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English Faculty Community Building: Writing Portfolio Assessment Groups as Teaching Circles

Dauvan D. Mulally
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

ENGLISH FACULTY COMMUNITY BUILDING: WRITING PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT GROUPS AS TEACHING CIRCLES

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Dauvan D. Mulally

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Dauvan D. Mulally

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

07-01-2013 Signature on File
Gian S. Pagnucci, Ph.D.
Professor of English, Advisor
Distinguished University Professor

07-01-2013 Signature on File
Bennett Rafoth, Ed.D.
Professor of English
Distinguished University Professor

07-01-2013 Signature on File
David Schaafsma, Ph.D.
Professor of English
University of Illinois at Chicago

ACCEPTED

Signature on File
Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: English Faculty Community Building: Writing Portfolio Assessment Groups as Teaching Circles

Author: Dauvan D. Mulally

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Gian Pagnucci

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Bennett Rafoth
Dr. David Schaafsma

This study investigates how first-year composition teachers use portfolio-based assessment groups as opportunities for interdepartmental conversation and collaboration about teaching, probing of pedagogical belief systems and evaluation of teaching practices and as refuges to explore new instructional methods. The study was conducted at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) where freshman writing instructors meet weekly in portfolio grading groups to evaluate student writing; however, these assessment meetings have evolved into something more complex and important. They have become unofficial teaching circles in which teachers reflect on their own teaching and that of their colleagues in order to more effectively negotiate the difficulties of teaching first-year composition. In these "faculty learning communities" teaching becomes “more public” and "community building” occurs (Cox, 1999, p. 41). Research in composition studies supports the idea that portfolio groups enrich the process of assessing writing, the teaching of writing, and curriculum and faculty development in a writing program (Elbow & Belanoff, 1997; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Broad 2003). The study was designed to answer these research questions:

- What is the context in which these portfolio assessment groups occur?
- How do teachers talk about teaching within the context of portfolio assessment groups?
- How does this group talk impact teachers’ pedagogical beliefs?
- How does this group talk impact teachers beyond pedagogy?

The study used an ethnographic design and employed multiple methodologies (i.e., observation, journals, field notes, interviews and cultural artifacts) to fully explore how portfolio assessment groups function as more than a method for grading student writing.

The major findings of the study indicate that teacher participants used the portfolio grading groups to make their teaching more public, to dialogue with colleagues about good professional practice, to develop as teachers, gauge their effectiveness as instructors, and try new pedagogical approaches. Additionally, the findings confirm that the assessment groups also serve as an antidote to teacher isolation, promote collegiality, motivate department community-building, contribute to a healthier workplace, and act as a department equalizer for teachers in the study.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

New Teacher Story

The first time I taught composition was the Fall of 2000. Fresh out of my Master's in Higher Education I was hired to teach a first-year writing class. At 24 years old I was nervous about the challenges I would face as a new instructor. As I stared at a stack of sample syllabi and a long list of potential textbooks, my eyes glazed over and panic welled up inside me. Trying to play it cool I thanked the department chair for his textbook recommendations and scurried down the hall to the office I would be sharing with five other people. I had one week to prepare a syllabus, develop assignments, and figure out how to teach writing. I tried to quell the fear by reminding myself that I had an English degree and had worked as a writing consultant, so I would be fine. But it turned out I was not fine.

I anxiously watched as the other adjuncts and tenure-track faculty buzzed confidently around the department discussing their great new assignments and making photocopies of their syllabi. I was too afraid to ask for help. I did not want to be perceived as green or worse incompetent. I spent the next few days prepping for class and modeling my course around *The St Martin's Guide to Writing*. By the weekend I was feeling a little bit better about my course preparation. The first day of classes arrived and the anxiety of being a new instructor quickly reappeared. As I stood in front of my freshmen writing class, I was convinced that the students could smell my fear. Twenty-eight pairs of young eyes stared intently at me. The clock's slow moving hands finally struck 2:00 p.m., and it was time to start the class. I composed myself long enough to stammer out my name and let the students know I would be teaching the course. I imagined the agony of spending the rest of the semester fumbling around trying to figure out

how to teach freshman composition. It was definitely going to be a case of trial by fire; a kind of solitary rite of passage that I assumed most teachers had to face.

Fortunately I did not have to go it alone. After my initial terror, I discovered I would have help. The composition program at my university required all faculty members teaching first-year writing to participate in a portfolio grading group to collectively assess student portfolios. My portfolio group began meeting the third week of classes at a comfortable bohemian-style coffee shop close to campus. The assessment group was comprised of two veteran adjuncts, two tenure-track professors and me, the newbie. We were quite a diverse group from our different pedagogies to our range of specialties, where we had taught, attended school, our employment status and our number of years on the job. The first two weeks of class had been rough for me to say the least. I felt isolated from the other teachers. This meeting was the first real interaction I had with other professors in my department since starting my job. I was nervous being in the presence of such seasoned teachers and felt inadequate as an instructor. The first two meetings exposed my greenness and my fear of being found out a fraud. I was pretending to be something I was not—*a teacher*. The other writing instructors seemed to sense my anxiety and began to share horror stories from their early teaching days. "Don't worry," Anita advised. "You'll get the hang of it! We've all been there." Over time these portfolio meetings became more than grade norming sessions for me and the other members. We shared stories of our lives inside the classroom, dialoguing on curriculum matters and trading teaching advice. My involvement in the group reassured me that my pedagogical concerns were not unique and that I was not alone. We, veterans and novices, were all learning to become better teachers together, and learning that experienced instructors still struggled sometimes helped me to relax into the process of learning to teach writing. The support I received from my group was invaluable during my first semester

and every semester thereafter. Unfortunately, all too often the collegial scenario I experienced does not occur for many writing instructors teaching in the field of composition today.

Statement of the Problem

Despite calls from professional organizations such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the Modern Language Association (MLA), the National Writing Project (NWP), and the Two-Year College Association (TYCA) to provide teachers with opportunities for active and reflective dialogue in a professional community, the lack of communal exchange is still a common problem. One of the most consistent comments I have heard about being a teacher in higher education today is the lack of community. In speaking with a number of colleagues who teach college level writing at a range of postsecondary institutions, it appears that countless teachers work alone without the benefit of a supportive professional community. Of course, there are department meetings, but very few occasions to converse with colleagues on what is happening in our writing classrooms. Several of my composition peers reported feelings of isolation, longing for a sense of community, and little support for faculty development initiatives from their respective colleges and departments. It is unfortunate that far too often the amazing happenings that occur in writing classrooms remain there, solely witnessed by the individual instructor and his or her students. Many of the writing professors I spoke with expressed a strong interest in discussing pedagogy and other teaching-related matters with their colleagues. However, they described how tenure systems, faculty rank, curriculum, specializations and schedules make collegial interactions within their respective departments difficult and most admitted to being starved for conversation about teaching first-year writing. Such comments not only highlight our desire for collegial exchange, but also underscore how rarely we as composition professors come together on a local community level to dialogue about our mutual interest—the teaching of college writing. Teaching should not be

done in isolation; it should be a collaborative process for the good of teachers, students, and writing programs. There are several factors (i.e., a lack of collegial exchange in composition, the privatization of teaching, a lack of teacher training/professional development opportunities, disciplinary specialization and departmental factionalism, and the continuing division between teaching and scholarly work) that make it difficult for writing teachers to meet in professional communities and they will be outlined in the next few sections of this chapter.

Lack of Collegial Exchange in Composition

With the exception of Hendricks and a handful of other authors, the literature on collegial exchange among writing teachers is a narrow thread in composition studies. A search through well-known journals in rhetoric and composition such as *College English* and *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* revealed little scholarship on the subject. Hendricks noted that in "mainline journals, writing about writing teachers' talk about student writing has never been a staple" (2009, p. 237) except for the now defunct "Staffroom Interchange" section of the *CCC*'s journal. The profession seems to be paying less attention to issues of how to teach, specifically the nuts and bolts. Former *CCC*'s editor Deborah Holdstein discussed how the field has "less and less publication about teaching now . . . we no longer have the Staffroom Interchange section that was an assumed part of *CCC*, which was the opportunity to talk about 'what to do in class on Monday morning'—'Here's how I teach this; here's a new way to do that'" (2011, para. 4). The profession, and its teachers for that matter, is starving for pedagogical conversation. Holberg and Taylor (2001) noted, "Yet in a profession in which a large portion of our scholarly work concerns itself with teaching, it is ironic that no single journal is exclusively devoted or consistently committed to exploring that work across the discipline and from a range of perspectives" (p. 2). Though it occupies the center of most of our work as compositionists, pedagogy remains a marginalized subject in English studies. Holdstein, like other scholars and

composition specialists, feels we have lost our emphasis on pedagogy and that there are far less academic spaces for writing teachers to share articles on what is happening in their classrooms and how those activities might benefit other teachers in the profession.

Teaching Remains a Solitary Act

The same silence that pervades many of the discipline's professional journals seems to have carried over into English departments. In "Working Alone Together" Hendricks (2009) commented on the lack of collegial exchange occurring in university English departments:

> Our real work, or part of it, is teaching composition, every semester. One might expect, then, that we would have rich and ongoing discussion of what we are doing in our composition courses. That we for the most part do not have these conversations is for me more than a trivial annoyance; the virtual silence in which we bathe ourselves feels like waste, the diminishing of our working lives. (pp. 235-236)

The virtual silence is evidence that for many instructors in higher education, teaching remains a solitary act. This trend persists on college campuses nationwide as teaching continues to be perceived as an individualistic, self-directed, and sequestered event. Stenberg and Lee (2002) note that English studies works out of what Wetherbee Phelps (1991) calls an "ethic of radical individualism" that positions the composition classroom as a private place (p. 866). Palmer (1999) declared privatizing teaching makes it difficult for colleges and universities to become adept at their teaching missions. When instructors teach in isolation, they diminish their professional growth potential exponentially. Teachers may partly believe that what they do in their own classrooms is so distinctive and private that it cannot be usefully evaluated or even productively talked about with others. Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999) determined that "learning involves making oneself vulnerable and taking risks, and this is not how teachers often see their role" (p. 183). One of the reasons for this attitude may be because instructors, especially

writing teachers, generally come to their university teaching careers with limited formal training or teaching experience besides the content of their discipline and employment as a teaching assistant (Dore, 1993; Gardiner, 2000; Myers & Kircher, 2007). This lack of instructional experience and formalized training can make some college teachers wary of going public with questions, seeking help from colleagues, and opening up their classroom to others. But in discussion outside the classroom, teachers can decide how open and vulnerable to be with others. Also, once relationships and trust have been established, colleagues will naturally become more open leading to deeper and more effective dialogue.

Lack of Teacher Training and Professional Development Opportunities

Another factor that makes it difficult for writing teachers to participate in professional communities is because freshman composition courses are typically taught by a mixture of full-time lecturers, part-time adjuncts, and graduate students who are credentialed in fields outside of composition/rhetoric such as literature and creative writing. Very few of these instructors have had little more than a single course in composition or writing pedagogy (Beech & Lindquist, 2004; Stenberg, 2005; Stenberg & Lee, 2002). This was essentially the case for me and many of my peers. I did not receive formal instruction in composition pedagogy until nearly six years into my teaching career when I took a doctoral course on the topic. Most composition instructors in my study were not enrolled in a composition and rhetoric doctoral program or had not received a doctoral degree in composition and rhetoric. Therefore, many turned to other means to learn how to teach first-year writing. Gilles (1996) describes below how many composition teachers learn how to teach composition:

> We rely on our memories of our own freshman year, our experiences as graduate teaching assistants, personnel reviews (when we sometimes get a chance to watch someone else teach freshman comp), and whatever stray remarks we hear in the hallway

> or restroom to help us construct our courses, design assignments, and evaluate essays. (para. 2)

According to my colleagues and research, Gilles' portrayal is unfortunately accurate. Due to their lack of formalized training in composition/rhetoric, many instructors rely upon recollections of how their favorite college instructors taught or draw on their own experiences as graduate level teaching assistants (Loflin-Smith, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Stenberg, 2005). A few of my part-time peers were simply handed a textbook and sent off to teach. So with no training and/or mentoring, they let the textbook do the teaching. Some utilized books and professional journals to glean information, but Marshall (2008) noted that adjunct instructors, in particular, had limited time for the "reading and study that would add to their knowledge base" (p. 426). Until enrolling in an English doctoral program, very few of my classmates had even subscribed to journals in the field. A small number attended regional and national conferences, departmental in-services or generic faculty development programs offered by their college or university. None of the faculty development programs they participated in specifically addressed the teaching of composition. Many of my non-tenure track faculty peers reported not having access to these types of professional development initiatives at their home institutions because, they intuited, their departments did not seem particularly concerned about their intellectual and professional growth as teachers. Much has been written about the deficit in the amount of professional development activities available for contingent faculty and the importance of ongoing faculty development across ranks (Daniell, Davis, Stewart, & Taber, 2008; Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Schell & Lambert Stock, 2001). In response to the lack of teacher development opportunities, many of the adjunct instructors turned to informal means within their departments.

Nearly all of my English colleagues frequently recalled utilizing informal exchanges with other instructors to assist with their course construction, assignment development, and

assessment evaluations. Hendricks' 2009 study of his home institution California University of Pennsylvania also found that in his workplace "teacher-to-teacher connections seem at all times in the last four decades to have flourished in a culture of *informal* professional exchange" (p. 246). This teacher-to-teacher contact usually transpires informally in hallways, at the copy machine, in the parking lot, and even in faculty bathrooms. Like Hendricks' co-workers, many of the composition instructors I interviewed regarded these exchanges as valuable ways to see the composition classroom from other perspectives. Nearly all of them used these casual conversations to talk about their students, classrooms, teaching techniques, how to get students to read, write a strong essay, or participate in class. Sharing their successes or failures and offering or asking for advice eased their loneliness and insecurities about their own job performance. While these informal encounters were considered helpful, faculty members admitted that these occasional chats in the public restroom or office hallway do not adequately replace professional development. Teachers need time to talk specifically about composition pedagogy, classroom practices, and assessment with other teachers in local communities. This collaboration is not only good for teachers but also students and the writing program.

Disciplinary Specialization and Departmental Factionalism

Colleagues also pointed to disciplinary specialization as another factor that makes it difficult for professors to come together for cooperative interactions in professional communities, especially at the local level. Aside from the standard literature emphasis, today's English department typically includes other specializations such as composition, film, or linguistics. This level of specialization has caused some departments of English to lack a cohesive, established identity. McComiskey (2006) captures this very issue: "[o]ne of the primary obstacles facing twenty-first century English studies, in both academic and public contexts, is its disciplinary opacity, its murky content, and its uncertain boundaries, which defy

definition" (p. 2). A few of my composition peers spoke about the field's clouded identity and discussed how disciplinary factionalism can sometimes lead to a lack of collegiality and community within some departments and even within first-year writing programs. A number of teachers I interviewed noted that non-composition faculty members in their respective departments often begrudgingly teach freshman writing. According to my colleagues, these same instructors complained about teaching lower-level courses outside of their specialization. This stance caused tension within the department, made the composition instructors reticent to interact collegially with those particular faculty members, and dampened their desire to belong to the departmental community. This scenario is obviously nothing new. Much has been written in the last few decades about the strained and sometimes tenuous relationship that exists between composition and literary studies.

In "The Work before Us: Attending to English Departments' Poor Relations" Beech and Lindquist (2004) discuss the factionalism that often occurs between composition and literature faculty. Conflicts often arise between traditional and emerging fields. Within the "departmental family" composition is often viewed as a "poor relation" because it is perceived as "something that an English professor *does/teaches* when necessary, not as something that a serious scholar *studies*" (Beech & Lindquist, 2004, p. 172). Some English faculty in my former department viewed freshman writing as a preacademic course not worthy of teaching. They typically only taught one section of first-year composition because they had to. When asked to participate in collaborative portfolio grading groups they responded with dismay over being forced into groups that focused on composition teaching. As the "kids of the family," compositionists "perform the department's chores" (e.g., teaching and directing first-year writing programs, operating writing centers, overseeing placement exams, etc. [p.176]). The frame (composition is a necessary chore)

speaks to the hierarchical nature of this family dynamic and calls into question the value of composition work.

When faculty members view composition in such a demeaning way, it further strains relationships within the department. Such separation often leads to a lack of collegial exchange between professors with different specializations and ranks, and creates divisional lines within the departmental community. This was especially true of my department when non-composition faculty failed to support any plans requiring all instructors, regardless of specialization and rank, to teach freshman composition. The resulting strain and factionalism led to a split from the English department, and the formation of an independent writing program and department.

The problem, as *Pedagogy* editors Jennifer Holberg and Marcy Taylor (2008) see it, and as I have illustrated through numerous examples in this section, is that "our conversations—in staffrooms, in journals, at conferences—take place in a bounded sphere" (p. 46). While many English professors claim to have rich conversations and valuable ties with others in their postsecondary institutions and with colleagues in their subdisciplines, the collegial exchange is still largely restricted by specialty and rank. Such disciplinary walls limit the collegial spaces where instructors can have productive discussions with colleagues outside their area of scholarly focus. Additionally, when these conversations do happen they often occur on the fly, which speaks to the fact that teachers are not given the time or space to routinely discuss such issues. Teachers need intellectual communities within their departments where they can exchange ideas with peers, take interest in each other's work, or collaborate with one another.

What the Field is Doing to Support Writing Teachers

Despite these factors, it is important to note that the field of composition studies has long supported and promoted the teaching and study of college writing by sponsoring conferences, community listservs, and discussion boards that serve as forums for the exchange of knowledge

about composition, composition pedagogy, and rhetoric. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication have worked hard to enhance the conditions for learning and teaching college composition and to promote professional development for all writing teachers. In 1982, the CCCC's adopted the "Position Statement on the Preparation and Professional Development of Teachers of Writing" which recommended that college and university English departments provide composition faculty opportunities to develop knowledge of theory and skill in the teaching of writing. The organization places the responsibility to do so on "college and university English departments, faculty of teacher preparation programs, faculty and administrators in elementary and secondary schools, and staffs of state departments of public instruction" (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1982). In 1996 the NCTE passed the "Resolution on the Importance of Professional Community" that states teachers need to be active, reflective participants in some sort of a professional community. The resolution further suggested that "teachers who engage in activities within their local and the broader professional communities maintain a vitality that not only keeps them in this field but also promotes the career of teaching to others" (para.1). In spite of the adoption of such resolutions, collegial interactions in professional communities regarding teaching remain relatively scarce in most English departments for a variety of reasons.

Continuing Division between Teaching Work and Scholarly Work

Lastly, the lack of collegial exchange transpiring in professional communities within composition studies is also due to the continuing separation between writing instructors' teaching work and their scholarly work. In the inaugural issue of *Pedagogy*, Levine (2001) claims that English studies is "a nation divided" between our teaching work and our scholarly work (p. 7). Stenberg (2005) contends that "despite composition's recent lip service to pedagogy and the

'teaching professor,' we continue to abide by a model of the research professor imported from the German university around the turn of the last century" (xvii). The preparation to become a professor differs distinctly from the training one receives to become a teacher. In this traditional model, professors' growth is exclusively focused on the mastery of a subject and professors are largely perceived as scholars, not teachers. As a result, many graduate students receive limited teacher training and are either underprepared or unprepared to teach. Because many graduate courses are not devoted to pedagogy, professors do not discuss what they are doing in their classrooms with one another. This carries over into their university teaching careers, which discourages collaboration among teachers and causes them to see themselves as self-developing individuals. In this research paradigm, once professors receive a doctoral degree they are no longer considered teacher apprentices and are done learning how to teach. This is especially problematic when a large number of graduates will spend the majority of their time teaching. According to a 2000 *MLA Newsletter* article "Job Market Remains Competitive," due to the changing job market 75 percent of job candidates will locate employment in teaching oriented colleges and universities. While efforts have been made in composition studies to professionalize graduate students and to improve teacher training at the graduate level, only partial headway has been made in challenging the deep-rooted research professor metaphor within the discipline. To accomplish this, we must view teachers as learners and see teaching as a site for communal scholarly inquiry. This is especially crucial locally for many reasons. Locally, we understand our student population; we understand the goals of the program; and we do not get together on a broader level but once or twice a year. English faculty members need local spaces within their departments where they can openly dialogue with colleagues about good professional practices in teaching, curriculum design, and other educational endeavors. This study argues that teaching communities are a way to fill this void in English studies.

Rationale for the Study

Teaching Circles and Faculty Learning Communities

From a historical context, teachers began meeting in small groups known as teaching circles at the end of the nineteenth century as a way to discuss their classroom work and extend their pedagogical knowledge. Richlin and Cox (2004) found that many universities and even some departments were creating initiatives through faculty development centers, summer institutes, and development grants to bring teachers together to share knowledge and build community. In learning communities teaching becomes “more public” and "community building” occurs (Hutchings, 1996, p. 5). Faculty learning communities are essentially ongoing teacher groups “designed to improve classroom performance, foster support for excellent teaching and, ultimately, improve student satisfaction” (Strom-Gotfried & Dunlap, 2004, p. 65). These teacher communities have individual and collective benefits. The establishment of these groups reinforces the belief that teaching is valued. This helps raise instructor interest in teaching and learning and “provide[s] safety and support for faculty to investigate, attempt, assess, and adopt new methods” (Cox, 1999, p. 45). This is especially important for faculty retention and job satisfaction. These collaborative meetings also provide a space “to voice concerns” and to “help normalize the challenges and apprehensions” that arise in teaching (Cox, 1999, p. 43). Teaching communities facilitate the socialization of new faculty to teaching roles, improve instructional capabilities, supply opportunities for feedback and improvement of teaching practices, and generate greater familiarity with colleague’s courses, approaches and teaching styles (Strom-Gotfried & Dunlap, 2004). In composition studies, scholars like Bizzell (1992), Bartholomae (1985), and Harris (1989) have written extensively about the concept of community in the teaching of writing. It seems clear that new and experienced faculty members greatly benefit from belonging to a teacher community, not only for the shared purpose and effort, but also the

consensus and conflict Harris notes can arise in communities. It is through belonging to such a community that teachers can remain current and effective practitioners in content, pedagogy and methodology.

Discipline's Call for Teacher Communities

A growing body of composition and education scholarship has called for the creation of teaching communities that are dedicated to examining the local contexts in which teaching occurs (Broad, 2003; Elbow & Belanoff, 1986; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 1993; Marshall, 2008; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Stenberg, 2005; Wetherbee Phelps, 1991). In the realm of composition studies, writing professors have reported the use of a range of teacher communities to promote genuine discussion and mutual respect building within their writing programs and/or departments, which are outlined later. While these teaching communities might take different shapes and forms, they remain centered on collaboration, inquiry, reflection and community building. Reading these narratives provides other teachers with a perspective into how effective professional exchanges can occur within respective English departments. In "Teaching Circles Supporting Shared Work and Professional Development" Marshall (2008) highlights how her English Department at the University of Miami-Ohio used teaching circles to discuss curricular goals and instructional practices. Instructors in Marshall's study reported that belonging to the groups allowed them to partake in critical reflection of their teaching in a safe, communal setting. Previously, the department relied heavily on classroom observations to stimulate pedagogical conversation between teachers. Many of the instructors in Marshall's report did not feel comfortable talking about teaching practices with other teachers because they often felt judged. Therefore, providing the safety of teaching circles, especially for new English instructors, was the key to good faculty development in the University of Miami-Ohio's English Department.

In the introduction to their collection *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing* editors Good and Warshauer (2008) discuss the anxiety they felt as graduate assistants teaching for the first time. One graduate student from their collection, Dunn Neeley (2008) noted, "To the English department, I was a 'teaching assistant,' but in my mind, I was teaching independently. I had no one to assist but myself—in surviving the semester" (Dunn Neeley, p. 19). Unlike Dunn Neeley, new graduate students Good and Warshauer had more experienced graduate students to turn to for advice and reassurance. This informal mentoring continued the rest of the year with teaching assistants regularly meeting over coffee in each other's offices to discuss struggles over creating effective writing assignments and developing in-class activities. Good and Warshauer (2008) posit these meetings "also served as a source of solace as we struggled to overcome feelings of inadequacy in the classroom, respond to papers, and deal with students' challenges to our authority" (p. ix). In the collection *Stories of Mentoring*, Lauer et al. (2008) reflect upon the range of collaborative communities they belonged to as students in Purdue University's graduate program in rhetoric and composition. As teaching assistants in the doctoral program, they were part of a required mentoring group that met once per week for two to three hours focused on teaching an introductory composition course. Bill Hart-Davidson, a member of this group, commented, "it was equal parts on-the-job training for the professional work of rhetoric and composition scholarship, teaching and administration, and as my colleagues point out, community building" (p. 34). This original group eventually morphed into an informal support group for students preparing for comprehensive exams, writing dissertations, and locating jobs.

Participation in this collaborative community helped these future professors understand that colleagues are the best resource for any academic, administrative, and pedagogical challenges that arise. Another graduate student from this group, Baotong Gu found that these

groups "extended the collaborative relationships among students and fostered a prolonged sense of community," (p. 45) which for the Purdue rhetoric/composition graduates has now lasted nearly twenty years. This example illustrates how having a supportive community of colleagues is integral when it comes to teacher development. They, like many other English graduate students, found comfort and support in these informal encounters with their composition colleagues.

Others, like Karen Mato, an English lecturer and Gabe Regal, a full-time faculty member in English and women's and gender studies at Curry College discovered collegial support in a writers' group at their home institution. According to Friend and González (2009), writing groups "bring many benefits for scholarly writers, including immediate response from a peer audience, the opportunity for collaborative critique that may inform manuscript revision prior to submission for publication, and greater understanding of the writing style and format expected for publication" (para. 5). The writers' group was both professionally and personally beneficial to participants. Mato describes the writers' group as "a great gift" because it provides her a way "to keep my writing current while teaching" and gives her the opportunity to "learn from my colleagues' teaching in action" (as cited in Davis, Provost, & Major, 2009, p. 39). The writing group supplied Mato and Regal with immediate response from a peer audience, the opportunity for collaborative critique, and a better understanding of the writing style and format expected for scholarly publication. Regal calls it "one of the most rewarding and enjoyable experiences at Curry…It inspires me and teaches me on many levels" (as cited in Davis, Provost, & Major, 2009, p. 39). The writer community that formed also forged strong collegial relationships between faculty members and aided in their professional development as instructors.

In the journal *Pedagogy*, Kennesaw State University English professors Daniell, Davis, Stewart, and Taber (2008) discuss how they utilized their department's formal in-house

conference as a type of teaching circle to shake up traditional faculty roles and foster community in their composition program. When choosing presenters, the teachers serving as conference planners made sure to select a range of professorial ranks and to represent a variety of different approaches to teaching their first-year writing course. Showcasing tenured and adjunct faculty scholarship together gave members of Kennesaw State's English Department a greater sense of equality. Further, the department-sponsored event emphasized the effectiveness of converging all ranks of faculty together in order to exchange ideas. The conference showed instructors the department values pedagogical conversation and collegiality. Ultimately, Danielle, Davis, Stewart, and Taber wanted to "distinguish this event from composition committee discussions, hallway conversations and generic faculty development opportunities on campus" (p. 451). This is important to note because most in the field agree that generic faculty development programs do not help most writing teachers. Teaching first-year writing is one of the most difficult jobs in the university, and is often taught by graduate teaching assistants, adjuncts, and newbies who especially need opportunities to talk with other teachers about their teaching lives. The multiple examples shared in this section highlight the need for increased opportunities for composition faculty to get together on a more regular basis for professional exchange.

Portfolio Assessment Groups as Modern Day Teaching Circles

Probably the most well-known representation of professional exchange within composition studies is Elbow and Belanoff's 1986 "Staffroom Interchange" article on portfolio assessment at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook. Elbow and Belanoff introduced the use of program-wide writing portfolios as a way to replace timed exit exams with a portfolio system that involved having teachers meet to discuss and evaluate writing. This new collaborative approach not only improved the teaching of writing as their home institution but inspired many compositionists to develop portfolio programs for placement and program

evaluation. Since the 1990's a large number of university writing programs have implemented portfolio grading groups which bring faculty together for productive small group discussions of teaching and grading. At GVSU, my home institution, first-year writing instructors meet weekly in such portfolio grading groups to discuss student writing, assessment, pedagogical approaches, and collegial support. In a number of ways, these groups have become unofficial teaching circles or learning communities for us to reflect on our own teaching and that of our colleagues.

Research in composition studies supports the idea that teacher inquiry groups, such as GVSU's portfolio grading groups, enrich the process of assessing writing, teaching writing, of developing curriculum and faculty in a writing program, and collecting data about the program's effectiveness (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 1993). Aside from Belanoff and Elbow's original study in 1986, a limited number of studies have explored the communal relationships forged between teachers in portfolio assessment groups or teaching communities for that matter. A. Nelson (1999) completed a pilot study of Seneca State University's implementation of a freshman assessment teacher group program similar to SUNY-Stony Brook's. Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) conducted a study on developing an intensive, portfolio-based placement program at the University of Michigan, and Broad conducted a 2003 study of one university's use of portfolio assessment in an introductory composition program. All of these studies are especially important because their research hints at how such groups counteract faculty isolation, bring teachers together to work as colleagues and help build community within English departments.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Although we do know from previous studies (e.g., Broad, 2003; Durst, Roemer, and Schultz, 1994; Elbow & Belanoff, 1986; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000) how portfolio-based grading groups impact writing assessment, no research study has fully explored these groups' deeper impact on the teaching of writing and the development of composition teachers in the

context of their institutions. Therefore, I studied three portfolio assessment groups in order to gather richer descriptions of teachers' experiences in these groups. I offer these as a continuance of what Elbow and Belanoff began in 1986, what Hamp-Lyons and Condon and Broad offered in 2000 and 2003 but with added detail on how the teacher-to-teacher interactions effect composition instructors in and out of the portfolio grading groups.

The research is significant in that it reveals how portfolio assessment groups are rich resources for studying how collegial conversation about pedagogical practices facilitate faculty development and supply an open forum for writing teachers and writing program administrators to re-think the goals and the means to achieve the goals of a freshman English program. It is also a critical site where teachers can share stories of teaching and learning with one another. Ultimately, the purpose of this ethnographic research study is to draw attention to the limited opportunities for collegial exchange surrounding the teaching of college writing today, and to acknowledge teachers' strong desire to meet with their composition colleagues in order to gain support from a professional community. Further, the study is crucial in that it highlights how GVSU's portfolio assessment groups can provide a meeting space that brings writing instructors together for *much-needed* dialogue and opportunities to gain more self-awareness and reflection regarding teaching practices.

Research Design and Questions

While GVSU's Department of Writing has anecdotal evidence that faculty members in the portfolio grading groups learn from each other and talk about teaching practices, we have not specifically documented how this communal activity contributes to the professional development of writing teachers and their pedagogy. This qualitative study investigates how the learning, mentoring, and modeling that occurs in GVSU's portfolio grading groups aids in the development of writing teachers, both veterans and novices, within the department. It is

imperative that we look at this previously undocumented work to see how it impacts teachers and teaching. This research also explores what happens when these communal discussions go beyond grading rubrics and provides an internal snapshot into how portfolio assessment groups offer writing professors much needed time and space to exchange ideas on a local level with colleagues.

Utilizing an ethnographic lens, I provide teachers with an opportunity to articulate their group experiences through reflective journaling, personal interviews, and observations, affecting an awareness of the benefits of such collaboration. Other data included field notes, internal departmental documents, faculty and student materials, transcribed tape recordings of the portfolio meetings, and transcribed tape recordings of the personal interviews. The data was summarized, and throughout the course of the study—one academic semester—I coded the data to expose key findings that I later examine in-depth in a narrative style. Through these descriptions, I present a more contextualized understanding of how first-year composition teachers use portfolio-based assessment groups as opportunities for interdepartmental conversation and collaboration about teaching, probing of pedagogical belief systems, the evaluation of teaching practices, and as sites for exploring new instructional approaches. The specific dynamics previously discussed led me to ask the following research questions:

- What is the context in which these portfolio assessment groups occur?
- How do teachers talk about teaching within the context of portfolio assessment groups?
- How does this group talk impact teachers' pedagogical beliefs?
- How does this group talk impact teachers beyond pedagogy?

I answer these questions in Chapters Four and Five, and one of the emergent themes is the importance of having teachers meet with colleagues for conversation on the teaching of writing,

a finding that suggests that the field can longer ignore the crucial need for teachers to meet in professional teacher communities, whether it happens in a portfolio assessment group or not. My findings stress how these assessment groups function as much more than simple mechanisms for instructors to collectively assess student writing. The portfolio groups provide writing instructors with a sense of community that enables them to learn from one another and gain much-needed support from peers. The results of this study confirm that portfolio assessment groups do, in fact, support teacher learning, promote collegiality, facilitate faculty development and contribute to departmental community-building. Ultimately, the study's conclusions underscore the strong desire composition professors have to come together on a local level to dialogue with colleagues about our shared professional work—the teaching of college level writing.

Overview of Study

In his book, *Writing Relationships,* compositionist Lad Tobin (1991) reinforces the importance of collegial faculty relationships acknowledging, "it is that relationship—the one that any writing teacher has to her colleagues in her department and in her discipline—that provides the context and often the direction for the teacher-student and student-student relationships in the class" (p. 142). This dissertation argues that as composition practitioners, we should foster a dialogue about teaching and emphasize our collective responsibility to open our classroom doors to one another, both literally and figuratively in order to promote open discussion about what, how, and why we teach. When we engage in these types of discussions we learn how other faculty members negotiate the classroom terrain and how they address issues they face on a daily basis as teachers. We also see models of teaching we may not have had in our own training by discussing teaching with colleagues whose teaching and experience we respect. Faculty learning communities, such as GVSU's portfolio assessment groups, are an effective means to beginning this very important dialogue. Teacher narratives make meaning of the professional landscapes in

which we reside—in the composition classroom, in faculty meetings, workshops, and in informal teacher-talk with colleagues—it is the mode in which teachers so often represent our teaching lives. Such stories, Clandinin, Pushor, and Murray Orr (2007) declare are:

> Ripe with possibility for inquiry, surround and envelope us as teachers. They are the woven fabric of school landscapes. Moving from telling stories of our teaching practices to narratively inquire into our teaching practices situates teachers in the known and the familiar while it asks us to make the known and the familiar strange and open to new possibility. (p. 33)

It is through these stories—these conversations with other teachers—that we begin to see ourselves and our own teaching more clearly.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One offers the problem and purpose of this study. It presents several overarching research questions, a rationale for the study, the significance of the study, and an overview of the study design. Chapter Two is a literature review of previous and current scholarship on portfolio assessment in the college writing community and its impact on writing teachers. Faculty development, teacher reflection and collaboration are also addressed in this section. Chapter Three is a report on my methodology, my use of ethnography, and a description of my data collection and analysis techniques. Chapter Four is a report of the study's results, which highlights and analyzes the most important research findings. Chapter Five draws conclusions on the study's findings as well as observations and questions for further research.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review begins with a discussion of how portfolio assessment has been utilized historically in the college writing community and how it has impacted writing teachers and writing theory. This study seeks to investigate how first-year composition instructors use portfolio assessment groups as opportunities for professional growth—opportunities they are not formally given elsewhere.

Since faculty isolation and inadequate university resources often constrain teachers' development opportunities, I have focused portions of the review on three facets of teacher development—collaboration, professional development, and critical reflection. This literature review also reinforces the importance of alleviating faculty isolation by creating regular occasions for teachers to talk about teaching and to share stories of their professional practice with peers. Through collaboration in faculty learning communities, such as portfolio assessment groups, teachers can participate in collaborative inquiry and reflection. Participating in these peer-to-peer conversations, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of their own teaching experiences leading to professional growth inside and outside of the classroom. This dissertation explores how collegial conversation at the local level can help teachers become better colleagues and better teachers.

Portfolio Assessment in the College Writing Community

Portfolio-based writing assessment began in the mid-1980s at the State University of New York (SUNY)-Stony Brook when Belanoff and Elbow (1986) successfully demonstrated how using portfolios across a writing program can be an effective assessment approach. Elbow and Belanoff's research found portfolio use to be pragmatic and valuable to students, teachers,

and administrators. Now, more than two decades later, portfolios have become a well-established assessment mechanism in college writing curriculums across the nation. Essentially, portfolios are collections of student writing over a semester, which include documentation of their writing processes and proof of the writer's growth via self-reflection (Hamp-Lyons, 1996).

The literature on portfolio assessment in the college writing community indicates that portfolios are used in multiple ways. Portfolios are utilized by individual teachers in individual classrooms (Belanoff & Dickson, 1991); as an exit assessment tool to determine a student's readiness for the next step in a writing program or curriculum for multi-sectioned first-year writing courses (Condon & Hamp-Lyons, 1994; Elbow & Belanoff, 1991; Durst, Roemer & Schultz,1994); as an entry-level assessment to determine where in a sequence of writing courses a student should begin; as a tool for assessing a student's progress through a school's curriculum; and as a means for promoting writing across the curriculum (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). It is clear from even this partial listing that portfolios serve a variety of purposes and functions within the field of composition.

Much has been written about portfolio assessment in the last fifteen to twenty years. Most practitioners would agree that, when used correctly, portfolios are useful tools for teaching writing because they provide a wider range of student writing showing, hopefully, a progression of growth. A large majority of the literature published on the success of portfolio assessment focuses on its appeal to teachers. Scholarly articles appearing in *Assessing Writing, College Composition and Communication* and *Teaching English in the Two Year College* discussed how portfolio-based assessment provides evidence that the curriculum reflects a process approach to writing, which invites students' judgment about their reading and writing and serves as a way for teachers to maximize students' attention to writing and to diminish the autocracy of grading.

In addition, portfolio assessments can chronicle the changes learners experience in reading texts and their responses to those texts and serves as a means of creating dialogue among colleagues about writing and evaluation (A. Nelson, 1999; Durst, Roemer & Schultz, 1994). Portfolio assessment is a natural fit with composition because it enables first-year writing teachers to incorporate critical thinking into their classrooms. Portfolio use is also student-centered and emphasizes the importance of problem-solving and reflective thinking to students. Portfolios help students focus on expanding their minds through reading and discussion of texts while refining their own thinking through writing. The portfolio approach puts the control in the students' hands because they are in charge of selecting what material goes into their portfolio. Also, through early revision and semester-long revision, students learn about putting effort and time into their writing and how that gets evaluated.

How Portfolio Assessment Impacts Writing Teachers

Though portfolios serve as a mechanism for teachers to work together to set community standards on the evaluation of student writing, these small assessment groups of four to six teachers also provide an opportunity for instructors to discuss other teaching matters and to gain support from colleagues. These groups provide invaluable opportunities for teachers to get together to talk about teaching. Based on the studies of Baumflek et al. (1997); Broad (2003); Durst, Roemer, and Schultz (1994); Elbow and Belanoff (1991); Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000); and A. Nelson (1999), it would seem portfolio groups are an excellent place to examine how teachers talk with each other about how they teach, how they evaluate students' work, and how they believe teaching and evaluation should evolve as a result of their collaboration in these groups.

Although the main focus of a portfolio program is collaborative grading, Elbow and Belanoff (1991) suggest that as teachers talk during these meetings, they are learning from one

another. Such groups "draw teachers together, (and encourage) discussion about ways to help students talk about standards. Inevitably, this [process] makes standards more consistent and teachers more conscious of their teaching methods" (p. 15). As composition instructors continue to make their teaching more public, they have the opportunity to consider the methods of others, so they can either incorporate some of these new ideas or not as they see fit. This idea is further supported by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) who found that in the process of building consensus in these assessment groups, teachers "articulate, share, and negotiate virtually every aspect of their classes, from the basic theoretical underpinnings to the criteria for final judgment" (p. 54). Sometimes just articulating events helps us make sense of them; we see them in different ways, which effects change and growth.

While portfolio groups are primarily used for assessment purposes, the research indicated that writing teachers were often so starved for interaction that they utilized these groups to talk with other teachers about teaching. The true value for most members is "hearing what is important to teachers: gripes, desires for change, different approaches to evaluating student text. This kind of conversation is one of the few set-aside spaces where the voices of teachers are central" (Durst, Roemer, & Schultz, 1994, p. 294). It seems as if teachers naturally have a fundamental need to talk about what they do with other teachers and hear from others how they handle different teaching situations. This collegial space allows for crucial teacher-to-teacher interaction to occur, which can stave off the psychological implications of working in isolation. According to Alber (2012), isolation from colleagues can cause teachers to feel low efficacy, loneliness, or even unhappiness, which can lead to burn out. In extreme cases it can also cause instructors to permanently leave the teaching profession. Therefore, staying connected with colleagues is essential for teachers. In a sense, the structure of these groups opens teachers' classrooms and themselves up to one another and brings the curriculum out into the open. Ewing

and Sorcinelli determined “faculty conversations within and across disciplines often provide the means for an individual teacher to adapt an idea or strategy for his or her course” (as cited in Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education, 2007, para. 5). For instance, Durst, Roemer, and Schultz (1994) observed in their study how teachers in portfolio assessment groups traded information about how to best work with international students and tutoring resources available for special student populations at the University of Cincinnati. Such interactions lead to improved classroom strategies, enhanced teaching techniques, and strengthened curriculum and syllabus choices, and also addressed pedagogical concerns.

As an active member of many portfolio grading groups, Gilles (1996) fondly recounted “being struck by the wonderful engagement—the joy—evident in the writing of the students” of one of his colleagues (p. 66). He would ask her, "How do you get your students to care so much about their writing?" She explained the activities used to help students select topics and share readings she utilized to guide and inspire her students. She was generous in sharing her strategies, and “in just one semester, I learned a tremendous amount from her. Each of us had something different to offer the group,” he reflected (p. 66). When members of his portfolio group discussed poor writing, they shared revision strategies for advising students on their revisions. They also talked about the art of writing clear assignments and conferencing techniques. These are only a small sampling of how professors in portfolio assessment groups extend the mission of these groups to something much more expansive—how we do what we do in the classroom. Given the opportunity teachers will talk about teaching because they constantly seek to improve their craft. Belanoff and Dickinson (1991), Condon and Hamp-Lyons (1994), and Elbow and Belanoff (1991) have also written extensively about how portfolio reading and/or grading groups offer opportunities for writing instructors to meet throughout a semester to share

syllabi, assignments, and to discuss theory and practice as these unfold in their respective classrooms.

In addition, these groups are noted as providing composition teachers with the opportunity to share the challenges and triumphs of teaching in a supportive environment. In "Reflections on an Explosion: Portfolios in the '90s and Beyond," Elbow and Belanoff (1997) discussed how the establishment of SUNY Stony Brook's portfolio assessment model increased collaboration and community within their own writing program. For the authors, the portfolio system is viewed as an antidote to teacher isolation that tends to occur so often in teaching at all levels of education. By meeting in these small portfolio reading groups, Elbow and Belanoff found teachers were no longer grading in isolation, but rather in collaboration with colleagues. For example, as a "teacher reads a paper or ponders a distinction, she relies on an insight from a small or large portfolio meeting; she has more experience than her own to fall back on" (p. 22). It is clear one of the most important distinctions of group assessment is that teachers have a support system and are able to grade confidently because the group is in agreement. This takes a tremendous amount of pressure off teachers, especially new teachers.

Teachers in portfolio grading groups are able to call upon the joint teaching wisdom of other faculty members. This experience allows them to learn from one another and to discover that despite the occasional disagreements, everyone in the group has something special to offer. It also opens up the possibility that multiple teaching styles are good, that not everyone has to do everything the same way, that we can all be effective employing our own unique style. What works for some might work for others, but it might not, and it does not have to. In addition, Elbow and Belanoff (1997) described how teachers "carry some of the power of this collaboration and community back into the classroom" (p. 22). Although these writing instructors return to their own respective classrooms, they recognize that they remain part of a

larger community of teachers. Elbow and Belanoff's participants reported hearing their colleagues' voices as they read student drafts and developed course content. While many faculty members benefit immensely from participating in portfolio grading groups, adjunct, teaching assistants and new teachers probably benefit the most from these meetings. The veteran teachers get the opportunity to mentor the newbies; giving them a sense of accomplishment and purpose to pass on their knowledge, which is a win-win for any department.

Contingent Faculty, Teaching Assistants, New Faculty and Portfolio Assessment Groups

In their book, *Assessing the Portfolio,* Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) emphasized the benefits of portfolio groups for teacher development, reflection and change. They argued that in well-theorized writing programs, portfolio assessment provides a "powerful engine for faculty development (or, in other situations, graduate student training), that the assessment acts as the focal point for strong community building within the program" (p. 63). For many teaching assistants and adjunct faculty, portfolio norming groups may be the only formal opportunity to discuss the teaching of writing with other instructors. The sense of belonging to a larger group, such as this, is important to job satisfaction and faculty morale. Schrodt, Stringer Cawyer, and Sanders (2003) determined that ownership in the department, knowledge of role expectations, and collegial relationships are directly linked to instructor job satisfaction. The largest reason noted by researchers for job dissatisfaction in higher education was a lack of *collegiality* (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Manger & Eikeland, 1990; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992; Smart, 1990; Turner & Boice, 1987; Walvoord, Carey, Smith, Soled, Way, & Zorn, 2000). Several aspects of faculty life can be negatively impacted by a lack of collegiality. Boice (1993) and Olsen (1993) found that faculty dissatisfaction can lead to a decline in teaching success, research production, and departmental labor. Further, isolation can breed unhappiness and uncertainty about one's values and abilities as a teacher. At the University of Michigan (U of M), the site of Hamp-

Lyons and Condon's research on portfolios as exit assessments, the researchers found that the teachers would use the portfolio groups as mediums for exchanging ideas and teaching methods. They also observed writing instructors utilizing these groups as a resource for fresh ideas, as a place in which to discuss possible revisions of assignments, and as a location to gauge how well what they were teaching matched the writing program's mission. So again, the purpose of these groups is extended beyond the original scope because collegial exchange is something teachers seem to want and need. This appears to occur organically when they meet because instructors seem to naturally want to talk with other teachers about teaching. Even if writing programs do not want to use portfolio groups, time and space should still be provided for composition instructors to meet with their colleagues on a regular basis to talk about teaching.

As previously outlined, a variety of composition scholars have reported that utilizing portfolio assessment groups created a forum for modeling, reading and teaching behaviors so teachers could assess, both publicly and privately, how their instructional practices compared to what colleagues were doing with the same course. In similar research conducted by Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) at Colorado University (CU)-Denver, a portfolio-based exit assessment was introduced into the college's composition program. Unlike the University of Michigan, CU-Denver's portfolio program consisted of pre-master's teaching assistants (TAs) who lacked extensive teaching experience. However, like U of M, the portfolio groups became a site for instructor development for the teaching assistants. Hamp-Lyons and Condon's (2000) research stressed that writing programs benefit directly from involving teachers in conversations about curriculum, assignments, course design, standards, etc. Providing opportunities for such conversations to "occur as a natural part of the process of teaching a course means that the program can constantly respond to the needs of the students it serves, of the faculty who teach in it, and the university at large" (p. 127). This allows writing programs and even postsecondary

institutions to address the needs of all parties involved. Such an approach benefits both teachers and students, and ultimately benefits the writing program and the university at large.

In some cases creating safe, supportive environments, such as portfolio grading groups, has been a useful way to combat the alienation and isolation often experienced by contingent faculty in various college and university settings. For example, Durst, Roemer, and Schultz (1994) analyzed the conversations from two groups of instructors grading portfolios (beginning TAs and veteran teachers) and discovered that, despite the fact that adjuncts and teaching assistants were marginalized groups in different ways within the department studied, they appeared confident and self-assured in these portfolio norming sessions. Adjunct faculty and TA voices were central in the portfolio assessment groups in Durst, Roemer, and Schultz's study and were described as "strong and powerful; they were the voices of teachers with strong personal commitments to teaching writing and, in most cases, a long history of classroom success" (p. 293). Because the portfolio grading group structure values all teacher voices, the researchers found that adjunct instructors invested themselves wholeheartedly into the portfolio negotiations often sharing their own belief systems and the personal values they used as teachers to evaluate student writing.

In addition, Baumflek et al. (1997) found that in their community college system, many part-time faculty members who were initially hesitant about joining full-time teachers in discussions about teaching and assessment later described the sessions as a fruitful experience. One adjunct stated that exchanging portfolios with a full-time instructor gave him "affirmation, seeing their classes as the same level as mine [his]; respect; an exchange of ideas; all of which help me [him] to gain confidence in myself [himself], making me [him] a more effective instructor" (Baumflek et al., 1997, p. 311). Portfolio assessment groups appear to bring faculty of all ranks together on a collegial level. Other researchers have also determined that portfolio

grading groups provide faculty acculturation to new instructors in a writing program. A. Nelson (1999) reported that new teachers viewed the portfolio norming sessions as their best indication about their department's expectations concerning students' writing, which made them feel more secure that they were assigning and evaluating papers in a manner that was consistent with their colleagues. This leads to increased job satisfaction and boosts faculty morale, which is good for the teacher, his or her colleagues, and the department. These studies highlight how writing programs utilize portfolio assessment groups to acclimate new faculty into a writing program and to offer opportunities for collegial interaction and teacher development for adjunct instructors.

Broad (2003) has also argued that participation in communal writing assessment groups has the potential to "teach teachers more powerfully than any conference, course, book, or other method of professional development" (p. 121). The portfolio assessment meetings in Broad's (2003) study provided a safe and stimulating community for instructors to grow as professionals. He explained:

> Coming face to face with colleagues, reading and debating with them your judgments on students' writing, putting your rhetorical values on the line and advocating for them, and listening to others do the same—these intense collegial activities lead to professional growth for teachers of writing unlike any other experience. Instructors become more aware of their own evaluative landscapes; they learn how others often evaluate and interpret texts very differently; and they work together to forge pedagogical policy on sticky issues such as revision policies, how to value in-class timed writing in a portfolio, and plagiarism. (p. 121)

Here, in addition to commenting on the assessment value of such groups, Broad also captures the extent to which such collegial exchange can assist instructors in their development as teachers

and how professors can come together around controversial subjects they face in their individual classrooms and writing programs.

As Nagelhout (2007) points out, faculty development means that writing teachers are provided opportunities to hold conversations about expectations, standards, and the types of support they need for long-term success as educators. For Gilles (1996), the best part of the portfolio grading process for teachers as well as for the university and the students is that "we've learned a lot about one another—about how each of us teaches this very important and challenging [first-year writing] course" (p. 68). The weekly norming sessions provide a valuable opportunity to interact with colleagues and discuss the teaching of writing. While this opportunity exists in "drive-by" discussions in the hallway or perhaps the faculty lounge, having a regularly scheduled time to hold these conversations is particularly beneficial. The studies outlined in this section highlight how these sessions provide a dedicated space for instructors to converse about program goals, update faculty about ongoing program assessments, discuss syllabus design, compare teaching techniques, practice responding to student writing, and discuss grading criteria and expectations. So they are not just grade norming sessions. The research on grading groups appears to show that teachers consistently have extended the purpose of these meetings.

Portfolio Assessment, Pedagogies and Theories of Writing

Since the interpersonal relationships that develop between teachers in the portfolio grading groups will be explored in this study, it is important to understand how instructors with such diverse pedagogical approaches collaborate to make judgments, negotiations, and set community standards and values for student writing. Portfolio assessment allows for consideration of pedagogical values and variances. What is highlighted in this section, and what

matters most, is that there is discussion amongst members of opposing pedagogical theories, and given the portfolio system, they can see the results of each other's teaching.

In *A Guide to Composition Strategies*, Tate, Rupiper, and Schick (2001) list what they consider to be the most significant pedagogies within the composition studies field. Current and prospective writing teachers are often encouraged by individual theorists to align themselves within one of the pedagogical camps. So, within the context of portfolio assessment, how do two professors with opposing pedagogies work together? Hulst (2007) illustrates this difficulty by asking, what if one professor in a portfolio assessment group accuses another of being a current-traditionalist? The first professor who characterizes herself as an expressivist believes that students, who work hard, apply themselves and explore their own writing, should receive a high grade. The other professor believes that such a student should still be assessed on the quality of their work, and this includes proper mechanics. While it took a semester of discussion, disagreement, and negotiation, at the end of the term these two professors were able to agree on what constituted an A, B, C, or D (Hulst, 2007). Hulst argues the range of pedagogical approaches found in portfolio assessment groups invigorates not only the conversations about grading, but our disciplinary conversations as well. Hulst says teachers learn from being exposed to differing perspectives and approaches to writing instruction, and it forces them to reconsider their own beliefs. Durst, Roemer, and Schultz (1994) similarly capture the significance of diverse voices in portfolio conversation in the following passage:

> What does happen is that in a public, safe, and carefully designed space, teachers have the opportunity to articulate for their own sake and for the information of their colleagues, the standards that they invoke and apply in private. Not to name these differences does not mean they don't exist; it simply means that we deny them. To name

> them, it seems to us, is to name the reality of difference and of diversity that informs, enriches, and enlivens our work. (p. 295)

Through the use of portfolio assessment, portfolio grading group members with different pedagogies work together, learn from each other, and while perhaps not completely embracing another's pedagogy, can still respect each other's professionalism and beliefs, all while coming into assessment agreement.

Despite the obvious issues that diverse voices and various pedagogies employed within portfolio assessment groups might cause, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) contend that portfolio assessments accommodate a range of theories and pedagogies of writing (e.g., current-traditionalism, expressivism, social constructionism, process, etc). This ability to accommodate such a range of teaching approaches is largely based on the nine characteristics that form the basis of portfolio assessment theory: collection, range, context richness, delayed evaluation, selection, student-centered control, reflection and self-assessment, growth along specific parameters and development over time. Portfolios by definition include more than one product, and usually include three or more pieces of writing. This collection allows the writer to display and the evaluators to judge a range of performances. This range originates when teachers provide students opportunities to write in an array of genres, for a variety of purposes and/or an assortment of audiences. The context in which the learning takes place and the close proximity of instruction and assessment often creates a richer portfolio. Portfolios typically contain a selection of a writer's work and not the entire body of a student's work from the course. Students self-select the work that they feel best represents their strongest writing over the course of a semester. Much of the control within portfolio assessment lies with the student from the selection of papers for the portfolio to how much effort they put into drafting and revising. Portfolio design usually includes some kind of student reflection or self-assessment of the writing and learning that took

place and provides writers and readers with a way to trace growth over time and along specific parameters (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). These combined attributes create an assessment tool that can accommodate the tenets of a diverse set of theories.

Expressivism is a pedagogical approach amenable to portfolio assessment theory. The expressivist movement grew out of the work of Elbow (1973) and Murray (1980) and is based on a theory of "relations between language, meaning making, and self-development" (Burnham, 2001, p. 25) and tends to center on learner authority. Expressivist pedagogy also works well within a portfolio assessment framework because the full set of portfolio characteristics fit with this approach to teaching. Expressivist portfolios measure student growth along specific parameters or development over time because the portfolio documents how the writer's thinking and writing has progressed (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). In addition, the portfolio's focus on the learner and self-development enables expressivist teachers to have students use reflection to gain more awareness of their growth as writers.

Growing out of the expressivist movement and the writings of Macrorie (1970) and Elbow (1973), process theory focuses on "the writing behaviors that writers use to translate thought into language, and particularly into coherent, extended writing statements" (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000, p. 48). Composition courses centered on this process approach encourage writing as a process of invention, drafting, revision and publication. Because portfolio assessment originated from the process writing movement, it naturally fits well with the process-based approach.

Portfolio assessment can also accommodate the social constructionist approach to writing which emerged from the work of Bruffee (1973), Bizzel (1986), and Swales (1990). Social constructionism focuses not only on the writer and reader, but the community within which and for which the writer writes. Such classes would focus on helping student writers learn how to

write for different discourse communities, such as the academy. Writers also learn to share their work extensively and contribute an emerging body of work in the form of a portfolio. Despite the collaborative nature of social constructionist classrooms, each student has created their own individual work, which chronicles their own development and encourages reflection and self-assessment (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000).

Finally, portfolio assessment even works well with one of the oldest pedagogies—current-traditionalism. This school of thought based on the works of Corbett (1971), Kinneavy (1971) and Hairston (1982) focuses on the study of rhetorical modes, places an emphasis on academic writing in standard forms and correct grammar, involves having students model their writing after writings of selected masters and centers the authority on the teacher. Current-traditionalism is primarily product focused, so portfolios fit into this formalist approach because they are a set of products. The evaluation criteria for assessing portfolios are also flexible enough to allow judgment to focus on the formalist objectives of conformity to specific rhetorical modes (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000). Thus portfolio grading reconciles the differences between the instructor's pedagogical approaches and the student's need for time to develop their writing.

No matter what pedagogical school of thought a composition teacher subscribes to, portfolio-based assessment provides strong support for many of the most effective teaching and learning strategies in the discipline. This information is useful in terms of this study because it helps us understand how teachers with such diverse pedagogical beliefs can come to learn from one another. However, it is important to note that these differences can at times cause real conflict between teachers in these groups and ongoing membership in the group often forces these instructors to either work through these differences or learn to respectively tolerate them. Additionally, Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) contend that working in such groups causes teachers to "articulate, share, and negotiate virtually every aspect of their classes" (p. 50) which

ultimately makes their classrooms a public space that every teacher can dialogue about with colleagues.

Collaborative Learning

Learning communities, such as portfolio assessment groups, represent an approach well-grounded in earlier educational traditions, and are found in modern educational settings such as colleges and universities. These communities of practice are validated by pedagogical theory and research on collaborative and cooperative learning, writing, and critical thinking across the curriculum. The structural and pedagogical roots of contemporary learning communities can be traced back to the work of Meiklejohn and Dewey in the 1920s and the early debates about general and liberal education. Educational reforms that have occurred in the last 100 years carry a set of assumptions about the nature of knowledge, student learning, curriculum structure, and the role of faculty in the academy (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). These assumptions are strongly associated with social construction of knowledge theory, which emphasize the role of community in shaping discourse and the importance of understanding community expectations (Clark, 2003, p. 15). Using the work of compositionist Bruffee as scaffolding, Cross defined social construction:

> We construct and maintain knowledge . . . by negotiating with one another in communities of knowledgeable peers . . . Knowledge is actively built by learners as they shape and build mental frameworks to make sense of their environments…Knowledge is not something that is transferred in an authoritarian structure from teacher to students but rather as something that teachers and students work interdependently to develop. Thus it fosters active learning over passive learning, cooperation over competition, and community over isolation. (as cited in Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 20)

While collaborative pedagogy in composition is often applied in a student context, for this study its principles will be adapted to faculty members.

In their book, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, Ede and Lunsford (1992) document the increased interest in discourse communities and in the social construction of knowledge within composition studies. They draw upon examples from history and the founding of the nation to illustrate the emphasis placed on rugged individualism within our society. They highlight the role that English departments played in emphasizing the concept of writing as an "individual, solitary act," but noted how some educators "resisted the trend toward individualism and isolation in English instruction" (p. 109). Advocates of collaborative learning, Moffett, Murray, Macrorie, and Elbow, strongly supported a socially constructed approach to learning and to knowledge. Perhaps the most well known supporter of social constructionism and collaborative learning within the field of composition is Kenneth Bruffee.

Based on his work with peer response in the composition classroom, Bruffee determined that "knowledge is a social phenomenon, and the social context in which we learn permeates what we know and how we know it" (Bruffee, 1978, p. 447). Bruffee's later work, *Collaborative Learning* (1990), emphasized "that true knowledge is grounded in conversations among community members, and these social relationships in education become imperative to the building of knowledge" (as cited in Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 21). In the case of portfolio grading groups, faculty members co-create knowledge via their dialogue on the teaching of writing. In this sense, meaning is seen as socially constructed, through collaborative learning. Giroux affirmed, "Through talk, they [professors] make their tacit knowledge more visible and call into question assumptions about common practice" (as cited in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992, p. 94). Collaborative pedagogy encourages knowledge that is connected, relational, and constructed knowing. As researcher Lytle (1993) suggested:

> In teachers' communities, this kind of rich descriptive talk helps make visible and accessible the day-to-day events, norms and practices of teaching and learning and the ways that different teachers understand them. Talk of this kind transforms what is ordinarily regarded as 'just teaching.' (p. 23)

When teachers share their daily work with their colleagues in a teaching community, they generally provide rich information about the ways they construct their world inside and outside of the classroom. Such conversations also elevate professional collegial exchange to a higher form.

Writing scholar Moore Howard's (2001) research on collaborative pedagogy outlined other major supporters of collaboration in the classroom, such as scholars Lunsford and Ruggles Gere. Her study highlighted some of the main characteristics of collaborative learning such as small-group discussion, peer review, and collaborative writing. Moore Howard (2001) pointed out that using group dialogue and peer response strategies have been successful in collaborative-oriented composition classrooms. The result of these collaborative approaches is the discovery of new ideas that could not have been achieved independently, as well as a clear understanding of audience. Ruggles Gere applied this theory to composition pedagogy when she posited, "Knowledge conceived as socially constructed or generated validates the 'learning' part of collaborative learning because it assumes that the interaction of collaboration can lead to new knowledge or learning" (as cited in Moore Howard, 2001, p. 56). Building on collaborative learning theory, this study takes the view that the knowledge that is socially constructed among the teachers in the portfolio groups leads faculty to reflect on their own practices, which leads to new knowledge and perhaps promotes positive changes in their own teaching pedagogy. In this model of collaboration, teachers not only teach each other, but together they discover things that individually they might not have.

L.S. Vygotsky describes learning, such as this, as a process of taking in experiences, attaching new knowledge to what one already knows and making and remaking one's understanding of the world (as cited in Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). At GVSU, much of the learning in the portfolio grading groups involves instructors' engagement with other members of the group—talking and listening, giving and receiving feedback, and undertaking collective or collaborative activities. Bruffee's works note that collaborative activity is essential to individuals' emerging understanding of their own and others' capacity to be constructors of knowledge. In addition, Schon (1983) observed that skilled professionals are "reflective practitioners" whose conscious attention to their practice would "continually adjust it in subtle ways" (p. 36). As they worked through various situations, these professionals would tap into and deepen their expertise in a kind of "internal conversation" with those situations (Schon, 1983, p. 37). Reflection is an important aspect of the portfolio grading process. For Schon, practitioners, like writing teachers in portfolio assessment groups, must build their habits of monitoring their prior knowledge and their learning, consciously connecting new learning to what they already know, noticing what is confusing, or inventing a new strategy if the one they are using does not seem to work. In this regard, a teaching circle becomes a community of reflection where teachers not only share a common identity and a series of learning experiences but may also be sharing responsibility for one another's learning through an ongoing, semester-long dialogue.

In addition to a push for collaboration in the classroom, there has been an increased call for collaborative scholarship in rhetoric and composition by Bruffee, Lundsford, Ede and others. As McNenny and Roen (1992) view it, "Coauthorship enriches the exchange of ideas within the university while encouraging an openness and a spirit of collegiality" (p. 292). However, despite the obvious benefits of collaborative scholarship, McNenny and Roen note that there is still a

perception that coauthored pieces are signs of "incompetence" or "dependence or others' ideas" (p. 293). Thus, while the sharing of ideas and social construction of knowledge is touted as a valuable pedagogical practice in the composition classroom, it is sometimes met with skepticism and resistance in the field, especially by tenure committees. As McNenny and Roen (1992) see it, "collaboration with other professionals is an affirmation of the rich potential of our community in actively constructing a discipline that is multivoiced" (p. 298). Establishing learning communities within English composition programs is one way to allow all voices to be heard and enable teachers to professionally engage with one another on teaching matters. That is why it is especially important to provide composition teachers, novices and veterans, with opportunities to work together to develop effective teaching pedagogies in the writing classroom.

Developing Pedagogies: How Teachers Learn How to Teach

According to a 1999 study conducted by the National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, the majority of faculty members (93.8%) work in non-doctoral institutions in which the majority of their time is spent teaching rather than researching (as cited in Richlin & Essington, 2004). In addition, hiring institutions claimed that candidates often "do not show expertise in teaching or an understanding of their institution's culture and students" (Cox & Richlin, 1991, p. 1). Boice (2000), a national expert on faculty development estimated that only 3 to 5 percent of new faculty members are able to perform "professionally at exemplary levels" in their first few years on the job (p. 5). Though more graduate programs are offering training in how to teach (Chism, 1987; Heenan & Jerich, 1995; Lewis, 1993; Nyquist, Abbott, Wuff, & Sprague, 1991), many faculty development programs must still educate faculty members who did not have such preparation in graduate school how to teach more effectively. Much of the research completed on transitioning from a student to a faculty member discussed the need to better understand the experience of becoming a professor.

The issue of teacher training is further complicated by the deeply-ingrained "research professor" metaphor that views instructors as "specialists," not teachers (Crowley, 1998, p. 55) and assumes that professors primarily develop in isolation, or in relationship to their scholarship, but much less from collaboration with other teachers or students. Stenberg and Lee (2002) also note that at many universities it is assumed that once someone earns a doctoral degree, they are no longer "teachers-in-training" and are to a great extent done learning how to teach; and finally that since a faculty member's primary relationship is to the field, not students, it is assumed that a "professor's development should be grounded in the mastery of a subject matter" (p. 327). Reybold (2003) further adds that students build early psychological representations of what it is like to be a professor in graduate school, and these models continue into their university teaching jobs. Postsecondary institutions also appear to subscribe to the myth that if you know your subject, you can teach it. This view gives new teachers little help in becoming effective teachers. The authors in this section of the literature review raise several important points in this section of the literature review. They say it is imperative that instructors at the college-level continue to view themselves as learners so they can continue their evolution as teachers. Their primary motivation should not be based solely on their discipline, but also the students they teach. Stenberg and Lee (2002) suggest that oftentimes these attitudes are tied to a teacher's upbringing, their beliefs, their education, and so on that inclines them toward some ways of teaching and away from others.

Beliefs about teaching are often typically established by the time a student reaches college. Richardson (1996) argued that these prior beliefs about teaching come through personal experience, schooling and instruction, and formal knowledge. Britzman (1986) described them in terms of "implicit institutional biographies—the cumulative experience of school lives . . . All this contributes to well-worn and commonsense images of the teacher's work" (p. 443). Other

researchers viewed the origin of beliefs in terms of years of pedagogical modeling from teachers (Loflin-Smith, 1993; Stenberg, 2005), exposure to cultural archetypes of teaching (Sugrue, 1997) and subject matter instruction at the college and university level (Moon, Mayer-Smith, & Wideen, 1993; Stenberg & Lee, 2002). Huber (1992) noted, "teachers are apparently supposed to know how to teach because they have been watching teachers do it since first grade—kind of like learning how to play tennis by sitting in the grandstand" (p. 124). One study conducted on factors that influence teacher pedagogy at the postsecondary level indicated that observing colleagues teach, talking with other teachers, attending staff development workshops, reading pedagogical literature, and reflecting on their own teaching had the most impact on the participants' approaches to teaching (Willcoxson, 1998). According to Willcoxson:

> the way in which teachers teach and their choices of teaching methods has also been shown to be influenced by whether they conceive of teaching as the transmission of knowledge or as the facilitation of learning . . . Instructors are also affected by contextual factors such as class size, perceived degree of control over the teaching process and perceptions of the extent to which teaching is valued in the academic department where they teach . . . (pp. 59-60)

Teaching writing is both of these, transmission of knowledge about how to write and facilitation of the writing process. As highlighted in this section, many different factors contribute to the development of a teacher's pedagogical belief system.

While the original formation of teaching beliefs of K-12 teachers and college instructors appear to be similar, the literature on how university instructors learn to teach differs greatly from their elementary and secondary school counterparts. The vast majority of elementary and secondary school educators have the benefit of preservice teacher education and year-long student teaching appointments. College professors do not get to go through such a process.

According to educational researchers Mayer-Smith, Moon, and Wideen (1994), preservice teacher education, including campus and field experiences provides an ideal environment in which individuals learn how to teach. It is the "one time when they can concentrate on examining their beliefs about teaching and acquire the skills and knowledge to be competent teachers" (p. 14). In addition, student teaching provides a supported context for beginning teachers to apply pedagogical content knowledge under the direction of a supervisory teacher (Beynon, 1992), take risks, reflect on their experience (Borko & Mayfield, 1995), and focus on the "why of teaching" rather than the "how" (Chant, 2004, p. 25). Most states require K-12 instructors to attend continuing education classes and begin coursework towards a master's degree in an educational area within three years of graduating with a bachelor's degree in teaching. College teachers have no such requirements, nor do they usually have support, a conundrum that was the genesis of this dissertation.

Adjunct Teaching

In 1970 Beem (2002) reported that 22% of college professors in all disciplines were adjunct faculty. That number increased to nearly 43% by 2000. According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 48% of faculty members are now part-timers, and 68% of all faculty appointments take place off the tenure track. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) cites similar figures, reporting that a mere 27% of postsecondary instructors hold full-time, tenure-track positions (Cross & Goldenberg, 2009). In spite of their growing numbers, many contingent instructors are not provided with the pedagogical training they need to be successful educators. Gappa and Leslie's research (1993) confirms that professional development opportunities aimed at teaching are offered to full-time faculty much more often than part-time faculty. A 1997 report from the MLA Committee on Professional Employment also shows the nature of the problem: adjuncts generally do not have the "time or institutional

support to teach in the committed and expert way expected of regular faculty members" (para. 5). This is the type of comment I have heard repeatedly from adjunct colleagues who felt they did not receive the same type of support that tenured professors did. This is one of the reasons this study of teacher development in portfolio grading groups is so important, since this research looks at groups with a diverse range of full-time and part-time faculty.

Additionally, in sharp contrast with the K-12 sector, teachers in higher education traditionally come to their careers "with little, if any, formal professional training or experience other than the content of their various disciplines and perhaps employment as graduate teaching assistants" (Gardiner, 2000, para. 4). This is especially true of adjunct faculty. Despite the fact that the average college teacher spends 10 to 11 hours per week in the classroom, instructors often enter the profession with limited preparation for teaching other than their own experience as students (Dore, 1993; Palmer, 1999). In this section I will explain this issue to further highlight the lack of training writing instructors receive. I will be arguing that portfolio grading groups are valuable places for adjuncts and tenure-track teaching faculty alike to learn how to be an effective teacher.

Because few disciplines require college-level teacher training on how to teach college-level courses, most pedagogical training or professional development comes from "on-the-job experience and formalized in-services, often in the form of single exposures to experts" (Erklenz-Watts, Westbay, & Lynd-Balta, 2006, p. 275). Many first-year writing instructors come to the course without graduate training in composition or rhetoric. Part-time or adjunct instructors typically hold a master's degree in English or a similar field such as Education, which has traditionally given them license to teach at the college-level. These adjuncts often include high school English retirees, professional writers, or professionals from related fields such as journalism or communications. In composition, these adjuncts are known as freeway flyers

because they often cobble together several sections of introductory writing courses to make ends meet. Some of my composition colleagues who spent some time as freeway flyers suggested that a two-hour commute between assignments was not unusual. This made it difficult for my peers to locate time to learn about teaching or to professionally engage with other teachers. Due to these various factors, some adjunct faculty may lack a sense of agency with respect to the course or lack critical content knowledge for communicating with colleagues who have been trained in the field, or even may lack theoretical background in the field in which they are expected to teach (Myers & Kircher, 2007). This lack of formal training in composition theory often causes adjuncts to feel displaced within their respective departments and further disconnected from their tenure-track peers. This seems ironic since many tenure track professors have no more training than adjuncts. However, this perception may cause some contingent faculty members to question their ability to teach college-level writing. Researchers Gappa and Leslie (1993) found that "part-timers have strong feelings about whether they are or are not 'connected' to or 'integrated' into campus life. For the most part, they feel powerless, alienated, invisible, and second class" (p. 180). These feelings of marginalization hurt the self-esteem of adjunct faculty and drastically diminish their success as teachers.

McGuire (1993) noted that "too often, colleges fail to integrate part-time faculty into their institutions" (p. 3). Adjunct faculty are not typically provided the same institutional support offered to tenured faculty, such as opportunities to participate in professional development activities such as teaching workshops, in-services and professional conferences that might strengthen their teaching (Outcalt, 2000). For example, in their research, Schuetz (2002) and Leslie and Gappa (2002) determined that part-time faculty were less likely than their full-time counterparts to have engaged in instructional and/or professional development activities such as joining a national or regional organization, attending a professional conference, receiving an

award for outstanding teaching or revising a course syllabus. According to Schuetz (2002), this lack of collegial interface may interfere with adjunct faculty members' abilities to develop their instructional practices over the course of their academic careers. This issue is further compounded by the fact that adjunct faculty are typically working at least two jobs to make ends meet and do not have the time to participate in such activities.

Akroyd and Caison (2005) indicated that since many colleges and universities hire contingent faculty at very low salaries, with no benefits and no job security, these adjuncts often feel no professional obligation to the institutions. This attitude is reinforced by the fact that many postsecondary institutions are also not investing in their contingent faculty members' recruitment, training, development and retention. Some adjuncts find little support for their interest in teaching from their respective departments and universities. As one part-time instructor stated, "I understand what it means to be on the lower rung of the department and in a profession where opportunities to explore the scholarship of teaching beyond the classroom were underfunded or nonexistent" (Daniell, Davis, Stewart, & Taber, 2008, p. 450). Professional organizations, such as The Two-Year College English Association (2006) have recommended that adjunct faculty lacking recent coursework in composition should be provided workshops in composition theory, assessment, etc. Ultimately, however, many adjunct university and community college professors have to rely upon themselves to learn how to teach through trial and error. Capturing this frustration, a college instructor in a study on teacher development lamented, "From the day I entered this place to right now, you sort of figure out how you're gonna teach yourself" (Grubb, 1999, p. 49). In many cases, this trial by fire approach is also how graduate assistants learn to teach composition at the collegiate level. If departments throw teachers out into isolated classroom, how can they possibly be expected to know how to teach? This can lead to larger problems such as teaching inconsistencies within a program or

department. There should be minimum standards and practices, things departments have to teach first-year composition students. My writing colleagues reported seeing issues like this frequently arise, especially composition students who were not taught basic first-year content. A large number of these peers felt that teacher communities, such as GVSU's portfolio group system, could ameliorate such issues.

Teaching Assistants

Due to the fact that graduate students teach a large majority of first-year composition courses at bachelor's granting institutions (Good & Warshauer, 2008), it is imperative to understand how they learn how to teach. Most college professors begin their teaching careers as teaching assistants or apprentices while they are still in graduate school. Stygall (2003) contends that full-time English faculty in most departments still believe in "the originary myth of the inexperienced graduate student teacher" that views teaching freshman writing classes as an apprenticeship of sorts (p. 13). Many English graduate programs offer a variety of opportunities for graduate students to assist in a course that a faculty member is already teaching, which often later leads to teaching their own courses. During her 1996 study of curricular requirements for TAs in 36 doctoral-granting institutions, Latterell found that a large majority of teacher-training programs relied heavily on a skills-based or a "what-works" approach to prepare new instructors offering either two-day TA workshops or requiring an introductory teaching course (p. 67). Compositionists Stenberg and Lee (2002) reported this commonly used "basic training" set-up occurs on a regular basis within many composition programs in order to provide new teachers with the skills, policies, syllabi, and assignments they are thought to need to enter the classroom and to familiarize TAs with the college's or department's requirements (p. 327). Bly (2008) found that most respondents in his survey had only a two-week training session prior to beginning their graduate assistantships. His research emphasizes how dissatisfied teaching

assistants are with their preparation, and how they "wish for more instruction in pedagogy and in practical applications of composition theory" (p. 4). For example, quite a few of my composition colleagues found their training courses helpful in terms of assignment planning and syllabus preparation, but not as useful for how to do daily work as a teacher or how to interact with students. The problem most teaching assistants continue to have is that they still know very little about how to teach.

Royse (2001) discovered that while teaching assistantships provide further modeling, they may yield uneven results for young teachers, depending on the abilities of the supervisory teacher and the way the assistantships are structured. Reybold (2003) claimed that training for faculty roles are all too often left to "happenstance" (p. 235). Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, and Weibl (2000) agreed, arguing that, "for too many individuals, developing the capacity for teaching and learning about fundamental professional concepts and principals remain accidental occurrences" (x). Further, Boice (2000) noted, "the change from student to professor is far larger than most new faculty anticipate" and the adjustment is "unlikely to be painless or easy" (p. 225). The transition from graduate student to assistant professor is often a frenzied process. Freshly minted instructors must adjust to a new work environment and learn about the organizational climate. Additionally, they must also closely study the culture of the institution and the department. They also face the pressures of creating new courses, providing service to the department and college, and establishing a publishing record.

According to Moore and Miller's (2006) *A Guide to Professional Development for Graduate Students in English*, graduate programs experience tension trying to provide both scholarly and professional development to their students. Graduate students may also find most of their time devoted to succeeding at their coursework and learning how to teach first-year composition. Bly (2008), a former graduate student at James Madison University, noted the

frustrations of fellow graduate students who expressed their concerns about balancing their work as instructors with their work as students. In 1973 The National Council of Teachers of English advocated that graduate English departments provide "education in basic pedagogical skills through formal programs, internships, and other comparable experiences." The Two-Year College English Association (2006) posited that the field of composition must have a "consistent voice about what is expected in training and philosophy in newly hired, full-and part-time faculty" (p. 12). Former graduate students (Bly, 2008; Good & Warshauer, 2008; Stenberg, 2005) have called upon English departments to better facilitate the transition from student to instructor by acknowledging that teachers are never done learning and pedagogy is a subject worthy of study. In Stenberg's view, teachers are characteristically seen as complete, after undergoing some sort of training or apprenticeship and after finally "owning" the material—the knowledge or methods of the field. These long-held assumptions affect the way we value, understand and enact teacher preparation in higher education, which in turn reinforces the need for academic spaces, such as faculty learning communities, where teachers can meet in peer groups that aid in their development as teachers and learners. The present study examined how portfolio groups impact teacher development. The research project also sought to answer whether portfolio grading groups can really help fill the gap in the training of so many teachers.

Obstacles to Effective Teacher Learning and Development

Although it is important to gain more knowledge of how teachers learn to teach, it is also crucial to understand the factors that can impede teacher growth and development. The educational literature on obstacles to developing strong teachers at community colleges and four-year universities stresses faculty isolation and inadequate resources for faculty development. Many studies argue that faculty members need each other's support and that many faculty members express the desire to work with colleagues (Eble & McKeachie, 1985; Sorcinelli,

1985). Collegial community support appears to be critical to learning how to teach, as it is seeing that, one is not alone as a teacher. According to a survey conducted by the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, "tenure-track faculty care more about departmental climate, culture, and collegiality than they do workload, tenure clarity, and compensation" (Fogg, 2006, para. 2). The study notes that this is a considerable change in the professoriate because prior generations often placed higher value on workplace autonomy and pay over the respect of their colleagues and the climate of their respective department. Grubb (1999) and his associates interviewed 60 college administrators and 257 instructors and found that faculty isolation is a key obstacle to effective teaching. His research suggested that with the exception of a small number of exemplary institutions, most instructors speak of their lives and work as "individual, isolated and lonely" (p. 49). This sense of isolation can be especially disconcerting for teachers of writing who have one of the most difficult subjects to teach in the academy. In her article "The Best of Times, The Worst of Times" Brumberger (2000), a writing instructor vividly recalls: "the sense of isolation—the lack of 'colleagues' and therefore community—that often accompanies these positions and makes professional development difficult, if not impossible" (p. 92). While many instructors would like to collaborate with colleagues, the vast majority of teachers are locked into institutional structures and cultures that tend to reify and emphasize individual work over collaboration. The "departmental silos and bureaucratic, hierarchical administrative structures in higher education represent an institutional and academic history that goes back a hundred years" (Kezar, 2005, p. 52). Kezar claims that the archaic nature of how institutions and even departments are structured can be a definite impediment to the fostering of collegiality in academia today.

Faculty isolation is especially problematic given many instructors' lack of formal teacher training. The isolation also cuts off a valuable source for learning about teaching: other teachers.

The present study examined whether portfolio groups benefit teachers by alleviating some of this isolation. Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck (1994) conducted nearly 300 interviews with faculty members in the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences across eight research institutions, four doctoral institutions, and three liberal arts colleges to determine what conditions within departments support or inhibit faculty members' working together on undergraduate education. Their study found a strong element of isolation among faculty due to the autonomy of being a teacher at the postsecondary level. Respondents overwhelmingly acknowledged that "faculty work alone" in "relative isolation" with "little guidance" from departmental colleagues or department chairs (p. 10). In addition, tenure systems, office configurations, curriculum, and schedules can all make collegial exchanges in departments more difficult. Faculty isolation certainly inhibits the development of a community atmosphere in many English departments at the university level. Establishing teacher communities can bring departments together as a community to dialogue about teaching, which would very likely increase collegiality while also helping teachers and students.

However, for many years the professional development of teachers has been primarily an individualistic and solitary act. Colleges and universities have historically expected faculty members to take care of their own professional and personal development as educators. The assumption had long been held that the scholar/faculty member would and could self-educate to keep abreast of new developments and maintain high-level skills (Camblin & Steger, 2000). Unfortunately, such an approach has left many instructors alone to determine how to "be a member of the profession, a scholar, a thinker, a researcher, a teacher" (Daniell, Davis, Stewart, & Taber, 2008, p. 456) without the influential guidance of peers or other professionals. Further, Sorcinelli (1994) and Hill (2009) reported that new and junior faculty members were hesitant to search out colleagues for support. Some of my composition colleagues, who were new professors

at the time, recalled feeling anxious about seeking help from other teachers because they did not want to appear unskilled or ignorant. According to Hill's research, new instructors viewed the academic setting as isolating due to the lone expectations of teaching and research. This outlook may also be due, in part, to new faculty's perception that they are being compared to or are in competition with their departmental co-workers. Meyer (2002) posits that creating spaces for the socialization of new faculty permits inexperienced teachers to build lasting relationships with colleagues in their department. Hendell and Horn (2008) revealed that new faculty who turn to colleagues for support experienced greater job satisfaction and less stress. Many of the writing instructors I interviewed found it easier being the newbie when there were other faculty members available to confide in and who could relate to what they were experiencing as new instructors.

Faculty Development in Higher Education

Postsecondary institutions in the United States have a long historical commitment to developing faculty members' disciplinary knowledge and research. The main focus of these institutions was supporting professors' growth as scholars within their fields of study. Most colleges and universities focused solely on increasing faculty members' research expertise well into the 1960s. Few institutions had formal programs attending to teacher development (Ouellett, 2010). According to Berquist (1992) and Rice (2007), faculty development as it is known today, surfaced in higher education during the social and fiscal turmoil occurring in the U.S. in the late 1950s and 1960s. College students wanted more control over what they studied and how they were taught. Faculty life shifted significantly during this time frame with discussion of what should constitute the central work of professors. The focus began to change from research and publication to teaching during this time period. However, it was not until the mid-1970s that faculty development actually became a regular occurrence on American college campuses (Centra, 1985). During this time more students were entering the higher education system than

ever before and teaching and learning was recognized as an area requiring serious assistance (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach, 2006).

By definition, faculty development is any activity "designed to improve faculty performance in all aspects of their professional lives—as scholars, advisers, academic leaders, and contributors to institutional decisions" (W. Nelson, 1983, p. 70). According to Sikes and Barrett (1976), the goal of faculty development should be to make "college teaching more successful and more satisfying" (p. 1). Faculty development has specifically been concerned with the improvement of subject matter competence and the mastering of one's discipline as it relates to teaching (Gaff & Simpson, 1994). Professional development is also perceived as an essential mechanism for "deepening teachers' content knowledge and developing teaching practices" (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002, p. 81). A fundamental aim is also to decrease the isolation in which instructors teach their classes and to provide a means of informing colleagues of useful innovations (Herr Gillespie, Hilsen, & Wadsworth, 2002). To accomplish these goals, many postsecondary institutions offer a range of activities and resources to support and enhance classroom instruction.

Schuster (1990) noted professional development opportunities for faculty often include new faculty orientations, visiting professorships, academic leaves, and the reduction of course loads. Sometimes these activities are also expanded to include workshop presentations, travel grants and teaching improvement programs (Baiocco & DeWaters, 1985). More modern approaches to faculty development, often offered through teaching and learning centers, are committed to addressing issues of vitality and renewal which expand personal awareness (Hubbard & Atkins, 1995) and strengthen relations among colleagues (Gaff & Simpson, 1994). However, such vigor is difficult to maintain if a "sense of collegiality is supplanted by a counter-productive competitive spirit spurred on by the day-to-day struggle to survive in an environment

lacking proper support systems" (Camblin & Steger, 2000, p. 4). Much of the scholarship on faculty development appears to support this very claim.

Literature on faculty development indicates that while there has been a push to increase professional development opportunities for instructors in the last thirty years, the effects are not highly visible in college classrooms (Murray, 1995; Schuster & Wheeler, 1990). Brownell and Swayner (2010) recommended that postsecondary institutions invest more in faculty development since teaching practices that support student achievement require assistance and expertise to properly implement. Research on teacher development has consistently proven that professional development aids faculty in acquiring the skill sets that encourage and reinforce student learning (Nuhfer, Blodgett, Fleisher, & Griffin, 2010). Elmore (1997) argued that a majority of teachers today "patch together a lifelong curriculum of professional development in odd and assorted ways" (p. 16). For instance, some teachers passionately pursue learning opportunities while others only attend mandated workshops. Herr Gillespie, Hilsen, and Wadsworth (2002) found that to be especially true among poor and mediocre teachers who did not voluntarily participate in professional development activities. Other instructors work in universities where leaders have a certain theory about teaching that drives decisions about what opportunities teachers have to learn. Still many work in colleges where little thought is given to either how teachers learn or when (Elmore, 1997). This is despite the call in the late 1980s by Boyer (1990) to reform undergraduate teaching by strengthening general education through improving faculty development efforts. Postsecondary institutions for a variety of reasons have been "neither sufficiently alert to the ever-changing circumstances of their instructional staffs nor adequately resourceful in meeting their changing needs for professional development" (Cross, 1990, p. 4). Many faculty development opportunities often stem from deficiencies perceived by the administration not the teachers themselves.

It is striking how much has been written about faculty growth and renewal but yet few campuses have developed comprehensive, systematic programs (Schuster & Wheeler, 1990) to assist faculty in their development as educators. Much of the research on faculty development reported that teachers need such support services for ongoing instruction and also as opportunities to experiment with fresh and innovative instructional approaches (Menges, 1984). The literature warned that, "the difference between revitalization and burnout may depend on the presence or absence of effective faculty development programs" (Murray, 2001, p. 488). Gaff (1991) summed up the reasons many researchers have offered for the significance of faculty development:

> Faculty development is not simply something "nice" to do. The evidence indicates that it is a very important strategy for strengthening general education by changing the curriculum, by improving the nature of teaching and learning within courses, and by keeping the focus on the people at the heart of the enterprise—students and faculty members. Simultaneously, it helps to increase the quality of education for students, to revitalize the institution, and to renew the faculty. As such, it is in everybody's self-interest to operate a substantial program that supports a professional growth of the faculty as teachers of general education. (p. 33)

Educational researchers Keig and Waggoner (2003) found that teaching only improves when faculty avail themselves of development programs in which they work collaboratively to improve teaching. Elmore, Peterson, and McCarthy (1996) claimed that "understanding teacher learning includes attending to both the curriculum and the pedagogy of professional development, to *what* teachers learn and *how* teachers are taught" (p. 213). Unfortunately, many faculty development programs are ill-designed to assist professors and often do not focus on teacher improvement.

Berman and Weiler (1987) studied the condition and value of faculty development programs in California's system of higher education and found that even when opportunities were available to faculty they were often hampered by poor preparation, restricted access, and inadequate size. A number of my composition colleagues considered professional development activities a waste of time because the information was often not focused on teaching, but rather on how to publish or student-oriented issues. Most of my peers desired programming that focused on pedagogical issues and gave them the opportunity to interact with colleagues. This sentiment is echoed by Grubb (1999) who contends that faculty development programs are "formulaic, contrived, and often not focused on teaching" (p. 285). The instructors I interviewed described the sessions they attended as prescriptive, one-shot programs with trainers telling them how to do something without giving them any wiggle room to try things their way, or the opportunity to infuse their personality into it. In addition, the people leading the sessions had never taught at the college level: they were typically faculty trainers or administrators. This made many of the composition teachers distrust what the trainers were saying to them. Grubb's (1999) research establishes, and as my colleagues suggest, professors want faculty development activities that are ongoing and collaborative. Based on these views, portfolio groups appear as a more effective faculty development activity because it allows teachers to talk to each other and take from it what they want, not what an administrator or trainer dictates.

Meeting the Growing Pressures of the Academy

Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy and Beach (2006) conducted a key study on faculty development in postsecondary education. She and her colleagues surveyed 500 directors of teaching and learning centers, faculty members, department chairs, academic deans, and other senior administrators from research and doctoral universities, comprehensive universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, Canadian universities, and other institutions such as medical and

professional schools. They found expanding faculty roles and needs of new faculty, non-tenure-track and part-time faculty as the primary challenges facing higher education institutions in the next five to ten years. Survey results recognized expanding faculty roles as one of the most significant issues affecting professors today. The set of responsibilities placed on faculty members is escalating under mounting demands to stay current with new trends in teaching and research. For example, Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy and Beach noted that new instructors may need to develop skills in online course instruction or grant-writing. Veteran faculty members may also be required to keep abreast of up-and-coming specialties in their disciplines. A number of researchers (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Finkelstein, 1984; Graubard, 2001) discuss how this may be especially hard for senior faculty who often entered their professional careers in higher education under different conditions than their younger counterparts. Veteran writing colleagues pointed to the changing composition of the student body, advancing technology, and increasing financial cuts as some of the major changes they observed since starting their teaching careers. Just like their new colleagues, seasoned teachers need professional development opportunities as well as support from departmental colleagues. According to the survey, whether teachers are experienced or inexperienced, "all faculty will continuously need to learn new skills in the face of an increasingly technological workplace" (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, & Beach 2006, p. 29). Creating opportunities for professors to reflect on fresh ways to arrange their classes and teaching materials and working collaboratively will be crucial in the coming years.

New faculty development is also a vitally important area to attend to as well. Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach's (2006) survey respondents reported a number of inhibitors to the professional achievement and well-being of new faculty: "getting oriented to the institution, excelling at teaching and research, navigating the tenure track, developing professional networks, and creating work–life balance" (p. 37). Reybold (2005) noted that new faculty members suffer

stress related with adjusting to a brand new environment and unfamiliar institutional standards. Part of the problem is that new instructors often align themselves with their previous postsecondary institutions and communities rather than developing connections with individuals at their university or in their academic discipline. Experts recommended that universities and departments offer newly minted faculty professional development programs such as orientations, mentoring programs, individual teaching consultation, learning communities and writing groups to develop skills and increase job satisfaction. For example, Ortlieb, Biddux, and Doepker (2010) documented their experience of creating a new faculty guild with several other newly hired faculty members at Texas A & M University and discussed how they used it to share research progress, trade successful teaching tactics, and as a support system. The authors noted that while the university sponsored programs can do this, they still needed a space of their own. The teacher guild was able to develop a strong sense of camaraderie and members of the group were able to share not only knowledge and resources, but also "frustrations, interests, ideas, feelings, and trust" (Ortlieb, Biddux, & Doepker, 2010, p. 112). The faculty guild, much like the teacher learning communities discussed in this research study, suggests the need for collegial spaces where faculty can openly dialogue with other teachers about their shared journey—college teaching.

Part-time and adjunct faculty members were also identified as a critical new focus for faculty development. An ever-increasing number of postsecondary institutions are relying on contingent faculty to achieve financial savings, react to shifting learner interests, and assist students in linking their university studies to the workforce. Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy and Beach's (2000) findings recommend that as faculty ranks become more varied, faculty development initiatives should ensure that teachers of any academic rank feel supported. However, as McGuire (1993) argues, part-time faculty have been excessively excluded from

nearly all facets of academic life ranging from faculty meetings, professional development programs, student advising, textbook selection, and curriculum development matters. In addition, they are isolated from the full-time teaching staff and other members of their institutions. Several of my composition colleagues who are adjuncts report that they have limited contact with their co-workers, which in turn has led to few discussions about teaching and no forum to ask questions regarding problems they may be facing in the classroom. Schuetz (2002) and Grubb's (1999) studies have noted that colleges and universities need to be more inclusive of adjunct staff. Initiatives to better achieve this goal might "include orientations or seminars for part-time faculty in which departmental colleagues address common teaching issues (e.g., preparing a syllabus, understanding their students, testing and grading guidelines) and department policies and practices" (Sorcinelli, 2007). Ultimately, part-time and full-time instructors need to collegially engage with their peers over teaching matters on a more regular basis. Doing so not only increases collegiality within the department, but makes contingent faculty feel like viable members of the university community.

Teacher Education and Professional Development

Over the last thirty years teacher learning has become one of the most important concerns in K-12 and higher education. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) asserted that teacher learning is no longer seen as a one-time process of teacher training where students are equipped with methods in their subject area and sent out to practice teaching. Likewise, for experienced teachers, teacher learning is no longer perceived as a process of random staff development where instructors "congregate to learn the latest information on effective teaching practices" (p. 16). Current approaches to teacher learning center on how teachers think about their work and emphasizes the "knowledge teachers hold, how they organize that knowledge, and how various knowledge sources inform their teaching" (Kagan, 1992, p. 67). Further, research on how

teachers develop recognizes that both novice and experienced teachers bring previous knowledge and experience to new learning situations. Teacher learning also takes place over time rather than in isolated moments in time and active teacher learning requires opportunities to think about prior knowledge with new understandings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). These findings support the fact that the most effective teacher training is doing it, talking about it, and having time to process both the doing and the talking.

Yonemura (1982), whose research supports faculty development, suggested that since teachers are engaged in work that influences the lives of others in significant ways, professional development should be an essential part of their work lives. She believes that part of this development should involve an increasing awareness of the values and beliefs that underpin their practice. In a 2007 *College Composition and Communication* article, writing teacher Nagelhout called for faculty development in composition to be viewed as both professionalization and a support mechanism. If faculty development is viewed in these ways, then it may then become a legitimate part of teacher's daily lives.

According to the *Guidelines for the Academic Preparation of English Faculty at Two-Year Colleges* (2006), effective teachers are reflective, participate in professional community via conferences, etc. and collaborate with colleagues (Moore & Miller). Fundamental to this conception of teacher learning is collaboration, particularly in inquiry communities or faculty learning communities. In addition to student evaluations and student progress, Schiller, Taylor and Gates (2004) suggested that effective teaching can only be judged through communal conversation and that professional growth occurs not in isolation but in relationship with others. Willard-Traub (2008) perceived faculty development not only as a teachable moment, but as a chance for "reciprocal exchange, learning, and knowledge production" (p. 434). Viewing professional development from this lens allows faculty participants to confront the collective

wisdom of their respective discipline and come to a better understanding of their identities as teachers. Thus my study of portfolio grading groups as sites for collaborative teacher development follows from this stated need in the professional literature.

Faculty Collaboration and Teacher Development

While there has been much research published over the past 70 years on the development of learning communities in support of students at the collegiate level, the idea of learning communities as professional development sites for faculty is relatively new. The present study of portfolio groups as learning communities is situated within this research gap. Over the last two decades university-based teachers and researchers have closely examined teacher learning in inquiry groups, such as faculty learning communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994). This research has determined that in order to improve college teaching, more professional development opportunities are needed for teachers to explore and question their own and others' interpretations, ideologies, and practices. Schon (1983) argued for the growth of groups capable of bringing about their own continuing development by functioning as learning systems. Such groups encourage communal leadership, shared learning, joint values and vision, supportive conditions, and common personal practice. Sergiovanni (2000) defined these communities as a group whose members are dedicated to thinking, developing, and inquiring. He stated that these are groups "where learning is an attitude as well as an activity, a way of life as well as a process" (p. 59). This is representative of most teachers; if a few teachers get together, the conversation will naturally drift towards teaching.

Cox (2004) found that community is playing a more significant and increasing role in classrooms and universities, connecting teachers with their students and colleagues. Creating faculty learning communities is one way that engages "community in the cause of student and

faculty learning and transforming our institutions of higher education into learning organizations" (p. 6). A faculty teaching community is defined as:

> A group of trans-disciplinary faculty, graduate students and professional staff in a group of 6-15 or more. Such groups engage in an active, collaborative, yearlong program centered on enhancing teaching and learning and with frequent seminars and activities that provide learning, development, transdisciplinarity, the scholarship of teaching and l earning, and community building. Evidence shows that FLCs increase faculty interest in teaching and learning and provide safety and support for faculty to investigate, attempt, assess, and adopt new teaching methods. (*What is a Faculty and Professional Learning Community?*, para. 2)

Faculty members desperately need spaces where they feel safe to ask questions about their classroom practices. Doing so in a community of peers provides teachers with the collegial support they need to try new strategies and take risks with their teaching.

In the last 20 years, the role of faculty peer collaboration and department-based instructional development has received increased attention (Cox, 2004; Hutchings, 1996; McDaniel, 1987; Shulman, 1993; Zuber-Skerrit, 1991) as a way to improve teacher learning. Individual faculty members often perceive development initiatives that happen within departments as more relevant to their professional situation and more transferable into their teaching practices than institutionally-based activities (Jenkins, 1996; Smith & Geis, 1996). This is especially critical for writing teachers because teaching writing is so nebulous. Department-based teaching collaboration has the potential to make teaching "community property" which potentially breaks the cycle of faculty isolation and the privacy of individual courses (Shulman, 1993, p. 6). Quinlan and Akerlind (2000) perceived these advantages as especially strong "where the aim is to change faculty beliefs about teaching and learning, rather than simply addressing

teaching skills, and strategies per se" (p. 23). A study on the characteristics of departments which were supportive of teaching found that members in those departments saw themselves valuing teaching, frequently interacting, tolerating differences about theory, methods and directions of the discipline, enjoying equity among different generations of faculty and distribution of the workload, being led by an effective chair, rotating course assignments and evaluating and providing incentives for teaching. The researchers also determined that the "more often faculty interacted with one another; the more likely they were to discuss issues relating to undergraduate education" (Massy, Wilger, & Colbeck, 1994, p. 12). Such peer interactions on teaching-related issues helps teachers collaborate on solutions together.

Much of the research in this area reinforces the importance of allowing teachers to get together to talk about teaching and swap stories of their professional practice. Quinlan (1998) and McDaniel (1987) asserted that the best way to learn about teaching is through having peer groups share experiences and insights. Such ongoing dialogue enables open discussions of issues and creates an environment where individual members develop through experimentation and learning from each other. Gross and Kientz (1999) suggested that the focus of a learning community is authentic student learning, which is perceived as more valid when constructed by collaborators rather than isolated individuals. Garmston (1997) posited that learning communities "learn more, work more effectively, and are more emotionally stable and committed to outcomes" (as cited in Harwood & Clarke, 2006, p. 32). My study sought to understand how department-based teaching collaboration could potentially increase faculty interaction in ways that make teaching more public, increase discussions of teaching practices and facilitate teacher reflection.

Teacher Talk in the Study of Teaching and Teacher Education

Within the last fifteen years, educational scholars such as Clandinin and Connelly, (1992), Elbaz (1991), Grossman (1989), and Richert (1990) have made story a central part of their analyses of teachers' knowledge and a central focus for conducting research in the field through narrative inquiry. Teachers' lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the major ways that instructors fill their teaching world with meaning and enlist other teachers' help in building teaching communities. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted, "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 12). In other words, teachers' lives consist of stories. Teachers need to talk about these stories with one another. Published stories of teachers' experiences in and out of the classroom are becoming more and more common in composition. Writing teachers are becoming storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories. Examples of this type of teacher story research include Schaafsma's *Eating on the Street* (1994), Perl and Wilson's *Through Teachers' Eyes* (1998), Haswell and Lu's *Comp Tales* (1999), Pagnucci's *Living the Narrative Life* (2004), Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* (2005), Hull and James' *Geographies of Hope* (2007), and Eble and Lewis Gaillet's *Stories of Mentoring: Theory and Praxis* (2008).

Educational researchers use the metaphor of talk to describe how teachers learn through inquiry. In his book, *Teaching: Making Sense of an Uncertain Craft*, writer J. McDonald (1992) described teacher learning as a matter of "breaking professional silence" when teachers collaboratively think, discuss, write and "read the texts" of teaching by collectively commenting on the vignettes and commentaries of group members, in part by responding to and critiquing others' teaching practices (p. 43). Teacher stories play a critical role in teachers developing both a sense of self and a sense of community. Unfortunately, such opportunities are usually too

infrequent because the “norms of school” and the privacy of teaching have “obstructed the development of a critical dialogue about practice and ideas” (Wilson & Berne, 1999, p. 186). However, when teachers talk about their teaching, it becomes a way of confronting structured silences that abound in teaching (Kretovics, 1985). The silence often occurs simply because professors are too afraid to ask questions or raise concerns because they might be viewed as “bad teachers” in the eyes of their peers. For this very reason, many teachers do not want to share the perceived imperfections of their classes with colleagues. Teaching communities built on mutual respect and trust are able to address such insecurities and help teachers get more comfortable with their discomfort and learn how to see their questions not as a weakness, but as a strength.

Smyth (1989) argued that when teachers engage in the activity of “unpacking descriptions of their teaching…they are really capturing the pedagogical principles of what it is they do” (p. 6). Conducted in isolation, inquiry and reflection provide a limited opportunity for learning because it will be "unsystematic with checks against realities constrained by the limitations of the single perspective" (Day, 1999, p. 36). Teachers need these additional perspectives from colleagues just as a writer needs others to comment on his or her work. It comforts teachers to know that their struggles in the writing classroom are not so different from their colleagues’. Whether someone is a fresh-faced new instructor or a seasoned veteran, we all have valuable insights and diverse experiences to share with one another. Teachers benefit greatly from telling the stories of their practice to other teachers and from developing relationships where they examine together the contexts of their teaching experiences. Teacher communities, such as GVSU’s portfolio assessment groups, provide a community space where the “process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying” can take place (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Stories are the form in which teachers most often represent their experiences to other teachers (Pagnucci, 2004). These narratives capture the richness of our

experiences as educators and "the complexity of our understandings of what teaching is" (Carter, 1993, p. 5). By exchanging knowledge in a collegial environment, both novices and experienced teachers develop new ideas and strengthen their teaching practices. It is imperative that teachers be given time and space to share their stories. Doing so leads to increased job satisfaction and improved teaching. It is one of the few ways most teachers get the professional support they need to be effective educators in today's college classroom.

Much of the research in narrative inquiry focuses on teachers' personal stories. Elbaz (1991) ventures, "Story is the very stuff of teaching, the landscapes within which we live as teachers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense. Teachers' knowledge in its own terms is ordered by story and can best be understood that way" (p. 3). In her article, "The Place of Story in the Study of Teaching and Teacher Education," Carter (1993) suggested that stories "exist within a community in which readers make something of them" and that researchers and teacher educators need "to help teachers come to know their own stories" (p. 8). Establishing teacher learning communities within composition programs is one way to promote the telling of these stories and to release teachers from the solitude they may face in their respective departments and universities (Shulman, 1993). Such interactions potentially break the cycle of faculty isolation and the privacy of individual courses. Exploring such collegial exchanges within the context of portfolio grading groups is one of the main focuses of this study.

Teacher Reflection as Professional Development

Many of the studies compiled on teacher reflection as professional development are theoretically-based (Scribner, 1999). Reflective practice, a term often used in education pedagogy, was coined by Donald Schon in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* which was published in 1983. Reflective teachings combine John Dewey's philosophy on the moral,

situational aspects of teaching with Schon's process for "a more contextual approach" to the concept of reflective practice (as cited in Ferraro, 2000, para. 3). Dewey (1933) defined reflective practice as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). For Dewey, the major purpose for education was to help people acquire reflective habits so they could engage in intellectual action. After Schon introduced his notion of reflective practice, many schools, colleges, and education departments began creating teacher education and professional development programs based on his concept.

Schon (1983) argued that the primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers is gaining a deeper understanding of their own teaching practice and improving their effectiveness as a teacher. Reflection can help teachers see their teaching in new ways, leading to professional growth within and outside of the classroom (Glazer, Abbott, & Harris, 2004). Other specific benefits of reflective practice include the "validation of a teacher's ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice" (Ferraro, 2000, para. 2). Recent research on faculty expertise indicated that the one thing that exceptional teachers have in common is that they frequently and persistently reflect on their own teaching (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2004). By reflecting on their personal experiences, instructors are able to learn things about themselves as educators they may never have realized. This reflection helps teachers develop a new self-awareness of who they are as teachers and become more cognizant of what they do in the classroom and why they do it.

A range of methods (i.e., action research, ethnography, and journal writing) are advocated to assist teachers in thinking more reflectively about their teaching (Calderhead 1989; Zeichner 1987). For example, journaling provides instructors with opportunities to use writing to express and discover their teaching tactics. Journal writing is used in this way as a pedagogic

technique to promote reflection. Many times faculty members use reflective journaling to document their experiences, thoughts, questions and ideas. Schneider (2008) found that scholarly teachers do things such as "reflect on their teaching, use classroom assessment techniques, discuss teaching issues with colleagues, try new things, and read and apply literature on teaching and learning in their discipline" (p. 513). Reflective writing provides an opportunity for instructors to think critically about what they do and why. According to Ho and Richards (1993), reflective journaling provides teachers with the opportunity to challenge themselves and what they do and free them up to do it differently and better. Journaling provides teachers with guided opportunities to think aloud on paper and reflect on their own perceptions or understandings of the situations encountered in their classrooms. Before trying solutions to problems in their real teaching lives, teachers can be creative and express feelings and frustrations on paper. Journaling also gives professors a means to develop a personal philosophy of teaching and an opportunity to view teaching objectively and not see all problems as personal inadequacy or as the students' fault.

Measuring Teacher Growth

Teachers use evaluative measures such as student evaluations, teaching portfolios, classroom observations, and self-reflection to measure their growth as instructors. Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan (1991) deem "reflective practice" a necessary precursor to improved teaching. Owens (2001) suggested that if professional development is to be a growth-enhancing experience, it must be motivated by an inner search for meaning, improved self-esteem and job performance, and more satisfying relationships with colleagues. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), there are three primary views of how teachers learn and ultimately grow as instructors. In the first view, teaching is coming to know what is already known via formal knowledge. In this instance, experienced teachers learn from training, books and best practices

from literature in their respective field. Secondly, learning and growth occurs when teachers intentionally reflect upon their classroom experiences. Both researchers noted that teachers need opportunities to reflect and examine knowledge that is inherent in good teaching practice. In the third conception outlined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, it is understood that the knowledge teachers need in order to teach and ultimately grow as educators is created when they regard their own classrooms and schools as locations for deliberate inquiry.

Akerlind (2005) investigated how professors perceived their growth as instructors and the development of their university teaching. She found that instructors viewed development as achieving academic credibility and recognition for one's work. This included "feeling comfortable with one's performance as an academic, clarifying one's personal role as an academic, and feeling accepted within one's department and amongst a network of colleagues" (p. 12). University instructors in the study also measured their growth in terms of ongoing improvement in the quality and effectiveness of one's work and ongoing accumulation of personal knowledge and skills. Lastly, study participants perceived development as increasing depth and sophistication of understanding in one's field as well as contributing to disciplinary growth or social change.

To foster growth in teachers, many researchers maintain that teachers must examine teaching beliefs and develop collegial relationships in order for instructional and curricular improvement to occur (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003). Akerlind (2003) asserted that in order to better understand teacher development researchers must investigate faculty members' "understandings of their own development as a teacher, and the relationship between their understandings of teaching and of teaching development" (p. 378). In her qualitative study of academics' conception of their "own growth and development as a university teacher, she concluded that development as a university teacher was varyingly experienced as an increase in

- the teacher's comfort with teaching, in terms of feeling more confident as a teacher or teaching becoming less effortful;
- the teacher's knowledge and skills, in terms of expanding content knowledge and teaching materials, and/or an expanding repertoire of teaching strategies;
- and learning outcomes for students, in terms of improving students' learning and development" (Akerlind, 2003, p. 380).

Effective faculty development is predicated upon creating the appropriate climate and conditions for growth. It appears that only professors who avail themselves to self-reflection in the company of their colleagues can fully attain this higher level.

Conclusion

This review of literature reveals the crucial need for colleges and universities to better attend to both the curricular and pedagogical aspects of professional development, to *what* teachers learn and *how* teachers are taught. Research has proven that collaboration among peers, especially departmentally-based collaboration, helps counteract the isolation experienced by so many instructors in postsecondary institutions. In the article "Faculty Development as Community Building" researchers Eib and Miller (2006) recommended that educational institutions and the departments within them should "attend to the development of dynamic and nurturing interactions among faculty that support excellence in instruction and the scholarship of teaching. Such conditions, in turn, will promote a collective sense of mutual benefit and reciprocal responsibility among faculty" (p. 1). This study argues that in the field of composition we must continue to be vigilant in our concern for the quality of our teaching faculty, the preparation and experience of faculty, and the opportunities that colleges and universities can provide for continued professional growth of faculty via collaborative, collegial engagement.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Overview of the Study Design

At GVSU first-year writing instructors meet in weekly portfolio grading groups to assess student writing; however, these assessment meetings have evolved into something more complex and significant. They have become unofficial teaching circles in which instructors reflect on their own teaching and that of their colleagues in order to more effectively negotiate the difficulties of teaching first-year composition. This chapter describes the methodology utilized in planning, executing, and reporting on ethnographies of three of five portfolio assessment groups and their 14 members. Data collection occurred during the winter semester of 2009. This research study intertwines narratives, journals, interviews, and traditional analysis to offer an ethnographic account of how first-year composition teachers use portfolio-based assessment groups as opportunities for interdepartmental conversation and collaboration about teaching, probing of pedagogical belief systems and evaluation of teaching practices and as refuges to explore new instructional methods. An ethnographic lens was specifically chosen to closely examine how portfolio grading groups function culturally as faculty learning communities. This chapter begins with a rationale for the qualitative research design and for selecting GVSU as a research site. Finally, the procedures for collecting and analyzing various data sources are discussed in detail.

Rationale for an Ethnographic Approach

Long established as a theoretical direction and knowledge-seeking paradigm within anthropology, ethnography has, for the past two centuries, been used to reach a better understanding of human culture (Cheek, 2003). In the past two decades, ethnography has been an increasingly prominent research method in composition studies. Educational researchers, including scholars in composition and rhetoric, have begun moving toward ethnographic inquiry

as a primary method for studying sociological spaces such as writing classrooms and other sites of literacy learning to understand the "complex literacy cultures that occur in schools and communities" (Bishop, 1999, p. 13). Ultimately, ethnographers study other cultures to better understand their way of life and behaviors. Such research often combines elements of social history with anthropology and education. Seminal ethnographic works in the field of composition include Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* (1983), Perl and Wilson's *Through Teachers' Eyes: Portraits of Writing Teachers at Work* (1986; 1998) Bishop's *Something Old, Something New: College Writing Teachers and Classroom Change* (1990), Schaafsma' *Eating on the Street: Teaching Literacy in a Multicultural Society* (1993), Sunstein's *Composing a Culture: Inside a Summer Writing Program with High School Teachers* (1994), Rankin's *Seeing Yourself as a Teacher: Conversations with Five New Teachers in a University Writing Program* (1994), Tinberg's *Border Talk: Writing and Knowing in the Two-Year College* (1998), and Cushman's *The Struggles and the Tools* (1998). These composition-focused ethnographic studies provide readers with rich, textured portraits of cultures, such as working-class people and writing teachers at work, in order to bring out the larger patterns of meaning found in these communities.

Many composition scholars claim that context-based study, such as ethnography, "illuminates previously neglected areas (for example, classroom cultures) and produces holistic understandings of complex processes (becoming a writer or a writing teacher)" (Bishop, 1999, p. 13). For my study, I looked to previously published research on portfolio assessment groups, such as Belanoff and Elbow's (1986) study on SUNY-Stony Brook's portfolio-based writing program, Hamp-Lyons and Condon's (2000) study on developing an intensive, portfolio-based placement program at the University of Michigan; and Broad's (2003) long-term study of one university's use of portfolio assessment in an introductory composition program. Each explored the communal relationship between teachers in these portfolio-based approaches to writing

assessment. While these composition scholars firmly acknowledged that professional development and community building did occur in such groups, they never fully explored how that happens or what that looks like.

This study is unique in that it provides a slice of everyday reality for portfolio grading participants. Ethnography is the process of data collection, content analysis, and comparative analysis of everyday situations for the purpose of formulating insights (Smith, 1978). The research focused on using portfolio assessment groups as a way to better understand teacher culture within a writing program. The findings presented here attempts to build upon the previous studies' findings by providing a more in-depth view of *how* portfolio groups impact the teaching of writing and the development of faculty in a first-year, portfolio-based composition program.

Research Focus and Questions

In naturalistic, qualitative research, the problem statement is an "expression of a dilemma or situation that needs to be addressed for the purpose of understanding and direction" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993, p. 49). The purpose of this particular research inquiry was to address the limited collegial exchange and openness surrounding the teaching of college writing. Learning communities, such as GVSU's portfolio assessment groups, provide a meeting space that bring writing instructors together for dialogue and opportunities to gain more self-awareness and reflection regarding teaching practices. These specific dynamics have led me to ask the following research questions:

- What is the context in which these portfolio assessment groups occur?
- How do teachers talk about teaching within the context of portfolio assessment groups?
- How does this group talk impact teachers' pedagogical beliefs?

- How does this group talk impact teachers beyond pedagogy?

Research questions, such as these, allow researchers to develop and explore theory that emerges from the context under study. The purpose of such ethnographic inquiry is to resolve the problem by "accumulating pertinent knowledge and, in collaboration with the various stakeholders in the social context being studied, direct meaning toward that end" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 49). I developed my research problem and formulated my questions based on these ideas from Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen.

Research Site Overview

GVSU, a mid-sized, four-year public postsecondary institution in the Midwest with a fully accredited liberal arts program was selected as the primary research site for this study. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences houses GVSU's Department of Writing, which in turn houses the First-Year Writing Program. The Writing Department offers instruction in academic, creative, and professional writing. First-year composition offerings include *Writing 098: Writing with a Purpose* and *Writing 150: Strategies in Writing*. Nearly 3,000 students enroll in Writing 150, the basic introductory composition course, in their first year of study at the university. The mission of GVSU's Department of Writing states that the department's goal is to "develop in students the ability to write well in a variety of contexts and to promote good writing and good writing pedagogy in local academic and non-academic communities." The department's mission also states that it values an "academic environment, collaboration, interdisciplinary research, a progressive reliance on technology for rhetorical ends, a connection to the local, national and international writing community and a commitment to supporting academic, creative, and professional concerns in the university and local community" ("GVSU Writing Department Mission," 2009).

Rationale for Site Selection

Due to its unique configuration of having first-year writing teachers meet weekly over the course of a semester, the diversity of its freshman composition instructors, its accessibility, and its fit with the ethnographic research design, GVSU's freshman portfolio program seemed an excellent context in which to conduct the research study. The location of the site was convenient and allowed me to devote needed time to the study. In qualitative work, the context in which a research study transpires always includes the physical setting in which social action occurs, a set of participants and their relationships to one another, and the activities in which participants are involved (Hatch, 2002). Additionally, GVSU's composition program appeared to be the only one in the West Michigan region and the state of Michigan where first-year composition faculty met in small portfolio grading groups for an extended period of time to discuss assignments, student writing, teaching, and grading. As a teacher at GVSU, I also had the advantage of insider access to the site. At the same time, I acknowledge that my membership in this very community can be a limitation (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), which I will discuss in more detail later. The following section provides a comprehensive description of the study site, which includes GVSU's Department of Writing and First-Year Writing program.

Context of GVSU's Portfolio Assessment Groups

In order to fully understand the context of GVSU's portfolio grading groups, and the significance of this research study, one must also consider the history of the department. At its inception in the 1960s, the composition program was housed in the Department of English. In the 1970s a writing center and a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) program were established. Back then literature faculty taught the bulk of freshman writing courses. GVSU's English Department remained literature-centered until the 1990s when it hired its first rhetoric/composition specialist. The university's rapid growth led to the hiring of three to five

tenure-track faculty members per year, which included two composition/rhetoric specialists to direct the first-year writing program and to keep other faculty apprised of the newest developments in the profession. In 1993, there were low standards and inconsistency across sections of ENG 150 so the new first-year composition director was asked to overhaul the freshman writing program (Royer & Gilles, 2002). As a result, freshman writing courses were refashioned. Team-graded course portfolios were introduced as was a guide with course goals, sample assignments, grading rubrics, and model student papers.

Status of Composition in GVSU's Department of English

According to Gilles, before 1995, literature faculty members within the English department were willing to teach composition, in part, because they were free to teach the class as they saw fit: "Classicists taught Virgil, Americanists taught Thoreau, etc. Some people taught very touchy-feely 'values clarification,' while others taught very strict literary analysis" (personal communication, July 2011). As a result, some of the ENG 150 sections were taught more like literature courses than first-year writing courses with no real consistency in the writing they required. In response to student complaints about inconsistency in what each teacher wanted and each class having its own grading scale, GVSU's English Department began experimenting with portfolio grading groups in 1993. The goal of the groups was to create common goals, evaluation criteria, and grading standards and share them with students. The pilot group met every week or two and agreed they would grade each others' students work rather than their own. The group of six teachers would discuss student essays and their responses to them "and negotiate a common set of expectations, so that we would all grade the final portfolios in just about the same way" (R. Gilles, 1996, p. 64). The portfolio grading groups were successful enough that the first-year writing program started piloting it in other sections of ENG 150 on a voluntary basis.

In 1995 the composition specialists began to direct the freshmen writing program, mainly by expecting all faculty members to participate in portfolio groups. At the time, many within the English department viewed first-year writing as a pre-academic course they did not want to teach. Others resented being forced to join the collaborative grading groups. Some instructors argued that if they were not trained in composition studies and did not enjoy teaching composition, they should not have to teach it—and the composition director agreed with them. For Gilles, the composition director at the time, that was the interesting part: "People were used to having me and other comp directors insist that everyone 'share the burden' of teaching comp, but at some point we comp folks realized that we were buying into their 'frame' (that comp is a necessary chore)" (personal communication, July 2011). This shift in thinking was a major turning point in GVSU's English Department and in its relationship with the composition program.

As a result, Gilles and the other rhetoric/composition specialists decided to change the conversation to acknowledge that first-year writing is equal to every other course and that only those trained in and/or interested in ENG 150 should teach it. The group attempted to turn the argument further to say, "Not only do we agree that you don't have to teach comp if you don't want to. We don't think you should be *allowed* to teach comp if you're not interested in it" (R. Gilles, personal communication, July 2011). A few professors were pleased about this, but others still wanted the *option* to teach composition whenever and however they wanted to. After three years of voluntary participation in portfolio grading groups, the first-year writing program began requiring all instructors teaching ENG 150 to participate in a portfolio group. This move was supported by the department chair at the time, as well as subsequent chairs, who saw value in having a coherent composition program. However, the majority of these sections continued to be taught by rhetoric/composition faculty, full-time composition fellows (visitors), and part-time

adjuncts. None of the other 35 or so English faculty chose to teach composition. According to Royer and Gilles (2002), "some [English faculty] did [teach composition], either out of a lingering sense of duty or continued interest—or perhaps simply because of a canceled literature seminar" (p. 24). Despite the changes, however, composition continued to remain a low priority to the Department of English at GVSU.

This was a significant transitional period in the department's history because before then "composition was a necessary chore, made more palatable simply by its being a required part of the job" (Royer & Gilles, 2002, p. 23). Those involved in the composition program knew they wanted to elevate first-year writing into something more than a mere chore. Their opportunity arose in the Spring of 1998 when the university administration voiced concerns that not enough tenure-track faculty were teaching first-year writing to substantiate the number of hires given to the department. In response to the administration's concerns, GVSU's English Department held a series of meetings to discuss staffing and growth issues (Royer & Gilles, 2002). This led to the commencement of a summer task force charged with exploring different options for reorganizing the department. Initial discussions of increasing the proportion of tenure-track professors teaching composition gave way to talk of forming an independent writing department. The desire to establish an independent program evolved from Royer and Gilles' desire to create a community that valued the teaching of writing instead of remaining in one that thought of comp work as "cleaning the toilet" (p. 23). The bone of contention boiled down to the continuing devaluation of composition within GVSU's English Department.

Becoming a Separate Writing Department

Conversations about the possibility of separation heated up during the 1997-1998 academic year. The portfolio groups established in 1995 were for Gilles "the start of the real rebellion" and played a bigger "role in the growing independence of the composition program. I

really believe that they were the first step we took toward an independent department" (R. Gilles, personal communication, July 2011). At the time, GVSU's English Department was one of the largest academic units on campus offering up to one hundred and fifty sections of ENG 150 per year. Much of the department's budget and new faculty positions were tied to the composition program that had become the "economic center, if not the curricular center, of the department" (Royer & Gilles, 2002, p. 26). Since ENG 150 was a required university course hundreds of first-year students and transfer students were taking ENG 150 each year. In addition, the successes of the first-year composition program in the early to mid-1990s had allowed the rhetoric-composition specialists to build solid working relationships with the campus community, especially university administration officials. The English chair at the time knew that dividing the department would diminish its presence on campus. Therefore, she initially discouraged the idea of separation when it first came up. Despite her reservations, she did want everyone to understand the implications of whatever decision was made.

In Fall 1998, she circulated a document that showed what the schedule would look like if each teacher in the English Department taught one section of composition. For most faculty members, the mock schedule meant losing a coveted class or one course in their area of specialization. Discussions arose about the importance of staffing courses with the most qualified people. It was clear to the rhetoric/composition faculty that the vast majority of the English department would not support any plan requiring the universal teaching of composition. Rhetoric/composition staff felt that remaining in the department would further marginalize freshman composition and the teachers who wanted to teach the course. After weighing all of the options, and realizing that the "English department didn't want to make composition a central part of its identity," the composition program broached the idea of creating an independent writing department (Royer & Gilles, 2002, p. 27). After much debate and negotiation, and

university approval, GVSU's Department of Writing became a separate unit within the Arts and Humanities Division in July 2001. The department began offering a writing major with concentrations in creative and professional writing and a writing minor. However, freshman composition remained a central component, if not the heart of the department. GVSU's English Department continues to offer major coursework in Elementary and Secondary English Education, Language and Literature, and Linguistics. These earlier historical developments give a sense of how the identity and culture of GVSU's Department of Writing has evolved into what it is today and the critical role the portfolio grading groups played in that history.

GVSU's Department of Writing and First-Year Writing Program

GVSU's First-Year Writing Program continues to be the Department of Writing's strongest and best supported initiative. The program is nationally known for innovations such as directed self-placement and collaborative portfolio grading. It is also distinctive because the freshman composition program is housed in a department of writing rather than a department of English. Therefore, the department's primary focus is on writing and creating a culture of writing. Those who founded the original Department of Writing wanted to make composition a central part of its identity and the center of its work. They strove to build a culture where students could become conscious of their identities as writers within a larger community of writers. One of the main reasons for forming a separate unit was to "[create] a writing-oriented *community* of teachers…in an academic culture that was supportive" (Royer & Gilles, 2002, p. 25). The writing department that emerged in mid-2001 was based upon the values of community and collaboration and an interest in attracting faculty genuinely interested in teaching composition. The department made a concerted effort to build a collegial community of teachers who focused their professional lives around the "intersection of teaching, scholarship, and service within a writing program" ("Writing Department Final Plan," personal communication,

2000, p. 4). In reviewing other departmental documents and in speaking to current and former GVSU writing program administrators, it is clear that as a separate academic unit, they envisioned creating a more intimate department with a sense of disciplinary purpose, a mutual commitment to students, and a more personalized working relationship with colleagues.

The department's community-oriented approach and collaborative spirit can be seen most vividly in the First-Year Writing Program. Since the primary mission within the department is to teach composition, a large portion of the teaching that takes place is service-oriented in nature. In the "Departmental Perspective" Gilles (2002) notes,

> a composition program 'serves' its students, the faculty throughout campus, the institution itself, and the larger democratic society. But a good composition program also serves the English profession by providing apprentice graduate students and any other faculty with an extremely valuable experience working with others in a coherent, goal-oriented program. (p. 9)

Much of the department's success is largely due to its clearly expressed outcome goals, established community standards, and professional development opportunities. The standardization of many foundational elements such as course objectives, grading criteria, and departmental policies has created a consistent program for students and faculty alike. Such guidelines help writing instructors to understand the program's objectives and to value course expectations. Teachers share common purposes and mutual understanding of what they value as a community, which has led to a department with a cohesive, established identity. As *The GVSU Guide to First-Year Writing* states, "Our faculty have the supportive attitude that we are communally joined in the teaching of our students" (Mulally, 2009, p. 13). The emphasis on collaboration has contributed to the department's team-oriented culture. Keith Rhodes, GVSU's

current First-Year Writing Director also points to the importance of faculty expertise in determining the program's success:

> We have a highly involved former director and chair, a current chair who has been a former director, a director who has twelve years of experience at three different schools, a writing department whose faculty share a strong commitment to composition (and about a quarter of whom have a comp-rhet doctoral focus), and a core group of full-time, experienced instructors in all portfolio groups. (personal communication, June 2012)

Additionally, teaching in GVSU's freshman writing program educates faculty members on how to work with and contribute to programmatic goals rather than just personal teaching goals. This is due to the fact that instructors are able to play an active part in program development regardless of academic rank and because the writing program is continuously reviewed and shaped by an engaged, professional staff.

Establishing a Community of Teachers

Two of the original premises for becoming a separate academic unit were, first, that all faculty in the department housing the composition program should be interested and involved in the teaching of composition and, second, the creation of a sustainable community of teachers. The department's founders knew it would be difficult to build such a community when the staffing varied so much from semester to semester ("Writing Department Final Plan," personal communication, 2000, p. 4). In the past GVSU's Writing Department tended to hire faculty to teach both general-education and majors courses that were both lower-and upper-division in nature. Today, while tenure-track faculty often teach at least one first-year writing course every few years, much of their time is spent teaching in the major programs, guiding curriculum matters, developing courses, and generally running the department. As a new department in early 2001, the chair often turned to visitors and adjunct faculty to either fill in for tenured faculty on

leave, to cover gaps in the curriculum until tenure-track faculty could be hired, or on occasions when enrollments exceeded expectations.

Visitors, or composition fellows as they are often called, are three-year teaching apprenticeships for newly graduated writing teachers. Faculty members are defined as visitors because they are institutionally viewed as temporary fill-ins for tenure-track faculty. Visitors are typically qualified for tenure-track work, often the product of national searches, and they generally expect to make a career of teaching the full range of courses in a university curriculum ("Summary Explanation Affiliate Faculty," personal communication, 2002). The faculty recruited graduated from MFA programs and doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition. The department also used the visitor position as a sort of composition fellowship to further train newly graduated writing instructors.

Many of the adjuncts who taught composition in GVSU's English Department continued to do so in the newly formed writing department. However, like many other colleges and universities, GVSU had come to rely heavily upon adjunct faculty as much more than temporary replacements. Department members saw this as an opportunity to craft the teaching community they had envisioned early on. In coordination with the university's provost's office, GVSU's Writing Department created an affiliate faculty position in 2002 "to provide significantly more pay, along with health and retirement benefits, to those who can offer the extra commitment it takes to work with the tenure-track and visiting faculty to deliver the composition program on a full-time basis" ("Summary Explanation Affiliate Faculty," personal communication, 2002). Many of the long-term adjuncts who had taught first-year composition in the English Department became affiliates. Affiliate contracts run for three consecutive academic years and are renewable. Like tenured faculty, affiliates are expected to exclusively teach at GVSU through the duration of their contract. These professors are salaried, receive healthcare and retirement benefits, and

have their own office space. The approved job description specifies that affiliates will teach "a limited range of courses" partly to acknowledge that the department has certain courses that cannot reasonably be staffed by tenure-track faculty, and partly to distinguish the full-time work of tenure-track and visiting faculty from the full-time work of affiliate faculty in order to protect the tenure system ("Summary Explanation Affiliate Faculty," personal communication, 2002). Yet, affiliate faculty members have been known to teach courses in the writing major. Additionally, affiliate faculty members are not contractually required to produce scholarship or perform service on behalf of the university or the department. Affiliates may do so if they choose on a voluntary basis.

Affiliates typically only teach in the university's writing program and generally teach *WRT 098: Writing with a Purpose, Writing 150: Strategies in Writing*, and *Writing 305: Writing in the Disciplines.* Although affiliates with specialized training and/or professional experience have been known to teach within the major when needed. Current department chair Dan Royer notes: "this type of approach recognizes that having a stable, full-time teacher of composition that can be relied upon from year to year is good thing—for the university, department, teacher, and students" (personal communication, August 2012). When the position was originally fashioned the department hired fifteen then-adjuncts into the affiliate role. Of those original twenty affiliates, only four have left the department, which indicates the permanence of the position and that teachers enjoy working there. This change has led to consistent program delivery and instruction, a dedicated, professionalized teaching staff, collaborative scholarly exchanges between contingent and tenured faculty and improved student-instructor accessibility.

Writing 150 and the Portfolio Grading Process

The hub of GVSU's first-year writing program is Writing 150, the writing course required of all students at the university. The course was renamed WRT 150, from ENG 150,

after the Department of Writing was formed. According to the GVSU's Annual Class Schedule, the department typically administers and staffs 120 sections of WRT 150 during the academic year to nearly 3,500 students. Students self-select whether they will enroll in WRT 098 or WRT 150 using GVSU's Directed Self Placement process. In this four-credit course students spend nearly two hours per week in a traditional classroom and two hours per week in a computer lab setting. The department occasionally does allow for variations to the standard configuration. The writing is mostly rhetorically based and focuses on topics that would be interesting to a college-level audience.

Assignment genres range from narratives and analyses to persuasive research-based papers. According to Rhodes, "in opposition to merely narrative, descriptive, or simplistically argumentative [assignments] we [WRT 150 instructors] ask students to join a 'live' intellectual conversation with a focus on audience and purpose" (personal communication, June 2012). Students write three to five 1,000 to 3,000 word essays over the course of a semester, but in reality, the upper range is actually becoming much longer. However, students who write fewer than four or five essays generally compose additional exploratory works during the semester. All WRT 150 students write original versions that their professors expect substantial revisions on. The main goal of the course is ultimately to prepare students for the academic writing they will encounter in their university classes and future professions. The class introduces students to the academic community and the reading and writing they will be doing at GVSU. WRT 150 is grounded in the university's liberal arts mission and "built around the values of context, community, and reflection" (Mulally, 2009, p. 1). Based upon these values, GVSU's Department of Writing uses portfolio grading groups to assign end-of-semester grades in WRT 150 based on shared, published criteria. All instructors use this particular grading method when they teach the course and evaluate student writing.

The department values consistency across course sections, which is one reason the portfolio grading groups are used. However, instructors in the program are given the flexibility to teach WRT 150 using various pedagogical methods. Teachers have the autonomy to choose their own textbooks and readings for their individual WRT 150 courses. The portfolio grading groups also enable teachers to design their own coursework, including in-class assignments and exercises. According to *The GVSU Guide to First-Year Writing*, "Our over-riding course philosophy is that teachers control their course content and select the means to generate the best possible student portfolios" (Mulally, 2009, p. 13). For example, some professors select textbooks while others might choose a grammar handbook or perhaps no textbook at all. From an assignment perspective, one teacher might have his or her students write a narrative while another decides to assign a comparison/contrast paper. A different faculty member might come from an expressivist background while his or her colleague prefers a social constructionist approach to composition. The department only asks that whatever supplemental materials are used or pedagogical approach is taken that the instructor takes into account the departmental grading standards, policies and course goals. In order to strike a balance between this freedom and responsibility, GVSU's Department of Writing replaced the extremes of letting teachers do whatever they want with following guidance from the first-year writing director who enables teachers to take professional responsibility to the program and students. Rhodes contends, "By giving teachers true freedom–the kind that includes true responsibility–we develop an intellectual community in which all members develop genuine programmatic expertise" (personal communication, June 2012). Due to this approach, Rhodes reports that teachers feel personally responsible to members of their portfolio group and their students to create portfolios that produce the highest grades possible. Each instructor has to cautiously consider the connections among assignments, teaching, student expectations, student outcomes, and student

achievement. As a result, teachers in GVSU's first-year writing program naturally adjust to community expectations.

How the Portfolio Assessment Groups are Structured

After three years of successful experimentation, portfolio grading officially became a required part of Writing 150 in the late-1990s. The portfolio system was adapted from a Kansas State University model outlined by Smit, Kolonosky, and Seltzer (1991) in *Portfolios: Process and Product*. This collaborative grading approach was designed to encourage the development of community standards for letter grades and to allow students to select which papers should represent the bulk of their grade. Faculty members coach their students through the term as they draft and revise papers for possible inclusion in the portfolio. According to "The Process Guide for Portfolio Grading Groups" (personal communication, 1998), "the main function of the portfolio group is to provide a forum where a group of teachers can norm themselves as to their standards of A, B C, and D student writing" (para. 3). The grading criteria emphasize such categories as content and research, organization, style and mechanics. The rationale for grading in this manner is to guarantee consistency in grading across multiple sections, to ensure students who pass the class are achieving course goals, and to provide students with a real, academic audience beyond their own teacher or their classmates.

The GVSU Guide to First-Year Writing notes that, the portfolio system is set up to ensure that students receiving a C or better satisfy the standards of at least two writing professors and, by implication, as many as five or six WRT 150 faculty. The use of this type of collaborative grading helps establish a department-wide standard for assessing student writing (Mulally, 2009). Part of this stability is due to the fact that all composition instructors teaching WRT 150 are required to participate in a portfolio grading group. Despite the many benefits of the portfolio grading system, there are still some student complaints regarding having a teacher who is not

their course teacher grading their work, as well as, having the majority of their grade based off of three papers, and not based on the effort they put into writing those papers. There are also some faculty members who do not value the portfolio grading system and think it strips them of their authority as teachers. After a semester or two of participating in grade norming sessions most of those instructors' complaints diminish because faculty begin to see the value in the system. Royer notes, other teachers who do not see the value often choose to voluntarily leave the composition program because they prefer to grade individually rather than collaboratively.

The portfolio groups are formed at the beginning of each semester, and teachers normally work with different faculty members from semester to semester in order to become exposed to a range of views on academic writing. Each portfolio group is generally comprised of four to six instructors. In an average semester, there are four to six portfolio grading groups in operation. Whenever possible, the department tries to include at least one long-term affiliate faculty member in each group who possesses extensive portfolio group experience. The department does not have teachers meet in one big portfolio group because it "would be difficult for individuals to influence the norm and difficult to make concrete abstractions of the printed grading criteria" ("The Insider's FAQ," personal communication, 1998, p. 4). Teachers are basically being asked to make concrete judgments on what constitutes excellent, good, average, and poor writing in these groups. Breaking down the large task of grade norming to smaller groups appears to make the process much easier to manage and provides a reasonable possibility of reaching consensus over the course of the semester. To accommodate teaching schedules and to limit the size of these groups, the department automatically places instructors into individual groups each semester based on teaching schedules. Such changes "keep the groups fresh and new" ("The Insider's FAQ," personal communication, 1998, p. 1) so instructors feel challenged to reinterpret and extend their own understanding of the grading criteria. Mixing up groups every semester is

done to help prevent stagnation and to help teachers avoid the kind of group think and easy agreement that can occur when groups remain the same for too long.

The department wants to bring a variety of opinions together, and have teachers arrive at common grades working from there. Rhodes observed that when instructors collaborate together in a small group for one semester, they seem to naturally begin reaching similar assessment short-cuts like "the paper is too short" or "there are too many dangling modifiers." While these short cuts are acceptable, the department does not want them turning into artificial standards. Changing up the groups each semester "means that whatever set of shared expectations a group has developed have to be re-thought and re-negotiated each term–making each group more of a true audience. When we think we've arrived at things that really are true 'rules' that all should share, we revise the grading criteria to include them (K. Rhodes, personal communication, June 2012). As a result, teachers in the portfolio grading groups are constantly re-envisioning the standards and even the First-Year Writing Program from semester to semester.

The portfolio groups typically meet ten to twelve times over the course of a semester for about fifty minutes each week. Writing professors in these groups discuss student writing, teaching and the department's grading criteria. The meetings begin the third week of classes and the first one typically consists of sharing syllabi, describing paper assignments, and general teaching approaches being used in WRT 150. Some groups may even discuss a sample portfolio from a previous semester. Every teacher submits their students' work on a rotating basis from week to week. Instructors use copies of student papers as anchors for conversation. Teachers also utilize the portfolio meetings to negotiate with other group members about what assignments will work and what assignments might not work in their respective classrooms. Rhodes explains, "When examples are brought in for weekly discussion, two things happen. The teachers learn how to re-shape revisions to come closer to the standards, and the group learns how to re-shape

their expectations to bring papers like that within the standard" (personal communication, June 2012). Papers are normally distributed in hard copy or digital format with the student's permission at least two days before the next meeting. On average, most groups discuss three student compositions per session, each representing a different instructor.

GVSU'S Portfolio Norming Process

Each member of the group reads and assigns a grade to each student paper prior to the meeting. Teachers are asked to make concrete judgments on what constitutes excellent, good, average, and poor writing in these groups. Breaking down the large task of grade norming to smaller groups appears to make the process much easier to manage and provides a reasonable possibility of reaching consensus over a semester. It generally takes about fifteen minutes to discuss each essay for a total of fifty minutes. At the beginning of every session, each group member states the grade she or he assigned to the paper and provides a brief rationale for it. Once everyone has gotten a chance to speak, the group often engages in further discussion of the essay. Some common discussion questions include: *What was the paper's best and worst moments? What would need to happen to this paper in order for it to become a higher grade? Why is this paper a B? What keeps it from being higher or lower?* Groups also tend to touch upon what they've learned about one another, about teaching writing, and about WRT 150 grading. Afterwards, instructors share the outcome of these discussions with students in their classes so students better understand the portfolio group's expectations.

This norming process continues on until the end of the semester when the groups exchange portfolios for final grading. Each student submits a final portfolio in a manila file folder consisting of three pieces of writing from the course, including at least one paper integrating multiple outside sources. Each portfolio is read and graded by the teacher and by one reader from the group other than the student's own teacher. The final grades make up the bulk of

the student's letter grade in the course. Portfolios are graded simply as an A, B, C, or D. Brief comments are included only on D portfolios (Mulally, 2009). In addition to grading their own students' portfolios, each portfolio group member reads around the same number of other teachers' portfolios as he or she has students. Instructors give the portfolios a straight letter grade. Any grading disputes go to a third reader from the same portfolio group. Teachers may adjust the final grade with a plus or a minus, after evaluating student drafting, reading responses, participation, attendance, and so on.

There are some basic dynamics and attitudes that appear to make the portfolio grading groups run smoothly. Since the point of each session is to learn about other teacher's writing-related values, each person's voice "needs to be respected and integrated into our larger understanding of what it means to do academic writing" ("The Process Guide for Portfolio Grading Groups," personal communication, 1998, para. 3). Respect can be established within these groups when members listen and learn from one another. This generally means giving everyone a chance to have their voices heard during the meeting. The grade norming that occurs in the portfolio groups must be developed through inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. According to current department chair, Dan Royer, "The whole point of the portfolio grading process is not about giving up individual points of view, but coming to a common understanding as a collective group" (personal communication, July 2012). Rhodes asserts that the Department of Writing views differences of opinion as good because this keeps the discussions lively and challenges group members to rethink and/or develop their interpretations of the grading criteria (personal communication, July 2012). In observing three groups over an entire semester, it seems clear that this task can only be achieved through open-mindedness, negotiation, compromise, and dialogue. It appears to be through in-depth discussion of the grading criteria that each portfolio group is able to reach consensus or norm by the end of a semester.

Study Participants

GVSU's freshman writing instructors provided a rich pool of participants for my study due to the intra-group diversity of teachers working in the portfolio assessment groups. At the time the study was conducted, the department employed 50 faculty members (13 tenure-track, 17 affiliate, seven visitors and 13 adjuncts) and advised nearly 200 writing majors and/or minors. The undergraduate major in writing comprises two emphases: professional writing and creative writing, as well as a writing minor.

Selection Process

During the Fall 2008 department in-service, instructors who would be teaching Writing 150 during the Winter 2009 semester were informed about the upcoming research study. Once portfolio groups were established for the following semester, a request for study participants was sent via email. Responses were then reviewed to determine who would participate in the study. LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) purposeful sampling or criterion-based selection was utilized to select research subjects. Maxwell (1996) posits "this is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 70). This method allowed me to select individuals for my study who possessed many of the key characteristics that matched my research interests.

Each of the three groups selected had at least one veteran affiliate who had extensive experience teaching in the department's portfolio grading system. This was important because I wanted to observe how seasoned professors benefitted from the teacher talk compared to novice instructors. Likewise, groups were also chosen due to the newness of certain faculty members. For example, one of the three groups chosen had several new visiting professors and one new adjunct instructor who had only been in one portfolio group the previous semester. Including new visiting professors and a new adjunct in the study would allow me to see how novice

teachers in general benefitted from the collaborative nature of the groups. One particular group who had a large number of adjunct faculty members was chosen so I could study contingent instructor participation in the portfolio grading group. Finally, it was imperative to have a mix of faculty ranks (e.g., affiliate, visiting, and adjunct) as well as a range of specializations (e.g., rhet/comp, creative writing, business writing, literature, etc.) to represent the vast variety of teachers employed by the department to teach first-year writing.

From a pool of 23 instructors registered to teach Writing 150 during the Winter of 2009, 14 candidates were recruited for the study. Three different portfolio assessment groups, consisting of four to six instructors each, were selected. One of the first criteria in selecting instructors was to locate professors with a range of teaching experience (novice, mid-career and veteran). A second criterion was to have a mix of professorial ranks represented in the study from tenure-track professors to affiliate, visiting and adjunct instructors. It was also important to get a blend of teaching styles, specialties and training, and because I have participated in groups with some of my participants, I was privy to their varying teaching styles. In this regard being an insider aided my selection process. Chapter Four provides detailed descriptions of each portfolio assessment group and the individual members. Additionally, demographic information (e.g., age, gender, educational credentials, prior work experience, etc.) is highlighted in the next chapter as well.

I sought to obtain a sample that represented a typical portfolio grading group, which usually consists of a mixed group of teachers. The department creates the groups randomly so a good cross section of the various portfolio group types was necessary. Ultimately, the study attempted to reflect a variety of perspectives; therefore, participant selections were based on this diverse premise. It was also critical to have encultured informants, individuals who knew the culture well and made it their responsibility to explain what it means (Spradley, 1979). The

Writing Department generally includes one teacher in each portfolio grading group who has extensive, first-hand knowledge of GVSU's communally-based portfolio program. These experienced teachers served as encultured informants for my study.

Using an ethnographic design allowed me to study the learning that took place in the portfolio groups from a cultural context. Utilizing ethnographic research helped me produce a portrait of the portfolio groups from the perspective of its members. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) noted that ethnography "involves intimate, face-to-face interactions with participants" (p. 9) which was the focus of the study. It was imperative to have convenient and regular access to the research site because of the extensive engagement needed to closely observe the three different portfolio groups in their everyday setting and to conduct multiple, one-on-one interviews with the 14 portfolio group members.

Being an Insider

As stated earlier, I am a teacher at GVSU. Being an instructor in GVSU's freshman writing program gave me daily access to the research site, which enabled me to produce stories about events as they occurred in their natural environment and to become more intimately involved in the lives of study participants. In addition, the site was selected to accommodate the semester-long timeline. When time is a factor, researchers (Pelto & Gove, 1992; Scrimshaw & Gleason, 1992; Scrimshaw & Hurtado, 1985) have designed modifications of traditional ethnography that accommodated shorter timelines and/or multiple sites (as cited In LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Regarding this study, ethnography seemed possible because I was already familiar with the field setting and the cultural context of GVSU's first-year portfolio program. My insider status allowed me a more rapid and more complete acceptance by my participants. Teachers in the study were more open with so there was greater depth to the data gathered.

As a community member of GVSU's first-year writing program, I realize my potential bias as a researcher. Agee (2002) contends, "Being a native" presents problems similar to those of "going native" (p. 571). She argued, "Researchers who enter familiar settings, such as schools where they have been begin their work with layers of assumptions" (p. 571). Although my native status was very beneficial as it afforded me access, entry, and a common ground from which to begin the research, it did occasionally impede the research process. For instance, while conducting personal interviews some study participants failed to explain their individual experiences fully because they assumed I already knew the details since we shared similar roles. As a native researcher I had to be more conscious that my perceptions might be clouded by my personal experience and that as a member of the group. I sometimes had difficulty separating my experiences from that of the participants.

In order to reduce the potential effect my native status could have on the study, a peer debriefer was utilized. She made pointed observations and suggestions and posed devil's advocate questions throughout the process. Her role was generally consistent with that defined for a peer debriefer in the literature. The definitive purpose of peer debriefings is to supply a researcher with "an external check on the inquiry process" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). For example, my peer debriefer encouraged me to expand my data collection methods to include reflective teacher journals and to conduct interviews with past and present writing program administrators. These recommendations greatly enhanced the credibility of my study. In order to separate my role as teacher and researcher and to reduce my influence on the study, it was also important that none of the study participants were members of the portfolio grading group I belonged to during the Winter 2009 semester.

In many ways being a native also worked to my advantage. For example, I was able to gain access to the first-year portfolio program more easily than an outside researcher might have

due to my insider status. Also, in most cases, ethnographers typically live with or in the institutions or groups they are studying for extensive periods of time in order to become acquainted with the culture they are studying. As a writing teacher within the program I already had considerable rapport with and trust among study participants from the beginning of my research, so I was more knowledgeable about the groups I planned to study.

Gaining Access into the Research Site

Most educational research projects take place in institutional contexts, so designing access and entry requires careful analysis of the formal and informal structures of the organizations in which the research contexts are imbedded. Identification of gatekeepers who formally or informally control access to the study site was particularly important (Hatch, 2002). In the fall preceding my fieldwork I met individually with GVSU's Writing Department Chair and First-Year Composition Director to explain my research project. As writing administrators in charge of the program, I felt it was important to inform them about my study. Both were provided with a copy of the study proposal, which outlined what I would be doing as the researcher, when, and for how long.

In addition, I articulated what would be done with the data from the study and when they would have access to the study results. I clearly laid out the roles and responsibilities for myself as the primary researcher and those of the participants. Both administrators responded favorably to the dissertation proposal and granted access to the program for the purposes of the study. Shortly after that I applied for formal approval from GVSU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research project at the institution.

Ethical Protection of Study Participants

Before the study could be conducted, formal approval needed to be secured from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects from Indiana University

of Pennsylvania (IUP). IRB approval was obtained from GVSU in October 2008 and IRB approval was received from IUP in December 2008.

During the first week that all portfolio groups met, I attended the meetings of the three groups I planned to study and explained the research project in more detail and distributed consent forms for each participant to fill out. The forms assured me that the professors gave their fully informed and voluntary consent to participate in the study. In addition, to further protect the research participants, the use of pseudonyms was employed to protect the identities of the teachers involved in the study. The subjects were also informed that they had the option to remove themselves from the study at any point in time. All participants were also offered the opportunity to participate in the process of member checking. Member checking or informant feedback is a technique enables researchers to create detailed and reasonably correct procedures and a summary of the final results of the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such an approach helped ensure that information was reported as accurately as possible.

Methods of Data Collection

As a researcher I valued the importance of clarifying what data l was seeking from the research context being studied and what strategies I needed to employ to secure that data. Using an ethnographic approach during data collection facilitated a detailed exploration of group activity. Employing multiple methodologies (i.e., observation, journals, fieldwork, field notes, interviews and cultural artifacts) helped me work towards a theoretically comprehensive understanding of portfolio group culture. Ethnographies usually include an extensive description of the details of social life or cultural phenomena in a small number of cases. For this study, data was gathered on GVSU's first-year writing portfolio program by observing weekly portfolio meetings of three separate groups, conducting interviews with individual faculty participants and studying program documents and teacher reflection journals.

I served as an observer in the portfolio grading groups. During fieldwork, regular field notes were taken, audio recordings were made, and teaching artifacts (e.g., syllabi, journals, assignments, grading rubrics, textbooks, handouts, etc.) were collected and analyzed. Interviews were conducted with portfolio grading group participants and institutional artifacts (e.g., web site, mission statement, etc.) were examined. In doing fieldwork, Spradley (1979), acknowledged, "ethnographers make cultural inferences from three sources: (1) from what people say; (2) from the way people act; and (3) from the artifacts people use" (p. 8). Each of these data sources is discussed in the sections that follow.

Transcripts from the audio recordings of the group observations, reflective journals and individual participant interviews were also transcribed and coded. These transcripts expanded my analysis beyond field notes and observation, which allowed me to study the themes that emerged from multiple points of view. Data analysis consisted of recognizing patterns and relationships that emerged from the fieldwork and teacher artifacts. It is crucial in ethnographic research to build redundancy in data collection methods through triangulation of multiple sources of data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The use of multiple data collection methods ensured that each research question posed could be answered by more than one data source.

Group Observations

In order to answer research questions and gather research materials, ethnographers, sometimes called fieldworkers, often live among the people they are studying, or at least spend a considerable amount of time with them. Malinowski (1922) suggested that an ethnographer's goal should be to grasp the "native's point of view" and participant observation "would lead to human understanding through a field-workers' learning to see, think, feel, and sometimes even behave as an insider or native" (as cited in Cheek, 2003, p. 74). The purpose for using observation as a data collection tool was to record situations within the portfolio grading groups

as they occurred in their natural, everyday state. Spradley (1979) noted ethnographers often "use participant observation as a strategy for both listening to the people and watching them in natural settings" (p. 32). The goal of my observations was to document the activities, setting, participation structures, behaviors of individual teachers and the conversations and interactions that transpired in the groups on a weekly basis over the course of an academic semester.

Each of the three portfolio groups' 50 minute, weekly meetings were electronically recorded. I recorded 10 norming sessions per group for a total of over 30 hours of audio. The audio recordings were then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, which took an additional 90 hours. The number of transcribed transcript pages per meeting ranged from a low of 13 to a high of 26 pages. For example, Portfolio Group One had 10 meetings and ended up accumulating 138 total pages of transcription. I read through each of the transcripts one time, and then the second time I began to code the data from the audio recordings. Reviewing and coding the group meeting transcripts for themes took approximately 20 hours.

Observational notes were also recorded on behavior, which might be significant to my analysis. The data gathered during one visit in the field helped me learn what to watch for, notice, or ask during the next visit. As the fieldwork continued, ideas regarding what might be happening at the site were refined. At this level, ongoing data collection helped the fieldwork gain momentum. As an observer, my field observations and field notes assisted me in depicting the physical settings, acts, activities, interaction patterns, meanings, beliefs and emotions related to being a member of one of these portfolio assessment groups. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) suggested that field notes are a distinctive technique "for capturing and preserving the insights and understandings stimulated by the close and long-term experiences" (p. 10). Being intimately immersed in the world of the portfolio assessment groups allowed me to provide a detailed, context specific description of the culture I was observing firsthand. Nearly 40 pages of field

notes were taken during the semester the study was conducted. These field notes were reviewed each week and the data collected from these observations were coded at the end of the study and compared to the reflective journal entries and the audio recordings.

Participant Interviews

Ethnographers supplement what they learn through observation by interviewing people who can help them better understand the setting or group they are researching. While observation lends information about behavior in action, interviews provide a chance to learn how individuals reflect directly on behavior, circumstances, identity, events, and other issues. Because I was conducting qualitative interviews, I had a greater interest in the interviewee's point of view. This can be very valuable in fulfilling the main goal of ethnography: gaining an insider's perspective (Briggs, 1984). The 14 personal interviews conducted for the study were grounded in what was occurring in the local context and were undertaken to gain more insider information about what was being observed and to test the developing theory that I, as the researcher, was constructing. Each interview was tape recorded with the informant's consent to secure an exact account of what was said. While interviewing, I listened intently to my participants and took detailed notes. However, because I was also thinking of my next question or the direction I wanted the interview to go I used the notes to remind myself what comments to follow up on for clarification. Heritage (1984) outlined several advantages to recording and transcribing qualitative interviews. He noted, "it helps correct the natural limitations of memories and of the intuitive glosses that we might place on what people say in interviews; it allows more thorough examination of what people say; it permits repeated examinations of the interviewees' answers" (p. 238). Taping the interviews permitted the transcription of the interviews for closer inspection at a later date.

Over 14 hours of audio was electronically recorded during the personal interviews. After each interview, I immediately listened to the audio recording, which allowed me to really hear

what the interviewees were saying. This approach permitted me to focus more of my attention on establishing a rapport and taking in the nonverbal cues of my interviewees during the actual interview. Each audio recording was listened to twice, which amounted to over thirty hours of work. The audio recordings of the personal interviews were then transcribed by a transcriber, which took nearly 50 hours. The final transcripts of all of the personal interviews ended up being 85 single-spaced pages. These transcripts were then coded, which is explained in more detail later in the chapter.

The interviews with the portfolio grading group members took the form of conversations with different levels of formality and ranged from small talk to long interviews. I initially planned to interview my participants at various points during my ethnographic research. However, I found that using weekly reflective journals made this step unnecessary because I was collecting in-depth reflections from participants the entire duration of the study. Therefore, I interviewed each study participant at the beginning of the semester. Through these personal, one-on-one interviews, I collected in-depth information on each teacher, their personal teaching histories, their cultural knowledge and beliefs about teaching within a portfolio-based program, and a description of their individual teaching pedagogies. If additional information or further clarification was needed, follow-up contact was made via email or in person.

During the ethnographic interviews I employed both descriptive and structured questions. These descriptive questions were broad and general and allowed my participants to describe their experiences, their daily activities, and objects and people in their lives. These descriptions provided me with a general idea of how these individual teachers see their world. Structured questions were used to explore responses to descriptive questions. For example, all study participants were asked questions such as: “Do you provide assistance to colleagues on teaching matters? If so, in what ways?” and “How would you describe your relationship with other

teachers in the portfolio grading groups?" These questions helped me to understand how the teachers organized some of their pedagogical knowledge. A list of additional interview questions is included in Appendix A.

Reflective Teacher Journals

While GVSU's Department of Writing had anecdotal evidence that faculty members in the portfolio grading groups learn from each other and talk about teaching practices, it has not specifically documented how this communal activity contributes to the development of teachers and their pedagogy. Allowing WRT 150 teachers to personally reflect on their own experiences in the portfolio assessment groups through reflective journaling and an ethnographic lens seemed to be a good way to better understand how instructors in these groups learned from one another and how participation in these groups contributed to their development as teachers. Rowls and Swick (2000) "reported the effects of reflective journal writing on teacher development as providing new developmental information to the teachers participating in their study" (as cited in Uline, Wilson, & Cordry, 2004, para. 3). In another study, Doyle (1997) found by reflecting on their experiences, teachers were able to "think about their attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions . . . to promote self-evaluation and change" (p. 519). For my project I received a $2,400 GVSU Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center Teacher Development Grant to study this reflection and teacher development at work. The 14 teachers in the study were asked to spend half an hour each week completing a reflective journal over the course of the semester, which averaged about 7 total hours per person. Most of the teachers' journals, which were typed up, averaged anywhere from 500 to 1,000 words were entry. I collected 14 journal entries per teacher, which totaled nearly 60 pages. Upon completion of the reflective journaling, each instructor received a $200 stipend they could use towards a professional development activity such as a journal subscription, conference fee, workshop, etc. It took an hour per week to read and review the

journals for a total of about 14 hours of work. Those journal entries were then coded, which equaled out to 10 hours of work for me.

Document Analysis

As part of this study, I collected a range of documents, from teaching materials such as course syllabi and assignment packets to the departments' mission statement, website, faculty handbook, departmental textbook and internal memos. These documents provided me with additional insight and valuable information regarding my study. Documents, such as the syllabi produced by teachers in my field site, also helped me learn how portfolio grading group members expressed themselves to either insiders or outsiders. Posing questions such as those found below assisted me in gleaning crucial information and looking at the documents in new ways.

- What is written about and how?
- Why would this document be produced?
- Who will read or use the document, and how?
- What isn't included that could be?
- What does the document tell you, either directly or indirectly, about your guiding question?

Analyzing and coding internal documents created by the department, which took about five hours, also helped me place the teachers in the portfolio assessment groups I studied within a wider institutional context. For example, according to the departmental mission statement, GVSU's first-year writing program is built around the values of context and community, so I know that these ideals are valued by the department in which teachers in my study teach. I also had access to documentation of historical events such as the writing department's separation from the English department and when the portfolio grading system was adopted by the first-year

composition program. These documents gave me a historical perspective on how the department has evolved and changed over the years and provided another important source of data. Some of the documents collected and analyzed included:

- "The Insider's FAQ" (internal memo)
- Gilles, R. (1996). "An Experiment in Grading"
- *A Guide to Teaching WRT 150 at Grand Valley State University*
- "The Process Guide for Portfolio Grading Groups" (internal memo)
- "Summary Explanation Affiliate Faculty" (internal memo)
- Royer, D., & Gilles, R. (2002). "The Origins of the Department of Academic, Creative, and Professional Writing at Grand Valley State University"
- "Writing Department Final Plan" (internal memo)
- The Writing Department's mission statement

Transcription and Coding of Data

Oliver, Serovich, and Mason (2005) asserted "that transcription can powerfully affect the ways participants are understood, the information they share, and the conclusions drawn in research studies" (p. 1273). Therefore, after each interview I reviewed the tape recordings of the portfolio grading group meeting conversations and the personal interviews. Verbatim transcripts were created for both pieces of research material. I coded the transcripts to better understand and keep track of the research data being collected. This data was closely examined for pertinent information that could help answer the research questions posed. Coding enabled me to focus and track certain kinds of information, leaving out what was not relevant to the current research questions for a later time. This careful inspection of the transcripts was used as an additional way of uncovering layers of meaning in what informants said.

According to Spradley (1979), "ethnographers both examine small details of culture and at the same time seek to chart the broader features of the cultural landscape" (p. 185). Analysis of the personal interview transcripts and the group meetings helped me pinpoint local categories of meaning or themes within the data and locate trends and patterns that occurred across the various portfolio groups or within the individual teachers. Krueger (1994) viewed the process of analysis and interpretation as disciplined examinations, creative insights, and careful attention to the purposes of the research study. The data analysis began by assembling the raw research material and getting an overview or total picture of the entire process. As explicated in Chapter Three, each form of data (i.e., personal interview audio, teacher journals, portfolio meeting audio, field notes, and faculty, student and department documents) were each read a minimum of one time prior to the commencement of coding. The second time I read through the respective data, I began exploring it for emerging ideas and categories and noted related passages of text with a code label, so I could simply return to it at a later stage for further comparison and analysis. For example, when coding the reflective journal entries I noted teacher participants were frequently commenting on the benefits portfolio groups, so I generically coded these comments as Benefits (B). This category was then broken down even more specifically into Student Benefits (SB), Department Benefits (DB), University Benefits (UB), and Instructor Benefits (IB). Then each category was broken down into even finer detail, so categories like IB were refined to categories like personal (IPER) and professional benefits (IPRO) The third time I coded more specifically, moving from emerging ideas like Instructor Benefits to identify other codes that emerged, such as isolation (I), public teaching (PT), changes in pedagogy (CP), etc . After completing this coding process on all of my data sources, I was able to conduct further comparisons and analyses to come up with key themes that emerged as the study's findings.

My primary role during this stage was bringing order to the data, organizing what was present into patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units. The analysis process involved consideration of words, tone, context, non-verbals, internal consistency, frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity of responses and ideas. The interpretation phase included attaching meaning and significance to the analysis, explaining descriptive patterns, and looking for relationships and linkages among descriptive dimensions. Once these processes were completed I reported my interpretations and conclusions in the form of my last two chapters.

Audit Trail

In order to demonstrate the study's trustworthiness I conducted a "confirmability audit, a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings" (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319). In addition to describing the data, all research materials were archived to chronicle what was done in the course of my ethnographic study of teachers in portfolio grading groups using Halpern's (1983) categories for reporting information when developing an audit trail:

- **Raw data** – including all raw data, written field notes, unobtrusive measures (documents)
- **Data reduction and analysis products** – including summaries such as condensed notes, unitized information and quantitative summaries and theoretical notes
- **Data reconstruction and synthesis products** – including structure of categories (themes, definitions, and relationships), findings and conclusions and a final report including connections to existing literatures and an integration of concepts, relationships, and interpretations

- **Process notes** – including methodological notes (procedures, designs, strategies, rationales), trustworthiness notes (relating to credibility, dependability and confirmability) and audit trail notes
- **Materials relating to intentions and dispositions** – including inquiry proposal, personal notes (reflexive notes and motivations) and expectations (predictions and intentions)
- **Instrument development information** – including pilot forms, preliminary schedules, and observation formats (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 319-320)**.**

An audit trail was used to provide a transparent description of the research steps I took from the start of my research study to the development and reporting of my findings. Such data are important in many aspects of the study, particularly in helping me further substantiate myself as a trustworthy researcher.

Presentation of Results

The study employed three traditional types of ethnographic data collection: interviews, observation, and documents which produced three kinds of data: quotations, descriptions, and excerpts of documents which were blended together to create one product: a narrative description. By studying portfolio grading groups as learning communities, I hoped to realistically capture how writing faculty in a first-year, portfolio-based writing program develop professionally and personally through conversation with other teachers. Writing rich descriptions of the talk that occurred in the portfolio assessment groups helped me make visible the day-to-day events, norms and practices of teaching and learning in a portfolio assessment group and provided new insights into the ways that writing teachers construct their world inside and outside of the classroom.

Chapter IV

ANALYSIS

Introduction to Study Participants

Chapter Four provides descriptive portraits of each portfolio grading group, the individual members, and their perceptions of how their assessment groups function as faculty learning communities in GVSU's Department of Writing and First-Year Writing program. This chapter provides background on the study participants by analyzing their demographic details. This is followed by findings and analysis of data, and the summary. Because this study included participants with varying backgrounds, expertise, and experience, it was important to provide certain demographic information (i.e., age, gender, job title, credentials, and portfolio assessment experience). I will be using quotes throughout the chapter from journal reflections, personal interviews, audio recordings, and personal observations. Table 1 below explicates participant demographic data for easy reference throughout the chapter.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Portfolio Experience Group/Semester or Years	**Name**	**Age**	**Gender**	**Job Title**	**Education**
1 group=1 semester	Adam	30s	Male	Visiting Professor	Master of Fine Arts
1 group=1 semester	Helen	60s	Female	Adjunct Professor	Master of Fine Arts
1 group=1 semester	Karen	20s	Female	Visiting Professor	Master of Fine Arts
1 group=1 semester	Sierra	20s	Female	Visiting Professor	Master of Fine Arts
4 groups=2 years	Phillip	40s	Male	Adjunct Professor	Ph.D.
6 groups=3 years	Susan	30s	Female	Visiting Professor	Master of Fine Arts
12 groups=6 years	Bethany	40s	Female	Affiliate Professor	Master's Degree
12 groups=6 years	Cynthia	40s	Female	Affiliate Professor	Ph.D.
14 groups=7 years	Felicity	60s	Female	Affiliate Professor	Ph.D.
17 groups=8 years	Michelle	60s	Female	Affiliate Professor	Master's Degree
18 groups=9 years	Clare	50s	Female	Affiliate Professor	Ph.D.
18 groups=9 years	Hank	40s	Male	Affiliate Professor	Ph.D. Candidate
22 groups=11 years	Mike	40s	Male	Adjunct Professor	Master's Coursework
30 groups=15 years	Scott	50s	Male	Affiliate Professor	Ph.D.

Age and Gender

The portfolio grading group members represented in the study ranged in age from mid-twenties to early sixties. Specific ages were not included to protect the identities of study participants. As shown in Figure 1, the age makeup of study participants consisted of the following: two professors in their twenties (14%) followed by three professors in their thirties (21%), five professors in their forties (36%), two in their fifties (14%), and three in their sixties (21%). In terms of gender composition, five of the 14 research subjects were male (36%) while nine (64%) were female. When it comes to gender and age comparisons, 20% of participants were males in their thirties, 60% were males in their forties and 20% were males in their fifties. Eleven percent of research subjects were females in their twenties, 22% were females in their thirties, 22% were females in their forties, 11% were females in their fifties, and 33% were females in their sixties. The majority of males in the study were in their forties while the majority of females in the study were in their sixties.

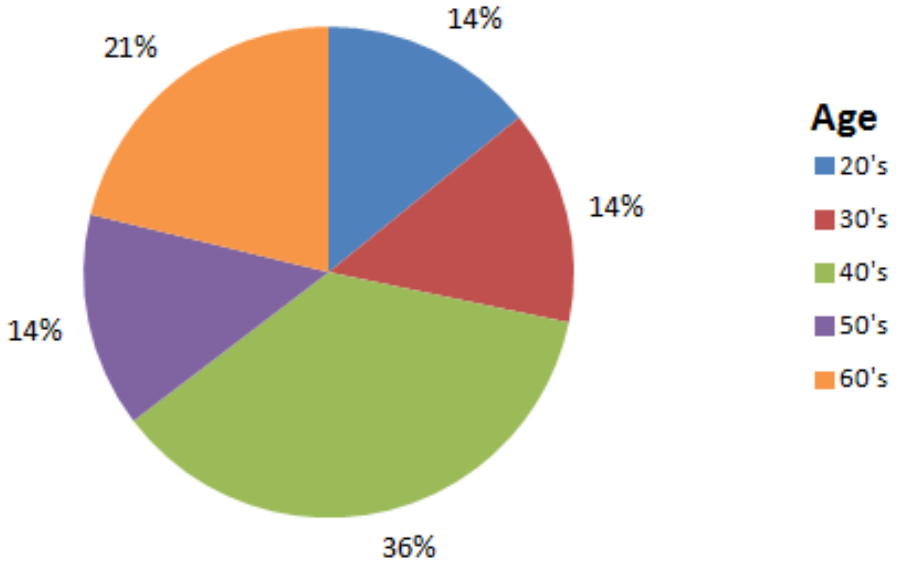

Figure 1. Age of participants. This figure illustrates the age ranges of study participants.

From a job position and gender standpoint, three of the visiting professors were female and one was male. Of the three adjunct faculty members, two were male and one was female. Two of the affiliate professors in the study were male while the other five were female. That means 11% of study participants were female adjuncts, 56% were female affiliates, and 33% were female visiting professors. As demonstrated by Figure 2 below, 40% of the teachers were male adjuncts, 40% were male affiliates, and 20% were visiting male professors. In comparing gender and number of years on the job, it was determined that female instructors were employed in GVSU's Department of Writing an average of five years while male instructors were employed for an average of eight years.

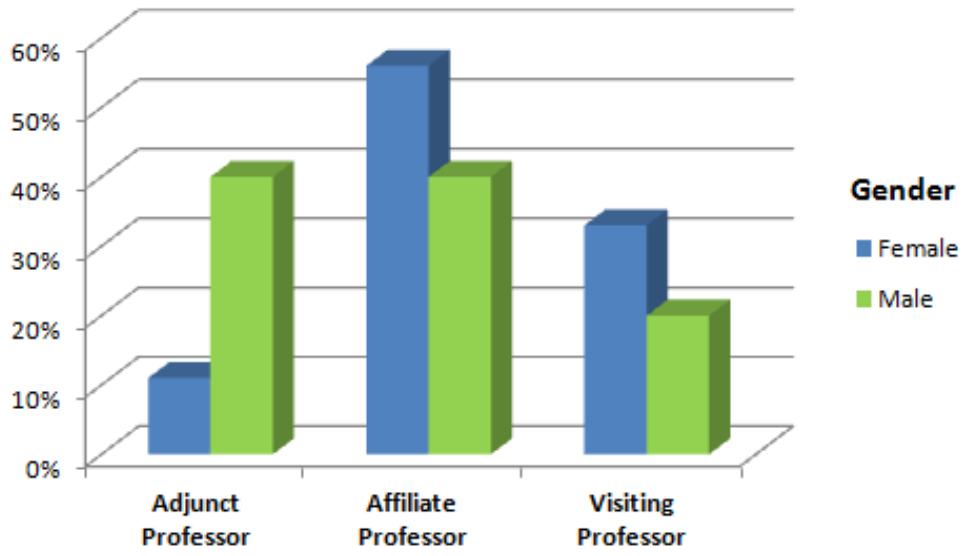

Figure 2. Gender and job titles of participants. This figure illustrates the gender composition and job titles of study participants.

Teaching and Portfolio Grading Group Experience

According to Figure 3, 21% of the teachers were adjuncts, 50% were affiliates, and 29% were visiting professors. Therefore, the majority of study participants were affiliate instructors. The large number of affiliates participating in the study was not surprising since this category of faculty members teach nearly 100% of the sections of WRT 150 offered each year. For instance,

during the semester this study was conducted, affiliates taught 20 of the 30 existing sections of WRT 150. Due to their experience teaching WRT 150 over a significant number of years, the Writing Department tends to assign at least one affiliate faculty member to each portfolio assessment group and affiliates average experience is nine years with a minimum of six and a maximum of fifteen years. As detailed in an earlier chapter, affiliate professors primarily teach in the first-year writing program and are given renewable three-year contracts. Unlike adjunct professors, affiliates earn significantly more pay and receive health and retirement benefits. Visiting professors are given three-year non-renewable contracts and teach courses in the composition program and in the writing major and minor. Visiting instructors receive a similar salary and benefits package as affiliate instructors do. Adjunct professors, on the other hand, receive temporary contacts from semester to semester for less pay and no benefits. These faculty members are typically hired to teach first-year writing courses or general writing courses.

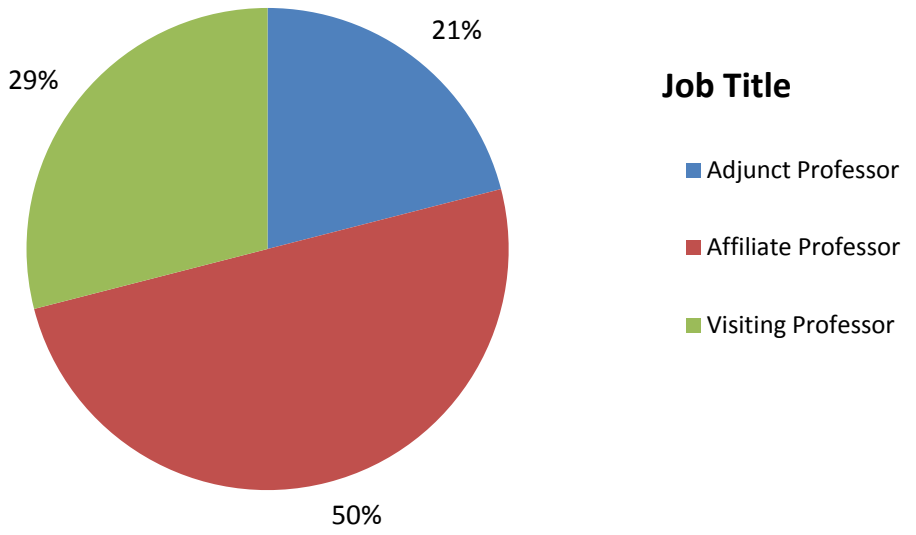

Figure 3. Job titles of participants. This figure illustrates the numerical breakdown of study participants by job title.

Affiliate Professors

Four of the seven affiliate instructors had also previously worked in the department as adjuncts before the new affiliate faculty category was officially approved in 2002. One affiliate was employed as an adjunct for eight years, two others were adjunct faculty for a period of two years, and another affiliate had worked as an adjunct for one year prior in the department. These figures demonstrate the long-term presence of affiliates in the first-year writing program, and more specifically in the portfolio grading system. Additionally, affiliates participated in more portfolio assessment groups than any other group (e.g., adjunct and visiting professors) represented in the study. The average affiliate participation rate is seventeen portfolio groups with a maximum of thirty and a minimum of twelve groups. Dan Royer, current department chair, commented on the value the department sees in employing long-term affiliates:

> The portfolio grading groups function at the heart of our program—it's here that the values of our program are made manifest in the conversations and consequences of our grading. These values are learned over a long period of time—several semesters at least—and the full-time affiliate position has enabled us to have stability and common understanding in our program. We simply couldn't run a coherent program without this position. (personal communication, July 2012)

These statistics are also important to note because affiliate professors have the most experience teaching in the portfolio grading system and serving as members of portfolio grading groups than any other category of faculty in this study or the department itself. Their wide-ranging experience teaching in the portfolio program has provided affiliate instructors with extensive knowledge of the portfolio grading system and how to effectively negotiate the system as teachers. Phillip, an adjunct who had recently returned to GVSU after not teaching in the Writing Department for nearly six years, was surprised at the number of original affiliate professors who

had remained since he left in 2002. He wrote in one of his reflective journals: "I think one of the reasons why so many [affiliate] professors continue teaching at Grand Valley are the relationships developed from working in the portfolio grading groups." Many instructors believe that without the affiliate position, the department would hardly have a first-year writing program. Royer further noted, "Adjunct faculty just don't have the long-term commitment to the program that affiliates have, and they don't have the memory of the department's values since they come and go so much" (personal communication, July 2012). Affiliate faculty members rarely leave, enabling the department to have a predictable set of practices from one semester to the next.

Visiting Professors

Of the 14 study participants, four were visiting professors appointed to three-year contracts in GVSU's Department of Writing. At the time the study was conducted, three of the visitors were in the second semester of their first-year teaching appointments at GVSU. One of the visiting professors was in the last semester of her three-year visitorship. Based on these study statistics, visiting faculty members were on the job for one year or less. These visiting professors were not only teaching *WRT 150: Strategies in Writing*, but also *WRT 219: Introduction to Creative Writing*, and *WRT 350: Business Communication*. On average, visiting professors had participated in two portfolio grading groups with a minimum of one and a maximum of six groups. Visiting instructors had partaken in fewer portfolio groups than any other faculty group represented in the study. Their presence in this research study was important because it allowed me to observe how newcomers negotiated these portfolio grading groups. In addition, I was able to see how veteran instructors related to the new visiting professors and document if seasoned instructors actually learned or were open to learning from teachers who had less portfolio grading group experience. Relative newcomer participation also provided a lens to view how

these teachers used the portfolio assessment groups as a way to acclimate themselves to the first-year writing program and the department at large.

Adjunct Professors

Adjuncts were on the job for an average of five years. Three of the instructors in the study were adjunct faculty who had worked in the department for eleven years, two years, and one semester respectively. Adjunct professors at GVSU are often hired for a single semester to expand course offerings or to meet student demand for a program which does not have enough staff. At the time of the study, the Writing Department employed a total of ten other adjuncts. The adjunct study participants were teaching WRT 150 as well as WRT 305 and WRT 219. One of the adjunct professors was also working as a technical writer while the other was teaching courses in another department on campus. Adjuncts are typically paid by the credit hour, and their teaching loads vary from semester to semester. Many adjunct faculty members in the Writing Department teach at multiple two-year and four-year institutions. However, this was not the case for the participants in this particular study. Adjuncts averaged nine portfolio assessment groups with a minimum of one group and a maximum of 22 groups. Adjunct instructors were in the middle of other groups represented in terms of the number of portfolio grading groups participated in. No tenure-track faculty members were teaching WRT 150 during the Winter 2009 semester, so none are represented in the study. The study was conducted over the winter term, and tenure track professors typically only teach WRT 150 in the fall semester. The affiliate experience helps make up for the fact that there are no tenure track professors in the study since several of the affiliates hold doctoral degrees and are highly experienced teachers.

Educational and Professional Credentials

Curriculum vitas were collected from all study participants to determine their educational and professional credentials. The majority possess undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral-level

degrees in the areas of English, Education, Journalism, Communications, Literature and Creative Writing. In terms of highest level of education attained, Figure 4 indicates the highest educational degree obtained by study participants. Three of the visiting professors hold Master of Fine Arts degrees in Creative Nonfiction and Creative Writing, while one holds a Ph.D. in English with a Creative Writing emphasis. All four of the visiting professors had completed their degrees in the last four years prior to the study. Four of the seven affiliates have Ph.D.s and another is a doctoral candidate in a rhetoric and composition program. Their degree concentrations include British Literature, Creative Writing, Comparative Literature and Rhetoric/Composition. The other affiliate instructors have master's degrees in Education and English Education. With the exception of one affiliate faculty member, those professors possessing Ph.D.s obtained their degrees in the last 15 years. The other two affiliates have held master's degrees for a minimum of 20 years. One of the adjuncts has a Ph.D. in Education, another has a Master of Fine Arts, and the last instructor had taken coursework in a master's level writing program.

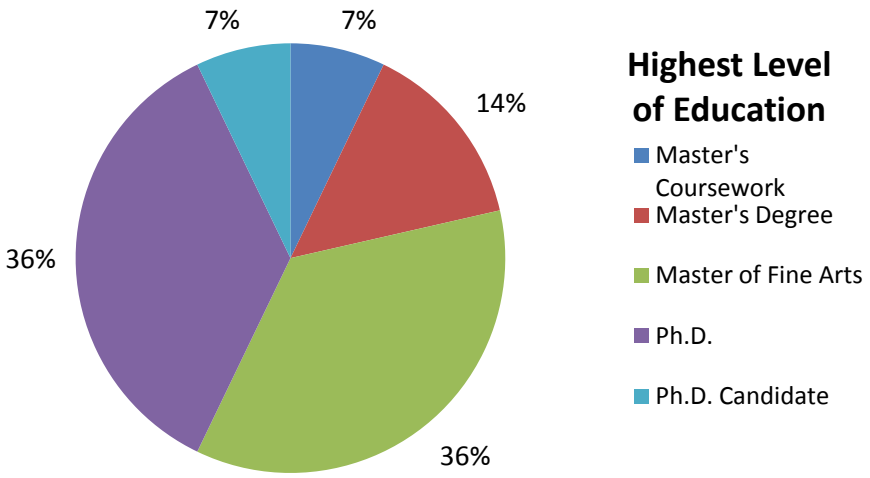

Figure 4. Educational credentials of participants. This figure illustrates the highest level of education attained by study participants.

Instructors in GVSU's Writing Department are typically required to have a minimum of a master's degree in a writing-related field to be eligible to teach in the First-Year Writing program. However, because the adjunct professor without a master's degree had worked extensively as a professional technical writer, he was permitted to teach in the program. This situation is rare, however. Many of the instructors in the study had also been employed as writers, editors, copywriters, journalists, and marketing executives prior to teaching in the department. For example, Philip, an adjunct instructor described how the composition chair hired him after looking at his background: "He understood that I had never taught before, but he thought my writing experience—writing for newspapers, especially writing feature stories would work well in teaching WRT 150." In addition to valuing teaching experiences, the Department of Writing appears to value teachers with workplace writing experience and the specialized expertise these professors can offer their students. As Figure 5 below highlights, many professors in the study previously worked as professional writers, editors, high school teachers, adjuncts at other colleges, tutors, and graduate teaching assistants prior to teaching composition at GVSU.

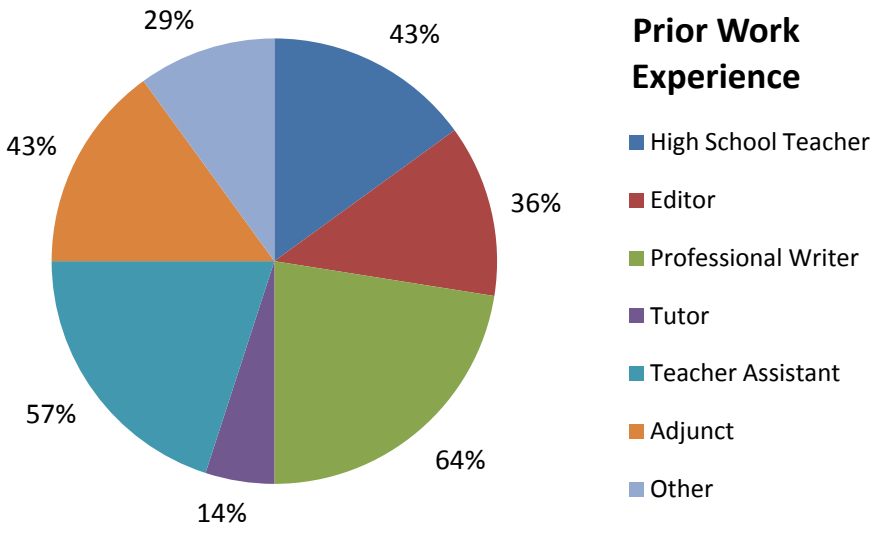

Figure 5. Prior work experience of participants. This figure illustrates the types of jobs study participants were employed in prior to teaching first-year writing at GVSU.

On Becoming Writing Teachers

Professors in the study began teaching college composition for a variety of reasons. Some teachers migrated to the job after teaching high school English and desiring the chance to teach at the university level. For example, affiliate Clare noted:

> What I liked least about teaching high school was the drama. It kept me awake at night, so I thought about going back to college. I started going back to school at first because I loved literature. I wanted to read and I loved writing [sic] so the reading and writing fit well together. The more I thought about what I wanted to do, I decided I would much rather teach college than I would teach high school. I love teaching, but I wanted to do it at the college level.

Others experienced a lack of literature teaching jobs upon graduation and found more employment opportunities teaching writing. Felicity, an affiliate, explained, "I became a writing teacher even though I had my masters in Comparative Literature. When I got out of graduate school a majority of the jobs were in writing." Another affiliate had a similar experience after finishing her Ph.D. and going on the job market: "I was still looking nationally for literature jobs, but there were so many more writing jobs available that I just stayed in that field." Some gravitated toward composition because they wanted to share with their students the writing expertise they learned on the job as editors and writers. Hank, another affiliate in the study "fell into" teaching composition after working abroad for a number of years as an English teacher. His undergraduate and graduate degrees in English influenced him to apply for teaching jobs at several local colleges. Helen, an adjunct, found herself in a similar situation having just returned home from living abroad and having no job. A friend informed her about an opening at a local community college, and she decided to give it a try. Helen enjoyed it so much that she decided to continue her education in that direction. Many found a passion for teaching writing during their

graduate-and-doctoral level teaching assistantships. Visiting professor Karen admitted, "I loved it, so I decided I wanted to be a teacher." Others wanted a career that would allow them to not only teach, but write as well. For instance, Susan, another visiting instructor commented that this type of job "allows me to write and teach at the same time." This section highlights the diverse range of paths study participants followed to become first-year writing teachers.

Learning How to Teach Writing

The majority of teachers in the study told me in the personal interviews that learning how to teach writing was a major challenge that they either faced alone or had to turn to other resources for support. The methods these teachers employed in learning how to teach first-year composition are discussed in the following section.

Modeling. When asked how they learned how to teach, study participants had very similar answers. Many noted being influenced by excellent teachers they had in the past. Bethany, an affiliate professor reflected, "I think I learned to teach through some really excellent teachers. I can think of like three people that I just had on a pedestal, as far as their pedagogical style, their philosophy of education and teaching, and I think I try and emulate and follow their models. They were just wonderful and inspired me, and I think that it is best…to lead by example." During personal interviews, several of the research subjects admitted using previous instructors as models for the type of teacher they aspired to be. Susan, a visiting professor learned to teach "by watching other people teach and how my teachers taught." Mike, an adjunct, credited composition mentors like Cynthia Selfe, Marilyn Cooper, and Billy Walstrom for giving him advice on how to teach. Modeling directly influenced nearly 85% of participants in learning how to teach first-year writing.

TA education. Professors who had been teaching assistants at the master and doctoral level stated that they received some teaching basics via graduate classes and department

workshops. Karen, a visiting instructor, had an initial two-week summer workshop and weekly workshops her first semester teaching. She remembered the workshops were "very hands on [and she] could always talk with people who were second or third years who had successful teaching background." Adjunct instructor Mike did not participate in a regular course, but recalled having "little seminars where we learned the basics." Another visiting professor, Sierra, went through a two-day intensive boot camp style composition workshop prepping for courses and talking about teaching and grading. Visiting instructor Susan participated in a teaching lab at the master's level but received no formalized teacher training at the doctoral level. She recalled, "The program felt that I already had that." Affiliate instructor Michelle met with a TA group every week, but also had a tenured instructor in the department observe her teaching. "I learned a great deal from him," she reflected. The majority of instructors in the study remarked that talking with other teachers was instrumental in helping them learn the fundamentals of teaching college-level writing.

Lack of effective preparation. While professors in the study did acknowledge they had received some form of "training" during their graduate coursework, quite a few described these encounters as "crash courses" or rushed forays into the world of teaching. Some, like Cynthia, were merely told, "Here is the *St. Martin's Guide* and a list of assignment sheets. Follow this every week." Scott, an affiliate, does not remember even receiving any teacher training at the master's level. "We would have faculty members discuss different works of literature we would be doing in our freshmen literature/ writing class. They had one discussion, a meeting before the school year began when we looked at a few essays and talked about grading them, but it wasn't really what I would call training," he explained. These abbreviated workshops often caused study participants anxiety due to the constant nagging fear that they did not know as much as they should as teachers. Affiliate Felicity who first taught writing in high school "discovered people

were not taught how to teach writing, so I worked very hard at how to teach writing on my own by being thrown into the classroom." Adam, another visitor, reminisced about the two classes that taught him how to teach. "They were probably the worst classes I ever took in my life," he lamented. He ultimately learned how to teach while working with at-risk youth. "I learned how to improvise, how to keep people's attention, prepare lesson plans, and keep it exciting," he responded. It is clear from speaking with instructors in the study that the vast majority had to either go it alone or turn to other sources to learn how to teach.

Learning from Colleagues

Informal exchanges. Study participants commented during personal interviews that many of them learned how to teach writing from talking to colleagues. For them, teaching is a lot of trial and error, so they turn to his first-year writing colleagues for help inside and outside of the portfolio grading groups. According to Cynthia, it is extremely common to see composition instructors in GVSU's Writing Department meeting informally in the hallway, in the bathroom, in the mailroom, or in each other's offices to discuss a range of first-year writing matters. Scott agrees, commenting, "It's usually running into someone informally in the hall or someone seeing me in my office and just sticking their head in to ask a question, you know, run something by me." The collegial relationships formed among instructors during the semester carry over into these informal encounters, which allow teachers to turn to one another for support outside of the confines of the portfolio grading group. From Michelle's perspective, the motivation for these informal exchanges comes from a desire to not only learn from colleagues, but help colleagues as well. She elaborates, "You've been there before. I've run into troubles and others have helped me and shared what they're doing about it." These informal encounters serve as opportunities for faculty members to feel that they belong to a community of teachers who value each teacher's contributions to the composition program and feel concern for their colleagues' welfare. The

collegial spirit created by the portfolio grading groups appears to have led to a more collegial department for the teachers involved in this study.

Professional exchanges in portfolio assessment groups. Study participants also discussed how the portfolio assessment groups in GVSU's Writing Department helped them learn how to teach composition. Some of the instructors in the study, including myself, had never taken a course in composition pedagogy or writing theory prior to teaching our first course. Therefore, the assessment groups became a crucial site for teacher development for many of the teacher participants, especially adjuncts and visiting instructors. During the portfolio meetings, I observed instructors regularly converse about how they teach WRT 150—from papers they assign and how they handle different classroom situations to sharing why they teach the way they do. Mike suggested that he learned how to teach from the "portfolio group process. My very first portfolio group was with Julie White and Rick Iadonisi, [two affiliate professors] and I still use the methods they taught me." For many professors, like Mike, the portfolio group seemed able to transform their teaching practices and to help them learn to become better teachers. The portfolio grading groups are helpful for others in that they are able to see what other professors think is important in the teaching of writing. Bethany claimed that one of the main draws of being in the portfolio grading groups is to "absorb the knowledge and experience conveyed by the group members and to improve my teaching." It is clear that these peer discussions have a direct impact not only on the teacher, but the teacher's pedagogy. Whether it was in graduate school, on the job, or in portfolio groups, individual instructors in the study valued talking with other teachers about teaching.

Staying current in the field. Each teacher was asked what they do to stay current in the subjects they teach. Answers to this question ranged from reviewing textbooks, reading composition and/or education-related journal articles or books to attending national or local

conferences, partaking in departmental or faculty sponsored professional development workshops, and participating in portfolio grading groups. Less than half of the research subjects stated that they regularly attend national or regional conferences related to the teaching of writing. Some writing instructors cited conference expenses and travel costs as impediments to their conference attendance. Cynthia stated:

> It seems like it is really harder for us [non-tenure track instructors] to get the application process going and usually even when we do there is only so much money left, and it has be split to so many people. A conference might cost $700, and the department will cover $200, and that's pretty much impossible for most people on our salary to do it, and we sort of give up.

A few instructors revealed that they do not attend composition-oriented conferences because they feel like outsiders. One affiliate noted, "I don't feel comfortable because I don't have the paper [degree]. I don't have the background in comp lit like a lot of people who are presenting at these conferences do have." Other affiliates, like Felicity, and some adjuncts blamed the fact that they were not aware that the department and the university provide conference travel for their professorial categories.

Visiting professors in the study informed me that they knew about the travel funds, and all three used the grants for conference travel to conferences like AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs). A few affiliate professors complained that the funding they received from the department could not go toward travel to "non-composition type conferences" such as literature and popular culture. A number of teachers discussed attending university-sponsored faculty teaching and learning workshops and conferences. Instructors like Phillip found these professional development programs useful. He fondly described attending the GVSU Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center Adjunct Academy, a workshop geared towards adjunct

faculty interested in meeting peers, sharing success and survival strategies, and discussing ways to improve student learning. Many teachers attended these types of workshops on a limited basis "because they were not geared towards writing faculty, and they cover things we already talk about a lot." Most faculty members prefer the Writing Department's fall and winter workshops because the sessions focused on the teaching of writing and the presenters were writing teachers themselves. Instructors seemed okay with the limited number of department in-services because they said the weekly portfolio grading supplied them with a space to discuss teaching-related issues.

Nearly half of the teacher participants stated they read composition-related journals or books to stay current in the discipline. Hank, for instance, subscribes to the *College Composition and Communication* journal and attends the Conference on College Composition and Communication on a regular basis. Scott, an NCTE (National Council for the Teaching of English) member said he reads their newsletter on a regular basis, but maintains that "it is talking to other people … that help me stay current." Further, visiting professor Susan found that "a big part of it [staying current] comes from the portfolio groups and listening to what people talk about and say about writing." Members of the three portfolio grading groups I observed were constantly exchanging ideas on assignments, swapping advice, sharing teaching stories and offering collegial support during their meetings. Mike discussed how whenever a member of his portfolio assessment group would mention an article or educational web site during their meeting, he would think, "Oh, I'll go check this out." The vast majority of teachers in the study claimed that participating in the portfolio grading groups or informally talking to individual teachers served as their most reliable tools to stay up-to-date in the discipline. This section highlights how much professors in this study appeared to favor talking with colleagues over many of the other professional development opportunities and other resources discussed here.

Description of Individual Portfolio Groups

Three portfolio grading groups were observed for this study, which included a total of 14 participants. Four visiting, three adjunct, and seven affiliate professors from GVSU's Department of Writing served as research participants. These portfolio groups can be defined as planned groups in that they are specifically formed for some purpose—to collectively evaluate student writing—by an organization—the department. This section will provide a detailed description of the individual portfolio assessment groups and their members. These portraits are based on group observations, personal interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, reflective journals, and audio recordings made over sixteen weeks during the Winter 2009 academic term.

Study Environment

Each of the three portfolio assessment groups studied met in the conference room located in 326 Lake Ontario Hall. The meeting space is centrally located on the third floor of the building between GVSU's Department of Writing's Main Office and the Pew Faculty Teaching and Learning Center. The room is very open, with glass walls, which provide plentiful natural light on the south side and beautiful ravine views to the north. The room's large windows are encased in gray metal trim and a large white dry erase board is anchored on the far left of the butter yellow cinder block walls. The only furniture in the room is a long rectangular plastic resin conference table with seating for eight people. Sage-colored padded modular chairs with hard metal bases flank each side of the table. Textured carpeting in shades of green, blue, and beige cover the floor while a single piece of student artwork, a tall wooden sculpture is positioned the far right corner of the room. A dormant bougainvillea plant lines the left corner of the room. The 18 x 22 foot conference room opens up to a student study lounge that consists of large brightly colored overstuffed chairs, round coffee tables, several portraits, and a large magazine credenza.

Group One

Old hands. The first group consisted of one male affiliate professor (Scott) and three female affiliate professors (Clare, Cynthia and Felicity). They met for 50 minutes on a weekly basis over 16 weeks in 326 Lake Ontario Hall. The meetings were held every Tuesday from 10:00-10:50 a.m. Instructors in this group had taught in GVSU's Writing Department anywhere from six to fifteen years. Research subjects had also participated in a large number of portfolio groups ranging from 12 to 30. One study participant referred to those in the assessment group as "old hands" while another called them a "well-seasoned set of professors," meaning that these teachers were very familiar with the department's first-year writing program and its portfolio grading standards. When asked about her initial impressions of the group, Clare commented, "When I saw that I was going to be in that group I felt respect…I have read portfolios from all of them before, and I've been pleased with the writing I have seen, and so I think of them as strong teachers." In journal responses and personal interviews conducted with this particular group, participants described group members as open-minded, professional, well-educated, willing to listen to other perspectives, and as teachers who work hard to teach their students. For example, I observed on more than one occasion that even when instructors in the group differed by two grades in their assessment of a paper, the person who gave a draft a B seemed willing to acknowledge that the people who gave it a D had valid arguments for doing so.

Respecting others. During portfolio meetings, members seemed sensitive to different pedagogies and teaching approaches, and they generally questioned assignments and drafts in a non-threatening manner. One proposed reason for this healthy "give-and-take" is the "lack of ideologies in the group." This was especially important for Scott because in a prior assessment group he felt like his teaching style was being negatively judged by another portfolio group member. "Sometimes personalities clash," explained Scott. "You need to recognize it as a

pedagogical stance, not as 'you suck as a teacher.'" The respectful nature of his current group appeared to put him and everyone else at ease which allowed for trust-building to occur rapidly in the meetings. In addition, the smaller size of the portfolio grading groups made it more intimate and personal. Words used to describe the disposition of the group included "relaxed," "pleasant," and "productive." Participants seemed comfortable sharing stories of their teaching lives in the classroom because of the positive rapport among its members and the group's welcoming atmosphere. The community-oriented nature and the perceived safeness of the assessment groups appeared to encourage these teachers to open up to one another via storytelling.

Story tellers. In the case of this study, portfolio grading groups are the communal space where the majority of first-year writing teachers share their stories. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) report there are "two fundamentally different places on the landscape: The one behind the classroom door with students and the other in professional places with others. Teachers cross the boundary between those places many times each day" (p. 25). On numerous occasions I observed Group One participants sharing teacher stories and stories of themselves as teachers. "When we tell teaching stories those stories often grow out of the focused discussion of specific drafts, and so they tend to seem more useful and applicable," Cynthia explained. During one particular portfolio meeting Felicity shared a story with the group about a student she suspected had plagiarized a paper. She narrates how she came to that conclusion and how she attempted to determine if the student essay was plagiarized. While she tells the story she transforms into a teacher detective trying to solve a student crime. Her story spurs another teacher to share a similar teacher story of encountering student plagiarism. These two teacher stories are captured below:

Felicity: My student turned in a paper the other day and my first instinct is that it was plagiarized. It doesn't match the guy. It seems like a plagiarism issue here because things don't add up.

Scott: Unfortunately we all have stories about plagiarism [Trailing off...].

Felicity: Too many things don't add up. I ran it through Safe Assign and I ran it through Google and I came up with nothing. But I had to say, "Well, I have to take this as though it is written by the student even though it doesn't seem to match his capability or style."

Cynthia: [Looking empathetic]. I was in a similar situation with a student. I really went after my student as far as revising it. And they usually drop it from the portfolio because they can't easily revise something they did not write.

It is important to note that the teacher stories shared within the confines of the portfolio assessment groups are often brief due to the fifty minute time constraints of the sessions. After the meetings, I often observed participants sharing more detailed accounts of their teacher stories because they had more time to elaborate outside of the group. Clare finds that hearing other teacher's stories offers her "a sense of community…this comes from realizing that others in my group face the same sort of classroom and work-related issues as I do." The group members said this was important psychologically, that they had shared experience. They stated it made them feel less alone and adrift. Despite the brevity of some of the teacher stories I recorded during my study, the example here highlights how teachers can use the communal space of the portfolio assessment groups to share stories as a way to make sense of their own teaching practices and as a means for connecting with their colleagues.

Teacher Roles in Group One

In addition to serving as collaborative readers and evaluators of student papers, each teacher served a certain role within the portfolio assessment group. Belbin (2004) defined roles as "a tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way" (para. 2). Each member brought a unique perspective or talent to the portfolio grading group. Hackermeier (2004) found that despite the fact that every person has the same role as a group member, they

each view their position in different ways. Hackermeier's rationale for this is that they take on different roles within the group. One of my study participant suggested the portfolio grading groups often "solidify professors into certain roles (e.g., mentor, philosopher, devil's advocate, etc). These roles allow for different types of communication and self-report)." I observed that this phenomenon occurred in all three portfolio groups. Additionally, participants were asked to define their role within the assessment group. Later in this chapter, each group member's respective role is detailed as well as how these roles benefit the portfolio grading groups.

Clare: Group coordinator and creative risk-taker. From the very first meeting, Clare took on the role of coordinator making sure the group stayed on track during meetings. She quickly became time manager of the group's fifty minute sessions. On multiple occasions I witnessed her trying to keep the discussion on topic and moving forward because frequently other participants tried to shift from assessment to other topics. She did seem to permit for these asides when teachers asked for help or wanted to discuss a classroom or student issue. She herself noted, "In some groups it is easy to get bogged down in details or distracted and talk about other things." She always appeared in control of keeping the group on task toward its goal of evaluating student papers. Additionally, it was clear from my group observations that Clare valued invention, language, and style, which she felt should not take a backseat to focus and logic. Her creative writing background appeared to enable her to encourage other teachers in the group "to give their students some creative space and take risks." For instance, during one portfolio meeting, I watched Clare give Felicity guidance on how her student could improve a particularly troublesome narrative about his grandfather. Scott and Cynthia had given her some general feedback on how to develop the story, but Clare gave her much more detailed information on how Felicity's student could improve his essay. In the transcript excerpt outlined

below we see veteran teacher Clare coach veteran teacher Felicity through how to provide substantive feedback to her student.

> **Clare:** [Encouraging Felicity]. I thought just little tweaks here and there. We don't need long expository sentences. Just a little tweak here. I don't know who woke *him up?* Because I thought it was the father who woke him up that the grandfather had died but maybe it was the great grandfather who died.
>
> [Felicity takes detailed notes in the background while Clare speaks].
>
> **Clare:** In a couple of places my biggest concerns was like when he says that would never change, but we all did after one late night phone call…that for me is too cliché for this writer. It promises something that he never goes there in terms of how much did they change? I don't want him to go into this changed me in this way and analyze it. [Reading from one of the lines from the essay].The ending the echo of memories, would make us all angels forever…that's too cheap.
>
> **Scott:** I agree about the ending.
>
> **Felicity:** [Laughing out loud]. I agree. I crossed that out too.

Felicity, who feels she is "stronger at teaching academic writing than narrative," appeared very grateful for Clare's insights. This scenario also emphasizes how even seasoned instructors can learn from other instructors in the portfolio grading group. As a result, Felicity seemed to learn how to better instruct her students on how to revise their narrative essays. Her inquisitive nature and love of open dialogue often led to these types of teacher-to-teacher interactions.

Felicity: Questioner and mentor. Felicity definitely took on the role of questioner in the portfolio group raising insightful questions with the other teachers, which elevated the collegial exchanges they had not only about assessing student papers, but about practical classroom issues facing them as teachers. As an educator, she sought clarity in their collegial conversations to build on her teacher knowledge. Felicity's supportive nature also became more pronounced during the group's portfolio meetings. As one teacher would comment, she would either be physically nodding in agreement or using affirmative language supporting what the instructor

was saying. In my field journal, I recorded some of these responses, which included words and phrases like “yes,” “I totally agree,” “That is a great point,” and “I thought the same thing.”

Many of her group members discussed how difficult it is to publicly evaluate student writing as a group and worrying whether or not they were in sync with other teachers in terms of grades and critique. Having Felicity’s backing seemed to enable her peers to feel more comfortable openly voicing their opinions about the student essays. According to group members, Felicity’s encouraging nature made teachers comfortable consulting with her on textbook selection, course design, and assignment-related questions outside of the portfolio meetings. In one journal entry, she recounted a recent incident where a colleague confided in her about a conflict she was having with another instructor. She wanted Felicity’s advice on how to deal with the situation. They were able to talk through the situation and come up with some options to resolve the issue.

When asked if Felicity perceived herself as a mentor, she answered, “I guess you could say I mentor people a little and I often share my materials.” Helen, another study participant from a different assessment group discussed how Felicity served as her mentor that semester. She reflected, “When I experience a problem in a class, either involving a student’s behavior or a writing issue, I like to talk it over with someone and perhaps gather advice.” Mentoring relationships, such as these, evolve between teachers inside and outside of the portfolio grading groups. In this specific case, Felicity, a more senior faculty member shared her experience, expertise and advice regarding teaching with her less experienced colleague Helen. This type of mentoring not only helps new faculty members acclimate to the formal and informal norms of the department and the program, but also refines and expands their teaching strategies. Further, many instructors in the study viewed the portfolio assessment groups as “supportive, unofficial mentoring groups” that aided in their development as teachers.

Cynthia: Observer and connecter. Cynthia was typically the last person in the group to speak because she was an avid listener who took special care to pay attention to what everyone had to say before commenting. Group members expressed appreciation for her acute listening abilities. Part of the reason she was able to listen so well to her colleagues appeared to be because she was constantly observing them. Cynthia seemed to have a keen ability to maintain situational awareness within the group, and interpret what it is that others were really trying to communicate. Cynthia played the skeptic admitting being "a bit impatient with student writing" sometimes, but viewing this trait as a strength when locating holes in student arguments or spotting where student writers were not making clear connections. In the excerpt below group members discuss a paper that lacks a clear argument. While her peers hint at the lack of focus, Cynthia is able to hone in on the problem right away.

> **Felicity:** Right off the bat I didn't have trouble with the form. What I had difficulty with was the Q & A format rigidly set in place. And on top of it, she doesn't answer the question. Those are the problems I had. However, I liked the topic. And I think she was trying to get at it. I think she needs to think it out more and really come to some position, really say, "Okay, this is how I view it."
>
> **Scott:** My response was she didn't have the right advice to answer too many questions and doesn't answer any of them convincingly.
>
> [At this point in the conversation, neither Felicity nor Scott has firmly identified the crux of the paper's argument. Both appear unsure of what to say next. Cynthia steps in].
>
> **Cynthia:** I think that. I didn't like that, but that's what I saw in a few places. I think that's what I felt…available natural resources. The answer would appear to be yes if conservation took precedence over human life. Right. Well, that's pretty agreeable. I mean I agree with that. *Human life in what way? Are people going to die right now? Are they gonna die in a hundred years? Are they* gonna live a *lower quality of life? Are they going to die when they're 30*?
>
> [While Cynthia speaks the others nod in agreement at what she is suggesting as the paper's focus. Her points spur Cynthia to add on to what she has said and the group ultimately agrees with her recommendations for the student's argument to focus on conservation over human life].

On numerous occasions Cynthia was able to distill the main argument a student was trying to make or to pick apart where a student was not making clear connections in their writing. She modeled this enough times over the semester that the other participants became more adept at locating gaps in the students' arguments by questioning what they were being asked to believe or accept by the student. Felicity reported that being in a portfolio group with "astute" teachers like Cynthia made her better "able to analyze the papers we are looking at quickly and ably." Despite having this ability, Cynthia was quick to point out she liked to look to her group members for a more patient explication of what a student may have meant as well.

Scott: The comedian and big picture guy. On the other end of the spectrum, Scott would on occasion use his sense of humor to lighten the group's mood. In a journal response he spoke about using "humor to help a group take the sometimes stressful task of evaluating student drafts less seriously." Part of Scott's reliance on comedy was due to past confrontations with colleagues he felt had been "uncivil to him." He notes, however, that most teachers in the portfolio grading groups are "nice and easy to work with." Due to these previous negative encounters, Scott naturally became the group's harmonizer, often mediating any differences between other members and relieving any tension through his jokes. Sometimes he used comedy when was doling out harsh criticism on a particular teacher's student essay. For example, during one meeting the group was discussing a student narrative involving a fight between two men over a woman. Scott felt the paper had "horrible audience issues" and "lacked reflection," which caused him to question aloud "what kind of moral is it I'll beat the crap out of anybody who threatens people who are close to me?" Realizing he might be coming across as insensitive to the student's teacher he suddenly turned to comedy relief in the passage highlighted below:

Scott [Asking the group]**:** This is post modern self-mockery, right?

[Other teachers in the group laugh non-stop at his comment].

Cynthia [Laughing uncontrollably]: Wow, I didn't see that!

Scott: I thought…you know, it's too pumped up on testosterone to take itself too seriously.

[Group roars with laughter again. Scott composes himself and begins commenting again. The group is suddenly much more jovial and upbeat].

I observed these funny asides on multiple occasions between Scott and the rest of the instructors in his portfolio grading group. His jesting would often soften the serious tone of the conversation and center the group once again. Scott's willingness to be humorous caused other teachers to relax and make a joke or two. When he was not making wise cracks, Scott also functioned as the "big picture" person in the group moving the conversation at times back from grammar and wording issues to items such as the overall content and ideas within a piece of writing. Other instructors, especially Felicity, would agree with him, and admit to getting sidetracked by grammar and punctuation corrections—items that could be completed later. Scott's slight redirections allowed all the participants to keep an eye on the larger picture.

Trading Advice

Additionally, Group One illustrates how having multiple teachers read the same text assists the primary instructor in catching things he or she missed in the first reading. As Cynthia put it, "I thought the group had thoughtful and thorough readers" and commented that her peers were very careful and really noticed things that she did not always pick up on. The close readings and analytical feedback I observed often led to detailed group conversations and solid revision advice teachers can take back to their students in the classroom. Moreover, instructors also used these portfolio meetings to solicit advice from colleagues on how to improve specific paper assignments. In the following transcript Clare asks how she can help her students make it clearer from the outset that their paper is a response.

Clare: What can writers do to let you know right from the start, "This is a response paper? It's not going to be a research paper about sibling rivalry."

Felicity: [Turning to Clare]. The big clue is the summary. In my response assignment, I asked that they need a summary of the article they are responding to. Then move to the point in the essay where the student wants to agree with the author or contest what the author is saying. This back and forth pattern needs to continue throughout the essay.

Clare: [Nodding in agreement]. I see what you mean.

Scott: Going along with the organizational pattern Felicity brought up, students will also need strong transition. Here is Bettelheim [author]. Here is where I'm bouncing off Bettelheim.

[You can hear other group members vocally agreeing in the background as Scott is speaking. This conversation continues on for several more minutes].

Clare: Thank you. This was very, very helpful. I agree about the organization and scope of the paper.

Felicity: [Chiming in]. I think the idea of taking something about the argument that they feel passionate about is important. It would show the student is a thinker versus a summarizer. Many students aren't good at that.

[Teachers give each other knowing smiles. Clare moves them on to the next paper].

Teachers in this portfolio grading group, much like the rest of the assessment groups in the study, regularly traded teaching advice throughout the semester. Referencing the previously described scenario, Cynthia journaled about how such collegial exchanges offered her an "opportunity to see that there are lots of right ways to teach, and that these different teaching strategies can result in rough drafts that look very different from each other." Other participants, like Clare, discussed how instructors in the portfolio groups began to open up and learn from the weekly exchange of ideas. She acknowledged, "Fortunately, portfolio grading groups, by making the drafting and evaluation process more public, call for a healthy relinquishing of one's private domain; some open up and learn from the weekly exchange of ideas." Other members of Group One also confirmed that this type of teacher-to-teacher interaction allowed them to make their teaching more public, which enabled them to solicit feedback on their teaching in a safe, supportive environment.

Rethinking Things

However, there were differences of opinion at times regarding grading and interpreting each other's assignments. For example, Clare found herself "feeling less and less secure about how the portfolio group will react" to a particular paper assignment she was doing for the first time. She confessed that she sometimes felt that a certain teacher in the group was not as flexible when reading final portfolios and thinking papers needed to be written in a specific way. Cynthia discovered that instructors in the group had different ideas about end-of-term grading. She confessed, "Some group members were willing to negotiate exact final grades while other group members felt that negotiation was not as productive." Therefore, they relied on third reads to resolve grading conflicts which meant giving that portfolio to another teacher in the group who had not yet evaluated it. Scott occasionally disagreed with Felicity's concerns surrounding grammar-related issues in student papers citing the fact that mechanics were only one of many criteria in the grading rubric. Felicity even agreed stating, "I have to make that shift" from mechanical issues to more content-based issues. Participation in the assessment groups seems to challenge instructors, like Felicity, to think differently about writing and their own teaching pedagogy. A few teachers, such as Clare, acknowledged that sometimes it is not easy taking other's opinions into consideration when forming assignments, offering feedback and assigning grades. Despite this, the vast majority of participants reported that belonging to these grading groups gives faculty members the structure, support, and incentive to try new instructional and pedagogical approaches to teaching writing.

Different Ends of the Spectrum

While this group of seasoned veterans got along extremely well with one another, there was evidence of subtle conflict in the reflective teacher journals and the personal interviews I conducted with individual teachers. For example, Scott communicated how mildly frustrating it

was when one portfolio group member gave too much weight to grammar and mechanics over items like organization and content. Another member commented on her being too concerned with how many comma splices she found in a student's paper. The member herself was aware of the fact that she tended to focus too much on grammatical errors and that she had to make a more concerted effort to place less emphasis on this when she was grading the drafts. This is a common complaint in many portfolio grading groups where community standards are supposed to trump individual standards. As noted earlier, Clare was also concerned about how her assignment was being perceived by another faculty member in the assessment group. There are often occasions where other instructors will pick apart your assignment in these groups. Some teachers take personal offense to this and it can cause issues in the group because they get worried that other instructors are negatively judging who they are as teachers. For example, Scott explained how confrontational portfolio group members can be detrimental to the integrity of the entire system:

> I have observed instructors plead to switch out of a portfolio group because a certain person was in that group. And should an instructor 'take one for the team' and remain in a group with someone confrontational, that instructor can have a miserable semester (as I have on more than one occasion).

This was the case for Scott who was harshly criticized in previous groups by two particular instructors. Scott recalled how "strong personalities or strong ideological clashes" can lead to bullying in the portfolio grading groups. He said he felt targeted because his ideological or pedagogical stance often differed from theirs. Royer stated that sometimes, as in Scott's experience, an instructor can get "mad and lash out at another that they view as not doing their job—overreacting and causing hurt or fear" (personal communication, July 2013). Other study participants also said that personalities become part of the group dynamic and sometimes they

conflict to the point that other instructors may feel intimidated or threatened. This type of behavior rarely occurs and is not tolerated by the department. In speaking with current and former GVSU writing program administrators, being asked to leave the program is an atypical occurrence that only happens in severe cases, such as bullying. As Scott was quick to point out, "generally, relationships are good. I find that almost invariably the people are nice, are good to work with, are earnest in terms of trying coming to consensus as opposed to trying to be confrontational and promote a particular type of teaching or particular criteria in grading." The examples highlighted in this section speak to the fact that tensions do arise in these groups and teachers choose to handle these conflicts in a variety of ways.

Learning Curve

In spite of their perceived differences, members of Group One seemed to learn quite a bit from one another. Scott explained that he came away from this experience with a firmer sense of how to help students produce stronger narratives while Clare hoped to use another instructor's activity that asks students to establish criteria and gather information as a group for their evaluation paper and then write his or her own paper. Cynthia planned to rethink how she assigns other required assignments outside of student papers and Felicity decided to it was not beneficial to have the whole class respond to the same article because readers "get tired of seeing the same thing." Members of Group One all commented on the fact that despite the different ways they go about teaching WRT 150 that they learned valuable things from one another. Teachers learning from colleagues during these collaborative interactions emerged as a consistent theme among the portfolio grading groups included in this ethnographic study.

Group Two

House of mirth. The second group in the study consisted of one male affiliate professor (Hank) and one male visiting professor (Adam) and two female affiliate professors (Bethany and

Michelle). They met on a weekly basis in 326 Lake Ontario Hall for a period of 50 minutes over 16 weeks. The portfolio meetings were held every Thursday from 12:00-12:50 p.m. Instructors in this group had taught in GVSU's Department of Writing anywhere from one semester to nine years. The participants had also participated in a varying number of portfolio grading groups ranging from one to eighteen. Three of the four group members had been in previous portfolio groups together, so they immediately felt very comfortable with one another. As Bethany stated, "I've been in groups before with [Hank and Michelle] so I wasn't anxious at all about this group." As a visitor Adam was fairly new to the portfolio grading process, having only been in one other group the prior semester with Michelle. The other affiliates warmly welcomed him the first day and appeared more than willing to answer any questions that he had. Veteran instructors seem to play a valuable role in this regard because they can help new instructors successfully acclimate into the department and first-year writing program culture.

Size is important. Study participants in this specific group repeatedly commented during portfolio meetings, in personal interviews, and in journal entries how the group's small size enabled them to be productive, efficient, and participatory. All of the group members had been in larger portfolio grading groups consisting of five or more professors and argued it made the portfolio norming process more difficult for a variety of reasons. During their first portfolio meeting I observed and recorded the following exchange between Michelle, Hank and Adam:

> **Michelle:** It was big [stretching her hands out to indicate the size]. We were in it together [Adam and her] and it was toooooo big!
>
> **Adam:** [Nodding his head in agreement]. It was unwieldy.
>
> **Hank:** [Puzzled]. How many?
>
> **Michelle:** Seven [Wrinkling her face in disapproval]. That's too many in one.
>
> **Hank:** I have had six. That is too many. I love four. Five is okay.
>
> **Michelle:** Well, seven was just toooooo many.

> **Hank:** The thing I liked about four was we'll each have more opportunity to help our students who want it. We'll be bringing in papers like every other week.
>
> [Bethany nods in the background while Hank speaks].
>
> **Adam:** Sometimes in our seven person group people did not have time to respond other than to say I liked it [Looking dismayed].

The excerpt highlights how these teachers said they felt that including too many members in a portfolio grading group can be problematic. Members of Group Two stated they found larger groups to be cumbersome because too often not all teacher voices are heard, or their comments are kept brief due to limited discussion time. They noted this often makes it difficult for larger groups to get through three papers during their fifty minute meeting, which can frustrate some portfolio members. In contrast, Group Two participants felt that their current group of four fell into that magic number. Due to the decreased size, Adam maintained he was better able to get to know his peers "because I hear them more and they hear me more." This configuration supplied instructors with enough time not only for in-depth discussion, but a chance for everyone to join the conversation. Michelle described how in this kind of environment "work is completed faster because there is no need for one member to try to outdo another member impressing all with [his or] her superior knowledge of writing. A consensus is quickly reached and the group moves on to another area of concern." There appeared to be a real sense of cooperation and mutual respect among this group. Based on body language observations and recorded comments, it was evident that the group enjoyed meeting with one another on a weekly basis. Thus based on my observations, when it comes to portfolio grading groups—*size* does matter.

Making a personal connection. Members of Group Two also expressed to me that this was one of the best, if not the best, portfolio group they had ever been a part of. According to Bethany, "I found myself walking on campus thinking about our group and smiling...the weekly

sessions of mirth have been nice." There was a natural ease about the way portfolio members interacted with one another. Participants humorously opted to name their portfolio grading group "The Preferred," which they suggested led to the cohesive camaraderie of their group. The portfolio assessment group typically spent the first five or so minutes prior to evaluating student papers catching up on each other's lives—in and out of the classroom. For example, Adam would occasionally share tales of his outdoor adventures in Colorado. The other instructors would reciprocate telling quick stories about their foreign and domestic travels. These discussions essentially allowed the teacher participants to learn a bit more about each other as colleagues, not just teachers. This behavior highlights how portfolio group membership can impact teachers beyond pedagogy. During the meetings participants would often joke around, which made this specific group appear more light-hearted than the other two. Part of the reason participants acted this way is because they had been in previous groups where the tone was too somber and they did not enjoy the experience. For instance, Michelle was extremely worried about arriving to the portfolio grading meeting on time because she was coming from a writing class that was located quite a distance away across campus. She explains the reason for her potential tardiness to the group:

> **Michelle** [out of breath]**:** So if I am a few minutes late it's because I'm coming from Henry Hall. I made it on time today, but I had to hustle.
>
> **Hank:** [Sarcastically responding].We'll be watching from the window.
>
> **Bethany:** Michelle is not running… [Everyone in the portfolio group is laughing hysterically].
>
> **Michelle:** [Looking amused]. I was almost going to run. Sometimes you get behind slow students.

The jovial nature of Group Two made the portfolio assessment group and the department for that matter, a more positive, enjoyable work environment for these teachers. They reported that the

upbeat nature of the group helped them build personal relationships with one another and made them look forward to attending the weekly meetings.

Teacher Roles in Group Two

Hank: Leader of the pack. At the outset, Hank stood out as the group leader, setting a fun, but serious tone for the portfolio meetings. He was often the one person coordinating who would bring papers to the next session and getting the ball rolling on discussing the paper drafts for that day. Hank explains why he felt compelled to take on a leadership role in his group:

> It seems to me that I'm the one who has been filling in the uncomfortable silences, starting a new topic for discussion, sending out the initial email, checking to make certain that the room is reserved for us, etc. I don't mind doing this, but I usually wait to see if anyone else is going to do it before I start. If this keeps up, I'll probably be the one who takes orders for food for the last meeting, too.

It is not unusual for a seasoned affiliate faculty member like Hank to take the leadership role within a portfolio assessment group. GVSU's Department of Writing attempts to include a veteran affiliate or two in each group to assist less experienced adjunct and visiting instructors in negotiating the portfolio grading process. Hank was the most senior affiliate in the group having participated in eighteen portfolio grading groups in the nine years he had worked as a first-year writing teacher. Newcomer Adam described Hank as a "strong and positive leader of the group" who set an entertaining tenor early in the semester. In observing Hank, it was clear he tried to create a group ethos and really wanted his colleagues to have an enjoyable experience in the portfolio grading group. From Hank's perspective, when he sees "something not so good developing I try to stop it." This can range from a "bully" trying to assert an unwarranted amount of influence to a professor attempting to shut down a student's work because he or she disagrees with the student for moral, ethical, or religious reasons.

For example, in one of his personal journals Hank recalled such an experience occurring in a prior portfolio group. According to Hank, a new visiting instructor complained to other members about their students writing about mission trips and having the significance focus on their spiritual awakening as Christians. The religious bent of the narratives was not appropriate in her mind and did not belong in academic writing. This comment caused some tension in Hank's group, so he took it upon himself to respond on behalf of the group. He gently reminded the professor that the portfolio group's responsibility is to read each student paper with an open mind, regardless of whether they agree with the student or not. By creating this type of atmosphere, a group leader could make the group more effective by allowing teachers to work together rather than against each other. Hank's easygoing disposition and non-confrontational demeanor seemed to put his portfolio peers at ease this semester. The instructor that Hank described eventually chose to leave the composition program. According to Gilles, "problem teachers" typically leave GVSU's program on their own accord. Some select other writing courses or move to another department or institution (personal communication, July 2013). Royer further notes that while there is occasionally a personality conflict, a bad teacher, etc. in the portfolio assessment groups; these are not so much portfolio group problems as department personnel problems.

Michelle: Opinion giver and critic. Michelle was the second most senior affiliate in Group Two with eight years of experience and seventeen portfolio assessment groups under her belt. She kept group members on their toes the entire semester with her no nonsense responses. She was an opinion giver as well as the evaluator/critic of the group. I first witnessed Michelle's snappy remarks during a one-on-one interview with her.

Me: How would you judge your knowledge in the subjects you teach?

Michelle: (Confidently): Very high.

Me: Do you think your colleagues would agree with that judgment?

Michelle: (Nonchalantly responding): I think so. Take a survey and find out.

I quickly laughed in response, but I knew she was serious. It was evident that Michelle is not afraid to speak up during portfolio meetings or in personal interactions if she feels something needs to be said to another group member. During the first portfolio meeting of the semester Michelle charged right in describing the type of teacher behavior she finds intolerable in portfolio assessment groups. In her interview she told me she could not stand "disrespectful" or "competitive" professorial types. Hank clearly found her candor refreshing: "I was glad to hear the discussion of what we haven't liked in portfolio groups we've had before." Participants in this group got these pet peeves out on the table early in the semester and so could address them as a group. Michelle's candid dialogue helped create a sense of openness within the group that allowed instructors to explore different perspectives. Additionally, Michelle also seemed to relish sharing her teaching tactics with her colleagues. During one portfolio meeting she described how she was giving her students seven different paper options as opposed to the traditional four paper options. I observed the group discuss the pros and cons to Michelle's approach for over ten minutes. This example showcases how teachers can use portfolio grading groups as academic spaces where they can openly dialogue with colleagues about good professional practices in teaching, curriculum design, and other educational activities.

Bethany: Eternal optimist and lifelong learner. The last affiliate, Bethany, came to the group with six years of experience teaching in the first-year writing program and participation in twelve assessment groups. Bethany's go with the flow approach appeared to make participants feel comfortable with her right away. Hank described her as having a "live and let live" mentality, which had a positive impact on the group. No matter what was discussed in the meeting, Bethany put an optimistic spin on it. She remarked: "I attempt to be positive and

accepting of others comments, perspectives, assignments, and personalities." She prided herself on making all of her colleagues in the portfolio grading group welcome and accepted regardless of differing opinions. Bethany said she credits this desire for fairness and respect to her twenty year experience as a public school educator. Additionally, she was extremely interested in hearing what other teachers were doing in their respective classes. As a proclaimed lifelong learner, Bethany stated: "I'm in the portfolio group to learn, to absorb knowledge and experience conveyed by group members, and to improve my teaching." In one of her last journal entries Bethany took stock of what she learned from her fellow colleagues this semester. She discussed how she re-learned that some topics can be too broad and it is necessary to remind her students to stay away from big topics like global warming. She also noted: "I always enjoy seeing other professor's assignments, and I think I will try Michelle's approach: teach seven papers; have the students choose three of seven options." Many teachers in the study, like Bethany, ultimately appeared to use the portfolio assessment groups as a weekly hour of professional development where they got to spend time with peers to discuss assignments, resources, styles of teaching and many other important topics related to the teaching of composition.

Adam: Newcomer and honest abe. Adam, a visiting professor, was a new hire in the Writing Department and had only been in one prior portfolio grading group. Despite being a newcomer, Adam was able to bring a range of skills to the assessment group. His creative writing background came in handy throughout the semester as his peers grappled with how to make their student narratives more purposeful. As an MFA, Adam had the creative writing background to offer significant narrative writing instruction. Specifically, Adam critiqued uninspiring topics initiating dialogue focused on ways to elicit more engaging college level topics. During one particular portfolio grading session Adam questioned the significance of one of Hank's "Who Am I" papers. Adam posited: "The paper is basically I am an athlete and this is

how I know that." This comment led to an in-depth discussion on how the paper could be transformed into something stronger. Because of his willingness to be honest, despite being new in the department and program, Adam was respected by the group.

Adam, a visiting professor, came with an open mind and a strong desire to learn from his peers. This inquisitiveness was evident during one particular portfolio meeting. Adam had a question regarding a C his prior group gave to one of his students. The collegial exchange recorded below highlights how new teachers' participation in portfolio grading groups can sometimes enable them to learn about department and programmatic culture.

> **Adam:** Quick question because I've heard conflicting answers to this question…you were talking about the C's, and you won't give them a minus.
>
> **Hank** [Swiftly responding]**:** We won't give them a C-.
>
> **Adam** [Looking perplexed]**:** How come?
>
> **Hank** [Speaking plainly]**:** Departmental policy.
>
> **Michelle** [Chiming in]**:** It would fail them.
>
> **Hank** [Trying to explain further]**:** It would mean they would have to take the course over again. We've determined that the product was going to pass, and it's like spiking the ball in the end zone and that your attitude was poor, so we are making you take it over.
>
> **Adam** [Seeming satisfied with the answer]**:** Alright. I missed that.
>
> **Hank** [Elaborating]**:** Let's put it this way if you had any students in your class right now that come to you and they got a C- in WRT 150, you could have them come down and talk to Dan about it.
>
> **Adam** [Responding]**:** At first I was told a C- was not flunking. I heard conflicting information. I never heard C- wasn't something we were not supposed to give.
>
> **Hank:** It's departmental policy. It used to be we would fill in the bubble sheets and turn them in, and Dawn would quick check that. Now there is no check on that.
>
> **Adam:** Now the A+ you don't allow that. I get it now. That's the great thing about learning.

Adam and the other teachers continued to have similar interactions throughout the semester. He said he was relieved to have clarification whenever a question or issue arose. Bethany, like the other group members, also appeared to appreciate having a new person in the group. She commented: "I always like to hear from the new people and [Adam] was new to me. I try to offer advice or help they made need regarding assignments and semester procedures. It is difficult to be new in this department, and I remember how it felt to feel lost and isolated." Adam appeared to be a refreshing addition to the group which had rich dialogue on a range of teaching-related matters and veteran members learned right alongside him.

Personality Conflicts

While members of this portfolio group commented this was one of the best groups they ever belonged to, there were still opportunities for conflict. Personal tension is very common in the assessment groups (e.g., a teacher is too stubborn, too vocal, or too unwilling to see a different viewpoint. During his personal interview, Adam said that he was worried about having Michelle in his current portfolio group because he had a negative experience being in a group with her. "Last semester I had a one bad person in my group and it ruined the entire group surprisingly quickly. There was one instructor [not Michelle] who had a bully pulpit. This type of action led others in the group to grab for power and the whole semester was a struggle," explained Adam. Gilles said that these types of tensions can arise in any portfolio group when teachers "talk too much, or listen too little, or treat their own students (or constituents) differently from others'" (personal communication, July 2013). Adam blamed the personal conflict on having a domineering talk-a-holic in the group who always had to have the final say. According to Adam, the whole group broke into factions and they had repeated and needless arguments. In the end, he had a bad taste in his mouth for everyone in his group, including Michelle. He was concerned that personality conflicts would ruin his second portfolio group

experience as well. Other study participants also commented on the fact that a teacher's personality can impact the dynamics of a portfolio grading group. Despite his initial concerns, Adam stated that he was pleasantly surprised to discover that he actually liked Michelle and his new group was comprised of "four people who laugh and joke and get to work." And this appeared to be the norm in not only the three portfolio groups I studied, but the ones I have belonged to over the last 13 years. According to the writing program administrators I interviewed, most of GVSU's first-year writing teachers are level-headed and act like civil colleagues, so there is not much outright conflict occurring in the portfolio assessment groups.

Group Three

Massively open. The third and final group in this study consisted of two male adjunct professors (Philip and Mike), one female adjunct professor (Helen), and three female visiting professors (Sierra, Susan and Karen). The six instructors met on a weekly basis in 326 Lake Ontario Hall for a period of 50 minutes over 16 weeks. The portfolio meetings were held every Wednesday from 4:45-5:35 p.m., which was much later in the day than Group One and Group Two. Instructors in this group had taught in GVSU's Department of Writing anywhere from one semester to eleven years. Besides Mike, Susan, and Phillip, the other teachers had participated in a very limited number of portfolio groups. Group Three participation numbers ranged from a low of one group to a high of seventeen assessment groups. Three of the six study participants (Sierra, Helen and Karen) had only been in one portfolio grading group the prior semester because when they were hired they were brand new to the department and the institution. Sierra declared, "We have both seasoned WRT150 teachers and other newbies like me." This was by far the largest group I observed, and it also contained the highest concentration of new instructors.

Quiet reservations. In journal responses and via personal interviews study participants overwhelmingly described the group and its members as "reserved," "easy to get along with," "accommodating," and "open to discussion." According to these participants, there were a variety of reasons for the group's reserved behavior during the initial meeting. Many of the teachers did not know each other very well, if at all. Some instructors had been in previous portfolio groups together, but the majority of participants had not. Mike had been in a prior portfolio group with Phillip, and Susan had been in a previous group with Phillip. Sierra and Helen had been in their very first portfolio grading group together during the prior semester—Fall 2008. Some of the newer professors were more shy and quiet than their peers in the first few meetings. Newcomer Karen suggested, "I want to soak in things, and I'm in a group with people who have been here for ten years. I'm not going to walk in with my guns blazing." The new professors such as Helen, Sierra, and Karen seemed to be looking for direction, and in some ways mentoring, from the more experienced teachers in their group. Ironically, Mike, the most seasoned instructor admitted that regardless of his extensive portfolio assessment experience, he still suffered from low self-esteem because he lacked an advanced degree. Phillip considered himself an "outsider" within the department because "unlike most of my colleagues, I don't have a degree in English or Writing." Their lack of confidence appeared to contribute to the passive nature of the group at the beginning of the semester. However, as the academic term progressed Phillip and Mike began to be able to offer more consistent support and encouragement to the new instructors within the group.

Putting it all out there. Group Three members spent a significant amount of time detailing their assignments and discussing their pet peeves as readers with one another. Sierra noted, "As with any semester with a grading group, we spent a few weeks getting to know each other's grading styles and peccadilloes." As the term wore on, I witnessed in-depth conversations

about academic sources, appropriate page length, and other items like comma splices and students' overuse of second person. Study participants appeared to find great comfort in getting on the same page or being in agreement on basic items like what constitutes an academic source, what is an appropriate number of sources, and which topics are overused. Susan, a third year visiting professor said she felt "the group was really open to discussion and [found herself] eager to learn from them and find out more about successful and unsuccessful assignments." Other writing teachers made similar comments on how willing and open group members were to discuss anything another instructor wanted to ask questions or vent about. In one journal entry Phillip reported that in the "[portfolio group] discussions we have are usually friendly, respectful, and humorous." The civil nature of the group's conversation seemed to allow the newer employees to experience a mutually beneficial camaraderie.

Teacher Roles in Group Three

Karen: Outgoing newbie. Newer instructors like Karen often compared their current portfolio group to the last group they were in, which appears to be a natural tendency for most professors who are new to the portfolio grading system. Karen reflected in one of her journal entries:

> It's clear this group is significantly different from my last one. This time around it seems that this group is a little less experienced with portfolio groups at GVSU (though not necessarily in teaching). The group dynamics are quite different; too—although I'm usually a pretty outgoing person, I shut up, sat back, and took *lots* of mental notes last semester. That was due in part to being new on campus, and also because the others in my prior group were also quite outgoing.

Though Karen was a newcomer to the department and had previously expressed being more reserved in her first portfolio grading group, she soon found her bearings in her second group.

After a few weeks of meeting she became more vocal and began to contribute her opinions on a regular basis. In observing her, I noticed that she seemed to want to stay on track and had limited patience for discussions that lost focus. When asked about the latter trait, she blamed it on the fact that the portfolio group met later in the evening. She explained: "after a long day of prep and student conferences sometimes I want to talk, and discuss, and make sure everyone's voice is heard—but also say what needs to be said and get out." Karen liked to think that she could refocus conversation on the big picture. Members of her group said they appreciated her sensible insights and her ability to stay focused on the major items students would be graded on. Karen also viewed herself as a "hard grader" and often became frustrated when group members began doing what she called emotional grading. Although she recognized how difficult it can be to grade students on their product and not their process, she told me she felt that a few instructors were grading on how hard his or her student worked on a paper or how much a student was struggling. While she understood that sentiment, she still thought emotional grading was problematic. Karen continued to grow in self-confidence as a teacher over the course of the Winter 2009 semester. She remained an active participant in Group Three who as Sierra noted, "called it like she saw it."

Phillip: The sponge. Despite having more portfolio grading experience than many faculty members in his group and a Ph.D., Phillip admitted feeling bashful during portfolio conversations that occurred early in the semester. I noticed on several occasions that he would wait until all of the other professors presented their feedback before making any comments on the student papers being discussed. He explained, "I was concerned about how I would present myself to the group if I made erroneous suggestions." Part of his apprehension was based on the fact that he had taken a few semesters off from teaching WRT 150 at GVSU, and he felt like he was starting all over again—much like the new instructors. He said the gap in his teaching within

the portfolio system made him more empathetic towards the new visiting and adjunct faculty members. As the semester continued, he appeared less intimidated about giving verbal feedback on student papers and became more comfortable communicating with the other professors in the group. He soon became one of the first people to speak during meetings and also began leading the portfolio grading group in terms of what paper to start with and who was bringing a paper the following week.

Midway through the semester he reflected, "With each passing week, I feel I'm becoming a better contributor to the portfolio group and a more confident teacher." Phillip's confidence in his teaching abilities appeared to be bolstered by the collegial support he received in this and past portfolio assessment groups. During my observations of Group Three, I observed him questioning other teachers about how they teach particular topics to their students. In several of his personal journal reflections he mentioned how he learned certain teaching techniques from past and present portfolio group members. For example, he discussed how one veteran affiliate shared with him how she held individual meetings with students during lab time to discuss her evaluations of their essays. He reflected, "I thought this was a great way of communicating with each student to make sure he or she understood all the feedback and also [to] encourage positive relations with each person; that likely wouldn't occur in a classroom setting." Phillip was like a sponge and absorbed as much knowledge as he could from his writing peers. His desire to learn underscores how both experienced and inexperienced portfolio group members can learn valuable lessons from one another as teachers.

Mike: The encourager. Much like Phillip, Mike deferred to other members of the portfolio group at the beginning of the semester. He described himself "as the most experienced person (in portfolio group participation) and the least experienced person (in academic credentials)." While Mike had completed a bachelor's degree, he had not finished his master's

degree coursework unlike the rest who had. Initially, I thought perhaps his low self-esteem originated from his status as an adjunct. When asked if his adjunct status had anything to do with his poor self-concept as a teacher, he replied, "No. I feel that adjuncts in the Writing Department are always treated with respect and I feel valued." His told me his lack of self-confidence actually stemmed from something many adjuncts face—the fact that they often lack the educational credentials and teacher training that their peers received. However, Mike was able to make up for his perceived shortcomings with his professional experience as a technical writer and editor. He noticed that after professors in his portfolio group heard about his real-world experience, they became "really interested in my corporate writing and editing tasks and picked my brain for a few weeks." Several members of his current group said they greatly appreciated his corporate writing and editing expertise during their portfolio discussions, particularly how writing has a wide variety of practical contexts.

Beyond his professional experience, in Mike's view, being able to adapt to the uniqueness of each individual portfolio group is probably his greatest strength. As the group's encourager he was often the one praising, agreeing with, and accepting the contribution of other group members. He consistently showed commendation and praise and in various ways indicated understanding and acceptance of other points of view, ideas, and suggestions. He recalled having to learn this trait being in a range of portfolio assessment groups over the years, each with their own vibe:

> There were groups that meshed well together; groups with lots of tension and disagreement; groups that were lenient on MLA format; groups that verified that there was a period at the end of every works cited page; groups that loved his profile assignment; groups that hated his profile assignment.

As a result of these experiences, he learned to remain calm, courteous, and friendly at all times. He was the supporter in the group providing warmth to individual members with comments such as, "yes, I think that's a good point," "that was really helpful," etc. Mike also used non-verbal body language—facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, posture, and tone of voice to offer support to his colleagues. Mike noted for him, showing great respect for everyone in the group and looking forward to learning new ways to analyze writing from all of his highly credentialed colleagues were keys to a successful portfolio group experience.

Susan: The diplomat and interpreter. As a third-year visiting professor Susan had belonged to a large number of portfolio assessment groups during her tenure in the department. She was definitely the diplomat of the group and had a knack for being sensitive to the feelings and opinions of her fellow group members. Susan was tactful in that she appeared to always choose her words carefully when responding to another instructor's student paper. Unlike some of her portfolio peers, she was more subtle when commenting rather than direct and to the point. Phillip reported that Susan was a good listener in that she was careful to take notes on what each instructor had to say as well as what he or she meant. He said she also seemed to go the extra mile in the group whenever anyone had a special request or needed assistance. For instance, at the end of each portfolio meeting one adjunct professor liked collecting each teacher's handwritten comments. In his journal response, Phillip commented that Susan was the only one who consistently handed him written comments.

Susan acknowledged that whenever possible she tried to be introspective with the feedback she received from other group members. However, sometimes she stated it was hard for her not to take the constructive criticism personally. For example, during one portfolio meeting, she wrote she felt somewhat "attacked about a student's paper—it felt like a barrage of criticism, and I actually got insomnia from it. I think I internalized that critique." Susan said that she

discovered from being in Group Three that even when she disagreed with someone, that she had to step back and think objectively about some of the criticisms. She was then able to realize that the points are "often valid and valuable" but only after she has time to process them. Susan reported that she found these experiences remind her not to take herself too seriously and that all teachers in the portfolio groups struggle with constructive criticism. Eventually instructors begin to view the comments purely as advice not as personal attacks on their teaching style. Additionally, Susan also noted belonging to the portfolio grading groups from semester to semester made her feel less isolated as a teacher because she had regular, built-in opportunities for personal interactions with colleagues, which she values immensely.

Sierra: Energizer bunny and advice gatherer. While Susan had a quieter, more reserved demeanor within the group, Sierra possessed a more energetic disposition. Perhaps it was her newness to the department or just her natural personality, but Sierra appeared genuinely excited to attend each portfolio group meeting. She seemed very engaged in the conversations and never hesitated to ask other teachers about course planning, class activities, troubleshooting specific problems and tensions, basic protocol, etc. In an interview she admitted being "an idea kleptomaniac" because she said she regularly asks other professors if she could see copies of prompts and assignments that she could use in her own WRT 150 class. Despite her novice status, Sierra was not afraid to vent her teaching frustrations or concerns with her portfolio peers. For instance, during one portfolio meeting as group members went around justifying each paper's grade, all of the instructors cited source material as a factor that lowered their overall grades for the essays being discussed. In my observation, it seemed that Sierra became irritated with one student's use of non-academic sources, and her own students for that matter. The following condensed transcript excerpt attempts to capture the exchange that took place in one of their portfolio sessions.

Susan: I think a lot of it for me was the sources. There are a couple of maybe good ones, but not a whole lot of variety. I mean, I don't feel like the person has reached out beyond the web, you know what I mean? I feel like a B or A portfolio should do that, you know, at least have that one paper that goes into the databases and shows that they're able to do that. Or a book or an interview, you know?

Mike: …*an*d then the *quality* of sources is not academic sources at all.

Karen: There are lots of generalizations. They're not supported by any evidence. I agree. The sources are pretty much…Yeah; I went to Google and found a bunch of basic sources. I mean, there's a couple sources that, you know, are basic ideology and religion, which is really problematic. Yeah… [Comments trail off].

Sierra: [Furrowing her eyebrows and raising her cadence slightly].I *think* that you gotta *get rid* of those sort of glorified algorithm searches to About.com! Some people say WebMD is *actually okay* but Answers.com is *not credible*. [Softening her tone]. I mean, are you guys *more lenient* about that kind of stuff?

Following Sierra's question, the rest of the group spent several minutes discussing the student's sources and what makes a source academic. Group Three members agreed to communicate the need for more scholarly sources with their WRT 150 classes. This scenario points to how professors can use portfolio groups as back up support when speaking with their students about areas that need improvement. Faculty members in these assessment groups sometimes utilized their colleagues as support to verify to their own students that they were not the only one saying to write a specific way. The teachers would refer to the assessment group to tell students other teachers were saying this too. This built-in support system appeared to make teachers in the portfolio group feel less isolated and alone when they taught composition in their individual classrooms. Sierra, who had been struggling to get her students to use more credible sources, appeared relieved to get this teaching complaint off of her chest.

The portfolio assessment groups were frequently used by teachers as spaces to voice these types of frustrations. Sierra admitted that as a "cub professor meeting with other professionals who have not only taught years longer, but have taught this specific class [WRT 150] for years is both helpful and comforting." For Sierra, these weekly exchanges with writing

colleagues seemed to become a critical support system for her as a new professor. Such an opportunity is especially important in higher education as teachers often do the majority of their jobs in isolation from their peers (Kezar, 2005). Helen reflected, "When I experience a problem in a class, either involving a student's behavior or a writing issue, I like to talk it over with someone. It's a good problem-solving method for me. The portfolio group has made me to feel more comfortable calling on others in my department." As Helen's comment appears to confirm, when colleagues talk about issues they are facing in their own composition classrooms, they are subtly telling other instructors they are not the only ones who are having these problems—they are not alone. The vast majority of study participants reported they turned to fellow colleagues within their portfolio assessment groups for advice on a variety of problems they experience in their own writing classrooms.

Helen: Anxiety-riddled analyzer. While the portfolio groups are supposed to be used to norm grades, my observations showed the meetings become much more because that is what the teachers in the groups seemed to need. Helen, a new adjunct instructor who had just begun teaching in GVSU's Department of Writing the prior semester perfectly illustrates this point. Of all the new professors in the study, Helen was the teacher who seemed to have the most questions about the course, department policies, classroom procedures, and the portfolio grading process. According to Helen, her inquisitive nature originated from a need to learn and understand what was going on around her, especially in the new environment of the portfolio grading group. At times, she came across as very anxious and unsure of how she was performing not only as a teacher, but as an evaluator. My observations showed that it was not unusual for instructors, both seasoned and novice, to use the portfolio grading groups as barometers to determine how they were performing as teachers. Helen described her insecurity as a teacher in this journal passage:

> I had a rough start that first time. There was so much I didn't know, and Grand Valley's methods of teaching composition were not the same as at the community college where I had previously taught. It's not that the standards are higher, although I think they are; it's more that the methods are different and I needed to know them and become comfortable with them.

In conversation with Helen, it appeared that her fears stemmed from the fact that she had only been teaching at GVSU for two semesters and she was still struggling to find what worked for her in the classroom and in the portfolio group. In one audio recording she openly admitted, "I spent a while [the first semester] where I wasn't even working on coming to consensus because I didn't know I was supposed to be." Helen said she felt that her input was beneficial to the other group members. Much like Mike, she stated she prided herself on the real-world viewpoint she brought to the portfolio assessment group as a *working* writer.

Can't We all Just Get Along?

While Helen's perspective was beneficial most of the time, it also caused some obvious friction and tension in the group. Group Three split into two factions, what I have labeled the grammar graders and the idea graders. Helen was on the grammar side while the rest of the group was on the idea side. On several occasions, I observed Helen discussing how academia tends to de-emphasize mechanics in favor of content. During one session she dropped a paper a whole grade due to mechanical errors. In defending her grade, she remarked: "Professors are so used to seeing poor grammar and syntax from students that they begin to decide it really doesn't matter that much, so they can concentrate on content. Mechanics *still* matter!" This appeared to be one of the biggest sticking points in Group Three's portfolio group discussions. When Helen would go off on these grammatical diatribes, Sierra and Karen's body language would stiffen and their facial expressions tensed up suggesting that they were highly annoyed by her comments.

Initially, when she did go off on this tangent, members of the group remained silent as though they were uncomfortable confronting what she was saying. While some teachers did appear comfortable confronting other members of her group when they disagreed with them, others like Melanie, avoided conflict by remaining silent during times of tension. However, after Helen did this a second and third time, Karen, Mike, Phillip and Sierra politely—but firmly—pointed out that her rubric for grading had shifted abruptly, and as members they were not comfortable with her assertions that any paper with more than five grammatical errors was an automatic *D*. Sierra reflected on the impact this type of teacher-to-teacher exchange had on her: "This is definitely something new that I learned this semester; that I can take the initiative to voice my opinions in a portfolio grading group." Phillip and other instructors suggested that Helen follow the Writing 150 grading criteria more closely and call on them if she needed clarification. Other members of the portfolio grading groups I studied would often turn to the grading rubric in order to address these types of group conflicts or seek advice on how to resolve the issue from teachers outside the portfolio group.

Helen consulted with me, Felicity and Hank regarding the grammar debate she was having with members of her portfolio group. She expressed frustration that teachers in her group were not seeing "her point of view," just their own. Helen was clearly having a difficult time norming herself to the community grading standards held not only by the assessment group, but the first-year writing program. According to Royer, the most common form of conflict that occurs in portfolio grading groups "has to do with more subtle ways of rebelling against community standard. And anything wrong with our portfolio groups is, I believe, some variety of being unwilling to go along with the emerging community standard each semester" (personal communications, July 2013). Felicity, Hank, and I reminded Helen that in these collaborative grading groups teachers are not supposed to go with their own personal standards, but rather

embrace the community standards. Royer details below what happens when "I" talk never gives way to "we" talk at the end of the term:

> For example, a discussion of a grade disagreement at the end of the term between reader one and reader two and reader two says something like, 'Well, I'm pretty stingy with A's. To me the paper has to . . .' In this case, I don't mean that reader two is referring to his or her interpretation of the standard discussed in that group in the last 14 weeks. I mean that reader two is referring to his or her 'personal standard' that has been established over the last five or ten years. Another way to put it is that a teacher begins to identify with a personal reputation that he or she feels more committed to than whatever group agreement emerges over time or in a given semester (personal communication, July 2013).

Conflict in a portfolio group is often much more subtle than the incident that occurred between Helen and her group. New portfolio group members often hold privately to their own standards with the grade. However, Royer suggests that that even after many years in GVSU's portfolio program, some teachers still find it difficult to let personal views give way to group views. Tensions might not even emerge until the very last meeting when grades are exchanged. This is a phenomenon problem I witnessed on multiple occasions firsthand as a teacher in GVSU's composition program. According to Gilles, the problems arise "when people don't do the work (e.g., they don't read carefully or honestly try to apply the published criteria to student writing), mislead others (e.g., pretend to agree with the group all semester and then apply a personal standard at the end), or refuse to acknowledge the will of the majority" (personal communication, July 2013). Royer explains that in the end, teachers sometimes just do what they are going to do without regard to the group standard and say, "well that's why we do third reads" as though they "are holding out to with their private view to the bitter end" (personal

communication, July 2013). In the portfolio grading groups I studied, participants may have championed or argued for their point of view during the semester, but in the end they agreed with the community's standards. No one reported at the last meeting that a group member privileged their own views over the group's views.

Helen reported in her journal that she eventually took the group's comments to heart. By modeling the appropriate grading approach Helen should take, study participants tried to help her strike a balance between content, organization, style and mechanics, over any of her personal credos. Working as a team did not always come easy for Group Three. There were obvious tensions and conflict reaching community consensus in this group. Sometimes portfolio groups must strive harder to get to the point where they can feel secure examining student work, discussing curriculum, or practicing teaching strategies in a collaborative manner. In my observations, every portfolio group experienced a learning curve and a comfort curve getting used to working with each other and the roles they take on. That appears to be the true beauty of these assessment groups—teachers seem to be constantly learning and transforming as learners and teachers within these faculty learning communities.

Summary of Results

This chapter provided detailed, individualized sketches of the study's portfolio grading groups, the individual study participants, and their views on how these assessment groups function as teaching circles within GVSU's Department of Writing and First-Year Writing program. The study's findings were analyzed in this chapter and it appears that participants in the study developed both personally and professionally due to the teacher talk that took place in these portfolio grading groups. As highlighted in this section, teacher talk took many different forms in the groups from trading teaching advice, venting frustrations, sharing teacher stories, discussing classroom issues, conversing about grades, etc. Such talk seemed to enable teachers to

make their teaching more public and allow them to dialogue with colleagues about good professional practice. The findings also appear to indicate that these collegial conversations have a direct impact on pedagogy in that writing instructors in the study used the groups to develop as teachers, gauge their effectiveness as teachers, and try new pedagogical approaches. The results also seem to show that writing teachers in these communities used the assessment groups to examine who they were as teachers and to question their teaching practices and, as a result, learn, craft, and negotiate new meanings that improve their practice. The study's findings also appear to indicate that the portfolio grading groups serve as an antidote to teacher isolation, promote collegiality, motivate department community-building, contribute to a healthier workplace, and serve as a department equalizer for teachers in the study. Final conclusions, study limitations, implications and future research recommendations will be discussed further in Chapter Five**.**

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS

Old Teacher Story

Many things have changed since I shared my original teacher story. I am now in my thirteenth year of teaching in GVSU's First-Year Writing program and have participated in over 25 portfolio grading groups during my tenure in the department. In those years I have worked closely with other affiliate, visiting, adjunct, and tenure-track faculty members in these assessment groups. Despite attending regional and national writing conferences, enrolling in a rhetoric and composition doctoral program, reading the field's journals, and attending faculty-sponsored workshops on campus and in my own department, one thing has remained the same—I feel I continue to learn the most from the collegial interactions I experience in the portfolio grading groups. As reflected in this study, I, as well as my composition colleagues, have benefitted immensely from these weekly teaching circles.

I firmly believe that belonging to these semester-long teacher communities are the most valuable professional development activity I can participate in as a writing teacher. For instance, this semester alone my current portfolio assessment group has discussed how to handle brazen students, learned about effective facilitation of peer workshop groups, conversed about giving papers a greater sense of purpose, and negotiated the implementation of a new e-portfolio management system. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the advantages of participating in a portfolio group. My findings highlight how these assessment groups function as much more than mere mechanisms for teachers to collaboratively evaluate student writing. Portfolio grading groups can provide writing instructors with a communal space to learn from one another and to gain much-needed support from peers. The results of this study confirm that portfolio assessment groups do, in fact, support teacher learning, promote collegiality, facilitate

faculty development and contribute to departmental community-building. Ultimately, the study's conclusions underscore the importance of having composition professors come together on a local level to dialogue with colleagues about our shared professional work—the teaching of college level writing.

Summary of the Study

Purpose of this Qualitative Study

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to explore more deeply how membership in portfolio assessment groups impacts the teaching of first-year writing and the development of composition teachers in these groups. This study serves as a continuation of what Elbow and Belanoff began in 1986, what Hamp-Lyons and Condon and Broad offered in 2000 and 2003 but with added detail on how collegial interactions affect composition instructors in and out of these portfolio groups. Therefore, I studied three portfolio grading groups in GVSU's Department of Writing over 16 weeks in order to collect richer descriptions of the 14 teachers' experiences in these groups. Additionally, the study is meant to draw attention to the limited occasions currently available for collegial exchange in composition and to recognize writing teachers' strong desire for collegial exchange in order to gain support from a professional community. Further, the study highlights how teacher communities, such as GVSU's portfolio assessment groups, can provide a valuable meeting space that brings writing instructors together for *much-needed* dialogue and opportunities to gain more self-awareness and reflection regarding teaching practices.

Research Methodology and Study Design

Utilizing an ethnographic framework and qualitative design, enabled me to fully explore how portfolio assessment groups function as more than a method for student grading and uncover the dynamic role they play in offering writing teachers critical time and space to exchange ideas on a local level with colleagues. An ethnographic approach allowed me to see the

portfolio groups in a new way and to present a more contextualized understanding of how first-year composition teachers use these groups as unofficial teaching circles. Using an ethnographic approach during data collection facilitated a detailed exploration of group activities. The qualitative research design enabled me to build upon the previous studies' findings by providing a more in-depth ethnographic view of *how* portfolio groups impact the teaching of writing and the development of faculty in a first-year, portfolio-based composition program.

Data Sources

An ethnographic approach during data collection facilitated a detailed exploration of portfolio group activity. Employing multiple methodologies (i.e., observation, journals, field notes, interviews and cultural artifacts) helped me work towards a theoretically comprehensive understanding of portfolio group culture. Data was gathered on GVSU's first-year writing program by observing weekly portfolio meetings of three separate groups, conducting 14 interviews with 14 individual teacher participants and studying program documents and teacher reflection journals. I served as an observer in the portfolio grading groups over a 16 week period. During fieldwork, regular field notes and audio recordings were made. Interviews were conducted with portfolio grading group participants and institutional artifacts (e.g., web site, mission statement, internal memos, etc.) were examined. Transcripts from the audio recordings of the group observations, reflective journals and individual participant interviews were transcribed and coded. These transcripts expanded my analysis beyond field notes and observation, which allowed me to study the themes that emerged from multiple points of view. Data analysis consisted of recognizing patterns and relationships that emerged from the data.

Research Questions

Based upon my data collection methods—fieldwork observations, reflective journals, field notes, audio recordings, personal interviews, and document analyses—this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What is the context in which these portfolio assessment groups occur?
- How do teachers talk about teaching within the context of portfolio assessment groups?
- How does this group talk impact teachers' pedagogical beliefs?
- How does this group talk impact teachers beyond pedagogy?

The answers to these research questions shed light on how first-year writing teachers can use portfolio assessment groups as opportunities for interdepartmental conversation and collaboration about teaching, probing of pedagogical belief systems and evaluation of teaching practices and as safe spaces to discuss and explore new instructional methods.

Findings

Summary. Three connective threads run through the study's findings—**first**, portfolio grading groups provide writing teachers with the much-needed *support* of a professional community. **Second**, this professional support encourages active *reflection* about good professional practices in teaching. **Finally**, this reflection motivates teachers' professional growth and in turn *inspires* teachers to evolve their composition pedagogy. The study's findings are organized by research question. Each research question includes a brief descriptor of the key findings followed by a more detailed discussion of the key findings. Additionally, implications and future research recommendations are also discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Context. This section of Chapter Five briefly discusses the context in which the portfolio assessment groups occur. Due to its unique configuration of having first-year writing teachers

meet weekly over the course of a semester, the diversity of its freshman composition instructors, its accessibility, and its fit with the ethnographic research design, GVSU's freshman portfolio program seemed an excellent context in which to conduct the research study. These groups bring faculty members together for productive small group discussions of teaching and grading. I studied three portfolio assessment groups comprised of 14 writing teachers (i.e., affiliate, adjunct, and visitors) over the course of an academic semester. In a number of ways, these groups have become unofficial teaching circles for teachers to reflect on their teaching and that of their colleagues. Chapters Three and Four of the study provide a more comprehensive discussion of the research site (i.e., GVSU's portfolio grading groups, the First-Year Writing program, the Department of Writing and teacher participants).

Teacher Talk. The findings in this section address how teacher participants talked about their teaching within the structure of GVSU's portfolio assessment groups. Instructors in this study reported that they used these groups to:

1. Make their teaching public
2. Dialogue with colleagues about good professional practice

Making teaching more public. Many writing teachers lack proper pedagogical preparation. College professors often have limited formal training or instructional experience (Gardiner, 2000; Palmer, 1999) at the college level. As some teachers in the study stated, their lack of critical content or theoretical knowledge in the field made it difficult at times for them to communicate with colleagues. Participants suggested that this perceived deficiency in teaching experience may also make some teachers afraid to open up their classrooms to other teachers for fear they will be negatively judged by their peers. Other instructors simply said they preferred to be in complete control of their composition courses and keep their teaching methods private. Senior affiliate Clare stated, "If someone sees teaching as private, individualistic, and isolated,

then he or she probably also sees it as authoritative. Indeed, the whole classroom experience may promote a sense of hegemony, since most instructors by necessity become little dictators when it comes to choosing what's read, when it's read, and how long the paper will be in response to what's read." Fortunately by making the drafting and evaluation process more public, portfolio grading groups appear to help teachers relinquish some their pedagogical privacy.

Newcomer Sierra understands why this can make some professors uneasy, but claims portfolio groups are great for breaking those feelings of privacy associated with teaching. Instructors in the study often commented on the fact that the assessment groups made teaching public property, rather than a private, individualistic, isolated activity. Participants said that with GVSU's portfolio grading system they get to collaborate, but they still feel as if they are masters of their classroom domains. Affiliate professor, and former teaching assistant, Michelle noted in one of her reflective journals:

> Portfolio grading opens up the classroom to one's peers. It is part of the portfolio grading process to become aware of what is taking place in the classroom of the group members. One knows what assignments are given, and because of the grading process at the end of the semester, one becomes aware of what was taught throughout the semester. For example, if formatting was not taught, the final portfolios reflect this.

Portfolio grading groups appear to challenge the notion of teaching as a solitary activity because of their collaborative spirit. Teachers stated they appreciated hearing about what was transpiring in other instructors' classes and how transparent group members seemed to be in sharing their teaching practices and concerns with their peers. Participants were observed making all of their assignments public every semester to new people.

Beyond assignments teacher participants seemed to reveal a key element of their identities as teachers: what grades they gave to essays and *why*. For most of our colleagues,

discussions and disagreements about grades take place between teacher and student with an obvious power dynamic at play. For teachers in GVSU's first-year composition program, there is no hiding behind a mantle of expertise as they are all equally expert. Phillip, a newly returned adjunct, reinforced this critical point, asserting, "[t]he portfolio grading group allows teachers to work with other faculty members and still have control of their classes." In this way instructors said they felt they got the best of both worlds. The study findings highlight how the cooperative dynamic of the portfolio grading groups seems to enable teaching to become more reflective.

Hutchings (1996), in fact, maintains that teaching needs collegial exchange and publicness. Therefore, by making their teaching public teacher participants have the opportunity to become reflective teacher practitioners examining their own teaching practices through the lens of other teachers. Seasoned affiliate Bethany, for example, stated how "constructive [it is] to hear what assignments have succeeded and which ones were more challenging from my peers in the portfolio groups. I think only positive results can be obtained from making teaching more public." Sharing their teaching practices with others allows teachers to take personal ownership over their teaching. As the research results seem to indicate, portfolio assessment groups can potentially allow teachers to step back and see more clearly and therefore learn from, their own teaching practices in a variety of ways.

Dialogue about professional practice. In addition to calling for teaching to be more public, disciplinary organizations such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Modern Language Association, National Writing Project, and Two-Year College Associate continue to advocate for writing teachers to have opportunities for reflective dialogue in a professional community. As this study documents, composition instructors are often eager for genuine, meaningful conversation with colleagues about teaching first-year writing. Yet many professors continue to lack formal or informal opportunities for this type of

collegial exchange. The limited professional resources many teachers face in their home institutions and departments makes this desire challenging to meet. Historically, postsecondary institutions have expected faculty members in larger part to take care of their own development as educators. According to Camblin and Steger (2000), there has been a long-held assumption in higher education that teachers could keep abreast of happenings in the field and develop new skills on their own. Teachers in this study complained about experiencing stagnation and a lack of motivation at some of their former teaching posts because they were responsible for their own professional development. Further, educational research confirms that in order to improve teaching at the collegiate level, professors need more professional development opportunities to investigate and query their own and others' practices, philosophies, and knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994). The writing teachers in my study complained that they had no regular opportunity to observe the teaching practices of peers. Several study participants said they thought it would be particularly challenging to reflect on the teaching methods they employ in the classroom without the portfolio assessment groups.

Examining the contexts of their experiences as writing teachers seemed to enable participants to collaboratively participate in a critical dialogue about their teaching practices. Faculty learning communities, like GVSU's portfolio assessment groups, have the potential to nurture norms of collaboration and exchange that increase teachers' opportunities to improve classroom practice (Little, 1999; Louis & Marks, 1998). Third-year visiting instructor Susan said that in her opinion the collegial discussion that occurs in the groups is extremely useful, remarking, "[t]alking is really useful to get a sense of what others expectations and ideas are. I appreciate hearing these things from others, because I always get a better sense of what my own expectations are, and I can pass this all on to my students." Many of the writing teachers in the study appeared to use the portfolio groups to reflect on their teaching methods by vocalizing

what they do in the composition classroom with others. By doing so, teachers in the study seemed to have discovered a variety of ways they can improve their practices by viewing themselves through the eyes of other teachers. When professors do not have time to talk to other professors, they seem to miss out on developing better ways to teach. This is especially important for beginning instructors who can often feel overwhelmed with the improvements they would like to make in their respective courses.

Impact on Pedagogy. The findings in this section showcase how the group talk that takes place in the portfolio assessment groups appears to directly impact teachers in the study and their pedagogical approaches to teaching first-year writing at GVSU. Writing instructors in the study used the groups to:

1. Develop as teachers
2. Gauge their effectiveness as teachers
3. Try new pedagogical approaches

Teacher development of both novices and veterans. Newer teachers in the study said it was difficult sometimes to identify where, when, how, and why things went awry in their writing courses. They recalled feeling both anxious and excited to share what they were doing in their classrooms with other portfolio members. New visiting professor Adam appreciated the teaching-oriented conversation he had in these groups. He stressed, "[it's beneficial] learning how other teachers teach lessons or what essays they assign. This is helpful because it allows me to get new ideas. Often, in this line of work we work alone. So it's hard to figure out what new ideas to try. Also, you can see if those ideas work by talking to the other professors and reading the student work." Adam, like many teachers in the study, said they found the portfolio group discussions often led them to think more deeply about what assignments to assign and how they set up their first-year writing classes.

The portfolio groups also appeared to assist new professors transitioning into the department and writing program. Writing instructor Karen described the social and personal benefits that portfolio groups provide new teachers:

> It can be lonely to join a busy faculty, and our once-weekly meetings provide some needed social interaction; it also provides me with a chance to talk about students and what issues are popping up in my class. It's not a venting or gossip session, but it does allow a group of teachers—who often work in a vacuum, albeit one filled with students—to check in with colleagues and know that they're not alone, that any population of students will have difficulty with commas or struggle with research despite the best of database lesson plans.

Portfolio assessment groups also appeared to aid in the professional development of veteran instructors. Seasoned teachers in the study said dramatic changes in the student population, technology, and pedagogy made it hard for them to keep up with the times, and reinforced the need for faculty development opportunities and support from colleagues. Mike, a long-term adjunct agreed, claiming, "personally, it's always a benefit for teachers of different academic backgrounds and levels of experience to get together to discuss student writing. Through the years, I have learned so much from the diverse views of many different people." The more experienced teachers stated that even new professors taught them something. For instance, I observed third-year visitor Susan ask first-year visitor Karen about her conflict-based narrative assignment. She liked how Karen's narrative showed some kind of tension, or conflict, or struggle compared to her own profile papers. Susan said, "hearing what people actually do in their classes—both the major assignments and the smaller in-class assignments. It's helpful to hear what works and what doesn't." Because Karen shared her assignment, Susan was able to decide if there was a more effective paper option for her students. Belonging to the assessment

groups seems to help teachers gain the collegial support they need to try new strategies and the inspiration to take risks with their teaching.

Gauging teacher effectiveness. Teacher participants described numerous advantages of opening up one's classroom to others. Some said the groups pushed them to perform. Many teachers in the study reported how easy it is to fall into a teaching routine and permanently remain there. Senior affiliate Michelle stated, "with this grading system, I find myself forced to keep up with the current trends and constantly change my assignments and experiment with how I teach to become more effective." Portfolio groups appear to force instructors to keep up with current trends in the field. Adjunct professor Mike said he relied on portfolio group members for updates on the latest developments in composition and recommendations on reading materials. Others, like veteran affiliate Felicity, stated they used the groups to change their assignments and experiment with how they teach to become more successful educators. According to Felicity, "because other professors get to see our assignments and some of the results of our work, portfolio grading groups make our teaching more transparent. This has the effect of urging us toward perfecting our methods, an important benefit." Teachers seemed to learn a great deal from group members about how to become more effective in the composition classroom.

Besides preventing teachers from becoming stagnant in their teaching and pushing teachers to stay current in the discipline, the portfolio grading groups also appeared to keep teachers excited about teaching composition. Study participants stated that teaching the same course every semester can be tedious. Sierra divulged, however, that participating in portfolio groups "prevents burnout among seasoned professors and helps to regulate and educate professors who are new to the 150 process." Further, teachers in the study reported that the assessment groups were the primary way they stayed motivated to teach the course. For seasoned instructor Cynthia, "I usually feel encouraged and energized by my interactions with my group

and motivated to put positive effort into my teaching." A number of participants stated that working closely with other teachers inspired them to put more effort and energy into their teaching.

Trying new pedagogical approaches. Teachers in the study said they felt participating in the portfolio grading groups was a growth-enhancing experience for them. While their respective motivations may have differed, participants' overall goals seemed to be the same—they all appeared to desire an academic space where they could learn from one another as educators and gain support from colleagues. A large number of researchers have examined how university professors view their professional growth as instructors and the improvement of their teaching at the college level. Several studies have established that teachers perceive development as attaining academic credibility and respect for one's work (Akerlind, 2005; Owens, 2001). Further, writing instructors in the study measured reported that they measured their development in terms of continuing progress in the quality and effectiveness of their work as teachers and gaining of personal knowledge and skills. Participants also said they perceived their development in the assessment groups as increasing the depth and complexity of their understanding of composition studies. Faculty participation in these groups appears to offer evidence of ongoing interest in pedagogical development, and the desire writing teachers have to improve their craft.

As explicated in earlier chapters, faculty members emerge from their individual composition classrooms to gather communally in portfolio assessment groups to discuss topics of common interest (i.e., course construction, assignment development, classroom problems, assessment, etc.). Teachers in the study said through the assessment groups they received the support of other faculty in diagnostic and assessment skills, tips on assignments and techniques, and advice on classroom situations. Newbie Sierra used the groups "because I'm still so green, I ask professors about planning, activities, troubleshooting specific problems and tensions, and

basic protocol." Teachers in the study reported that the mere presence of other instructors in the groups challenged them to contemplate how effective their pedagogy really was. Participants stated that they discovered new pedagogical knowledge, improved their self-perceptions as teachers, enhanced their job performance, and established satisfying relationships with colleagues.

For many writing teachers in the study, the portfolio grading group process appeared to help them strengthen areas in their teaching they perceived as weak and reinforced aspects they felt were already strong. While some faculty members reported they utilized the portfolio grading groups to improve the way they teach course content, others said that they used the groups to test and modify course assignments. There were many instances I observed where teachers got feedback on various WRT 150 assignments. Affiliate Bethany said she found it "constructive to hear what assignments have succeeded and which ones were more challenging from my peers in the portfolio groups." Teachers in the study stated that they appreciated hearing comments from instructors who had already tried out the assignment and determined its pros and cons.

Another way the portfolio grading groups appear to impact teacher pedagogy is through the members' assessments of student drafts and final portfolios. During the semester each portfolio member brought sample student papers for the group to grade. Much like the critique of assignments, I observed teachers weighing in on how well the student met the grading criteria and how to improve the paper. Veteran affiliate Clare stated, "When we discuss a student essay in the group, I think about the problems that the group identifies with the draft and try to consider whether I've done a good job of addressing those issues in class. Often, I will include instruction in class concerning issues raised by the group." Many teachers in the study also said that when there is a problem in the drafts that they have had trouble getting their students to

correct, they ask the group how they address this problem with their students. In this way, instructors seem to get new ideas for dealing with specific writing problems from the assessment groups. Senior affiliate Scott said he considers these as the "lessons of each meeting." He and other study participants said they almost always left a session with "something concrete" to report to their students about what the portfolio group has said about how essays will be graded. These pedagogical lessons appeared to help teachers and students demystify the evaluative process and seemed to improve the writing taking place in GVSU's first-year composition courses.

Study participants also reported seeking out other teachers for advice on how to handle different types of student and classroom issues. Clare stated that she found reassurance in the fact that "other members of the [portfolio] group face the same sort of classroom and work-related issues I do." Teacher participants reported that one of their biggest pedagogical roadblocks is trying to tackle a problem happening in their writing classroom by themselves. In all three of the portfolio groups being studied, I observed teachers discussing their struggles with various classroom issues. Teachers appeared to want counsel from colleagues on how to effectively deal with the situation. By commiserating with colleagues over problem they were facing, study participants seemed able to communally solve the issues they faced. This study finding highlights how engaging in collegial problem solving can potentially be a valuable pedagogical practice for portfolio group participants.

Finally, the assessment groups appear to provide peer incentives among teachers in the study to continue to improve. It seems as these writing faculty members learned together they were challenged to make changes in their respective classrooms. Senior adjunct Mike said he believed in this concept and reflected on the first WRT 150 class he taught in the Fall 1998 semester:

> When I compare it to how I am teaching the same class this semester; it's completely different, and much improved! The development of peer relationships over time does make us better writing teachers. It's amazing how slowly incorporating the best practices of 40+ teachers over time can improve a course. This could have occurred only through the peer relationships developed over time.

As teachers in the study learned better ways to teach certain elements of writing, they said they had the freedom to privately challenge their own ways of teaching, and perhaps, improve them. Portfolio grading groups seemed to allow teachers to improve their teaching practices at an individual pace. In addition to allowing time to reflect on personal teaching practices and sharing them with one another in a communal setting, writing instructors also appeared to study their local pedagogical sites (i.e., composition classroom, first-year writing program, and department) as places of intellectual inquiry. Ultimately, effective pedagogical practice can promote the wellbeing of students, teachers and the department community—it improves students' and teachers' confidence and contributes to their sense of purpose for being in the composition program; it builds community confidence in the quality of learning and teaching in GVSU's Department of Writing and First-Year Writing program.

Impact Beyond Pedagogy. This section of the study's findings reveals how participating in the assessment groups seem to have provided teachers in the study with a supportive professional community that offered much more than pedagogical benefits to its members. The following findings highlight how the collegial conversations that occur in GVSU's portfolio grading groups can potentially:

1. Serve as an antidote to teacher isolation
2. Promote collegiality
3. Motivate department community-building,

4. Contribute to a healthier workplace environment, and
5. Serve as a department equalizer for study participants

Teacher isolation. Much of the current literature on developing strong teachers in higher education today stresses faculty isolation as a major problem (Alber, 2012; Fogg, 2006; Grubb, 1999; Hendricks, 2009; Kezar, 2005). In these studies, many instructors report feeling isolated from their peers and receiving little or no professional support from colleagues. A comment from one of the current study's participants helps crystallize this problem. Karen, a new visiting professor, stated, "Being a teacher can mean some very isolated days, even though they may be filled with classes; although you talk constantly to students, it's not quite the same interaction . . . the autonomy associated with this profession is one of its biggest challenges." Several study participants shared stories of prior teaching experiences outside of GVSU where they often did not see colleagues for weeks at a time, rarely met with other instructors to discuss teaching-related matters outside of basic faculty meetings, and in some cases where other faculty members completely ignored them. Many of the teachers in my study lamented that having little contact with regular full-time faculty, or even other adjuncts, made them feel marginalized. According to adjunct professor Phillip, "teaching composition can be a slightly isolating experience, you only catch rare glimpses of what other instructors are doing, assigning, etc., in a few meetings a week or by snooping around the copy machine." Other professors said this perceived lack of collegiality sometimes caused them to experience feelings of seclusion and loneliness in their former English departments and first-year writing programs. These participants said they did not feel as though they were part of a community and; thus, felt alone in their teaching careers.

Seasoned affiliate Scott stated he experienced this lack of connection with co-workers firsthand while teaching composition at another postsecondary institution: "I would go to colleagues' offices to ask questions, and was repeatedly told they did not have time to speak with

me. They were ‘too busy’ to give me five minutes of their time. Their responses made me feel like I was alone in the department.” For participants, this treatment led to decreased job satisfaction and lower morale. Alber (2012) found seclusion from colleagues caused teachers to feel worthless, alone, or even unhappy. According to Wilson (2012), problems with isolation occur at all levels of teachers, from adjuncts to tenured professors. Junior tenure-track professors also reported frequent feelings of isolation, low job satisfaction, and high stress (Barnhart & Bechhofer, 1995; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Schrodt, Stringer Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). One reason for these feelings of isolation is that teachers are many times cut off from a valuable learning resource: *other teachers*. As study participant Felicity posits, “Colleague relationships have a great impact on my teaching,” and collegial conversations do influence her decisions in the classroom. Numerous participants expressed similar comments noting that connection with peers was clearly vital for both contingent and tenured professors in their careers as writing teachers.

Collegiality. Unlike many composition programs where freshman writing instructors grade alone, instructors in GVSU’s composition program grade collaboratively in assessment groups. Although the primary focus of the portfolio groups is evaluative grading, teachers in this study reported utilizing the weekly portfolio meetings to become better acquainted with other faculty members. Gappa, Austin, and Trice (2007) conducted research on the importance of collegiality in higher education and determined that ‘‘collegiality refers to opportunities for faculty members to feel that they belong to a mutually respected community of scholars who value each faculty member’s contributions to the institution and feel concern for their colleagues’ well-being’’ (p. 305). Scott, a long-time affiliate professor at GVSU, said he thought the portfolio groups break up some of the remoteness associated with the teaching of writing:

> The weekly discussions foster collegiality as we strive to agree on what constitutes an A, B, C, and D. Indeed, in a culture in which solitary research endeavors are the norm, the collaborative nature of portfolio grading is welcome. The weekly meetings also provide a valuable opportunity to interact with colleagues and discuss the teaching of writing. While this opportunity exists in 'drive-by' discussions, having a regularly scheduled time to hold these conversations is particularly beneficial.

As depicted by Scott and other teachers in this study, the establishment of portfolio grading groups in GVSU's Department of Writing has become a way to promote collegiality among faculty members. The study's participants reported that belonging to the assessment groups gave them a feeling of shared camaraderie with their peers and fostered a sense of community in the department. For teachers, like veteran instructor Hank, participating in the portfolio groups provided him with he said was a "sense of shared purpose" with his co-workers and a "supportive network" he felt he could turn to when he needed guidance.

In all three of the portfolio groups I observed teachers trading advice on a wide range of issues from classroom management tips, ideas on how to effectively teach students, thoughts on how to use signal phrases in their research papers, and even frustrations about a particular assignments. New professor Karen corroborates my observations. She said that she believed the assessment groups made teaching feel more public in the way that the members discussed assignments they have chosen, bounced around ideas for prompts or exercises, and provided a forum to commiserate and/or complain to one another. She noted, "These [portfolio groups] can be quite beneficial, particularly when you're a new or young teacher. It's a chance to feel less alone, and it helps build feelings of community." In this study the support generated by the assessment groups appeared to provide faculty members with opportunities for discussion about

the teaching of writing as well as a community space in which participants could collectively explore their lives as teachers.

For many writing faculty, portfolio grading groups may be the only opportunity to discuss the teaching of writing with other teachers. Affiliate Clare suggested that the assessment groups afforded her a chance to get to know new hires, people she may or may not have seen or been introduced to before. She further added, "even if I already know group members, the weekly meetings give me a chance to learn more about people as personal information gets shared. Such information solidifies the bonds of the portfolio group." The collegial bonding that I observed transpiring in these meetings seemed paramount to building trust and community among these teachers. Long-term adjunct Mike commented that belonging to these groups has helped him get to know many people in the department. He said, "[a]s an evening adjunct, I'm not around when everyone is on campus. This [group] has been the primary way for me to get to know everyone." Mike's experience reinforces how the assessment groups appeared to play a critical role in the department in terms of allowing adjunct teachers to connect with other teachers.

Faculty participants reported that interacting and getting to know one another better on a personal basis improved communication among colleagues and broke down barriers between senior and new colleagues in the portfolio groups. Helen, a new adjunct, said that without the portfolio meetings she would most likely not have had the opportunity to meet other first-year writing professors in the composition program. She stressed her portfolio group has "allowed [her] to feel more comfortable calling on others in my department if [she wants] advice." As other instructors in the study have indicated, the group meetings offered them a chance to compare assignments, grading methods, and criteria to that of other professors. Helen contends that these portfolio meetings are especially helpful for those new to the department because it

gives them a chance to discuss "what's important in a composition class—what we should be looking for, ways to present certain concepts, how we should be advising our students." Teachers in the study reported that without these types of collegial connections they would feel alienated from their peers, and perhaps even invisible in the department. Participants said that by interacting with teachers who were teaching the same course they were (i.e., WRT 150), they felt more connected to their peers because their presence was being recognized and they felt more in the loop with department culture. This appears to be an important benefit of the portfolio groups because it seemed to help create a more integrated, collegial department and faculty.

Department community-building. The findings of this study highlight how implementing teacher communities in a department potentially assists writing program administrators and writing teachers in building a more supportive academic unit. Teacher participants in this study reported that the portfolio grading groups enhance the climate, culture, and collegiality in GVSU's Department of Writing and First-Year Writing program. As long-time affiliate Michelle pointed out, "I believe the environment of the department is very important and influences how we teach." By creating a sense of community and instilling a sense of belonging in these professors, the department seems to have minimized most of its instructors' feelings of isolation. As current department chair, Dan Royer, one of the originators of GVSU's portfolio grading process noted, one of the primary motivations for becoming a separate writing department was to create a community of teachers dedicated to teaching first-year writing. It appears, based on the study data, that by establishing a portfolio grading system the department facilitated community building in the composition program as well as in the academic unit. It also appears that one of the main reasons the first-year writing program and the department seem so community centered because the groups bind teachers together in a common mission—defining and delivering departmental-wide expectations for first-year student writing outcomes. Royer believes that the

groups, with their requirement of a public standard, impose a kind of democracy or consensus building upon the entire department. He explains why he thinks there is such a collaborative energy in the writing program:

> No longer can we each hold a private standard, even with a nod toward abstract agreement. Instead we have to hammer out our understanding through sharing and listening to each other. In the process we have all expanded our understanding of what good writing means in the concrete. That's really what a community is, I think—a group with a shared understanding of what we value. (personal communication, May 2013)

According to the chair, the writing department that materialized at GVSU in 2001 was founded on the ideals of community and collaboration and an interest in attracting faculty genuinely interested in teaching composition. Therefore, the unit made a concentrated attempt to assemble a mutually respectful community of teachers who focused their professional lives around one common goal—freshman writing. As affiliate Clare sees it, "[i]f a department or discipline works towards a common goal—whether it's an assignment, grading rubric, or assessment plan, everyone is apt to benefit." It seems that because GVSU's writing professors meet around a common objective—teaching composition—they quickly establish common ground. Meeting in these groups on a regular basis over 16 weeks appears to allow teachers to discuss student writing, but offers teachers the chance to discuss what is important in a composition class—what they should be looking for, ways to present certain concepts, how they should be advising students, etc. Further, teacher participants in this study claimed that sharing this common purpose and a mutual understanding of what they value as a community led to the department's interconnected identity. Based on the study's findings then, it seems that GVSU's writing instructors are mutually joined in the teaching of their first-year writing students via these assessment groups.

Additionally, the portfolio grading groups allow professors to meet people in the department who teach the same courses they do. Faculty in the study said these professional interactions made them feel that they were part of a community within the department. The simple fact that the portfolio groups rotate means all the teachers talk with all of the other teachers. Over time, everyone knows everyone, and everyone has spent some time with all the other teachers in the composition program. Former first-year writing director, Roger Gilles, posits, "Meeting with new and different people each term, or joining once again with a familiar colleague after three or four years in separate groups, affirms that there is indeed a larger community at work—a kind of gestalt that operates beyond the reach of any one person or any one group." Teachers in the study overwhelmingly concurred with Gilles' portrayal that portfolio grading groups created that sense of community in the program. The assessment groups appear to be able to sustain this powerful sense of community due to the quality of peer connections between portfolio group members. Senior affiliate Hank expresses how the collective nature of the groups makes him feel as an instructor:

> We're all in this together. Are my students still getting D's and it worries me at this point of the semester? Don't worry, someone else will share that it is always like that. Your students will pull it together in the last week – they always do. Did I hand out an assignment that just isn't working well logistically for the students? Don't worry, we'll take that into consideration and won't hold it against your students. What should I do about this student that just doesn't get it? Here, try this strategy that has worked for me– and if it doesn't work for you, keep in mind that it isn't your fault–some students just don't get it yet. He'll be back, and then he'll do better.

Knowing they are part of a team seems to give instructors who participate in the portfolio groups a sense of shared responsibility and camaraderie. In creating a public culture of teaching,

portfolio groups appear to create conditions for motivating faculty members to assist one another as colleagues. GVSU's current first-year writing director, Keith Rhodes, believes "it's pretty clear we've developed a sense that we're all in this together, and that all the teachers have some stake in how well students do in each section. We help each other with teaching in every sense—with problems, with assignments, with exercises, with materials. It seems to have a natural connection with the shared grading" (personal communication, May 2013). Teachers in the study said they found the cooperative atmosphere, reflective dialogue, and the sense of community enabled them to thrive as educators. Many instructors credit the portfolio grading groups with making them stronger teachers and assessors of writing. For example, adjunct professor Phillip noted, "the portfolio grading groups have helped me become a better professor than I was six years before." Phillip and other faculty in the study said that for them the assessment groups were a powerful training ground for teachers because they got to learn through modeling, mentoring, and talking with colleagues. Promoting a sense of community is important to assure the continued development of professional and personal relationships within the department (Akerlind, 2005). These joint connections can facilitate collegial collaboration with others inside and outside of the portfolio assessment groups. Making the effort to create a tightly knit community among the faculty appears to have positively affected the quality of life in GVSU's first-year writing program. And that, in turn, has improved the quality of the teachers' work and the department's educational offerings.

Departmental equalizer. In the confines of the portfolio grading groups, faculty ranks or specialization seemed to have limited importance. Writing instructors in the study said that the portfolio groups helped teachers view each other as colleagues and equals rather than competitive rivals. Visitor Susan supports this viewpoint, suggesting she does not see much difference between the roles of tenured professors versus non-tenured: adjunct, affiliate, and

visiting professors. “I think that people are generally just trying to help students write well and that we all have that goal. I think the portfolio groups, if anything, help to equalize our roles in the department—it seems to be a more democratic approach where everyone can have a say in grades and rubrics,” she explained. Many professors, like Susan, said they credit this collective goal for creating the sense of equity present in GVSU’s freshman writing program. Additionally, the high value the department places on WRT 150 and its investment in the portfolio grading groups makes teachers feel like they play an important role in the academic unit. Other study participants said they attribute this sense of equality in how affiliate, adjunct, and visiting faculty members are treated as contributing members of the department. For example, professors in the non-tenured positions often co-present at conferences with tenured professors and participate in curricular matters in the first-year writing program. As an adjunct instructor, Phillip feels his “role is the same as all other professors by abiding and fulfilling the responsibilities as a teacher while working in the Writing Department.” Because GVSU’s portfolio grading group structure tries to value all teacher voices, adjunct study participants stated they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts with the group. Another adjunct professor Helen, who was in a portfolio group made up of mostly adjuncts and visitors this semester, said she was “unaware of any hierarchy or difference in the way comments and suggestions to the group are received. As a member of this group, I feel as though I am treated equally.” Some of the teachers involved in the study speculated that part of this perceived lack of hierarchy may be due to the fact that when adjunct, visiting, affiliate and tenure-track professors belong to the same group they get to see their classes at the same level.

Also, all instructors, regardless of rank, appear to be recognized by other writing teachers for their expertise in these groups, their contributions seem to be equally valued. Hank explains his view of the equalizing force that the assessment groups have on the department:

> I hear from those who have been adjuncts in other schools that they go in, do their job, and no one ever talks to them or in most cases even acknowledges their presence. Even as an adjunct here I never got that feeling. I always have felt that, even as an adjunct and now as an affiliate professor, that what I have to say was valued, that my contribution to the group was accepted at face value, and that I matter to the department. It's a good feeling.

For contingent faculty in the study, a sense of equity was directly related to their sense of fitting in and being treated with respect by colleagues. According to Scott, his experience has been that any group member—adjunct, visitor, affiliate, or tenure-track—who is competent, invested, and willing to listen to others is treated with respect and given equal consideration in the portfolio groups throughout the semester. This study finding highlights how portfolio assessment groups can potentially bring faculty members of all ranks together on a collegial level as equals, a very important part of building community in a department.

Healthy workplace. Based on the study's findings, it appears that GVSU's Writing Department and its faculty members have benefitted immensely from the implementation of portfolio grading groups. Many writing teachers in the study cited the assessment groups as a major contributor to the positive workplace culture present in the department and the composition program. According to study participants, belonging to a portfolio group, with its small, focused, cooperative activity was a great positive social interaction in the workplace. Teachers in the study also reported that the communal spirit of the groups caused them to feel more satisfied as employees on a personal and professional level. New visitor Karen agreed; "[i]t makes me feel more comfortable in teaching writing, even for the simple reason that liking my place of employment makes me a happier, more relaxed person." As substantiated by Karen and other teachers in this section, the assessment groups the department a more fulfilling place to

work. In turn, teachers in the study said they felt a greater sense of motivation and energy to excel in their teaching jobs because they took part in the portfolio groups. In the following excerpt Sierra elaborates on how she felt the portfolio groups kept her energized as a teacher:

> I am nervous that I'll get in a rut, teaching tired exercises, readings, etc. to my students because they once worked or were relevant but now are a little flaccid. With each semester, group members get to see the results of several writing assignments that are not their own, and this can be inspiring. Further, as we discuss student papers in the portfolio groups, professors often offer insights about the way they model papers, the way they comment, and what supplemental activities they include to assure that their students can write the best papers possible. All these things can keep a professor energized and feel less isolated, especially since we are in a new group each and every term.

Being exposed to a variety of teachers, their teaching styles, assignments, and sample papers seemed to inspire participants to remain open to new ideas and ways of doing things. In their personal interviews and reflections the vast majority of instructors in the study expressed that the groups gave them a strong sense of community, and stressed that they felt the department is good about encouraging faculty to interact with each other in order to form collegial relationships. Related research indicates that the level of support an academic unit offers plays a significant role in the ways that faculty members perform as teachers and act as colleagues (Massy, Wilger, & Colbeck, 1994). As this study documents, due to the department's supportive nature, faculty members said they felt that they valued teaching more, frequently interacted with one another, and were more tolerant of differences about theory and practices, experienced greater equality among different faculty ranks, and offered collegial support to peers. Such behaviors seem to indicate that the portfolio groups help create a strong peer work environment.

Study participants said the department's positive work climate can be largely attributed to the level of trust and respect that colleagues feel for one another. Teachers who participated in the portfolio grading groups stated that trust means that everyone will have honest conversations, will challenge one another, and be willing to take risks together. During the nearly 50 hours of group observations I conducted, participants often made themselves vulnerable by sharing classroom problems they were struggling with, offering candid, constructive feedback on certain assignments or teaching scenarios, or proposing new ways of teaching something. Gilles, who not only piloted the original portfolio group, but also participated in dozens after that, said "[m]eeting for an hour a week with colleagues can't help but develop mutual understanding and respect" (personal communication, May 2013). Many of the study participants had a similar assessment to Gilles', noting effective portfolio groups were respectful and accepting of each other's assignments and teaching perspectives. Long-term affiliate Michelle said she believes that what makes a successful assessment group is cooperation and respect among the members. She described her current portfolio group in the passage below:

> Our group this semester met these criteria; therefore, it was a pleasant group to be in. Instead of feeling dread and frustration when meeting—feelings that arise in me in group meetings when there is a lack of cooperation and respect—it was enjoyable to meet. With this kind of environment, work is competed faster because there is no need for one member to try and outdo the other member, impressing all with her superior knowledge of writing.

Most writing professors in the study said they agreed that portfolio groups are most valuable when members can work effectively together and enjoy working with one another. Additionally, the teachers stated they found the work challenging and appreciated the fact that they work for an academic unit that offers opportunities for professional development. Therefore, study

participants have positive working relationships with peers and a positive perception of their workplace.

Limitations of the Study

Length. There are a few limitations to this study, most of which are associated with the length of the study, my status as an insider-researcher, and the lack of problematic behavior or conflict among study participants. As explicated in Chapter Three, GVSU's freshman portfolio program seemed an excellent context in which to conduct the research study. The location of the site was convenient and allowed me to devote needed time to the study. The length of my engagement in the field setting (i.e., one semester) where the ethnography took place was brief compared to many ethnographic studies. According to LeCompte and Schensul (1999), "typically "ethnographers spend many months or even years in the places where they conduct their research often forming lasting bonds with people" (p. 76). However, in some cases researchers have designed modifications of traditional ethnography that accommodate to shortened time lines. In order to make this successful, the researcher must be familiar with the field setting and be able to understand the cultural context.

Insider-Research Status. As a teacher at GVSU, I also had insider access to the site. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) "identified key advantages of being an insider-researcher: (a) having a greater understanding of the culture being studied; (b) not altering the flow of social interaction unnaturally; and (c) having an established intimacy which promotes both the telling and the judging of truth" (as cited in Unluer, 2012, p. 1) Further, as an insider-researcher I knew the official chain of command and how GVSU's portfolio grading groups really work. According to Smyth and Holian (2008), "insider-researchers also know how to best approach people. In general, native researchers have a great deal of knowledge, which takes an outsider a long time

to acquire" (as cited in Unluer, 2012, p. 1). However, I recognize that my insider status in this very community can be a limitation.

As an insider-researcher I sometimes struggled to strike a balance between my native role and the researcher role during my time conducting the study. As an insider, I had to take extra measures to ensure that I was receiving or seeing important information that I might otherwise see as unimportant or mundane. Hermann (1989) found that in "any insider research if the researcher does not take serious precautions to prevent this issue, the researcher's needs, critical to the study, may not be met" (as cited in Unluer, 2012, p. 7). Additionally, my insider status sometimes caused the study participants to assume I already knew what they knew. Therefore, I sometimes had to conduct follow-ups with study participants via email or in person to collect additional data. In order to see the bigger picture and avoid bias in my research, I confronted my own blind spots. In order to do this, I employed a peer debriefer who made pointed observations and suggestions and posed devil's advocate questions throughout the process.

Lack of Conflict. One last limitation of the study was during the semester that I conducted the study the portfolio grading groups appeared to devoid of any real conflict. The three assessment groups I observed did not exhibit negative behaviors (e.g. verbal attacks on teaching style, dominant personalities taking over groups, etc.) during the semester I studied them. Discussion of these types of behavior would seem to be an expected result of studying group dynamics. However, teacher participants only discussed these types of behaviors occurring in past groups they belonged to during a previous semester, which is briefly touched on. Therefore, I was unable to extensively report on these types of findings in my study.

Future Research

Decade Long Gap in the Research. The results of this study have several important implications for future research. Many of the original studies completed on portfolio grading

groups date back to the late 1980s into the early 2000s. Aside from Belanoff and Elbow (1986), Durst, Roemer, and Schultz (1994), Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000), and Broad (2003) no composition researcher has studied the tremendous potential portfolio assessment groups offer for writing instructors' professional growth and feelings of professional community. Limited research has been conducted on the impact portfolio assessment groups have on writing teachers over the last decade. This study encourages more composition scholars to explore the non-assessment benefits of these groups. Such studies should also provide more significant detail on the changes made to teachers' practices; instead of alluding to change without explicit documentation or detail. Additionally, many of these original studies were conducted in compressed timeframes, such as a single semester. Therefore, any future study could be expanded to further test and solidify the findings of the original study or perhaps even reveal new findings. For example, in future research I conduct on GVSU's portfolio assessment groups, I plan to study these groups over several consecutive semesters rather than a single semester to expand the sample size.

Research Sites. A number of composition scholars have also called for the study of teacher communities in order to better examine the local contexts in which teaching occurs (Broad, 2003; Elbow & Belanoff, 1986; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 1993; Marshall, 2008; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Stenberg, 2005; Wetherbee Phelps, 1991). Because my research focused on such a specific local context, it might encourage other compositionists to study their first-year writing programs or English departments as sites for potential teacher inquiry. For example, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study to mine at another research site where first-year writing teachers collaboratively assess student writing in portfolio grading groups. It would help answer the question: would I get these same results if I conducted my study in a different setting? Additionally, although teachers' perceptions about the value of portfolio assessment groups are

both valid and valuable, understanding the outcomes of these endeavors on teaching practice and student learning would also be crucial. There is evidence, as my study highlighted, that portfolio groups do impact teaching in a variety of ways. What, however, does the evidence tell us about the effects on students? This makes it pressing for future studies to demonstrate how teachers' work in portfolio grading groups improves student learning.

Non-Assessment Teacher Communities. In the realm of composition studies, writing professors have narrowly reported on the use of different teacher communities (e.g. teaching circles, in-house workshops, writers groups, and graduate mentoring groups) to promote genuine discussion and mutual respect building within their composition programs and/or departments. While these communities might take different shapes and forms from the portfolio assessment groups, they remain centered on collaboration, inquiry, reflection, and community building. Therefore, studies of other types of teacher communities, for instance, which are not assessment-based groups, could also be conducted. Studying these types of communities could provide the field with a better perspective into how effective professional exchanges can occur within respective English departments when teachers have time and space and no assessment component. This type of research is important to conduct because there is limited discussion of non-assessment teacher communities currently happening in composition studies. An additional study could examine English departments and composition programs with no portfolio groups and that do not offer teachers the time and space for professional exchange. These variables could then be compared and contrasted with my original study's findings (e.g. isolation, pedagogy, collegiality, etc.).

Formal versus Informal Exchange. Other future research topics sprang from my study including conversations about informal versus formal collegial exchange. Many of the writing teachers I spoke with outside of GVSU found that in their workplace teacher-to-teacher

interactions transpired in a culture of *informal* professional exchange in hallways, at the copy machine, in the parking lot, and even in faculty bathrooms. It would be interesting to conduct a study that compares these types of informal exchanges with the more formal professional exchanges that occurred in the portfolio grading groups in my original study.

Workplace Culture. A few of the findings from the original study highlight a number of new avenues that could be explored in future studies, especially findings that I did not originally anticipate. For example, how portfolio assessment groups are perceived as a major contributor to positive workplace culture in the department could be explored further. My data suggested a positive impact on teacher morale as a result of participation in the portfolio groups. Teachers reported an increased sense of community and collegiality as they participated in these groups. This type of change in teacher culture, which has traditionally been described as isolationist seems to be fertile ground for future study on how these dynamics lead to fundamental shifts in the way that teachers approach their work. This research could lead also to a model of an effective healthy writing program, since this is the wave of the future—writing programs separate from English departments.

Implications

Writing Teachers. This study has important implications for writing teachers, the field of composition studies, professional teacher organizations, departments of English and writing program administrators who oversee first-year writing programs. The findings of this study speak **loud** and **clear**: writing teachers both *want* and *need* opportunities for active and reflective dialogue in a professional community. I find it hard to fathom how I could teach writing without the professional connections I find at writing conferences, in e-mail or phone communication with my doctoral colleagues, or in my conversations with the books and journals in the field. However, I readily admit that I would not be the teacher I am today without the teacher-to-

teacher connections experienced in GVSU's portfolio assessment groups. Teachers in this study solidly demonstrate the value of regularly meeting with colleagues to talk about what is happening in our composition classrooms. While collegial exchanges do appear to happen informally in public restrooms, hallways, and by the copy machine, most instructors are not fully satisfied with these random drive-by encounters. They *shouldn't* be. Teachers need to more strongly voice their feelings of isolation, longing for community, and the little support they receive for faculty development from their colleges and departments. This study calls for us to rise above tenure systems, faculty rank, curriculum, schedules, and any other factors that limit time and space for teachers to get together. We must ensure that more formal opportunities for collegial exchange occur for the benefit of all writing teachers. These professional exchanges need not take the shape of portfolio grading groups, but the implication is that teachers need local spaces within their departments where they can openly dialogue with colleagues about their mutual interest—the teaching of college level writing. Creating teacher communities is one way to fill this void in composition studies.

The Discipline. The study's findings have implications not only for writing teachers on a local level, but the field of composition at large. Our *real* work, or at least part of it, *is* teaching first-year composition, each semester. One would expect that we would have plentiful and ongoing discussion of what we are doing in our writing courses with each other. But, we don't, and this is largely due to the perception that teaching is a solitary act. This study points to teacher communities as a way to *shift* teaching from an *individual, sequestered* activity in order to reposition the composition classroom as a *public* space. In making our teaching and our classrooms more public in these teacher communities, we can also begin to discuss, and potentially address many writing teachers' lack of formalized training and instructional experience in composition pedagogy. The troublesome fact is that many of the instructors

teaching composition today are still relying on memories of their own freshman writing experience, their experiences as teaching assistants, department reviews, and whatever random remarks we hear in the restroom to help construct our first-year writing courses. Yet, the teacher participants' narratives of pedagogical development via the assessment groups point to progress we can make in lessening the burden of teachers learning how to teach alone or through less effective means.

English Departments and Writing Programs. Additionally, the study's findings have implications for departments of English and writing programs. The sense of collegiality and community-building fostered in GVSU's own Department of Writing speaks to the great potential teacher communities have in bringing faculty of different specializations and ranks together for cooperative interactions. As illustrated in Chapter One, several compositionists have documented the use of a range of teacher communities in promoting genuine discussion and mutual respect building within their departments and writing programs. Whether it is a traditional teaching circle, a graduate student mentoring group, in-house conference, or even a writers group, teachers in these studies, as in my own study, reported forging strong collegial relationships and professionally developing as instructors. These multiple examples highlight how such intellectual communities within departments and programs can lead teachers to exchange ideas with peers, take interest in each other's work, or collaborate with one another. Though collegial exchange remains a limited scholarship thread, the findings underscore the need for more published scholarship on professional exchange in composition studies.

Discipline's Journals. While we need to challenge the virtual silence that permeates many English departments and composition programs, it appears we also need to do this in the discipline's journals. As I flip through the pages of the well-known journals in rhetoric and composition like College English and College Composition and Communication there tends to

be less publication about teaching now. As the findings of the study emphasize, teachers are hungry for pedagogical conversation not only with peers, but in the texts of their field. Scholars such as Hendricks (2009), Holberg and Taylor (2001), Holdstein (2011), Stenberg (2005) are also questioning why pedagogy is a marginalized subject in composition studies when it occupies the center of most of our work as compositionists. Part of the reason for this may be the continuing division between teaching work and scholarly work. Despite our claims of valuing pedagogy and embracing a teaching professor model, we continue to cling to the research professor model of yester yore where an instructors' growth exclusively on the master of a subject. Unfortunately, in this traditional model, which we continue to abide by, writing teachers are self-developing individuals who are done learning how to teach when they graduate. However, observing teachers in my study gives me hope that we are having success in dismantling this harmful research paradigm in place of a better model, one that views teachers as learners and sees teaching as a site for communal scholarly inquiry for the benefit of students, teachers, and writing programs.

Final Thoughts

Today as I see new fresh-faced teachers arrive into GVSU's Department of Writing each semester, I feel they are in good hands. I know they will be supported, mentored, and taught by the same portfolio group colleagues that nurtured me so long ago and continue to nurture me on my teaching journey. However, I wish many others could experience the power a collaborative teacher community has to *connect*, *challenge*, *awaken*, and *inspire* teachers. Countless writing teachers continue to work alone without the benefit of a *supportive professional community*. I join others in our field (Broad, 2003; Elbow & Belanoff, 1986; Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 1993; Marshall, 2008; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Stenberg, 2005; Wetherbee Phelps, 1991) calling for the formation of teacher communities where composition professors can come together on a local

level to dialogue about their *mutual interest*—the teaching of college writing. The findings of this study point to the many merits of using teacher portfolio assessment groups. As this study shows, these assessment groups hold great potential to serve as modern day teaching circles where teachers feel *less alone* in their teaching careers. This study offers data showing that assessment groups can be an effective form of faculty development because novice and veteran instructors alike in the groups gain *much-needed* support from colleagues, share teaching stories, reflect on their own teaching, and find motivation and inspiration to change their teaching practices. The findings of this study speak to the great potential of assessment groups to have a deeper impact on the teaching of first-year writing and the development of composition teachers. The composition instructors in this study had a palpable desire for collegial exchange which I believe was effectively met by their membership in the portfolio assessment groups at GVSU. We need to find more ways to meet teachers' needs for collegiality and membership in local professional communities. Even if an institution does not want portfolio grading, they should provide a space for this sort of collaboration. It does not have to be in a portfolio groups; but it does need to be somewhere on the landscape of teaching. I would not be the writing teacher I am today without my teacher community—GVSU's portfolio assessment groups.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

- How long have you been employed by Grand Valley State University's Writing Department? In what capacity?
- How many portfolio grading groups have you participated in?
- How did you become a writing teacher?
- What is your educational background?
- How would you describe your teaching philosophy/approach to teaching?
- How has your teaching changed in the past five years? In what ways?
- What do you perceive as your teaching strengths? Weaknesses?
- Do you feel you take an active role in the improvement of instruction in the department? If yes, how so?
- How has your teaching changed from participating in these groups?
- What do you see as the major benefits of the portfolio grading groups? Drawbacks?
- How would you describe your relationship with other teachers in the portfolio grading groups?
- How do you think the portfolio grading groups fit in with the mission of the department and the university?
- How has participating in portfolio grading groups improved your teaching and/or encouraged your growth as a teacher?
- How do you think students benefit from your participation in the portfolio grading group?
- Do you seek out opportunities to increase knowledge of your subject? How so?

- Please describe the professional development opportunities (e.g., professional conferences, workshops or organizations) you participate in.
- What have you learned about yourself as a teacher or about WRT 150 from participating in this portfolio grading group?
- Within your discipline, which area do you regard as your strongest? Your weakest?
- What is your greatest asset as a classroom teacher? Your greatest shortcoming?
- Which teaching approach works best for your discipline? Why?
- Do you change methods to meet new classroom situations? Can you give a recent example?
- What is your primary goal with respect to your students?
- How would you describe the atmosphere in your classroom? Are you satisfied with it?
- In what ways have you tried to stay current in the subjects you teach?
- How would you judge your knowledge in the subjects you teach? Do you think your colleagues agree with that judgment?
- What have you done or could you do to broaden and deepen your knowledge of the subject matter?
- What is the one thing that you would most like to change about your teaching? What have you done about changing it?
- What would you most like your students to remember about you as a teacher ten years from now?
- Overall, how effective do you think you are as a teacher? Would your colleagues agree? Your students?

- Which courses do you teach most effectively?
- In what way has your teaching changed in the last five years? Ten years? Are these changes for the better? Why or why not?
- How are your beliefs about teaching and learning reflected in your actions as a teacher?
- Do you provide assistance to colleagues on teaching matters? If so, in what ways?
- What, to you, are the great and wonderful rewards of teaching? Why is teaching important? How do you want to make the world or at least higher education better? When you are overworked and feel undervalued, to what ideals do you return in order to rejuvenate yourself and inspire your students? How do you want to make a difference in the lives of your students?
- How have you improved your syllabus since the last time you taught the course?
- What are your current research interests?
- What is the source of my ideas about language teaching?
- Where am I in my professional development?
- How am I developing as a writing teacher?

Appendix B: Reflective Journal Prompts

- What was interesting about the first meeting, initial impressions, etc?

- What unique perspective do you think you bring to the portfolio group? This could be based on work experience, your professional interests, who you are as a teacher, etc. What do you feel you have to offer other teachers in your group?

- What do you perceive are the benefits of being part of a portfolio-grading group? What do you get out of these weekly, semester-long meetings from a personal and professional standpoint? Feel free to include specific examples that support your points.

- What do you think of Grand Valley State University's portfolio-based grading system? What do you see as the benefits and/or drawbacks to students, teachers, the writing program, department and the university?

- Since it's nearing mid-term time I would like to have you to reflect on how you think your portfolio-grading group is going so far for you this semester.

- As an adjunct/affiliate/visitor what role do you feel you play in GVSU's Department of Writing? How do you think other instructors view that role? In what way(s) does the role you play in the department impact the portfolio-grading groups (past or present)?

- Teaching has long been viewed as a private, individualistic and isolated activity. Often the prospect of peers in the classroom as observers or even collaborators makes some instructors uneasy. How do you think portfolio-grading groups challenge these assumptions? What do you see as the benefits and/or drawbacks of making teaching more public and less privatized?

- In his book, *Writing Relationships*, compositionist Lad Tobin reinforces the importance of teaching relationships stating, "if we want to become better writing teachers, we need to develop better writing relationships; and if we want to develop better writing relationships, we need to start by carefully examining, analyzing, and telling stories about

the peer relationships that currently exist in our departments and in our discipline" (142). He goes on to say, "it is that relationship-the one that any writing teacher has to her colleagues in her department and in her discipline-that provides the context and often the direction for the teacher-student and student-student relationships in the class" (142). What is your reaction to such claims?

- For this week's prompts I want to ask you about makes a successful portfolio-grading group? How do you determine whether a portfolio-grading group experience has been successful for you or not? What have been the highs and lows for you in your portfolio-grading groups this semester? Have you learned anything new?

- Now that the semester is over (yeah!) what are your final impressions of your portfolio-grading group? What did you learn from being in your group this semester? Do you plan to change anything related to your teaching (course content, teaching style, etc.) from being in the group? If so, in what ways?