negotiation process</td>
<td>Did not participate in negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Did not provide perceptions of negotiation process</td>
<td>Negotiated evaluative feedback. Emphasis on not evaluating so much on grammar but rather content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Opportunity to voice opinion and suggestions which made her feel like an adult in college</td>
<td>Negotiated evaluative feedback. Emphasis on not evaluating so much on grammar but rather content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emelee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Did not provide perceptions of negotiation process</td>
<td>Did not participate in negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Negotiation provided some leeway on grading. Took advantage of the leeway.</td>
<td>Negotiated evaluative feedback. Participant wanted feedback on grammar. Emphasized freshman as beginner and to grade in a progression in order to adapt to college level writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Negotiation allowed for setting standards for herself</td>
<td>Negotiated behavioral aspects, specifically absences. Emphasized freshman as beginners and to grade in a progression in order to adapt to college level writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Negotiation provided second chances, established a relationship with instructor, and gave authority to students.</td>
<td>Negotiated behavioral aspects, specifically absences and missing assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Final negotiation allowed for one more chance for dialogue</td>
<td>Did not participate in negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Negotiation allowed for chances. Picking her own grade.</td>
<td>Did not participate in negotiation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few of the participants held the view that having a negotiation process enabled them to have a second chance or some leeway with grading. Those who indicated that they had an opportunity for a second chance emphasized the behavioral component of the negotiation process. Some Group 2 participants - Amanda, Amber, Stephanie, and Alicia- all looked at the negotiation as having a second chance. Amanda and Amber both participated in the negotiation process and emphasized behavioral components such as number of missing assignments and absences permitted to get a good grade. Having the opportunity to
negotiate meant having the opportunity to express voice about evaluative feedback requested by the students. Amanda and Brittni both expressed the notion of freshman as beginners who have progressively to learn how to meet the demands of college writing or writing within the academy (Bartholomae, 1986).

Out of the participants in Group 1, only Silvia and Janine engaged in the negotiation process. Both negotiated evaluative feedback that focused not on grammar but on improving essays based on content and style. While Janine was the only participant in Group 1 to articulate her attitude of the negotiation process, she felt it allowed students to have a voice in the class. Participants in Group 1 did not provide much insight into the negotiation process; however, those participants in Group 2 were more active in the overall negotiation process. While there was opportunity to negotiate many aspects of the course, structure, grading, and assignments, Group 2 solely focused on behavioral aspects of the course, which indicated their primary concern was about meeting behavioral standards similar to that of traditional grading structures. In order to answer the ancillary question “what are the students’ perceptions of the negotiation process of a grade contract,” I analyzed and coded the interview transcripts. From the interviews regarding the negotiation process, four findings emerged - sharing power, redistributing authority, and new processes for decision-making.

**Sharing power.** Through the interviews, participants placed emphasis on how the negotiation process provided a sense of sharing power with the instructor. Some of the participants focused on the concept of forming a relationship with the instructor as a sense of power sharing. One participant, Amber, stated, “I thought it [the negotiation] was cool. It’s a relationship you make with your instructor and students.” Amber
articulated having the ability to develop a power sharing relationship with the instructor was something that instructors should consider. Amber believed the negotiation “…gives you chances and more of a relationship. It is cool and different and should be tried.” Alicia agreed with the sentiment that not many instructors establish a power sharing relationship:

To me, a regular instructor…would say “hey, if you missed these days, you already fail.” It’s more like you [the instructor] gave us the option to let us throw our opinions in, how we felt about the contract was thrown in. Either you agree or disagree and you [the instructor] would discuss it with the class and for most people they agreed and some disagreed and I thought that was pretty cool.

Much like Alicia’s position about having the opportunity to express their opinions regarding the grade contract, Silvia agreed that the negotiation process provided an avenue for students to express their thoughts about the structure and nature of the course and grading.

While Alicia and Amber emphasized the relationship as a form of power sharing, Silvia highlighted power sharing through her understanding of the lack of power students have within traditional education settings. Silvia provided a comparison of the negotiation process to a more traditional approach of power, “it [the negotiation] was a lot better because it actually gives us voice rather than just the regular educational system and the same thing, like how normally things are.” Silvia’s perception of the negotiation process being a better process alludes to her understanding of traditional grading practices and those practices being the “norm” in typical educational environments.
**Redistributing authority.** The finding of “redistributing authority” highlights participants’ perceptions of the instructor as one who typically holds all the power and authority in the classroom. Through the negotiation process, the participants expressed a sense of added authority on the part of the students. While still distinguishing that the instructor held some authority, Amber articulated how she recognized that the students also gained a sense of authority, “it’s like you [the instructor] are putting in our input and it’s just not like one authority, so yeah, I thought it [the negotiation] was awesome.” While Amber’s statement demonstrated an overall sense of a redistribution of authority, there were two other instances where participants specified how they felt about how they gained authority. Alicia highlighted gaining authority through negotiation as an advantage from a grade standpoint, “An advantage [of negotiation] was actually how you let us pick our grade through …negotiation.” Mirroring Alicia’s sentiments, Stephanie also expressed that the negotiation process was an advantage, “One advantage [of negotiation] is the final grade, getting to negotiate your grade through the final letter.” Stephanie’s statement addressed the process in which students were able to petition and negotiate their final grade via the final email sent to me at the end of the semester.

For some participants, the redistribution of authority to students came as a surprise. While initially unsure about what having this authority meant, these participants articulated how they were able to take this added authority and shape it. One participant discussed the negotiation process as an advantage in the sense of validating her role as a college student. Silvia described perception of authority through negotiation as validation by explaining her experience with the process. She stated, “At first, I was scared because it was new but then being able to negotiate our grade
depending on how the class goes makes you feel more like an adult in a way. It felt more like college and not just another class.” Silvia’s perception suggests that some instructors perceive students as too young to have any kind of authority in the class. Another participant echoes this dynamic through her statements describing a typical, traditional course construct. Amanda made this comparison:

> I was like surprised because I was used to the instructor telling us what you [the instructor] what to expect. It’s not what we expected out of it [course/grading], so when we were negotiating it [contract]…it was different because it wasn’t like what I was used to. I was used to getting percentages and points and like counting on adding like, “oh, I have to get this to get an ‘A,’” but like for the contract, it is kind of like unpredictable but you know if you put your work into it, you get an idea of what you are going to get.

In addition, Amanda stressed the notion of redistributing authority as having a sense of control as a student.

> I like how you [the student] can negotiate with the instructor and you [the student] had a little more leeway, like you had control over how you wanted [your grade] and how you felt, like your schedule would allow you to accomplish it [assignment] in time and also how you can negotiate. If you take off [negotiate out of] an essay, it gave more time for revisions of other essays.

While Amanda expressed her perception of students having some authority through the negotiation process, she later confirmed how she took action through her added authority, “the missing assignment one [category] I took advantage of. It’s like since I couldn’t do this essay right now, I could put it off until later.” Amanda’s statement demonstrated that
she was fully aware of the function of the contract and by participating in the negotiation, she was able to gain some authority as a way to help her navigate the course for herself.

**New process of decision making.** One of the findings that emerged from the interviews is the notion of new processes of thinking. For all of the participants, engaging in a negotiation process for a grade contract model was something that was new. While in retrospect, as demonstrated by the final interviews, many of the students liked the idea of being able to negotiate a grade contract. However, data from the interview show some of the participants having to engage in new ways of thinking their actual role in the negotiation process. For Stephanie, the act of engaging in the negotiation process demonstrated a transition in the way she thought about the grade contract and the negotiation process.

A disadvantage is the pressure of everything, but then again we got to choose it but I didn’t really think like in the beginning when we all like heard about it we knew what it was going to be like. It seemed too easy so we all agreed to it but when the semester got going and we started doing everything, it was like “okay.” We [the class] should have thought more about it. I think we thought about it like it was going to be easy.

Through Stephanie’s sentiments, she demonstrated her initial thoughts of the process as a disadvantage because of the perceived added pressure of the grade contract. She then highlighted her transition into her understanding the reality of having more power than she initially thought. Adding to her earlier statements, Stephanie went on to discuss transitions from a passive role to a more active one.
The negotiation process, I was like the first part [initial negotiation] I didn’t really care in the beginning, I was just like ‘I don’t care,’ will just follow but when we got to renegotiate…I was going to put input but a lot of the other students already said what I was going to say, so I felt like it was a smarter idea [to add input] because it gave us a feel for that it [negotiation] actually was.

Stephanie’s statements point to the re-negotiation process as providing another opportunity to voice an opinion because of the lack of participation during the first negotiation process. Students who do not fully think about their role in the negotiation process have a chance to experience it and re-think the process itself and their role in it. Thus, having an opportunity to re-negotiate allows those students to transition from passive student to active participants.

By engaging in the negotiation process, students positioned themselves to think about what it meant to have a role in shaping the course. Some participants developed new ways of thinking about the standards they were setting for themselves and standards set by others through the negotiation process. Brittni highlighted this notion:

The fact that we got to negotiate was nice because it is pretty much you [the student] put that goal for yourself, you set the standard and you have to keep your standards or else you know that it’s going to affect your grade, but it also, to me, made me see how other people might not like having high standards for themselves, that they don’t like pushing themselves but this is an opportunity, it’s like you know you can get that grade you want but it is also reflecting on how much effort you actually put into it. It’s really like the outcome of what you do.
Brittni demonstrated her new way of thinking about how the negotiation process was about setting a standard for herself and thinking about how her efforts would lead to the outcome of her grade whether good or bad. Rosemarie supported Brittni’s position by articulating her belief that the negotiation process challenged her way of thinking about her own efforts, specifically by attending class, “it [negotiation] challenged us a little bit. It made me go to class. It motivated me because I knew if I didn’t, if I had two or more missed [classes], it could drop my grade down to a C, so it kept me motivated.”

**Negotiation results.** Upon the completion of the negotiation process, the class and I discussed the results of the negotiation and finalized the contract for the semester. I reminded students that once everyone voted, the contract was official; however, there would be an opportunity to re-negotiate at the midpoint of the semester. What follows is the final student negotiated contract with indicated changes (Table 18).

Table 18

*Final Negotiated Contract*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th># of absences</th>
<th># of late assignments</th>
<th># of missed assignments</th>
<th># of ignored assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the “A” category, the class decided, and I agreed to change the “missing assignments” number from zero to one. While Amanda had suggested two missing assignments to receive an “A,” the majority of the class and I did not agree with adding the additional number for missing assignments. Although Brittni suggested through her
online negotiation that number of absences change from three to four, the majority of the class and I agreed that four absences was too many for an “A” student. Additional changes took place for the “C” category to add one point for each category except for number of absences. Changes took place for the “D and F” categories in order to adjust the changes stemming from the “C” category.

Regarding the evaluative feedback and expectations, I agreed to the class’ suggestion that I provide feedback for all written assignments regardless whether it was marked as “complete” or “needed revision.” Furthermore, I agreed to the suggestion that the blog’s evaluative structure would focus on content and expectations without an emphasis on grammar, spelling, and mechanics. I agreed to these terms not because I did not want students to practice these traits but because they had other exercises in the class that focused on those aspects. The goal was to have students writing in different capacities. I further agreed to evaluating essays based on content, assignment requirements, and mode of writing including clear structure, appropriate language, organization, spelling, and style (appropriate to genre structure), clear, and coherent. As many of the participants suggested, I agreed to evaluate essays on grammar in a progressive format. As the participants indicated, I agreed to evaluate grammar and mechanics as I taught each concept.

**Re-negotiation process.** The students engaged in a re-negotiation process that took place at the midpoint of the semester. Students had the opportunity to make changes to the grade contract and remain in the course or they could opt out of the course by officially withdrawing per the institution guidelines. The re-negotiation of the grade contract followed the same protocol as the initial negotiation. I asked students to submit
any suggestions for changes to the grade contract via the online class portal. The same
discussion boards were established and students had one week to submit their
suggestions, ideas, questions, or motions for changes. Once students completed the re-
negotiation process, I printed out the discussion board conversation and coded the data.

The findings for the re-negotiation were minor and limited but nevertheless
important finding about the participants’ desire to eliminate an assignment. During the
initial negotiation, students provided comments for discussion boards one and three but
provided no discussion for message board two, which focused on the number of official
assignments required for the course or changes to the number of assignments required.
During the re-negotiation, however, students and participants provided very brief
suggestions only for discussion board two in which their limited suggestions for change
solely focused on eliminating an essay from the list of required assignments (essay 4).
The students as well as the participants emphasized a need to have more time for
revisions and more time to work on essays three and five, and in order to do so, they
suggested removing the fourth required essay. While the participants and students
completely agreed with removing the fourth required essay, there were zero requests for
making changes to the actual contract itself. As a result, I agreed to the re-negotiation
request and eliminated the fourth required essay leaving students with more time to work
on their third and final essay. From the findings of the actual negotiation process, two
main findings emerged that highlighted how the negotiation process provided the space
for students to voice their opinions about what they expected from the instructor and the
course as well as the expectations they held about themselves as students.
Students’ expectations of instructor. Under the finding of “expectation of instructor,” a majority of the participants made the focus of the negotiation about expectations of the instructor regarding evaluative approaches to written assignments as well as the expectation of the kind of feedback they should have on all assignments. These findings directly related to the negotiation discussion board three. Janine stressed a difference in the way the instructor should evaluate assignments, specifically as it related to the types of writing that took place in the class, “I think that blogs shouldn’t be held up to the essay standard,” indicating that she perceived the essay assignments to be held in higher regard than the blog assignments. This touched on the section of the grade contract that specified all assignments were weighted the same. Janine further articulated her reasons as to why there should be an evaluative difference, “Blogs should be a fun thing to do, a way to express a different sense of writing.” Through her explanation of evaluative difference, Janine alludes to how grammar and spelling are often perceived as what separates “serious” writing and “fun” writing. Janine stated, “I don’t want to worry about grammatical errors or spelling as much when blogging.” Her sentiments reaffirm that essays are a form of more serious writing.

In addition to points made regarding evaluation based on the type of assignment, there were opinions made about the level of evaluation by the instructor. Some of the participants felt the instructor should evaluate assignments with a bit more leniency at the beginning of the semester but increase the level of evaluation over time. A few of the participants cited their rationale for this level of progression. Brittni articulated that there should be a level of evolution as the semester moved forward because of her own perceived level of writing, “In my opinion, I think that our assignment expectations...
should be slightly lenient as we start off because I personally sometimes have trouble with writing.” While Brittni focused on a level of progression based on her own personal struggles with writing, there was agreement with another participant on a need for this type of progression. Amanda noted a need for leniency at the beginning of the semester as well, “This is our first semester as college students and we haven’t gotten into the flow of how everything works yet.” Amanda made the argument that freshman students must learn how to acclimate to college and in turn felt students should not be evaluated too harshly because of it. While these participants discussed the need for a level of leniency over time, Silvia argued the need for a level of leniency regarding the evaluation of grammar and mechanics, “As far as grammatical errors go, I feel it shouldn’t be too strict but still be checked for proper use to improve our errors.” Silvia made the case for evaluating grammar as a form of improving writing rather than evaluating grammar as simply error identification.

Through the negotiation process, students also voiced their expectations of the instructor regarding feedback and the type of feedback they expected. Brittni expressed her position on feedback stating, “Your [the instructor] feedback would be of great help.” While Brittni emphasized feedback as a form of help from the instructor, she also stressed a distinction between feedback from an instructor (typically expected) and feedback in the form of tips and strategies from a writer. Brittni continued her expectation for feedback as a form of “…tips which have personally helped you [the instructor as writer] with your writing skills over time.” Brittni’s thoughts on feedback pointed to her awareness of the perceived distinction between feedback from an academic and feedback from a writer. While Brittni was vocal about feedback as a form of help to
improve as a student and writer, Amanda strongly pointed out her specific expectations for feedback as it related to grammar and other aspects of writing:

Regarding the feedback expectations, I personally would like to hear how I could improve not only grammar, word choice, spelling, and punctuation (especially comma splice and proper citation for sources), but also diction, voice, and organization, and staying within the same tense which I have had troubles with in the past.

Amanda’s specificity of feedback pointed to an understanding of the demands of college and academic level writing as well as her need to improve on those aspects to advance her overall writing. It is important to note here that many of the other students were in agreement with the points made by the participants. Many simply maintained they agreed with a certain classmate without a rationale as to why. As indicated earlier, while only a few participants participated in the initial negotiation, data from the participant interviews highlight reasons as to why they did not participate. Nevertheless, the interview data shed light on their perceptions of the negotiation process, which I present in the findings of the perception portion of the negotiation process.

Students’ self-expectations. Findings from the online negotiation included expectations of participants as students as it related to the grade contract. Students who did not participate in this portion of the negotiation process either agreed with the original contract in place or agreed to the suggestions made by those who engaged in the online negotiation. Participants who engaged in the negotiation expressed what they felt should be expected from them as students as it related to assignments, absences, and behavior.
The negotiation findings presented here directly relate to the grade contract chart and address specifically discussion board one.

All of the participants who suggested changes to the numbers in the contract chart only emphasized the expectations for achieving an “A” in the course. Despite the contract indicating the default “B” grade (as well as other levels of grades), all the participants focused on the letter grade “A,” which suggested a desire to achieve the highest grade possible through their process of negotiating those specific expectations. With the understanding that a missed grade was an assignment submitted anytime during the semester after the 48 hour “late assignment” due date, some of the participants focused their suggestions on the number of “missed” assignments “A” students could receive. Since there was a central focus on “missed” assignments, the participants were attempting to negotiate being able to achieve an “A” grade while not setting themselves up for failure. In a sense, the participants attempted to provide a margin of error for receiving an “A.” Aware that the initial contract had permitted zero missed assignments in order to receive an “A,” some of the participants felt that number should change. Yet again, pointing to the fact that many of the students are freshmen, Amanda pointed out the need for the change in the missed assignment category, “Since the majority of the class are freshman, I feel that we should be allowed to have at least one missing assignment to obtain an ‘A.’” The mention of freshman status furthered the notion of freshman as beginners and the perceived need to alter expectations for freshman who were adjusting to the demands of college as indicated earlier in the negotiation. Agreeing with Amanda, Brittni also indicated that an “A” student should be allowed one missing assignment. Taking it a step further, Amber felt that one missed assignment was too
strict. Amber stated, “I think we should have at least two missing assignments to still receive an ‘A’ in the course.” Amber felt that a student wanting an “A” in the class could potentially hold off on submitting two assignments until the end of the semester. While no other participants petitioned for changes to the “late assignment” category, Amber added that there should be “two late assignments also to receive an ‘A.’” Amber’s appeal for the number of late assignments permitted for an “A” agreed with the initial grade contract, which was in line with my position on number of assignments that could be submitted within 48 hours of an assignment’s initial due date.

Though many of the students and participants agreed with the number of absences listed in the original grade contract chart, there were two instances in which participants negotiated expectations of absences for “A” students. While in partial agreement with the number of absences in the original contract, Amber demonstrated indication of a more strict number of absences permitted, “I think we should have at least 2 or 3 absences to still be an ‘A’ student.” Brittni, on the other hand, argued “…an ‘A’ student should have four absences,” which would equate to missing a little over a week of classes. Although only two participants negotiated number of absences, there is some level of awareness by the students regarding their expectations of themselves and their commitment to attending class.

While much of the effort was on negotiating the numbers of the contract as it related to assignments and absences, Amanda offered her expectations of behavior of self and others in the course:

Now for the class expectations, maybe we could have a rule that all phones must be on silent mode and maybe vibrate but only when the person is expecting a call
or message that is of extreme importance. Unless that is the case, I don’t think that anyone’s phone should be on vibrate because when someone’s having a full blown conversation on their phone and it’s vibrating every five seconds, it could be very disruptive and distracting.

Amanda’s position sheds light on her experiences with cell phones as distraction in her other courses and with other students. While no other students made suggestions for behavioral aspects of the contract, Amanda took advantage of the negotiation discussion board to speak to her classmates about distractions and the class environment. Amanda went on to say, “Let’s all respect each other’s learning environment😊.” Adding the smiley face emoticon to the end of her statement showed an understanding of possible miscommunication of tone through online discourses that sometimes lead to hostility. By adding the emoticon, Amanda communicated to her classmates that her request for showing respect for the learning environment was a peaceful plea.

**Grade Contract**

While a majority of the participants viewed the grade contract in a positive way, there were a few who held the attitude that the grade contract was more challenging and perceived the grade contract to put more pressure on students. Table 19 provides a comparison of each participant’s overall attitude about the grade contract and the emphasis that highlighted their overall views of the contract.
Table 19

Comparison of Attitudes About The Grade Contract

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Attitude About the Contract</th>
<th>Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Overall positive. Allowed her to care more about her efforts in the class and writing.</td>
<td>Knew what she needed to do. Helped her keep track. Professor was more involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Overall positive. Allowed her to be more motivated for class and her work.</td>
<td>Knew what she needed to do. Helped her keep track.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Overall positive. Open to new form of grading.</td>
<td>Knew what she needed to do. Helped her stay on track.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emelee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Overall positive</td>
<td>Knew where she stood at all times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Manageable</td>
<td>Ability to achieve but worried about falling behind. The ability to miss assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Expectations set forth by student</td>
<td>Effort determines overall grade Accountability on student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Viewed as a rigid structure</td>
<td>Focus on behavioral aspect of contract i.e. absences, missing assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Evoked a lot of pressure</td>
<td>Focused on the challenging nature of the grade contract and the pressure to be responsible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Having choice</td>
<td>Allowed to choose own grade based on effort.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While each participant held their own attitudes and emphasis about the contract, those classified in Group 1 held overall positive views of the grade contract. Rosemarie, Janine, Silvia, and Emelee all stressed an emphasis on having a clear understanding of the expectations negotiated and set forth in the grade contract. For these participants, having a grade contract helped them to know exactly where they stood in the course and helped them stay on track. The participants classified in Group 2 had mixed attitudes about the grade contract. Amber and Stephanie both had tensions regarding the contract in that their emphasis did not focus on the opportunities the grade contract could produce but rather they placed their emphasis on behavioral aspects of the contract. For instance, they both were worried about absences and number of assignments they had to submit to get a passing grade. In essence, they felt it produced more of a challenge and responsibility.
than needed. Amber, Brittni, and Alicia were all aware their grade was based solely on the effort they put forth in the class. While this is a positive notion, they were all worried about being able easily to fall behind. If they did not have the ability to maintain efforts for any reason, they knew they would drop a grade based on the grade contract.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the findings that support grade contracts as a way of improving the writing of basic writers. The data show that establishing a grade contract that included a negotiation and re-negotiation process positively influence student motivation; thus, improving student writing through by students engaging in moderate frequency of revisions as well as high-level of revisions. Furthermore, employing a grade contract redistributes power between instructor and students, which positively affected the participants’ attitudes about learning and writing. Based on these findings, a potential dialogical model of employing a grade contract emerged and provides one example in which a grade contract can be used in order to improve level of writing for basic writers and across disciplines.

In the next chapter, I present the discussion of findings as well as the example of one dialogical model of a grade contract as a way of reporting possible connections between theory and practice. Moreover, the next chapter details how my findings extend and support the current literature as well as offer implications for policy, practice, and future research in the field.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

“Higher education should be defended as a crucial democratic public sphere where instructors and students have the chance to resist and rewrite those modes of pedagogy, time, and rationality that refuse to include questions of judgment and issues of responsibility” (Giroux, 2011, p. 120).

For most of the participants in the study, working under the grade contract was a positive experience that led to improved writing and positive attitudes about writing. As the instructor of the course, naturally I wanted to know how these experiences intersect with the resisting and rewriting of standard, traditional modes of pedagogy. What I concluded through this study is that employing a grade contract that incorporates negotiation as a form of power sharing directly addresses issues of responsible teaching practices. While implementing a grade contract may appear as a raindrop in a sea of change in pedagogical practices and politics in higher education, it does serve as a starting point for pedagogical practices that are transformative and include both instructors and students. This chapter discusses how the overall findings support the implementation of a grade contract as a form of assessment that positively affects student writing and attitudes about writing and supports other studies that have argued for grade contracts.

Discussion

The following is a discussion of the themes that emerged from the overall findings. Furthermore, I describe and discuss an example dialogical model of a grade contracts.
contract that emerged from these themes. Based on the grade contract, which included a process of negotiation as a form of assessment, I discuss experiences as well as how instructors can move from a one-dimensional assessment model to an evolving more critical, transformative assessment model to improve the writing of Basic Writing students while maintaining a critical classroom. The sub-themes that emerged from the grade contract model include the following: motivation, authorship, revision, and writing development. I expand on each of these major themes within the larger themes in order fully to answer the guiding questions. Finally, I draw links between my findings and the current literature; address the implications the findings may have on policy, practice, and future research; and provide a reflection of the limitations of this study.

**Grade Contracts Make Assessment Clear and Relevant to Students**

Based on the results of this study, I came to the understanding that the grade contract seems to make assessment more clear and understandable to the student. There seems to be an impact on writing because the evaluative feedback was directly connected to the writing rather than a grade. In addition, I came to the understanding that the grade contract model makes the participants more likely to engage in revision thereby making the assessment more relevant to the participants. While the grade contract did not completely remove evaluative structures, it did establish a structure that required students to engage actively in the evaluative process by way of analyzing and understanding instructor feedback and using this feedback as part of their revision process for improving writing. Furthermore, when the participants perceived the feedback they received as criticism of error, it appeared that they were comfortable knowing that it would not directly affect their grade in the course. For Silvia, even though she perceived the
feedback as error or her doing something “wrong,” she wanted to ensure she got to a point where she no longer received as much feedback that she perceived as criticism. This pushed her to focus on the feedback and work to make improvements based on the feedback. Through the grade contract model, the participants were aware they had multiple opportunities to make changes or revise. The participants did not have to draw conclusions as to how feedback translated into a letter grade. It was evident the participants connected the feedback as guide to areas in which they could improve or fix, if they chose to make changes. Alicia and Amber both indicated that having the opportunity to revise without penalty of a low grade helped them improve their writing especially when it came to making errors or forgetting aspects of their essays.

When receiving evaluative feedback under a traditional grade system, many basic writers fail to make the connection between the feedback and the grade received. Thus, when students receive feedback they feel as though the first draft they submit are complete drafts and not part of a writing and revision process. As Sommers (1982) describes

The comments encourage students to believe that their first drafts are finished drafts, not invention drafts, and that all they need to do is patch and polish their writing. That is, instructors’ comments do not provide their students with an inherent reason for revising the structure and meaning of their texts, since the comments suggest to students that the meaning of their text is already there, finished, produced, and all that is necessary is a better word or phrase. The processes of revising, editing, and proofreading are collapsed and reduced to a
single trivial activity, and the students' misunderstanding of the revision process as a rewording activity is reinforced by their instructors' comments. (p. 151)

Having the grade contract in place allowed Rosemarie to re-think how she perceived evaluative feedback and how it directly related to revision. Rosemarie specified that she felt more confident moving forward to her other classes because having the contract model allowed her to see revision as more of a process rather than simply completing a rough draft and final draft, as she was accustomed. She further stated how her process now included breaking writing down into more of a thought process rather than one, sweeping fix from first to final draft. Rosemarie further described her process of revision under the grade contract by engaging multiple drafts for all of her essays in this class; many of them that she recognized made no sense to her initially. By allowing herself to brainstorm in the form of an essay draft, it seemed to help her succeed in improving on her essays.

A large part of the grade contract is its more responsible form of assessment in that it is not about the instructor evoking his or her authority of assessment but rather it is about the students and thus becomes relevant to the students. With a traditional grade model in place, students are in a position to take the instructors’ evaluative feedback as truth with an unclear connection between the feedback, grades, and revision because students often perceive instructors as the authority or experts at writing. As a result, writing students can become passive when it comes to making decisions or thinking critically about their own writing, particularly because they might fear not meeting the expectations of the instructor. This notion reinforces what Freire (1970) labeled as the “banking concept” where the instructor knows everything and the students know nothing.
This notion stifles students writing ability when making rhetorical decisions about their writing as well as the feedback they receive and what they decide to do with it. A grade contract model removes the granting of grades by the instructor for each writing assignment allowing students to engage in a writing and revision process that promotes them thinking about their own writing as it relates to their topic and choices. A large part of the grade contract includes a focus on feedback provided by the instructor. Rather than students relying on an arbitrary grade to determine how to improve their writing, they are more inclined to evaluate the instructor’s feedback as a form of guidance in improving writing. This in turn requires instructors to provide careful, critical feedback as a mode of facilitating students in making relevant rhetorical decisions. Thus, students writing under the grade contract model are more likely to take control over their own writing and make informed decisions about the changes they make to their writing rather than writing for the instructor. Amanda made this evident stressing that because there were no percentages or points for assignments she felt more freedom with how she wrote, particularly with her own style. With traditional grade models, Amanda would cater her process to what she felt the instructor wanted and her focus was on trying to fulfill those unclear expectations. Similarly, Silvia felt her process of writing did not include having to think about what she perceived as the high demands of professors, which led to increased stress. In a sense, she felt the high demand was more about not taking into consideration that students make mistakes and being penalized for something that all humans do, particularly with writing, was stressful for her.
**Grade Contracts Give Students More Control and Authority**

While the grade contract itself can stand alone, as indicated in studies and experiences discussed in the review of the literature, a large part of the grade contract for this study included the participants engaging in a negotiation process. Having a grade contract in place without negotiation runs the risk of taking on the form of a prescriptive, traditional grade model where students do not have a space to speak or share power with the instructor. Without negotiation, the instructor and his or her authority still establish the regulations of the contract. As Shor (1996) argued, “negotiation counts because it involves the co-authoring of mutual obligations” (p. 13). In this study, the participants had two opportunities to negotiate the contract and context of the course during the semester as well as have a final opportunity at the end of the semester to provide a reflection to me about their grade and rationale for it. The findings indicated that having the negotiation process as part of the grade contract provided the participants a sense of control and authority in the context of the course as well as control over their writing and learning process. Additionally, the participants felt that having a dialogical negotiation provided a mutual relationship between the instructor and students rather than the typical one-sided relationship of power held by the instructor. This was evident through Amber’s feelings about the negotiation; she felt that negotiation meant not having just one authority in the class. Part of this mutual relationship was students having a voice in the class. For Silvia, Amber, Alicia, Amanda, and Stephanie having a contract and being able to negotiate it meant that they had a voice and a say concerning evaluative and assessment methods. Furthermore, these participants felt having the opportunity to negotiate the contract meant they had more control over the grade they aimed to achieve.
They perceived themselves as being able to choose the grade they wanted to receive in the course by negotiating the contract in a way they felt met their needs and learning goals. This was evident through Brittni’s statement:

The fact that we got to negotiate was nice because it is pretty much that you put that goal for yourself, you set the standard and you have to keep your standards or else you know that its going to affect your grade, but it also, to me, made me see how other people might not like having high standards for themselves that they don’t like pushing themselves but this is an opportunity, its like you know you can get that grade you want but its also reflecting on how much effort you actually put into it. It’s really like the outcome of what you do.

Through the grade contract and negotiation process, the participants were in control of the standards they established for themselves. They were aware of what they needed to accomplish at all times and there was no confusion about how to achieve their grade. Thus, the participants were able to focus their attention on their learning and writing without being discouraged from arbitrary assigned grades for each assignment. As Danielewicz and Elbow (2001) argue, “with conventional grading, many students ascribe their low grades to causes that make them resentful or even make them give up: ‘I’m not good at English,’ or ‘The instructor didn’t like me’” (pg. 255). By the participants having control over the standards set forth by themselves, they are less likely to be discouraged to learn and write. Students will likely be more willing to make adjustments and changes to improve their writing because they are holding themselves accountable for their own learning rather than perceiving the instructor as in control of their learning.
Another important aspect of the contract and negotiation process was students having more control in the sense of having more authority in the way they write as well as the topics in which they chose to write about. This is an important notion as this pushes back against what Freire (1970) describes as banking concept practices. It is not uncommon for students to be aware of the banking practices. For instance, students recognize that instructors often choose and enforce his or her own choices as they relate to the course and in this sense, students recognize they must comply and must adapt to it. Having the contract in place created a more active role for the participants in which they had more control of their learning and writing. The findings indicated that the participants felt they had more authority by having the freedom to write in a way that reflected their own style of writing rather than conforming to the rigid writing styles typically taught in high school and traditional basic writing courses. This was evident from the interviews and reflections by Silva, Brittni, and Rosemarie who all indicated that they felt they had more freedom to write in a way that was not as rigid as the strict formats and styles of what is often described as academic writing. The grade contract provided the participants an opportunity and a space where they could feel more comfortable writing and expressing their ideas without fear of a failing grade. These participants made clear that for them, academic writing in a traditional grade format was more about writing to please the professors rather than a mode of communicating their ideas, opinions, and perspectives of topics relevant to them. Silvia’s comment highlights this notion. She stated, “I used to look at academic writing as just structured writing to please instructors but I now know one’s own voice should never be lost in one’s own writing.” What is important here is that having the freedom to write in a way they felt comfortable opens
them up to exploring more of their ideas, ideas about the world, and their overall opinions and experiences. With this freedom, however, comes issues of resistance and tensions. While many students might initially feel like they would like to write about topical themes or controversial topics as they describe, there is still some resistance. As Shor (1992) argued, “more resistance may be generated by the student-centered process because traditional schooling has taught students that knowledge is serious only if it comes from the instructor or textbook” (p. 73). Despite this resistance, it was evident through the findings that having the grade contract in place allowed the participants to have more authority of their knowledge, even if deemed “controversial.” Furthermore, the participants felt they were better able to communicate their knowledge through their writing. The participants Amanda, Emeele, Brittni, and Silvia support this notion by stating that they all felt they could freely communicate their ideas in different ways. This included them being able to broaden their range of topics in order to be able to express themselves more. I provided some examples of these topics in the previous chapter. While the goal was not to analyze the topics the students chose, they provide some examples of how they represent topics not typical of Basic Writing courses. As indicated through the participant interviews, it appears as though the participants recognized that by having more authority, they saw writing as not having one authority or expert, which in turn allowed them to recognize themselves as writers who have valuable ideas that were important inside and outside academia.

**Grade Contracts Increase Motivation**

Typically, when instructors assess students using a traditional graded model, they engage heavily with extrinsic motivation in order to complete their writing assignments.
In traditional models of grading, students directly tie their letter grade to their level of writing. Thus, the primary goal for many students is to get the best grade possible without making any connections to what they are leaning. As a result, students who do not receive high scores on their writing often experience a decrease in motivation. When students experience a decrease in motivation, what inevitably follows is a low sense of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defined self-efficacy as a person’s beliefs about his or her abilities to achieve certain levels of performance, which impact events that affect his or her life. In the case of students, particularly basic writing students, if self-efficacy is low, the students will likely experience already perceived low-levels of confidence in their abilities as writers. Multon et al (1991) argued that self-efficacy has a much greater effect on low-achieving students; therefore, having a form of assessment in place like a grade contract model is likely to increase motivation and self-efficacy.

While a grade contract still involves a letter grade at the end of the semester, the grade contract allows students to focus on their writing and improvement of writing without fear of getting a bad grade. The grade contract still includes somewhat of an extrinsic motivational factor, but the extrinsic motivation is student self-guided and directed. Throughout the course of the semester, the participants could focus on improving writing and in turn, increase their motivation for writing and learning. Through this process, students’ are more likely to increase their self-efficacy. This was made evident through Brittni’s reflection:

My overall feeling, I liked it a lot. I wish that all my classes had that. You just get bored of the regular A, B, C grades then you just don’t try enough or try hard because its just the same thing and the grading contract is a whole new
experience. You actually want to try and you actually want to. It's just learning in a whole new way.

Most of the participants shared similar feelings about how the contract made them more motivated not to necessarily receive a better grade but motivated to put more effort into their work. Janine, Silvia, Brittni, Emelee, Stephanie, and Alicia all indicated that having a grade contract in place motivated them to write better. They also added that they were more motivated to learn not just about writing but also about the subjects in which they were writing. Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) work on grade contracts support this notion in that a grade contract may not necessarily get every student to focus on intrinsic motivation, but it creates a space for it. Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) argued:

> Contract grading can’t magically transform students’ values, but it can give all students a space that invites internal motivation, not just externally imposed motivation. Sometimes it’s the students who have been defeated by grades who start to show the ability to work under their own steam—students who normally don’t strive for excellence in a graded situation. (p. 257)

It is extremely important for basic writing students to maintain some level of motivation that promotes self-efficacy. Because basic writers are typically those that are deemed “needing remediation,” self-efficacy is particularly important in helping students meet the learning goals they set forth for themselves. With a grade contract in place, students have a larger space to develop confidence in their writing and learning goals. As Pajares (2003) argued, students who have positive expectations that result from a strong sense of confidence are likely to approach tasks with optimism and continue to try in the face of difficulty. Pajares (2003) also contended that those with low confidence and few
expectations for success are more likely to withdraw their effort and give up on their goals. From the essay analysis findings, it seemed evident that the majority of the participants maintained some level of motivation based on the frequency and high-level of revisions made for their essays.

**Grade Contract Model as Critical Pedagogy**

Within the larger concerns that revolve around critical pedagogical practices, grading can be seen as one small aspect of the larger issues of assessment. Nevertheless, researching and experimenting with alternative grading practices that draw on critical pedagogy is necessary in order to push and engage in transformative practices. Employing and researching alternative methods for grading is not always simple. As Shor (1992) readily admitted, educational initiatives generally support traditional practices. Despite the difficulties that may surround critical pedagogical practices, particularly as they relate to grading, engaging in a dialogical process is crucial when employing a grade contract model. The dialogical process, as Shor (1992) described, “…assumes the unique profile of the instructors, students, subject matter, and setting it belongs to” (p. 237). A grade contract that includes negotiation becomes essential as part of the dialogical process especially as it related to this study. Like the dialogical process itself, a grade contract is not standardized or static. A large part of what makes a grade contract effective with critical pedagogical practices is its situation within the democratic class.

Since a grade contract is dialogical and not meant to be a standardized form of grading, it becomes important to research how it works in different contexts and share the experiences that stem from the research. The grade contract model that I present here is not designed to be a prescriptive approach to an alternative grade model, but rather an
example and experience of a dialogical grading practice that promotes the themes discussed including motivation, authorship, revision, and overall writing development in a basic writing course. Figure 19 provides an illustration of the grade contract model as part of the critical pedagogy framework that developed from the findings of this study. The phases I outline below reflect the processes of the grade contract itself as well as the results of having a grade contract in place. While this model is indicative of this study, it can serve as an example that could be adapted for other courses and learning goals.

**Critical dialogue.** Prior to engaging in the negotiation process of the grade contract, it is important to establish critical dialogue. As Shor (1992) describes, critical dialogue as a starting point is situated in the conditions and cultures of the students so that their language, themes, understandings, levels of development and needs are included.

Engaging in critical dialogue is important prior to the negotiation process because most

\[ Figure 13. Grade contract model \]
students have likely been accustomed to traditional forms of grading that do not take into account any given context of the course and those enrolled in it. In the case of the Basic Writing course, critical dialogue is crucial because the instructor can understand the students’ experiences with grading, and what grades mean to students and instructor, and how they translate to the demands of the basic writing course. Furthermore, both the instructor and the students can adapt to the needs, culture, language, and levels of development that surround both the students and the institution. Through this critical dialogue, students are more likely to engage in the negotiation process in a way they feel comfortable with as well as prepared to navigate the space to question the status quo of grading practices and offering their voices in the design of the content, curriculum, and assessment in the course.

As indicated earlier, the first part of the example model that includes critical dialogue was not included in order to preserve the nature of the study. However, had I included a full critical dialogue as I did with the pilot study, I firmly believe some of the participants would have been more likely to participate in the initial negotiation process. Whether this had an impact on participants’ perception of authority is difficult to say. Nevertheless, I argue that had the participants had issues with the initial negotiation process, they would have expressed this concern or offered significant changes during the re-negotiation; however, they did not. This makes it evident that consistent critical dialogue throughout the semester is central in promoting students to engage in the negotiation process and embracing the space for having more authority in the course.

**Negotiation.** The negotiation process includes dialogue about the grade contract and the structure, curriculum, and assessment of the course. The negotiation process
includes what Shor (1992) described as dialogue that is situated in a formal learning space directed by a critical instructor who has leadership responsibilities but who co-develops the class, negotiates the curriculum, and shares decision making with the students, using authority in a cooperative manner. Ultimately, students share power with the instructor about the decision-making processes in the course. While the instructor uses his or her authoritative power to establish a starting point, the dialogue then invites students to become active participants in the structure and assessment of the course rather than simply passive students with no voice or authority.

The findings of this study indicate that a majority of the participants focused more on behavioral aspects of negotiating the contract. Having had the critical dialogue in place prior to the negotiation process might have helped students negotiate more than just the behavioral aspects of the contracts such as number of assignments missed and number of absences. Nevertheless, the focus on absences might have been indicative of the institution in which the students enrolled. Because the college was located in an area far removed from where the participants resided, it required a majority of the participants to drive quite a bit of distance. For some participants, finding a ride to school might have been problematic for them. Considering outside variables beyond the control of the class is important in instances of negotiation. However, as previously mentioned, variables that might have an impact on the nature of the course, student performance, and the overall contract should be discussed during the critical dialogue discussion and more importantly, during negotiation.

**Reflective critical dialogue.** The grade contract does not end after the negotiation process is complete. Ongoing reflective critical dialogue should take place in a manner
that allows both the instructor and students to reflect on the decisions made about the course as well as evaluate how learning is progressing. This process is much how Shor (2009) described as the process in which students and instructor are responsible for evaluating the learning progress, with qualitative methods or feedback and assessment, on an individual and group basis. In this study, this took place during ongoing, in class discussion about the grade contract and how it may have a positive or negative impact on the progress of the students. Students were always encouraged to ask questions about these in class evaluations and reflections. As the instructor, I communicated progress with individuals between the evaluative feedback on all assignments as well as accompanying emails given to students in order to communicate where they stood with their learning progress at all times. In order to engage in reflective, critical dialogue as a group, I discussed with the class what I observed based on evaluative feedback as well as provided a space for students to discuss what they perceived these evaluations meant to them and their overall learning progress and how that would impact the grade contract. The ongoing reflective critical dialogue was vital in preparation for the re-negotiation process that took place. The participants would have an opportunity to re-negotiate the grade contract based on the reflective critical dialogue, which informed their choices during that process.

**Re-negotiation.** A re-negotiation process took place prior to the official withdraw date of the institution. This re-negotiation was a combination of the reflective, critical dialogue and negotiation process in order to make relevant changes or adjustments for progress and development. This allowed the participants to reflect on the critical dialogue that was ongoing throughout the semester and offer any changes to the course or grade
contract. As indicated in the findings, the participants chose not to make changes to the actual contract itself but suggested eliminating a writing assignment, which I agreed to do. It was evident the participants reflected on their learning progress due to their suggestion to eliminate the fourth essay in order to spend more time on their third essay and prepare for their final persuasive essay. As the instructor, I agreed to these terms because I wanted the participants to be able to focus on their revisions in order to improve. In this sense, my goal as well as the participants, was to focus on learning goals and writing as a process rather than focusing on performance goals and writing as a product. Having the re-negotiation process in place prior to an official withdraw date is important because it serves as a checkpoint for students to have an opportunity to withdraw from a class without penalty of receiving an F. It also provides students with an opportunity truly to reflect on their own learning progress.

**Disconfirming Evidence**

Examining the impacts of a grade contract is complex and while this study attempts to demonstrate the positive impacts of a grade contract, it is important to recognize aspects of the study that make it limited in its attempt to prove the direct connection between grade contracts and improved writing. Much of the findings from the data support the claim that the grade contract had a positive influence on student motivation, writing, authorship, and revision. However, the findings from the essay analysis indicates that some of the participants viewed the grade contract as a way of doing the bare minimum concerning how they approached writing and the course. For instance, when comparing the participants in Group 1 and Group 2 level of revisions and frequency of revisions, it is evident that those participants in Group 2 showed little effort
in revisions, which points to the possible gaps in the grade contract. One gap is the ability for students to use the grade contract to their advantage by willingly submitting assignments that they know need revision and in a sense buy themselves more time. In some ways, this makes the grade contract appear less rigorous than traditional grading models and in some ways, it can be. Part of what makes the grade contract effective or ineffective is how students use it. The grade contract can serve in a way that holds students more accountable as well as encourage them to improve their writing by providing many opportunities. The grade contract, however, can serve in a way that allows students yet again to focus on what grade they will achieve in the end. Part of this includes students planning what they can get away with not having to do in the course. This resemble much of a traditional grade system in that students calculate what scores they can receive on assignments in order to achieve a good grade. What this evidence tells us then is as instructors, it becomes vital to continues engage in critical dialogue that allows the students and the instructor to navigate what makes the contract effective and ineffective. A large part of this dialogue includes meeting students where they are and exploring how to approach and reexamine attitudes about grades and the connections to learning.

**Implications**

While the findings of this study are not necessarily generalizable to a larger setting, there are implications of the study that may be pertinent to policy, practice, and future research. In this section, I discuss these implications.


Policy

Often changes in education policy often support traditional educational practices. Thus, it is imperative for instructors and researchers of critical pedagogy to explore, study, and develop alternative assessment theories and practices (Gallagher, 2002) as a way to inform policy in a more democratic way. As Gallagher (2002) contended, “This is a crucial gap in critical pedagogy because assessment is the primary tool through which remote ‘experts’ control the work of instructors and students” (p. 85). This study examines the impact of a grade contract model as a form of critical pedagogy in a Basic Writing course. From a policy standpoint, issues of retention and remediation already come into play because of the frequent labeling of a Basic Writing course as a remedial course. Currently, there are initiatives in place in the state in which the study took place that promote remedial course within e-learning environments as well as initiatives that encourage students to take 15 credit courses each semester in order to graduate faster. Naturally, issues of access in e-learning environments come into play. The push for more e-learning environment require students to have a firm understanding of the demands of academic discourse as well as digital discourse, which can be problematic for those who are underprepared for the demands of college. The push for students to enroll in 15 credit courses in the context of writing courses reemphasizes the notion that writing within academic discourses can be learned in a short amount of time; thus, emphasizing writing as merely mechanistic. It becomes rather clear the gap that exists between policy initiatives and the actual needs of students labeled as remedial. Students today, remedial or not, are balancing multiple jobs, familial responsibilities, transportation issues, and financial issues. One can argue that when faced between the choice of survival or
education, the former takes precedents. More research and practice in pedagogy and assessment that take these issues into consideration must continuously be evaluated when establishing policy issues because without responsible practice, these students are set up to fail.

Because of a recent state mandated change in the higher education funding formula, there is a serious focus on retention and graduation rates rather than enrollment rates. These current changes will likely require higher accountability particularly concerning assessment. As policy demands increase, more pressure is put on English departments to produce numbers and retention, various and inconsistent practices and assessment come to fruition. In the Basic Writing classroom, this becomes a concern because the result will likely produce an increase in standardized curriculum and assessment practices that include but are not limited to rigid rubrics, more one-dimensional grading, and common end of semester assessments. I am not arguing that all standardization is detrimental, I do argue that it infringes on the democratic nature of a class and the needs of the students, especially one as vulnerable as a Basic Writing course. While the grade contract model in this study is not designed to push back against bigger issues of policy in order to make a grand gesture, it can act as a transformative approach that questions the status quo that rests within traditional assessment and grading practices. I argue the a grade contract model can work within these policies but there needs to be further investigation and shared experiences of these in order to be heard by those who create and employ policy. The grade contract allows those in higher education to put pedagogy first and allow for more student-centered practices in order to promote learning while still maintaining accountability.
Practice

This study primarily focused on the impact of a grade contract as a form of grading that aimed to promote improved writing for beginning writers at the college level. Using a grade contract acts as an assessment practice as critical pedagogy that highlights the act of writing as a process. As Danielewicz and Shor (2009) claimed, “The basic principle in contract grading is simple but radical: what counts (‘counts,’ literally, for the grade) is going through the motions. That is, contract grading focuses wholeheartedly on processes whereas conventional grading focuses much more on products, outcomes, or results” (p. 261). By employing a grade contract, composition instructors can focus more on evaluative feedback that is likely to increase revision practices as well as promote revision that is more effective for students, particularly beginning writers. A grading contract can seemingly be a lot of work for instructors as far as providing feedback is concerned. Because the grade contract does not provide a letter grade for students, instructors must provide extensive feedback as a mode for guiding students in writing and improving writing. Through this study, it became evident that the participants relied on feedback as the form of assessment. The participants were able to monitor their progress by the kinds of feedback they received from me. As many instructors of writing will argue, providing extensive, effective feedback takes time. In some cases, there can be anywhere between 25 to 30 students in a given basic writing course. This can pose a challenge. However, having a grade contract in place allows for more flexibility. A large part of the negotiation includes dialogue between the instructor and the students on what to expect from feedback. The instructor has the ability to cater and structure the feedback in a way that will be beneficial for students and realistic for
instructors. For instance, in this study, the students negotiated on a progressive form of evaluative feedback in that as students submitted each essay, they would be evaluated on some but not all aspects of writing, grammar, and style.

With a traditional grade model, students are more likely to focus their writing and process of writing to fit the demands of the instructor. Often times, it becomes unclear to students what these demands are and in turn, students become discouraged and develop a hate for writing. By implementing a grade contract, students can focus their attention on writing as a discovery process. Writing becomes more about invention and becomes epistemic in nature. Students can learn to use writing as a way to communicate their ideas and share their experiences in and outside of academia. From a critical pedagogy standpoint, having a grade contract promotes a more democratic classroom. Students engage in a dialogical discussion with their instructor that allow them to become more active participants in their own learning process rather than taking on a disconnected, passive role. Ultimately, establishing a student-centered class puts students in control of their thinking and learning.

**Future Research**

To conduct research in the critical classroom requires both instructor and students. Shor (1992) argued, “Because the critical-democratic classroom involves in-depth scrutiny, it defines students as active researchers who make meaning, not as passive receivers of knowledge” (p. 169). Since research informs many policy initiatives, it becomes important to constantly examine and analyze teaching practices, particularly as they relate to assessment. Because there are few studies that examine a grade contract in composition classrooms, it is vital for instructors continuously to research their own
practices. By doing so, instructors are able to examine the lives and languages of the students and how assessment practices are situated within these spaces. Furthermore, students are able to participate as part of the research process in order to provide a more authentic understanding of how current assessment practices might have an impact on students. Moreover, investigating alternative methods of assessment allows for both the instructor and students to discover the ways in which people learn and progress in thinking and writing. What is important about conducting future research with alternative grading methods is the direct connection to every day teaching. When instructors conduct research in their own classrooms they are actively making connections to current contexts rather than researching in isolation. In order to establish a more critical classroom within current higher educational context as it relates to assessment, further research is needed in order to understand the complexity that is assessment within critical pedagogy, which includes issues of race and socio-economic status. While there are few studies regarding grade contracts and race (see Inoue, 2012), further research is needed in order to better understand the intersection of race, class, and gender and grade contracts as a form of assessment. As in the case of this study, it is important to note that all the participants were predominantly Hispanic and perceived the grade contract improved their writing. This supports Inoue’s (2012) study.

The grade contract is not a one-size fits all, prescriptive assessment model, but rather it serves as a practice meant to be examined and reexamined as spaces, policies, research, teaching, and students change. Experiences with the grade contract, especially in the basic writing classrooms need to be shared in order better to understand the way we assess learning and writing. While this study focused on the grade contract in the basic
writing course, it is important to conduct future research in courses in which incoming freshman are required to enroll. Courses such as sociology, psychology, and history are all writing intensive courses that could implement a grade contract in order to provide students with enough flexibility and feedback to help them acclimate to the specific discourse required by each content area. Furthermore, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs could pave the way for incorporating grade contracts as a form of assessment across the curriculum.

Limitations of the Study

Like all research studies, this study has limitations. First, because this is a multiple case study, the findings and experiences only apply to those who participated in this study. While the study cannot be generalized in multiple settings, the processes and model can be researched and tried in order to determine how different contexts change the results of using a grade contract. Next, this study was limited in the number of participants and gender of the participants. Nevertheless, a case study research that includes nine participants is valuable because it examines a phenomenon that uses different data sources and perspectives in order to determine findings and provide a description of these experiences about using a grade contract. This study is also limited because the gender of the participants is restricted to only females. Attempting to obtain participants of diverse genders was initially limited due to only two enrolled males in the Basic Writing course but having different genders provides an added dimension to the study. Additionally, this study is limited because it does not address outside social and personal factors that may have influenced how the participants engaged with and experienced the grade contract. While I draw conclusions regarding the findings, it is
difficult to know if other factors played a role in how the grade contract had an impact on student writing. Lastly, my personal involvement and rapport with the participants can be seen as a limitation of the study. Because I was the instructor and researcher, it is hard to know whether this influenced the findings in a biased way. On the other hand, being the instructor and researcher could have provided a more authentic response from the participants because I developed a trust with them.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative multiple case study suggested that using a grade contract model that includes negotiation has a positive impact on students writing. This study also suggested that when students have a grade contract in place as the main form of assessment, they are likely to have an increase in motivation, a felt sense of authorship, and desire to engage in more frequent, high-level revision practices. Furthermore, this study suggests that when students engage in a negotiation process similar to the one described in the grade contract model, they are likely to feel more in control of their learning through the shared power between instructor and students. Additionally, the grade contract allows for a more democratic classroom that includes constant dialogical discussions that promotes more of an active role in student learning over the traditional banking concept. Based on the findings of this study, those participants who engaged in the negotiation process with a focus on learning over behavioral aspects of the grade contract produced more frequent revision and high-level of revision changes. Nevertheless, those participants who still had minimal revisions still perceived a positive level of motivation and authorship. This study suggests that grade contracts allow for
more of a focus on the writing process, and further studies should be conducted in order to fully understand the complexity of critical pedagogy assessment practices.
APPENDIX A: GRADE CONTRACT

This grade contract has been adapted from James Schirmer (2012) and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. More information can be located at the following link: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/

Within the field of composition, research shows that grades tend to be a distraction when it comes to authentic writing. Because this class places heavy emphasis on discussion, revision, feedback, and participation, grades may become a factor in which it hinders the way you approach this class. Writing is about a culture and this course is designed as a way to support the culture of writing.

Instead of assigning individual grades for each assignment and basing them on a point system, I will focus more on providing substantial evaluative feedback and comments on the majority of the writing that you submit to me this semester. Prior to the midpoint of the semester (last day to drop the course and receive a W), I will provide a midterm progress review. This review is merely a checkpoint for your progress in the class and serves as means to guide you in how you will approach the remainder of the semester. Please note, however, since everything will be submitted digitally and through the online class portal, you can check the status of your “grades” and your class standing anytime.

The grading contract for this course asks you to have responsibility to yourself and to the class to do the work required, to attend and participate thoroughly during class time, to
ask significant questions of me or your classmates, and to know what assignments have
been submitted and where you stand in relation to the contract. As the professor, I have
the responsibility to be prepared for every class, to answer any questions and consider
any feedback, to provide helpful and honest suggestions on your work, and to make
myself available for questions and concerns outside of class.

Before getting into the full description of the breakdown of the contract and its
framework as well as agreeing to the terms and conditions, please know that you will all
have an opportunity to negotiate the original contract. A full description of the
negotiation process is provided in the online class portal. We will discuss this on the
second day of class.

With all this said, the default grade for the course is a "B." If you do all that is asked of
you in the manner and spirit it is asked and negotiated, if you work through the processes
we establish and the work assigned during the semester, then you'll earn a "B." If you
miss class, turn assignments in late, forget to do assignments, etc., your grade will drop.
All official assignments submitted in this course will carry the same weight. Writing is
writing. Below is the following breakdown of the terms and conditions for each grade. As
stated earlier, this may change based on the negotiations that take place for this class.

Grade of “B”

You are guaranteed a course grade of “B” if you meet all of the following conditions:

1. Attendance/Participation/Presence. You’ll attend and fully participate in at least
95% of our scheduled class sessions and their activities and assignments (that’s at
least 44-46 scheduled sessions). You may miss (for whatever reason) 3 class sessions. For our class, attendance equates to participation. Therefore, it is not enough for you simply to come to class. If you come to class unprepared in any way (e.g., without work done, assignments read, etc.), it will be counted as an absence, since you won’t be able to participate fully in our activities. This means any informal assignment given, or ones not outlined on our syllabus, fit into this category of attendance.

Assignments not completed because of an absence, either ones assigned on the schedule or ones assigned on earlier days in class, will be late, missed, or ignored (depending on when you turn it in finally, see the guidelines #4, #5, and #6 below).

Any absence for specific reasons such as military duty, religious holidays, or school related events will require advanced notice. Students must provide written documentation, stating the days he/she will be absent beforehand. This will allow us to determine how he/she will meet assignments, participation, and the responsibilities of our contract, despite being absent.

2. **Lateness.** You will come on time or early to class. Walking into class late 2 or 3 times in a semester is understandable, but coming habitually late every week is not. If you are late to class, you are still responsible to find out what assignments or instructions were made, but please don’t disrupt our class by asking about the things you missed because you were late.
3. **Sharing/Collaboration.** You will work cooperatively in groups. Be willing to share your writing, to listen supportively to the writing of others, and, when called for, give full and thoughtful assessments that consistently help your colleagues consider ways to revise. We will be doing this quite a bit during our writing workshops.

4. **Late Assignments.** You will turn in properly and on time all assignments when required. Because your classmates in class depend on you to get your work done on time so that they can do theirs on time, all late assignments are just as bad as missed assignments. Twice during the semester, you may turn in a late assignment. All “late assignments” are due 2 days after their initial due date, no exceptions. Please note that a late assignment may be due on a day when our class is not scheduled to meet.

5. **Missed Assignments.** A missed assignment is NOT one not completed; it is one that has missed the guidelines somehow but is still complete and turned in. In order to meet our contract for a “B” grade, you can only have one “missed assignments.” Please note that assignments not completed at all are considered “Ignored Assignments” (see #6 below). A missed assignment is usually one completed after the 48 hours that would have made it only a “late” assignment, but it is complete.
6. **Ignored Assignments.** Any assignments not done period, or “ignored,” for whatever reasons, are put in this category. For this course, this means one ignored assignment is an automatic "D"; two ignored assignments means an automatic "F." There are no exceptions.

**All Compositions need to meet the following conditions:**

- **Complete/On Time.** You will turn in on time and in the appropriate manner completed work that meet all of assignment guidelines. All assignment guidelines are described in detail on their respective document. All assignment descriptions are located in the online portal.

- **Revisions.** If/when the assignment is to revise, you will reshape, extend, complicate, or substantially clarify your ideas – or relate your ideas to new things. You won’t just correct or touch up based on Word suggestions. Revisions must somehow respond to or consider seriously your classmates’ and my assessments. We will negotiate this during class.

- **Copy Editing.** When the assignment is for the final publication draft, your piece should be free from almost all mistakes in spelling and grammar. It's fine to get help in copy editing or seek assistance from the writing center.

- **Thinking.** Use your work to do some figuring out. Ask questions, move beyond the boundaries. Hone your intellect by using your power of observation and
documenting your thoughts in writing. Your work needs to move or go somewhere, to have a line of thinking. It shouldn’t be formulaic, random or surface level.

All Assessments and Peer Responses need to meet the following conditions:

- **Complete/On Time.** All assessments should be complete and submitted on time and in the appropriate way so that your colleagues will get your assessments of their writing the way the class has predetermined.

- **Content.** All assessments should focus their comments on the topic or issue at hand, following the directions established by our evolving class discussions about them.

- **Courtesy/Respect.** All assessments should be courteous and respectful in tone, but honest. It’s okay to say something doesn’t seem right in a draft, or that something doesn’t really work. Respect means we are kind and truthful. It’s not the “golden rule” (treat others as you would have them treat you), but a modified one: treat others as you believe they want to be treated.

**Grade of “A”**

The grade of "B" depends on behaviors. Have you shown responsible effort and consistency in our class? Have you done what was asked of you in the spirit it was asked? However, the grade of "A" depends on acknowledged quality. Thus, you earn a "B" if you put in good time and effort; we should push each other for a "B." In order to get an
"A," you have to make your time and effort pay off into writing of genuine, recognizable excellence that responds in some concrete way to your classmates’ and my concerns (and also meets the conditions for a "B"). This means that not only is revision important, but a certain kind of revision, one demonstrating a reflective writer listening, making decisions and moving drafts above and beyond expectations. Writing in the "A" category will respond to assessments and be reflective of itself.

For grades up to "B," you don't have to worry about my judgment or my standards of excellence but rather that of the outcomes of the course and as negotiated by the class; for higher grades, you do. But we'll have class discussions about excellence in writing and we should be able to reach fairly good agreement.

**Knowing where you stand**

This system is better than regular grading for giving you a clear idea of what your final grade looks like at any moment. Whenever you get feedback, you should know where you stand in terms of meeting the expectations of the course and expectations negotiated in class. More specifically, in order to help you keep track, you will receive a mark of “C” to indicate a completion based on the expectations established. When given the mark of “R,” you will have one week to revise and resubmit in order to receive a mark of “C.” You will have several opportunities to do this but remember that due to the fast pace nature of the course, you will want to strive to achieve the “C” mark the first or second time around. I will also guide some of these discussions in class, but if you’re doing everything as directed and turning it in on time (no matter what anyone says), you’re
getting a "B." As for absences and lateness, you'll have to keep track of them, but you can check with me any time.

**Grades Lower Than a “B”**

I hope no one will aim for lower grades. The quickest way to slide to a “C,” "D,” or "F" is to miss class, not turn in things on time, and show up without assignments. This much is nonnegotiable: you are not eligible for a passing grade of “C” unless you attend at least 86% of the class sessions and meet the guidelines above. And you can't just turn in all the late work at the end as it will be impossible to keep up with the pace of the course. If you are missing classes and behind in work, please stay in touch with me about your chances of passing the course.

**The Breakdown**

Here is the way grading works in our class. In order to get the grade on the left, you must meet or exceed the requirements in the row next to it (Again, this will be negotiated).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th># of absences</th>
<th># of late assignments</th>
<th># of missed assignments</th>
<th># of ignored assignments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>2 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All assignments that are turned in as “late” after the 2nd are considered “missed.” All “missed” assignments never submitted are “ignored.”

*If there are any extenuating circumstances, these issues need to be brought to me directly and immediately. Depending on the situation and circumstance, I will decide how to go about making changes to your contract.*

By staying in this course and attending class, you accept this contract and agree to abide by it, as do I (the instructor).
APPENDIX B: ESSAY PROMPTS

Essay 1: Ironies and Oddities (Description)

Directions:

Life is filled with occurrences, which, from our own perspectives, seem strange or ironic. A perceived gap exists between what seems and what is, or what out to be and what is. Often, these little ironies and oddities we encounter are either overlooked or simply noted and forgotten; and as a result, we miss the meaning that exists in the gap between what seems and what is. We neglect the importance of the odd, the ironic, and the marginal. But what can the odd and ironic tell us about American society and its values or other societies and values? How does the odd interact with what we consider to be "normal"? What factors contribute to our belief that something is odd or different? What is the difference between intended irony and unintended irony? How does irony differ from oddity, and how do these categories overlap? These are just a few of the questions that you might wrestle with while preparing to write your first essay.

For this essay, you will choose at least one odd or ironic event drawn from your own observations on which to focus. You will then write an essay that examines this subject carefully and critically in an attempt to arrive at the personal and social significance of the subject.

Approach:

First, observe your experiences and interactions carefully in order to locate an odd or ironic subject. Topics for the essay can be large or small. Once you discover an irony and
oddity worth writing about, ask important questions. Some questions to consider: What
does your subject say about society? What might it say about your own perceptions? Do
you see something as odd due to prejudice or bias? What might this subject say about
what you believe to be normal? Has observing this subject more closely led to any
significant changes in your viewpoints?

After you have asked a number of questions, focus your essay. On which question(s) do
you want to concentrate? Craft a thesis statement that leads your reading in a specific
direction. Remember that your essay must have a focus. This essay should not be a
wandering collection of random thoughts, but rather a concise and coherent treatment of a
subject and what it signifies. Because this essay will take on the more descriptive
approach, be sure to utilize the strategies and guidelines for writing a descriptive essay.

Considerations:

Remember the rhetorical concerns relative to any writing assignment:

1. What is your purpose for writing?
2. What do you wish to accomplish?
3. Who are you as a writer?
4. Who are your primary and secondary audiences?
5. What is the relationship(s) between writer and reader?
6. What form should the text take? What should it look like?
7. How can you most effectively arrange the information in the text?
This assignment is meant to stretch not only your perceptive abilities, but also your creative and critical thinking abilities. Think of the world as a larger text with you as a reader of that text. With each essay you compose, you are adding to that text in meaningful ways.

Requirements:

Length: 3+ pages

Sources: optional, but always recommended.

Style: MLA/APA

Works Cited: if necessary.

Essay 3: Subjects and Objects

Directions:

We are surrounded by a world of objects. Some people align their lives and values around obtaining objects. Psychologists study the causes and effects of desiring objects in our lives. Artists, architects, and engineers create objects for aesthetic and pragmatic purposes—to express values and beauty, and to furnish humanity with the tools of living. Criminals use objects to perpetrate crimes while philosophers and theologians tout the dangers of loving objects too much. Governments use objects to enforce their policies, and religions invest objects with sacred meanings. Regardless of our beliefs about a transcendental reality, we live at least partially in a material world. But are all objects the same? What separates a “sacred” object from a “secular”? How and what do objects
symbolize? Is there any meaningful difference between a pencil and a rose? If so, what? How might objects express and/or embody the subjects who create or own them? What motivates our need to possess? These are just some of the questions that you might consider as you craft your third essay.

**Approach:**

Choose an object to investigate carefully. The object might be small like a paper clip or large like a jumbo jet. Be sure to choose an object about which you feel you have something to say. Once you have chosen an object, proceed as usual by asking pertinent questions. What meanings does this object have for various people or groups? Does this object carry symbolic value? What does it symbolize? How? Has this object impacted major historical, political, religious, social, or personal events? Who created this object? What are the object’s properties and qualities? Who, if anyone, desires this object? What motivates his or her desire? How do your own experiences alter your perceptions of objects?

**Considerations:**

Remember the rhetorical concerns relative to any writing assignment:

1. What is your purpose for writing?
2. What do you wish to accomplish?
3. Who are you as a writer?
4. Who are your primary and secondary audiences?
5. What is the relationship(s) between writer and reader?
As with language, we must learn to evaluate objects critically. By examining the objects that make up our world, we are able to learn a little more about the people who create and use them. Remember, too, that your own role as a writer is to produce objects of lasting value. Consider this as you draft your essay.

**Requirements:**

Length: 3+ pages

Sources: optional, but always recommended.

Style: MLA/APA

Works Cited: if necessary.

**Essay 5 (Final Essay): Persuasion**

**Directions:**

Throughout the semester, you have been working to analyze more closely and accurately around you be it rhetorical analysis on research, visual media, or your own writing. You have been conscious of the effects of your own imagination on what you see and read as well as the influence of your own experiences have on the process of seeing specific topics or the world around you, particularly from a persuasive perspective. This essay assignment carries but a single instruction: to persuade.
For this paper, you will create a topic that is ripe for a persuasive essay. Whereas the previous writing opportunities were thematic and or topical, the only requirement for this essay is that it is persuasive in purpose.

**Approach:**

Begin by reviewing your blog entries for the semester. You have likely begun to see a variety of things in a new light, and a frequent outpouring of a new vision is to share that vision with others in an effort to persuade them to adopt it for themselves. Throughout the duration of English 100, what has piqued your interest? What do you feel the passion to speak about? A political issue? A moral or religious issue? An historical or aesthetic issue?

Next, consider carefully the forms that a persuasive essay might take. One form is the kind with which you are undoubtedly familiar—the basic college persuasive essay complete with research and statistics. If you are passionate about this approach to persuasion, feel free to adopt this format for this paper. However, if you are tired of writing this kind of paper, examine alternatives. Might you tell a story with a clear didactic message? Might a personal letter address your audience best? What about a letter to the editor of a newspaper or journal? Other approaches may also work well.

Feel free to aim for originality and to share your ideas with me. You may want to review the persuasive approaches discussed in Keith and Lundberg’s text regarding classical persuasion and persuasion techniques. Be sure you understand the structure of persuasive approaches, this includes but not limited to logic, logical progressions, types of appeals
(ethos, pathos, logos), rhetoric, arrangement, style, etc. You only have one week to complete this paper; while not a long essay, you will want to spend some quality time with this piece as your peers will be looking for holes in your argument during blog feedback.

**Considerations:**

If you decide to include research in the form of quotations, statistics, etc., attach a works cited page following the MLA/APA format. Outside sources are highly recommended, but are optional. If you choose not to include outside sources, your essay may be judged lacking if the potential for sources is obvious. In other words, if an essay seems incomplete without sources, it will be downgraded. Recall that part of becoming an effective writer is the ability to discern when and where outside sources are necessary.

Lastly, remember the rhetorical concerns relative to any writing assignment:

1. What is your purpose for writing?
2. What do you wish to accomplish?
3. Who are you as a writer?
4. Who are your primary and secondary audiences?
5. What is the relationship(s) between writer and reader?
6. What form should the text take? What should it look like?
7. How can you most effectively arrange the information in the text?
It is arguable that all writing eventually comes down to persuasion since readers are forced, at least momentarily, to adopt the basic worldview of the author in order to fully grasp the meaning and context of a piece of writing. As stated at the beginning of this semester, “Writing is power.” Learn to use it responsibly.

**Requirements:**

Topic: Open, but be cautious and consider the length of this assignment and your focus.

Length: 3 pages (no more!)

Sources: optional, but always recommended.

Style: MLA/APA

Works Cited: if necessary.
Negotiation Protocol

**Rationale:** The purpose of this negotiation process is to grant you, the students, a say in what takes place in this course. For the negotiation process for this course, you, the student will have a voice on how this class will function in terms of grading, policies, and assignments. Keep in mind that the instructor has already established what she feels is an appropriate approach for the course. However, because all courses and students are not the same, the process of negotiation becomes important. For this course, both the student and instructor will negotiate the grading contract set forth by the instructor. The result of the negotiation, in some cases, may play in the best interest of the instructor, and in other cases, it may play in the best interest of the students. Ultimately, the goal here is to ensure that the best case scenario is in the interest of the students. To participate in the negotiation process, we will engage in online dialogue. In order to engage in the process of negotiation you will complete the following…

**Directions:** At the start of the course, I the instructor will introduce the grading contract and structure of the course. I will also discuss my rationale for implementing a grading contract module and discuss a bit about Critical Pedagogy. This will provide you with some background information regarding my position on grades and structures of grading. After this takes place, you will be free to discuss your position and questions regarding grades and the nature of this course.
Once this is completed, you will have the opportunity to provide your feedback and negotiate what has been introduced as the grading contract and policies of the course. This will be completed online using the established discussion board topics. Please keep in mind that I will be engaging in the discussion as well. My purpose is to help facilitate the discussion and add any questions or comments to allow us fully to come to an effective conclusion. Also keep in mind this process of negotiation is voluntary and not required. However, I urge you to participate as this allows you to have a say in how this course will transpire. I will open the discussion board for one full week. Once that week is completed, I will present the findings in class and we will make the final decision on the contract and policies.

Topics for Negotiation

1. **Grade Contract**: This section will provide negotiation and discussion of the grade chart (see Appendix A) that includes absences, late assignments, ignored assignments, and missed assignments.

2. **Assignments**: This section will provide negotiation and discussion of the number of official assignments that should be counted toward the grading contract.

3. **Expectations and Evaluations**: This section will provide a negotiation and discussion of assignment expectation, class expectations, and evaluative feedback expectations. This section will determine what will be marked as “Complete” or “Revise.”
APPENDIX D: REFLECTIVE LETTER

Reflective Letter

Directions:

Self-Reflection is a critical component to the process of writing. In order to assess from your perspective your overall process of writing and improvement of writing in this course, I am asking that you construct a letter to me that answers the questions bellows. The questions about your writing and improvement of writing will allow you to reflect on your overall writing and process throughout the course of the semester. Furthermore, in order to help me improve my teaching and content of this course, I am also asking questions regarding the class and the structure of the class.

1. How has your writing during the semester affected your thinking and beliefs about various subjects?

2. How has your writing allowed you to communicate what you learned about the demands of reading and interpretation? How has this knowledge affected your reading and writing process?

3. How has your process of writing allowed you to acknowledge the special demands of academic writing and your attitude towards it?

4. Overall, how do you feel you have grown as a reader and writer? In what areas have you improved? What areas do you continue to struggle with?
5. What do you feel was your biggest challenge? Why? What steps do you believe you will take in the future to overcome this challenge(s)?

6. What are your overall general thoughts about your level of writing at this point in your academic career?

7. What are your overall thoughts about the content and curriculum of the course? Do you feel it has helped you be better prepared for the demands of academic reading and writing? Explain.

8. What are your overall thoughts about the structure of the course? Do you feel anything needs to be improved, changed, or eliminated in order to help students enrolled in this course succeed? Explain.
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROTOCOL

Interview Questions and Protocol

Protocol

Participants will be interviewed face to face at the culmination of the course. Participants will be interviewed after all final grades have been submitted to the registrar’s office. Interviews will take place on campus, but if there is an area that is more convenient for the student, the researcher will accommodate those needs.

Interview Questions

Note to Reviewer(s)

Following the interview protocol of Seidman (2006) that focuses on the concrete details of the present experience, open ended interviews will be conducted to fit the context of the study which focuses on student perceptions of contract grading in an advanced composition class. Interviews will last approximately 20 minutes per participant.

Interviewer:

Introduce yourself; remind interviewee that they have consented to the use of the audio-recording for this study.

Begin audio-recording

Interview Questions:

1. Based on your experience in the Basic Writing composition course, what were three advantages of the contract grading system for this course?

2. Based on your experience in the Basic Writing composition course, what were three disadvantages of the contract grading system for this course?
3. How did you feel the contract grading system affected your motivation for writing in this course?

4. How did you feel the contract grading system affected the process of revision in this course?

5. How did you feel about the negotiation process and its effect on your experience in the course?

6. How do you feel about the grading contract as the major form of assessment for this course?
## APPENDIX F: ONLINE DISCUSSION BOARD CODES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Data Excerpt</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Code for Excerpt</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Regarding the feedback, expectations are important. I personally tend to think how I can improve, but not grammar, word choice, spelling, and punctuation. Especially coming from a junior college, and I've noticed a lot of problems in the past. This is our first semester as college students and we haven't gotten into the flow of everything yet. This worksheet may be too overwhelming for some.</td>
<td>Demonstrates some level of understanding of expectations.</td>
<td>Evaluative – Feedback/Comments</td>
<td>Students' Expectations of Instructors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I agree - I think that blogs shouldn't be held up to the essay standards. Blogs should be a fun thing to do, a way to express a different sense of writing. I don't want to worry about grammatical errors or spelling as much when blogging.</td>
<td>Agreed with other student.</td>
<td>Evaluative – Clarity</td>
<td>Students' Expectations of Instructors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>In my opinion, I think that our assignment expectations should be slightly lenient as we start off because we haven't had trouble with writing. Your feedback would be of great help. It's always great to have personalized help with your writing skills.</td>
<td>Progressive evaluation due to self-awareness of writing level.</td>
<td>Evaluative – Progression</td>
<td>Students' Expectations of Instructors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>As far as grammatical errors go, I feel it shouldn't be too strict but will be checked for proper use to enhance our errors.</td>
<td>Evaluative as form of improving writing versus fixing errors.</td>
<td>Evaluative – Grammar</td>
<td>Students' Expectations of Instructors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Data Excerpt</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Code for Excerpt</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Now for the class expectations, maybe we could have a rule that all phones must be on silent mode and maybe vibrator but only when the phone is expecting a call or message that is of extreme importance. Unless that is the case, I don't think that anyone's phone should be on vibrate, because when someone's having a full blown conversation on their phone and it's vibrating every five seconds it could be very distracting and distracting. Let's all respect each other's learning environment.</td>
<td>Recognizes that phones, typically smart phones, are one of the main sources of distraction.</td>
<td>Student Behavioral</td>
<td>Students' Self-Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>An A student should have four absences... Yes, one missing assignment...</td>
<td>Suggested but class declined.</td>
<td>Contract - Absences</td>
<td>Students' Self-Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I think we should have at least 3 or 4 absences to still be an A student... I also think we should have at least 2 missing assignments to still receive an A in the course...</td>
<td>Agrees with original contract.</td>
<td>Contract - Assignments</td>
<td>Students' Self-Expectations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW AND REFLECTIVE LETTER CODES

**Impact on Writing – Interview Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Data Excerpt</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Code for Excerpt</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>My overall feelings about the contract are positive. I actually learned more in this class than I actually learned in high school, that's bad to say but I actually did.</td>
<td>Repeats actually</td>
<td>Perceived level of learning</td>
<td>Learning About Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I feel like I wrote way better as a writer</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Improved Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I feel like writing is my worst subject, personally, but I feel like having you telling me what I was doing and to get the feedback for our essays and know that we have a chance to fix our essays... that's what helped</td>
<td>Feedback as part of writing process</td>
<td>Writing and Reading Processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I felt like I was able to learn more</td>
<td>Perceived level of learning</td>
<td>Learning About Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emeece</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>It made me want to write because I am not a very good writer but with this grading contract, I actually improved</td>
<td>Perceived level of improvement</td>
<td>Improved Writing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>...it makes me want to write more</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Attitudes About Writing</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At first, I wasn’t sure about the grading contract because I have never done it and to me it was a little confusing but as the course progressed, I started to really like it.</td>
<td>Initial Resistance but showed changed over time</td>
<td>Attitudes About Writing</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I saw the huge improvements that I made in my writing and just discussions and just everything</td>
<td>Perceived level of improvement</td>
<td>Improvement of Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I don’t think there was a disadvantage, the contract motivated me to do my work. For the first time, I actually got something besides a C in the class</td>
<td>Increased motivation</td>
<td>Attitudes About Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>My overall feeling, I liked it a lot. I wish that all my classes had that. You just get bored of the regular A, B, C grades then you just don’t try enough or try hard because it’s just the same thing and the grading contract is a whole new experience. You actually want to try and you actually want to try hard learning in a whole new way.</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Learning About Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>One advantage of the grading contract is that I noticed how much effort I put into the class.</td>
<td>Increased effort</td>
<td>Improvement of Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>When I wanted to slack, the contract didn’t let me because it was something that was always in the back of my mind</td>
<td>Fear of failing</td>
<td>Writing Processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
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<td>Data Excerpt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I thought it [negotiation] was cool. It’s a relationship you make with your teacher and students. It gives you chances and more of a relationship. It is cool and different and should be tried.</td>
<td>Negotiation — Establishing relationships — Power — Sharing</td>
<td>Sharing Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The negotiation process regarding the contract, I enjoyed it. I really liked it for the simple fact it wasn’t too much on students. To me, a regular teacher would say ‘Hey, if you missed these days, you’re already failed’. It’s more like you gave us the option to let us throw our opinions in, how we feel about the contract was thrown in. Either you agree or disagree and you would discuss it with the class and for most people they agreed and some disagreed and I thought that was pretty cool.</td>
<td>Negotiation — Power — Sharing</td>
<td>Sharing Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Its like you are putting in your input and its just not like one authority, so yeah, I thought it was awesome.</td>
<td>Negotiation — Power — Sharing</td>
<td>Sharing Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Its like you are putting in your input and its just not like one authority, so yeah, I thought it was awesome.</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Redistributing Authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>An advantage was actually how you let us pick our grade...negotiation. I liked the whole negotiation because not too many teachers do that.</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Redistributing Authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>One advantage is the first grade, getting to negotiate your grade, [through the final letter].</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Redistributing Authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I liked how you can negotiate with the teacher and you had a little more freedom, like you had control over how you wanted your grade and how you felt. Like your schedule would allow you to accomplish in the time and also how you can negotiate. If you take off (negotiate out of) an essay, which gave more time for revisions of other essays. The missing assignment one I took advantage of. It’s like since I couldn’t do this essay right now. I could put it off until later. I was like surprised because I was used to the teacher telling us which you expect it’s not what we expected out of it so when we were negotiation... it was different because it wasn’t like what I was used to. I was used to getting percentages and points and like counting on adding like “Oh I have to get this to get an A” but like for the contract, it is kind of like unpredictable but you know if you put your work into it, you get an idea of what you are going to get.</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I liked the negotiation process. At first, I was scared because it was new, but then being able to negotiate our grade depending on how the class goes made you feel more like an adult in a way. It felt more like college and not just another class.</td>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>Redistributing Authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A disadvantage is the pressure of everything, but then again we got to choose it but I don’t really think like in the beginning when we all like heard about it, we knew what it was going to be like. It seemed to easy so we all agreed to it but when the semester got going and we started doing everything, it was like “okay”, [really]. We [class] should have thought more about it. I think we thought about it like it was easy. The negotiation process, I was like the first part [initial negotiation] I didn’t really care in the beginning, I was just like “I don’t care.” I will just follow but when we got to renegotiate, a lot of people, I was going to put input but a lot of the other students already said what I was going to say, so I felt like it was a smarter idea because it gave us a feel for what it [negotiation] actually was.</td>
<td>New process of decision making</td>
<td>New Process of Thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The fact that we got to negotiate was nice because it is pretty much that you put that goal for yourself, you set the standard and you have to keep your standards or else you know that it's going to affect your grade, but it also to me, made me see how other people might not like having high standards for themselves that they don’t like putting themselves but this is an opportunity, its like you know you can get that grade you want but it is also reflecting on how much effort you actually put into it. It’s really like the outcome of what you do.</td>
<td>New ways of thinking</td>
<td>New Process of Thinking</td>
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### Interview Codes: Grade Contract

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Advantage of grading contract, I knew exactly what I needed to do to get the grade I needed. There was no confusion on any of it. I thought it was plain and simple. You knew what you needed to do to get your things done. It gave me comfort knowing what I needed to do.</td>
<td>Clarity of Contract</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emilee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>You knew where you always stood with your grade, it was never a question.</td>
<td>Clarity of Contract</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>For me, the advantages were being able to keep better track of not missing my assignments. I like knowing there was no surprise grading. It was either you did the assignment or you didn't do the assignment.</td>
<td>Clarity of Contract</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>It felt like this system is better than traditional because I feel like the teacher is more involved with us as well.</td>
<td>Teacher involved</td>
<td>Instructor Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I felt like you cared a little bit more than other professors because you gave me feedback and I knew what I needed to do to get the grade that I wanted.</td>
<td>Teacher involved</td>
<td>Instructor Involvement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I like the absences policy, it made me more ready to go to class instead of saying “oh I can just miss class today, no big deal!”</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Increased Motivation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I just wish more professors would use it [contract], I think it would make students do more of their work because I find with my other classes that don’t have the contract I can say “oh I can miss an assignment, it would just drop me down a couple of points” where with yours [contract] I knew that if I missed an assignment, I was going to get dropped down a whole letter grade.</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Increased Motivation</td>
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## Interview Codes - Revision

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The contract helped out a lot with things I missed and forget. It helped me with the revisions especially, so yeah, I liked that part.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The personal process of revision was actually something very helpful. Again, we would bring our essays back in class and you would explain to us what was needed. The grading contract fit in to where you would give us, say we messed up a little bit on our essay, you would give us that week span so that we can go back and fix the revisions or anything that needed to be fixed, that was pretty helpful.</td>
<td>Revision Process</td>
<td>Increased Revision</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Usually, just like turn in my paper, I don't even revise my drafts, so I just usually turn in the first one. But then like with the contract, I had to go back and revise it and change things and make it better.</td>
<td>Revision Process</td>
<td>Increased Revision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I am feeling very confident going into my next class because I know like the writing was more laid out as a process of what needed to happen rather than just a rough draft and final copy and that's it, like you go back and it taught me how to break apart each paragraph like sentence by sentence, which is what I did for my last final essay so it became more of a process rather than just - you write this draft, turn your paper in, and you are done.</td>
<td>Revision Process</td>
<td>Increased Revision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>It gave me more insight on what I was doing wrong so when I am revising on my own now, I pick up on those mistakes a lot better than I was before.</td>
<td>Revision Process</td>
<td>Increased Revision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>For the process, it was more of all I knew I had to do it because if I didn't, I knew I would drop down a grade and I definitely didn't want that so at least me motivated very much throughout the whole class.</td>
<td>Revision and Improved Product</td>
<td>Revision and Improved Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skye</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>It gives you an opportunity to make your paper better and show your mistakes through feedback. The contract affected me positively because it made me want to improve my papers more so that way I would get more revisions. When you get the revisions back you have to like do all the things based on the feedback you teacher gave. I just wanted to get a perfect paper so I wouldn't have to. Because the first paper I got a revision needed. They second paper I got a revision need. After the third one, I didn't want to get a revision anymore, so then I tried to do better.</td>
<td>Revision and Fixed Errors</td>
<td>Revision and Improved Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>It really didn't kind of make me stress out as much because I knew that I was still going to get another grade according to the contract that we did in class. Its just kind of like it's easy if you did not do well the first time, you get teacher help and I can just have another chance. Its like it wasn't just for the grade but getting your feedback to improve our essay and not just let it sit there and just go on to the next assignment.</td>
<td>Revision and Fixed Errors</td>
<td>Revision and Improved Writing</td>
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## Interview Codes – Authorship

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>When I write, before, it was like very strict and the grading contract gave more like freedom and it was like you could &quot;breathe.&quot; Because there was no percentages or points, sometimes before when I wrote it be like thinking what is the teacher asking for but I am trying to fulfill those requirements like the F and during your class, I felt more freedom and I can do what I wanted to do, more freedom, my style.</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Freedom to Act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Date Excerpt</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Code for Excerpt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>This semester, my eyes were opened about the stuff I did wrong when writing. I’ve always had a problem with comma splices and I’m still getting used to all the comma rules you taught. I still have to work on that. Also, as a reader, I’ve gained more insight into analyzing the author’s intentions and reasons as to why they write what they write and how they write it. At this point, I believe I have improved. I wasn’t used to writing such lengthy papers since I was used to 1-2 pages of writing only.</td>
<td>Learning about writing Process Improvement</td>
<td>Learning About Writing Writing and Reading Processes Improvement of Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britten</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>This class has changed the way that I viewed English courses. There are so many small words that can change a whole sentence and the meaning it has to the person reading it. The result of that is papers that are unclear. The importance of understanding small grammatical errors was underestimated but after seeing it, it has changed the perspective of how I read and that was exercise in the time we had workshops and in our homework readings. One of the areas in which I have seen the most improvement has been in my sentence structure and avoiding the use of repeating myself. The area in which I still struggle and that is my biggest challenge is trying to not sound boring or write like I did in high school. I am slowly growing out of that old high school English class mentality.</td>
<td>Attitudes about Writing Learning about writing Improvement</td>
<td>Attitudes About Writing Learning About Writing Improvement of Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silva</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>This course has changed my mentality towards different subjects in different forms such as understanding what information given is credible and which isn’t. The knowledge I’ve learned has been very helpful now being able to distinguish little parts in writing that can completely change the whole tone and meaning of the piece of writing being extremely helpful to better understand the author’s point of view. Overall, I have grown as much as a writer. I’ve improved on organizing my essays properly and learning how to write intro paragraphs and create good thesis statements which I didn’t know how to do. What I continue to struggle with would be expanding my vocabulary more and being able to use different transition words to begin my sentences.</td>
<td>Attitudes about writing Learning about writing Improvement</td>
<td>Attitudes About Writing Learning About Writing Improvement of Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I will continue to struggle with grammar in my writing, but I think that after this class I have a better writing process.</td>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>Writing and Reading Processes</td>
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## Reflective Letter Codes - Authorship

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sulta</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>My biggest challenge throughout the course was tracking my ideas and being able to freely write and get out of the habit of strict academic writing that I was accustomed to.</td>
<td>Authorship - Freedom of Choice</td>
<td>Freedom to Act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemano</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>This class was different from other past English classes I have taken in the sense that I wasn’t forced to write about a certain subject. I enjoyed being able to choose what I wanted to write about which allowed me to present a better piece of work than if I was forced to write about something that wasn’t interesting to me.</td>
<td>Authorship - Freedom</td>
<td>Freedom to Act</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulta</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Now, rather than sitting for a good grade I put my best forward to get my point across and thoughts down which ends up benefiting me the best at the end.</td>
<td>Authorship - Learning</td>
<td>Writing to Learn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emalee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Writing has helped me communicate my ideas in a different ways. I have learned that one cannot just put a quote in their writing and not explain what the quote means. Writing has taught me that when I read and interpret I can affect how the audience will see my writing. When looking at my writing process I focus more on the subject by looking more into than just throwing random thoughts together.</td>
<td>Authorship - Learning</td>
<td>Writing to Learn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Writing this semester has broadened my range of topics. I am not constrained to book reports or the overview of one of Shakespeare’s plays. I am now more comfortable than I was writing about more controversial topics and that is okay to write about them and state personal opinions.</td>
<td>Authorship - Controversial Writing</td>
<td>Controversial Writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emalee</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>My writing process has allowed me to understand that everyone will not agree with my writing differently. No one person is automatically going to agree with me.</td>
<td>Authorship - Controversial Writing</td>
<td>Controversial Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulta</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The concept of this curriculum has helped me so much. I’ve learned more in this short period of time than I probably learned in high school. The course has not only helped me prepare in my writing but also</td>
<td>Authorship - Student control of knowledge</td>
<td>Student Authority of Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Britta</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Throughout high school, we were taught the “right” way to write. I remember sitting in class the first week and being blown away with some of the questions that you asked. One of those questions that I asked was “Who are they?” speaking about who really says what’s perfect or not because everything is written by people just like us and is said by people just like us because there is no right or wrong way to write. Most college students come out of high school with the mental set to write the specific way taught in that time, not only does that have an impact of being able to freely write but also in being able to understand what they read and the way it is being understood. Now, I can write freely and express myself more without thinking constantly about a certain format I have to follow or a specific way I have to make my writing sound.</td>
<td>Authorship - Student control of knowledge</td>
<td>Student Authority of Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulta</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The process of writing I’ve learned throughout this course has really changed my own on academic writing because I learned to not get intimidated by the high demand of instructors. I used to look at academic writing as just structured writing to please instructors but I now know and a own voice should never be lost in someone else’s writing.</td>
<td>Authorship - Student control of knowledge</td>
<td>Student Authority of Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemano</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have always been so focused on producing a paper that I think if I would have never really doubted my professor would ever ask for it. I have learned that there should be my right and wrong when it comes to writing.</td>
<td>Authorship - Student control of knowledge</td>
<td>Student Authority of Knowledge</td>
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## Reflective Letter Codes - Revision

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<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Academic writing at a college level is less intimidating now. I think the greatest lesson I've learned from this class was that it's okay to make a mistake. The first draft doesn't have to be perfect.</td>
<td>Revision – Improved writing</td>
<td>Revision and Improved Writing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britni</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The curriculum in this course not only helped me think outside the box, but also sparked an interest in reading and actually finding sources to support whatever it was that I had to write about. Even though I felt overwhelmed when we were told all the requirements for this class, it was beneficial and motivated me to push myself to change and slowly allowed me to improve the way I write.</td>
<td>Revision – Improved writing</td>
<td>Revision and Improved Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I have written multiple drafts for all of my essays in this class, and many of them had made no sense at first. Allowing myself to brainstorm in the form of an essay draft seemed to help me succeed in getting my ideas across.</td>
<td>Revision – Improved writing</td>
<td>Revision and Improved Writing</td>
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## Reflective Letter Codes – Grade Contract

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<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Overall, I think that the way this course was designed was straightforward, and not just to get the &quot;A&quot; grade. All of the assignments with the readings, blog posts, and essays I felt were all string together in some way which helped the course flow through the semester.</td>
<td>Perception of Contract in favor of clarity</td>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>The course was challenging, but I think managing it as long as you don't set yourself behind and stay on top provided with a checklist of things I need to look at when revising which will certainly help me in the long run.</td>
<td>Perception of Contract having control</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The only thing future students need to worry about with the grading system is staying on track and organized.</td>
<td>Perception of Contract having control</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosemarie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I think allowing our class to choose how many absences and late or missed assignments and such ultimately allowed us to choose our grade. We knew exactly what we could and should not do throughout the entire semester which also helped to keep me on point.</td>
<td>Perception of Contract having control</td>
<td>Control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of Revision</td>
<td>Type of Changes</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Indicators</td>
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| Lower Level      | Surface        | Surface level revisions include non-rhetorical changes and used only as a means to correct an error. Surface level changes include the most common punctuation (comma, period, and the capital), some grammar changes, and typographical errors. | Mechanics  
- Punctuation, spelling, capitalization, pluralization, word form corrections other than pluralizations (e.g., subject-verb agreement, tense changes), substitutions (e.g., fewer for less), corrected typographical errors (e.g., the for the), corrections on format |
|                  | Structural     | Structural changes include rhetorical revisions of the pattern of writing by the reorganization of paragraphs or type of paragraph. Structural changes also include revision of paragraphs by deleting, creating, or altering existing whole paragraphs. | Organization  
- within paragraphs and throughout whole essay  
- Shifting or changing the pattern of writing (description to narration, cause and effect to compare contrast etc.)  
Paragraphing  
- moving, shifting, deleting, creating, altering existing or new paragraphs |
| Higher Level     | Content        | Content changes include rhetorical changes that affect overall ideas of subject matter in order to develop, enhance, or clarify the essay topic. Content changes determined by the deleting or adding of new content or the altering or changing of an idea or argument by extending an issue or change of point of view or position. | Addition of new content  
- subject matter or ideas to develop; subject or clarify points  
(iden)  
Deleting and adding content  
- deleting content and/or adding new content to strengthen or shift subject or ideas  
Altering an idea, argument etc.  
- Changing or extending sides on an issue or shifting points of view |
|                  | Stylistic      | Stylistic changes include rhetorical changes that affect voice and style. Stylistic changes include changes on the word and phrase level. | Lexical  
- Stylistic word changes and/or additions (not of people for groups of people, contexts for any [verb change] or addition of an adjective or a verb)  
Phrasing  
- Syntactic (meaning-preserving rewordings, including adding or deleting words, e.g., to avoid an awkward construction)  
- Structural (meaning-preserving sentence restructuring, e.g., "When we went outside" for "Having gone outside") |

APPENDIX I: IRB APPROVAL FORMS

Notice of Exempt Review

Date: December 6, 2013
From: Dr. Paul Buck, IRB Chair
Re: Protocol #1312-0135: Impact of Grade Contract Model in Basic Writing College Course
To: Dr. Nayelee Villanueva, Liberal Arts and Sciences

The Nevada State College Institutional Review Board has reviewed the request for new Protocol #1312-0135: Impact of Grade Contract Model in Basic Writing College Course. Using the review process, based on 45 CFR 46.

The NSC IRB has determined that the protocol meets at least one of the federal exempt categories criteria under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

The protocol does not require further review or approval by the IRB. However, changes to the protocol may cause the project to require a different level of IRB review. Any proposed changes should be submitted for IRB approval before they are implemented.

Please Note:
The research team is responsible for conducting the research as stated in the protocol most recently reviewed by the IRB, which shall include using the most recently submitted Informed Consent/Assent forms and recruitment materials. Any problems of a serious nature resulting from implementation of this protocol should be brought to the attention of the IRB.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Institutional Review Board at IRB@nscc.edu or call Joni dos Santos at (702) 592-2107.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
1125 Nevada State Dr., Henderson, Nevada 89012 I Phone: 702.992.2107 I Fax: 702.992.2108 I www.nsc.edu
Social/Behavioral IRB – Exempt Review
Deemed Exempt

DATE: October 16, 2013
TO: Dr. Elizabeth Spalding, Teaching & Learning
FROM: Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects
RE: Notification of IRB Action
Protocol Title: Impact of a Grade Contract Model in a Basic Writing College Course
Protocol # 1310-4590

This memorandum is notification that the project referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45 CFR 46 and deemed exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

PLEASE NOTE:
Upon Approval, the research team is responsible for conducting the research as stated in the exempt application reviewed by the ORI – HS and/or the IRB which shall include using the most recently submitted Informed Consent/Assent Forms (Information Sheet) and recruitment materials. The official versions of these forms are indicated by footer which contains the date exempted.

Any changes to the application may cause this project to require a different level of IRB review. Should any changes need to be made, please submit a Modification Form. When the above-referenced project has been completed, please submit a Continuing Review/Progress Completion report to notify ORI – HS of its closure.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at IRB@unlv.edu or call 895-2794.
APPENDIX J: INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT
Department of Teaching and Learning

TITLE OF STUDY: Impact of a Grade Contract Model in a Basic Writing College Course

INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Elizabeth Spalding and Navele P. Villanueva
For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Elizabeth Spalding at 702-895-2632.
For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, contact the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794, toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of a grading contract model on student writing in a Basic Writing composition course at a state college located in the southwest United States.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you have important and unique information to contribute as a student who is enrolled in ENG 100 Section 2, a basic writing composition course.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: You will be a part of a post course interview in which your interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Your first, third, and fifth essays will be used for data as well as your reflective letters, Twitter post for the course marked with the hashtag #NSCENG100, and discussion posts regarding negotiation will be analyzed and quoted anonymously. These items are a part of the course and will take place regardless if you participate in the study or not. The interview will require 20-45 minutes of your time to meet with the researcher at the Nevada State College campus.

Benefits of Participation
This study seeks to explore the impact of a grading contract model in a basic composition course. The study design allows the UNLV researcher to learn from your experience in order to develop a deeper understanding of grading contract as a form of assessment and its impact on student writing. This research will add to the current knowledge base of connecting theory to practice regarding assessment in composition courses.

Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. This study may include only minimal risks, such as feeling slightly uncomfortable when answering some questions.
TITLE OF STUDY: Impact of a Grade Contract Model in a Basic Writing College Course

Cost/Compensation
This study will not require any financial cost to you in order to participate. The study will take approximately 20 – 45 minutes of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be destroyed. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Elizabeth Spalding at 702-895-2632. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at 702-895-2794.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with Nevada State College. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I have been able to ask questions about the research study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date ________________

Participant Name (Please Print) ____________________________

Audio Taping:
I agree to be audio taped for the purpose of this research study.

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date ________________

Participant Name (Please Print) ____________________________

Deemed exempt by the ORI-HS and/or the UNLV IRB. Protocol #1310-4590
Exempt Date: 10-16-13
References


*Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice, 10*(1), 7–12.


CURRICULUM VITAE

Nayelee Villanueva

4633 Diamond Head Dr. nayeleevillanueva@gmail.com
Las Vegas, Nevada 89110 702.856.6125

Education

**Ph.D Curriculum and Instruction.** University of Nevada, Las Vegas. 2014
Primary Area: Secondary Literacy Education
Secondary Area: Rhetoric and Composition
*Dissertation:* Impact of a Grading Contract Model in a Basic Writing Composition College Course

**M.Ed Curriculum and Instruction.** University of Nevada, Las Vegas. May 2006
Primary Area: Literacy Education
Secondary Area: English Education

**B.S. Secondary Education.** University of Nevada, Las Vegas. December 2002
Primary Area: English Secondary Education

Academic & Administrative Appointments

**Tenure-Track Instructor,** College of Southern Nevada Las Vegas, Nevada

- English 100 – Enhanced Composition Course
- English 101 – English Composition

Responsibilities include teaching courses, curriculum development, student advising, and committee and community service.

**Adjunct Instructor,** University of Nevada, Las Vegas August 2012-May 2014
Las Vegas, Nevada

- COE 102 - First-Year Experience Course: Instruct students by preparing them with skills and knowledge to promote academic success and retention.
- CIL 616 (Graduate) – Teaching Writing: A Master’s level course where I instruct students who are currently teachers in the Clark County School district and Teach for America program. The course is a Study of research-based practices and methods in teaching and assessing writing as well as composition theory. Emphasis is placed on the Common Core State Standards and curriculum development.

**Adjunct Instructor,** Nevada State College August 2007 – May 2014
Las Vegas, Nevada
English Department:

- English 411b - Principles of Modern Grammar
- English 401a – Advanced Composition
- English 100 - Enhanced Composition
- English 101 – English Composition

Director, Student Academic Center, Nevada State College  August 2008 – July 2012
Las Vegas, Nevada

- Under the supervision of the Provost, my role was to manage the operations of the Student Academic Center which included managing two centers and the following programs: individual and small group tutoring; online tutoring; study groups for required lower division General Education courses; study skills techniques; and workshops such as, study skills, learning styles, pronunciation, graduate school preparation, and others that address the specific needs of various student populations, particularly first generation and non-traditional students.
- Direct program development and review, monitor, evaluate and adjust programs in response to educational effectiveness and student needs; coordinate outcome-based assessment, planning and development of SAC programs and writing support services.
- Collaborate closely with academic departments and retention programs (Early Alert Initiatives and Retention Specialist) to develop, administer, and assess academic support services for Nevada State College.
- Assist students who require basic skill development in English, reading, mathematics, and other selected subjects.
- Maintain computer lab with current equipment, print capabilities, and current popular software, such as SPSS, Excel, Power Point, and Camtasia.
- Hire, train, and supervise faculty, staff and 20 student workers. Approve timesheets of all student workers.
- Experience and skill in working with and in supervising students from diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, national, and educational backgrounds. Work primarily with first-generation, Hispanic students and non-traditional students (older student population).
- Initiate policies and procedures
- Develop, propose, and manage the annual operating budget of $250,000. Annual budget increases with student enrollment.
- Collaborate with various programs and academic departments to obtain additional funding, including grant funding.
- Responsible for conducting research and assessment on student progress, retention, and educational barriers, as well as making recommendations based on assessment findings and data.
- Manage Student Academic Center presence in marketing including print material and social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, and other similar community sites, posting on relevant blogs, and seeding content into social applications that is fitting with the college’s culture and mission.
- Content writer for the Student Academic Center webpage. Maintain webpage per semester.
- Provide support for the Upward Bound Program.
- Develop and conduct campus wide workshops on academic topics and learning topics.
- Provide workshops in TEAS exam for pre-nursing students.
- Provide workshops in PRAXIS for education students.
- Provide both face to face and online writing workshops to aid students enrolled in English remedial courses.

**UpwardBound Instructor**, Nevada State College July 2012 – August 2012
Las Vegas, Nevada

- English
- Test Prep
- Senior Seminar

**Virtual Writing Specialist**, Sierra Nevada College September 2010 – August 2012
Las Vegas, Nevada

- Provide Master level students as well as teachers with an understanding of professional writing skills and the ability to communicate effectively through sound writing practices via an online web portal.
- Conduct tutoring to aid students in developing skills as a writer and researcher through monthly face-to-face workshops.
- Provide students support and resources needed to write at the Master’s level expected in specific programs of study.

**Master Teacher**, Brightstorm August 2008 – August 2011
San Francisco, California

- Curriculum development and video instruction for E-learning.
- Developed original curriculum and materials for e-learning publishing.
- Starred in videos for e-learning educational content.
- Develop SAT practice exams

**Part-Time Instructor**, International Academy of Design January 2008 – August 2011
Las Vegas, Nevada

*General Education/English Department:*
• Human 401 – Literature and Film
• English 101- English Composition
• English 102 – English Composition and Research
• College 101 – College Success

Reading Clinician, Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes Center       June 2007-August 2007
Las Vegas, Nevada

• Provide one on one instruction for reading, language, and comprehension students ages 5 – 30.

Substitute Teacher, Clark County School District       June 2006-June 2007
Las Vegas, Nevada

• English

English Teacher, Clark County School District       August 2003- June 2006
Las Vegas, Nevada

Spring Valley High School

• Charter staff of CCSD’s first wall to wall smaller learning communities and professional career academy high school.
• Taught reading strategies, English 1, American Literature, and Composition.
• Developed curriculum for a pilot reading strategies course.
• Developed a school wide guidance program curriculum and mentor program.
• Member of the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program.

Silverado High School

• Taught American Literature and Composition

Student Teacher, Tauhara College       August 2002 – December 2002
Taupo, New Zealand

• English composition

Academic Service

College of Southern Nevada
Member, English Curriculum Committee
Member, Assessment Committee
Member, Literacy-Reading Committee
Member, Social Committee
**Nevada State College**

*Member*, Executive Budget Committee. August 2010-June 2012  
*Member*, Academic Advisor Search Committee. Spring 2012  
*Member*, Financial Aid Counselor Search Committee. Spring 2010  
*Chair*, Internal Selection Committee Regent’s Award. Spring 2010  
*Member*, Institutional Strategic Planning Committee. Fall 2009-June 2012  
*Member*, Accreditation Planning Sub-Committee. Fall 2009- Spring 2011.  
*Member*, Nevada State College Online Training Certification. Spring 2010.  
*Member*, E-alert Specialist Search Committee, Spring 2012.  
*Member*, Retention Specialist Search Committee. Spring 2012  
*Member*, Admissions and Records Committee. Fall 2011- Summer 2012.  
*Curriculum Writer*, Common Course Initiative – English Composition, Summer 2012

**Conference, Presentations, and Workshops**

**Invited Presentations**


**Peer-Reviewed International and National Conference Presentations**


Professional Development Presentations
Villanueva, N. (September, 2011) *Responding to Student Writing*. Las Vegas, NV: Presented to the faculty and Masters of Education students at Sierra Nevada College.


Grants, Fellowships, and Scholarships
2012 Technology Fellows. English 100 Supercourse. Nevada State College $2,500

Professional Service
Conferences

Organizations
Committee Chair. Southern Nevada Writing Project. Las Vegas, Nevada. June, 2011 - present

Professional Memberships
College Reading and Learning Association
National Association for Developmental Education
National Council of Teachers of English
Two-Year College English Association
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Association for Teacher Educators
American Education Research Association
Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute
Ramirez Group

Computer Proficiencies
Course Management
Blackboard, Canvas, WebCampus, Moodle

Other Applications
Content Management System, PeopleSoft, LibGuides, Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint, Publisher, Photoshop, Wimba Series, Jing, Camtasia, SPSS, MaxQda, WordPress, Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)