

Teaching Women Writers in First-Year Composition: Dealing with Student Discomfort When

Teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

by

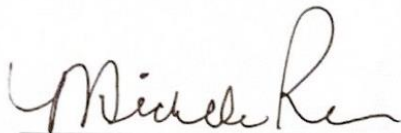
Samantha P. Conner

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for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Michele Ren

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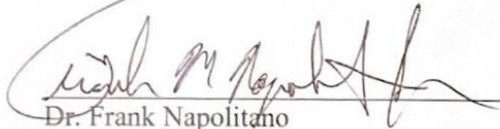
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Dr. Michele Ren
Thesis Advisor

3/30/23

Date



Dr. Frank Napolitano
Thesis Committee Member

3/30/2023

Date



Dr. Paige Horst
Thesis Committee Member

3/30/23

Date

Abstract

This thesis explores composition pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and feminist composition pedagogy along with scholarship on Zora Neale Hurston. I use these strategies and scholarship to create lesson plans and activities for a first-year composition (FYC) course focusing on using Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, to teach writing. I discuss the overall goals of first-year composition and the challenges that arise when deciding what to include in FYC syllabi. Discussions of student voice, dialect, and audience awareness are also highlighted in my research on composition studies.

Moving beyond the importance of composition, I extend my research explaining how to successfully practice feminist pedagogical strategies in a FYC classroom. Using these strategies can help alleviate and/or prevent some student discomfort that may occur when using Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to teach writing and critical thinking. If discomfort does occur, I provide several strategies to help students use their emotions in their writing and provide them with more opportunities to process their ideas in a more productive way. Overall, this thesis provides a framework for educators seeking to teach women writers, specifically Zora Neale Hurston, using feminist pedagogy in their FYC classrooms.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my students. Without each of you, I would not be half the teacher that I am today. You have challenged me, and you have encouraged me. You have made me laugh, and you have made me cry. You have pushed me out of my comfort zone, and I do not plan on going back. Your new perspectives will surely benefit all of my students to come. This project would not have been possible without you.

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Dr. Horst, you have been an incredible mentor to me throughout my time at Radford. You helped me as my academic advisor and professor during my undergraduate study, and continued to serve as my mentor as I completed my student teaching semesters. You helped me develop my "teacher voice" and taught me the importance of making sure that all of my students' voices are heard. Your lessons are a large part of why I chose to highlight Hurston and student voice in my thesis.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their support throughout my school career. Mom and Dad, thank you for teaching me that I can do anything I set my mind to. Instilling that confidence into me at an early age is what got me here. Serena, thanks for always giving me a hard time and pushing me to be the best version of myself (I know you love me!). Sierra, thank you for Tuesday night FaceTime calls, spontaneous trips to new places, and Taylor Swift concerts. You keep me in balance. Nick, thank you for being my rock when the hard days just get too much to handle. You always have my back and believe in me when I find it hard to believe in myself. Six years down, forever to go!

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Introduction

Using the ideas of feminist, composition, and literary scholars and educators alike, I answer the question: How can I teach women writers of color in first-year composition using feminist pedagogy and face the inevitable student backlash in a productive way? I provide examples and research illustrating how best to teach Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in a first-year composition course that highlights feminist themes and women writers using feminist pedagogical strategies while meeting the learning outcomes of a foundational writing course. In the process of undertaking this task, I focus on how to deal with any student discomfort that is sure to arise when teaching complex topics such as race, women writers, feminism, and composition.

Using Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an example, I develop lessons and activities that consider the needs of a first-year composition course and student reactions to feminist pedagogical strategies. Hurston's novel opens many gateways to critically thinking and writing about themes such as race, gender roles, and identity. These themes translate to the major goals of many first-year composition courses as students are being introduced to complex discussions of gender, sexual orientation, race, and language. For example, these types of discussions will satisfy the WPA Outcomes for First-Year Composition especially in the category of rhetorical knowledge. Many first-year students are also exploring who they are as individuals, and many use their time in college to develop an identity outside of their parents' identity. Hurston is developing her own ideas and identity in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, thus making this novel a great starting point for discussion, self-reflection, and writing in the classroom.

Furthermore, Hurston is described as a “loving champion of the Black vernacular,” which invites discussion of language, writing, and dialect (Bernard 146). Her inclusion of Black vernacular in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* allows for classroom discussions involving code-switching and students’ own dialects. Teaching dialect and code-switching alongside Hurston’s novel opens up opportunities for students to connect to the novel in a more personal way. I present lessons on dialect, voice, and code-switching to celebrate the voices of my students and explain the importance of Hurston’s use of dialect in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. When paired with feminist pedagogical strategies and appropriate methods of dealing with student discomfort, teaching Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as the primary text of first-year composition courses serves to increase first-year students’ critical thinking, reading comprehension, and writing skills.

The main purpose of my research is to provide a framework for first-year composition instructors interested in teaching a freshman composition course using feminist pedagogical strategies, theories, and texts. Previous scholarship surrounding my topic has mainly looked at the elements of my research separately. The three separate elements are first-year composition, feminist pedagogy, and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. There seems to be the most overlap in studies of feminist pedagogy and how to deal with student backlash. For example, Karen Dodwell’s article “Marketing and Teaching a Women’s Literature Course to Culturally Conservative Students” identifies ways to help more conservative students open up to feminist ideas and learn how to use their discomfort to dive deeper into class discussion topics. While these ideas are helpful to my research and writing, there is minimal discussion on how to implement these practices when teaching specific works of literature.

While there is overlap, my thesis expands the ideas previously discussed regarding both feminist pedagogy and student discomfort in the classroom. Many articles such as Dodwell's are also geared toward teaching feminist theory and using feminist pedagogical strategies in only women's literature or women's and gender studies classes; however, I extend this scholarship further by illustrating how instructors can use these same strategies to teach first-year composition and still meet the needs of the all-inclusive first-year composition course.

My thesis further adds to the conversation about Zora Neale Hurston's works by including information about how to lesson plan and design a course that teaches *Their Eyes Were Watching God* using feminist pedagogical strategies and feminist theory. Strategies associated with teaching Hurston were lacking in my preliminary research. Most scholars only talk about biographical information in addition to criticisms of her work with no in-depth discussion of how to teach her works. The few articles that I did find on teaching Hurston in first-year composition were 20 years old or older.¹ My thesis will provide a more relevant way of teaching Zora Neale Hurston using feminist pedagogy to twenty-first-century freshman. Using specific examples from my own first-year composition classrooms, I highlight the feminist activities and discussions that went well and those that did not go as planned. I also provide additional resources and ideas for teaching women writers, specifically Hurston, in Appendix D.

Chapter One of my thesis discusses the multitude of responsibilities that a first-year composition instructor has and the ways that these responsibilities could be met using feminist pedagogical strategies. I will include information from Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" and discuss the limits of a composition classroom designed to only highlight the academic voice

¹ See Brenda Greene's "Addressing Race, Class, and Gender in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Strategies & Reflections."

and how first-year composition could be improved using feminist pedagogical strategies. I demonstrate how my activities enhance critical thinking and provide insight from previous scholarship as well as my own classroom experiences to support my claims. I also take a pro-literature approach to using literature in first-year composition, extending the ideas of Gary Tate and countering those of Erika Lindemann in the ongoing debate that started in the 1990s. There has been limited scholarship in support of using literature to teach writing, so I present examples of classes where literature is used to teach writing and discuss the outcomes and benefits to reading comprehension skills.

Moving to Chapter Two, I begin to focus more on feminist composition pedagogy. I discuss practices of transparent teaching, small-group discussions, revision, and journaling. The overall goal of the writing instructor who wishes to implement feminist pedagogical strategies is to decenter oneself from the position of power. I discuss ways to share the power in the classroom with students to aid in this practice of decentering. Implementing these practices of feminist pedagogy in any classroom helps prevent student discomfort. Students should be challenged, not panicked, about the discussion and/or writing material. If discomfort does happen, I offer tools and strategies from other scholars and my own classroom to illustrate how to use discomfort in a productive way. My goal is to determine how best to use students' emotions to help them understand themselves better and be able to incorporate those feelings into their writing.

The final chapter of my thesis focuses specifically on Zora Neale Hurston and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Throughout this novel, Hurston includes themes of resisting patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles through Janie's life experiences moving from one husband to the next. Hurston's novel also comments on racial discrimination in the 1930s from Janie's

realization of her race as a child through her time spent working on the muck. By discussing this novel, students have the opportunity to develop critical reading skills and enrich critical thinking skills as they parallel 1930s race and gender discrimination to modern instances of race and gender discrimination. This section provides ideas for lesson plans and classroom activities that combine both feminist pedagogy with lessons covering *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Using the information about teaching Hurston from previous scholarship along with the activities suggested in Chapter One, this chapter serves as a teaching resource for any first-year composition instructor looking to teach Hurston and/or her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I include original examples of lessons that employ feminist pedagogy that I have tried out in my own ENGL 111 class and discuss my students' performance and reception of those lessons. I share what went well and how they could be improved. Chapter Three will be a culmination of all of my research on first-year composition, feminist pedagogy, and dealing with student backlash as I apply my knowledge to create lessons and activities for a first-year composition course centered around Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Chapter One: Teaching First-Year Composition

First-year composition (FYC) is one of the first college-level classes that many incoming freshmen will have to take at any university. This course has different goals depending on the university, but many first-year composition instructors ask the same question: How do I teach everything students need to know in one single semester? FYC instructors are often faced with hard decisions of what should be cut from their syllabi and what are the most valued topics that should be left in the syllabus. After all, most freshman in FYC courses will not be English majors and will most likely have some challenging emotions to work through surrounding writing. This chapter explores the important topics necessary to teach in a FYC course at any university.

FYC courses across the nation act as foundational college writing courses, and there is debate among universities and individual instructors as to what are the most important aspects of composition to include in the FYC curriculum that best teach a variety of learners from different backgrounds. I currently teach ENGL 111 and ENGL 112 at Radford University as a Graduate Teaching Fellow. In my first ENGL 111 class, as Radford University codes FYC, I did not teach a single English major. Most were nurses, criminal justice majors, and business professionals. I found myself asking, “How can I teach my students composition in a way that is transferable to their own disciplines?” As feminist scholar and writer, Charlie Zhang, insists, “Higher education plays an active and vital role in cultivating and fostering potentialities, tendencies, and momentums for structural changes to take place on macrolevels” (206). Because higher education plays such a large role in societal changes, it makes sense that FYC should be an introduction into public discourse, rhetoric, and, of course, writing. The Council of Writing

Program Administrators (CWPA) offers a list of outcomes that all students leaving the FYC classroom should have learned.

Two important composition goals that the CWPA says all FYC courses could include are rhetorical knowledge and critical thinking. The Council defines rhetorical knowledge as “the ability to analyze contexts and audiences and then to act on that analysis in comprehending and creating texts.” They explain that critical thinking is “the ability to analyze, synthesize, interpret, and evaluate ideas, information, situations, and texts” (CWPA). These two aspects of composition strengthen students’ skills for debating and supporting claims. Finding evidence to support claims will be a practice that students will need in all their courses. It will allow them to become more comfortable stating their opinion, not only in writing, but also orally. It helps them break away from values and beliefs that their parents and guardians may have had and incorporate their own values in a safe environment. Designing an FYC course around these outcomes will ultimately set students up for success in the workplace and allow them to begin to see themselves as active members of society. According to the CWPA, incorporating these skills into FYC courses will allow students to transfer the skills learned in composition class to their own fields as they develop “strategies for reading a range of texts in their fields” and negotiate “purpose, audience, context, and conventions as they compose a variety of texts for different situations” (CWPA). While these aspects are important to FYC, they are not the only two skills necessary to measure the success of a FYC course.

In addition to these CWPA outcomes, universities often have their own set of goals in place for their respective FYC courses. For example, at my institution, Radford University, we have a general education program called REAL that all students must complete to graduate.

ENGL 111 serves as our foundational writing course. Radford University has the following guidelines for instructors designing FYC courses called REAL Learning Outcomes:

- Students employ reading strategies to facilitate written communication.
- Students engage in the recursive writing process, including pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading to improve written communication.
- Students use appropriate vocabulary, mechanics, grammar, and style. (Radford University)

The Radford University English Department also has some additional outcomes that align with the field of English, specifically composition. Those two goals are:

- Students are able to produce a unified, developed essay that supports a thesis.
- Students use rhetorical principles as they write for appropriate audiences and purposes.

While these learning outcomes are important for each student in FYC to learn, these are not the only valuable skills that should be taught in a FYC course.

FYC scholar, Kathleen Yancey, writes in her article “Attempting the Impossible: Designing a First-Year Composition Course,” “...campuses often take the narrow outcomes focus and extend it outward to include their own specific foci” and that universities also “...see FYC as an empty vessel available for other projects, especially those related to student retention” (322). Yancey views the concept of an “empty vessel” as a negative way to look at FYC courses. She believes that universities try to focus these foundational writing courses around student retention while forgetting about the overall importance of teaching writing in these classes. While I agree with Yancey that universities should not view all FYC courses as empty vessels, I argue that there is room for helping students adjust to college life through writing. Where

Yancey uses the phrase “empty vessel” as criticism against the university, I view this “empty vessel” as an opportunity to show students how to “college.”

My justification for viewing FYC as an “empty vessel” of opportunity is because FYC courses are foundational writing courses; they offer the foundational writing skills that all college students will need to succeed in any and all courses at the university level. In order to fill up my FYC “empty vessel,” I decided that I needed to include strategies and practices relevant to all (or most) majors and not just English majors. I needed to provide students with opportunities to create their own university experience, not just invent the university for them, as Bartholomae suggests. To do this, I first shifted from MLA citation requirements to APA citation requirements for the course, as most other disciplines use APA. I then thought about what skills I needed as a freshman who was adjusting to college composition and research. Including lessons on how to navigate D2L, Radford University’s learning management system, and how to research using the library resources were key to my success. My first-year students also seemed to value this information because they could use it in their other courses, even non-English classes, for projects and papers.

Another adjustment to college that first-year students have to make has to do with their freedom in writing. Instead of prompts, they can usually choose their topics based on their interests. Students open up a lot in their FYC essays as they try out different styles of writing and have more freedom to express themselves in a college setting. FYC, at many times, can seem like the catch-all, or even one big therapy session as students attempt to sort through all of the new opportunities and obstacles that college brings. Introducing students to university resources such as student counseling, tutoring centers, and student health centers are necessary to keep students well so that they can write and be successful in their courses.

Though it is important to note the aspects of composition and “fill up the empty vessel,” I argue that it is equally important to note what is missing from composition courses. Instructors must make active decisions about what to exclude. As Yancey puts it, “But the importance and impossibility of FYC is also evidenced by what I haven’t included; those absences – of reading strategies, of evaluating sources, of considering how research is made in multiple fields – are a presence providing a small index to what we need to include” (340). Determining what to include is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching due to such a diversity of student needs. As Yancey accurately titled her article, there is an impossibility when it comes to planning for a FYC course.

After listening to student needs and seeing their struggles with writing in my own classes, it became apparent to me that FYC was more than just a freshman writing class; it should serve as a space to learn not only the foundations of academic writing at the university level, but also as a space to learn the foundations of college and public discourse. FYC is a place for freshman students to explore their identities, commiserate with other students going through similar struggles, and learn how to express their ideas and opinions in writing using college-level texts and organizational structures. It is a place where students can learn the art of academic writing, but also feel vulnerable and experiment with language and beliefs. FYC can shape the rest of their college careers and help them grasp new texts and ways of interpreting meanings.

All of this being said, first-year composition is not one thing. There is no governing force, other than CWPA and university composition course goals, that tells FYC instructors to teach certain texts a particular way and to include novels but not poetry and to include a research essay but not a personal essay. Composing can encompass a multitude of stylistic choices and

voices. Nedra Reynolds has a strong description of what she believes students should get out of a FYC course:

We need to offer students more and greater means of resistance to the thesis-driven essay, rigidly structured paragraphing, and the reductive emphasis on coherence and clarity that still determine so much of academic writing and the service-course ideology of composition programs. For composition we need to rethink radically the forms of writing we find acceptable. The result might be the breakdown of some of the rigid boundaries that separate life and politics inside and outside the academy. (71)

This hope is one that I share with Reynolds. FYC is more than writing essays. It is an outlet for students to express themselves. It is a way for students to become engaged with their own beliefs, values, and politics. FYC is the foundation of a college education.

Teaching students how to write based on their audience is one of the most important foundational skills they will carry with them throughout their careers. Many of the scholars included in this project also view knowing one's audience as one of the top lessons to be taught in FYC. While teaching audience can be helpful for students to learn how to write in an academic and professional setting, it can be daunting for students who may speak and/or write with a dialect. Some scholars, like David Bartholomae, may stress the importance of "writing for the university," explaining that teachers need to take a position of authority and teach students how to write for their specific readers (8-9). He argues that students do not begin college knowing how to "write for the university," and that many instructors expect them to copy the overall look of academic writing without teaching them how to confidently add to academic conversations (9). The expectations of these instructors highlight the importance of first-year composition serving as a foundational college writing course. Slightly contrasting Bartholomae, I

feel it is most valuable to teach students how to compose messages for a multitude of audiences. After all, they may not stay in academia their whole life. They will need to be able to transfer the skills learned in first-year composition to their own majors and their current and future workplaces. Even something as short as a business email is important. Professional writing practice will also help them when communicating with other professors throughout their university career.

Furthermore, Bartholomae states that FYC students "...have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they not only have to do this, they have to do it before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in and before, at least in terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say" (17). Instructors need to offer students opportunities to develop agency. While students need to know how to write in an academic setting, students should not hide their own voices just to please academics. First-year students need to develop confidence in their writing and sharing of ideas, so it is important for FYC instructors to validate what they have to say instead of embodying a domineering, unapproachable instructor that holds all the "power and wisdom."

One scholar that somewhat agrees with Bartholomae is Shirley Logan, a feminist composition scholar. She explains that "...many lack the argumentative skills needed to support their opinions and the adaptive skills needed to address different audiences" (Logan 55). Where she differs slightly from Bartholomae is her idea that student opinions should be incorporated into the classroom. Logan argues, "We won't always change their opinions – and perhaps we should not – but we certainly have a responsibility to teach them how to express those opinions and to challenge the assumptions that support them. A facility with language may be the most liberating pedagogy we can offer" (56). This "facility with language" can be incorporated into

lessons on knowing one's audience as a writer. When I teach FYC, how to write for one's audience is the place I usually start because it will apply to every assignment for my class, as well as the other classes my students are taking.

I typically start with a one-day lesson on informal versus formal writing. Students practice writing to close friends informally and then composing the same message they wrote to their friends to their professor or boss using formal writing. Students enjoy this activity and enjoy sharing how they communicate with friends via texting or social media. I find that after this activity, the emails that I receive about class absences and course questions are easier to understand and have a more professional tone. In addition, it is important to share some guiding questions with students to help them evaluate their audience. Students should consider gender, age, race, geographic location, political views, education level, and other aspects when thinking of audience. For example, I share the example of U.S. newspapers typically being written at an eighth-grade level with my students because that is the average reading level of most U.S. residents. Teaching how to evaluate one's audience sets first-year students up for success at all levels of the university and in the workplace.

In terms of my own teaching, I also vary what kind of audience they write for throughout the semester, so that they have plenty of opportunities to change the way they convey similar messages. For example, I like to include informal journal entries so that students can jot down the ideas in their heads for major assignments or reflect on classroom activities without having to worry about grammar and punctuation. Bartholomae suggests that "error is not a constant feature but a marker in the development of a writer" (18). While their audience is still the instructor, they have a bit more freedom knowing this is a low-risk assignment used to develop their writing skills. They practice formal, academic writing through major essays like the rhetorical analysis. I

grade the rhetorical analysis assignment more strictly than any other assignment because I want them to focus on creating a formal document that demonstrates skills they will need in future college courses and careers in their specific fields.

I also agree with Bartholomae's perspective on students needing to write "self-consciously" (17). Bartholomae explains that to write self-consciously is to operate within certain parameters or in a particular discourse (15). He explains:

Some students are able to enter into a discourse, but, by stylistic maneuvers, to take possession of it at the same time. They don't originate a discourse, but they locate themselves within it aggressively, self-consciously. Here is one particularly successful essay. Notice the specialized vocabulary, but also the way in which the text continually refers to its own language and to the language of others. (15)

Understanding how to locate oneself in Standard English composition is important, though it is equally important to examine one's own language thoroughly before conforming to academic standards. Teaching students to write "self-consciously" is my rationale for including journaling activities and personal essay assignments in FYC. Incorporating assignments that allow students to blend together both informal and formal writing such as the personal essay also assesses how well they can evaluate their audience. While they still need to follow a formal tone, and format the document in academic writing standards, they still have the freedom to add their own voice through informal dialogue if it supports their argument.

These types of assignments can lead to important conversations about code-switching.² Students need to understand how to switch between their informal "home" language to a

² Bartholomae suggests that students often have to write in a code that they do not know (17).

standard English formal language to use when they write formal, academic essays. If I were to require all of my students to write the way that I write because it has been deemed the “correct” way to do it, I would wipe out part of their identities as people and authors. It is also problematic to teach audience this way because it reinforces white, patriarchal power dynamics, as straight white men are often the ones determining what constitutes appropriate writing. The reinforcing of these power dynamics alienates many minoritized students, which may discourage them from continuing in higher education and make them feel less intelligent than their white classmates.

One way to celebrate student identity is to teach them how to write with agency. Teaching FYC students to write “self-consciously” and to celebrate their identities through code-switching leads into ideas of social justice and reform. Composition scholar Maxine Hairston laments that newer models of composition courses are being used as “...vehicles for social reform rather than as student-centered workshops designed to build students’ confidence and competence as writers” (180). While I agree with Hairston about the importance of writing, I contend that FYC instructors have the power to combine writing with practices of social reform in order to provide not only a foundation in writing at the university level, but also a foundation in civic discourse. I am not simply “brainwashing” my students to adopt my beliefs; it is my job as a composition instructor to ensure that they have the option to use their voices for changes they see need to occur. With the practice of critical thinking and the implementation of rhetorical knowledge comes opportunity for social and political transformation. Once students are confident in their writing abilities and can compose their ideas in an organized way, they have power.

In “Exploring Instructor Perception of and Practices for Public Discourses in First-Year Writing Courses,” Jill Parrott et al. claim that combining writing with public discourse “...also

establishes responsibilities for the classroom such as equipping students with tools to explore source integration, academic voice, and audience awareness” (250). The assignments I have described above provide such a tool kit. Analyzing rhetoric and evaluating audience will encourage FYC students to begin to perceive their audience “...as a contemporary, real, thinking public” (254). Royster and Kirsch, two feminist composition scholars, agree with Parrott and me explaining that teaching writing is about demonstrating to students how they can use communication, specifically in written forms, outside of the classroom (60).

Before moving to the realm of public discourse, students need to be at a certain comfort level with their writing abilities. The low-risk journal activities that I mentioned earlier in this section are a part of helping students gain confidence in their writing abilities and identities. Catherine Lamb, a feminist composition scholar, highlights the importance of the experimentation with language in “Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition.” She claims that the composition classroom should be a place where teachers and students alike can experiment with language (12). Empathy and understanding of differing experiences come with the freedom of language in the classroom (12). Empathy will be a good quality to carry into the public realms of discourse as students progress in their studies and careers.

Overall, if we expect students to be engaged citizens, we need to show them that their individual voices matter. The composition classroom should serve as a “mock-micro society” to allow students to hone their skills before entering the world of civic discourse outside of the society. Parrott and the other authors describe university composition as having “...a long-standing goal...to prepare students to enter into a democratic society as informed citizens, but contemporary practices are often aimed at cultivating individuals for specialized careers rather than preparing them for general civil interactions” (234). If we instill the idea that their voice is

wrong, students are more likely to remain silent out of fear. If we specialize composition studies further, students will not get the practice at civic discourse essential to existing as a citizen in the public sphere. FYC instructors would not achieve the CWPA goal of teaching rhetorical knowledge without self-conscious writing designed for an audience to engage in public discourse. To reinforce these ideas, my *Their Eyes Were Watching God* rhetorical analysis assignment discussed in Chapter Three highlights how characters in the novel adjust their speech, writing, and actions based on their audience.

Along with audience awareness, student voice and dialect are two of the most important aspects to freshman identity formation. Many scholars, especially those that teach using feminist pedagogical strategies, believe that celebrating students' voices makes them better writers and more confident writers if they are allowed to use their own voices and dialects in some class writings in FYC courses. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) updated their views on student dialect and voice in the FYC classroom in 1974 advising that "...teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language" (CCCC). The Committee agrees with my idea that there should be an open conversation about student writing saying, "By discussions of actual student writing both students and teachers can learn to appreciate the value of variant dialects and recognize that a deviation from the handbook rules seldom interferes with communication" (CCCC). They then provide a list of what should be included in composition courses with a special focus on how to switch between standard "handbook" English and EAE, or a student's spoken dialect. The CCCC's list provides justification for the informal versus formal writing and the code-switching lessons that I begin my FYC courses with as described above.

Allowing students to use their own voices and dialects in their writing may dissolve prior negative feelings they possessed about writing. When I asked my students about their personal feelings about writing on the first day of classes, only a couple of students raised their hands in response to “yes, I enjoy writing.” Some said they had mixed feelings about writing. Most said they despised it. When I asked students in the form of an individual journal writing assignment why they despised writing, several students responded that they hated to be given specific parameters for their writing; so, essentially, they hated being told what to write.

This distaste for writing stems largely from the learning standards that many teachers have to follow in a secondary school setting. Because of these standards, there is no time for creative writing, or to allow students the time to choose and research topics for themselves. Students, especially during the formative years of their life, need to have opportunities in class to search for and express their beliefs, ideas, and values. One way that I try to combat some of the negative feelings most of my students have towards writing is by starting most classes with a free write. Even though I typically give a little structure to the prompts like, “Write about something fun you did this weekend,” students still have the freedom to reflect on their lives and decide what they would like to share with me and their classmates. It also continues their thinking process about audience because not everything is appropriate to share to the whole group. They sometimes have the freedom to choose which genre of writing they would like to compose, such as poetry, lists, prose, or stream of consciousness prose.

I always set aside time for students to write in their home dialect or language for free writes. As composition scholar Greg Schafer highlights, we all speak our own dialect and interact with a multitude of different voices and dialects, especially at the university level (509). In his article, “Dialects, Gender, and the Writing Class,” Schafer provides his own student

responses to writing in one's home dialect. One student wrote, ““when you correct someone's speech, you're telling them that their culture and history is wrong. That doesn't seem right” (510). FYC is a place for students to come to terms and form their identities separate from their parents' or guardians' beliefs and values. One way to do this is to allot time for code-switching in the FYC classroom and uphold the guidelines of the CCCC.

Instead of having one language or dialect as the standard one to use in the classroom, feminist scholar, Cinthia Gannett, explains the importance of Bakhtin's heteroglossia in the FYC classroom. She writes, “As Kurt Spellmeyer points out, citing Mikhael Bakhtin, discourse communities are never monolithic, but always at least partially 'heteroglossic'; thus, students should be encouraged to find ways in which the conventions and practices of their 'home discourses' overlap with those of the university” (Gannett 202). A great place to start with this is through the act of journal writing. Encouraging students to begin the writing process for an academic essay in a journal using their home dialect or language and then transferring those ideas once they are written down to an academically formatted essay is the key to helping students gain confidence as writers. Including this “self-conscious” writing also helps avoid some of the writer's block that comes from feeling overwhelmed by the act of writing for academia.

If given more freedom as well as the reassurance that their voice matters, students become more willing to write due to a stronger feeling of confidence. Keeping their dialect alive allows them to connect with a multitude of audiences. Unfortunately, not all instructors follow this idea, especially straight white instructors who may be used to only Standard English guidelines of communication. Keeping to strictly Standard English guidelines can severely impact minoritized students in the classroom as many have not been taught about code-

switching. Writing scholar William Jones realized that the term “basic writer” was typically used to describe lower-class minoritized students and that the connotation surrounding this word needed to be reevaluated in composition classrooms (73-74). He goes on to explain that all races and genders in education and politics have internalized the negative belief that minoritized students will not do well with writing and the education system design will only set them back (74-75). Minoritized students may be more comfortable expressing themselves if they can write in the same manner in which they speak. Starting with a code-switching lesson before moving to a personal essay activity can allow minoritized students the opportunity to experiment with language. Jones agrees with this idea expressing that “the most useful pedagogues encourage Black and Latino students to use the intuitive and generative linguistic powers available to them as native speakers of English and as competent bilinguals” (77). Experimenting with new ideas and practicing new strategies is what college is designed for.

In addition, it will be important to talk about dialect and voice in student writing especially if it is to be paired with a text like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston that uses dialect to tell the entire story. Students seeing a Black dialect used in a published, well-known novel will increase their confidence when using their own dialect in writing. Pairing texts with differing dialects together can also be useful to show how different voices and dialects can still be successful in composition.

FYC courses have the potential to incorporate so many different aspects of a typical English classroom. Gary Tate, a composition scholar in favor of teaching literature in FYC, paints a grim picture of many writing programs and their interaction with literature: “The last time I talked to Richard Larson about his national survey of freshman writing programs, he estimated that only about one in five programs contains any literature, and the ones that have a

literary component are likely to be devoting a semester to ‘introducing’ literature rather than ‘using’ literature to help teach writing” (317). So, what are the benefits to using literature to teach writing? First, students can use the texts they read as models for the writing their instructor wants to produce. Reading scholarly articles can help students understand the components of academic writing, for instance. Another benefit to teaching literature in FYC is an instructor’s ability to satisfy any learning outcomes put into place by their universities. For example, in Radford University’s REAL learning outcomes, teaching literature in FYC will satisfy our outcome of “students employ reading strategies to facilitate written communication” (Radford University). When writing activities are paired with reading, students have the opportunity to enhance both skillsets necessary for success in college.

There was an ongoing debate in the 1980s and early 1990s about including literature in composition classrooms; this debate was largely focused on two scholars, Gary Tate and Erika Lindemann. Gary Tate took the position of the pro-literature side in “A Place for Literature in Freshman Composition,” while Erika Lindemann wrote about the cons of including literature in the composition classroom in “Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature.” Lindemann argues that “...literature-based courses, even most essay-based courses focus on consuming texts, not producing them” (313). She claims that writing courses should only focus on writing and should not include literature just “...for the sake of ‘humanism’” (313). Tate opposes her idea claiming that so many universities want FYC courses to fit inside a “core curriculum box” since so many students are not going to be English majors (319). I have seen this situation firsthand as none of my ENGL 111 or ENGL 112 students have been English majors in the three semesters that I have taught FYC. However, it is a Radford University composition learning outcome that “students employ reading strategies to facilitate written communication” (Radford

University). Tate agrees with Yancey that FYC is “hopeless” in terms of trying to fit all materials that will be useful to broad range of students, so there can be a place for literature in composition courses. It is up to the instructor to make the connections between the written text and students’ own writing in order to satisfy reading requirements in FYC.

The ENGL 111 instructors at Radford University seem to value “humanism” in their FYC courses. This value is evident by the high percentage of ENGL 111 instructors that teach some kind of literature in their course to improve their students’ writing skills. Out of 59 sections of ENGL 111 at Radford University, 28 of those sections teach writing through literature in some way. Some use novels like me, while others teach short stories, self-help books, or essays. While some may not consider all of these texts to be literature, many teach these types of written works paired with student writing. Literature used in composition courses can be used as model texts for organization, content, grammar, etc. This data is especially surprising to me because of the severe lack of research that supports the teaching of literature in composition courses. Why is there so little pro-literature in composition research out there when 47% of Radford University composition instructors find value in supplementing students’ writing instruction with literature? Though FYC courses are catch-alls for most universities, instructors still value literature enough to include it in their “impossible courses.”

Thinking back to Lindemann, how do composition instructors focus on producing texts rather than merely reading literature and interpreting it with students? Daniel Mangiavellano offers a unique teaching strategy paired with Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. He claims his students use the novel as a way to pinpoint first encounters and then jump into discussing how Austen draws her readers in to wanting to know more about each character and how it keeps the plot moving (Mangiavellano 552). By showing students an example of what good writing looks

like, students can apply the techniques learned from discussions of Austen's literature to their own writing (554). Providing model texts prevents the use of literature from only being about consumption and interpretation, as Lindemann warns her readers about.

Some scholars have questioned Lindemann's argument. One such scholar is Gary Tate. Tate explicitly calls out Lindemann in his article writing about the neglect of literature in the writing classroom:

One major reason for this neglect is that many teachers now believe – or, more accurately, have been led to believe – that the freshman composition course is a place to teach students to write academic discourse so that they might ‘succeed as writers in the academy’ or in order that they might ‘join the conversations that education enables,’ to use Erika Lindemann's elegant characterization. (319)

However, in order for students to “succeed in the academy” and to use literature as Tate suggests in his article with activities like Mangiavellano's Austen writing lessons, students need to be able to comprehend what they are reading. Teaching specific reading strategies is key for a successful pairing of literature with writing. One activity that I have found helpful is going through a text with students and annotating it. These annotations could be completed through a shared Google document or through a document camera projected on a board or screen in the classroom.

Modeling what to look for in a text can help ease some of the nervousness that students have with reading longer or more complicated texts in college. Instructors can also point out organizational methods that the author used to put together their writing and show how students can emulate those organizational skills in their own writing. Breaking down the reading process in this way can benefit both reader comprehension and writing skills.

Reading comprehension has become a forgotten subject in college classrooms. Reading comprehension lessons are often “regarded as unworthy of college-level instruction and therefore mostly avoided” (Wilner 6). Instructors and tutors across university campuses have seen a need for more reading instruction, specifically those in writing centers (8). Working in the Radford University Writing Center for a year brought this issue to my attention as many of the students I worked with either did not do the reading before attempting to write their papers, or tried to do the reading but could not grasp the main ideas of the texts. Many gave up trying to read due to their frustration with their inability to comprehend more complicated ideas present in college-level texts. English professor Arlene Fish Wilner proposes the following approach to teaching reading to college students:

In light of the similar limitations that affect college instruction, the remedy entails a dual approach: both a reconceptualization of composition as a course, or sequence of courses, that could better prepare students for the challenges they will face as they are asked to read sophisticated texts from many fields, and systematic faculty development to foster effective instruction in disciplinary reading across the curriculum. (15)

In other words, Wilner believes that there should be better faculty trainings surrounding reading pedagogy along with a rethinking of what a composition course should be. English professor Kelsey McNiff suggests using class time to model how to read with students. Some of the aspects of reading comprehension she suggests modeling are: activating prior knowledge, reading together, practicing putting texts (and acts of reading) in context, encouraging metacognitive reflection, and incorporating transmediation (McNiff 23-28). These are all topics that could be shared with faculty and implemented in the FYC classroom in order to help students comprehend texts and make connections from the texts to their own writing. These

teaching strategies directly oppose Lindemann's statement that "literature teaching offers the writing teacher no model worth emulating" (314). When students are able to break down and annotate texts, they will improve their abilities to translate the reading and interpret it in their own writing. They can also use their readings as a model for both structure and grammar.

Beyond just reading comprehension skills, my goal for including literature in my FYC classroom is to provide my students the opportunity to prepare for public discourse. Encouraging an open discourse in my classroom will help meet the CWPA outcomes of rhetorical knowledge and critical thinking. Tate agrees with me expressing that "it is the 'conversations' of these private and public lives that interest me far more than the 'conversations' of the various academic disciplines" (321). The challenge then becomes moving past reader comprehension and into teaching students how to address controversial, modern-day issues in writing. Lindemann disagrees with both Tate and me simplifying critical theory³ in the composition classroom to only giving "...students a more self-conscious awareness of their behavior as readers, engaged in significant acts of language in every class they take, not just in a literature class" (314). It does make students more self-conscious of their reading, but including literature in the composition classroom also provides students with new ways to structure their writing and examples of how other writers are using their voice to share their ideas. While I agree with Lindemann that students employ this reader-response criticism when interacting with controversial texts in the classroom, I contend that guiding students through the process of relating texts to current issues and trends is important to their roles as university students and future workplace employees engaging and, as Tate puts it, conversing with public life. Analyzing literature in FYC gives

³ Critical theory is "a way of thinking about or examining culture and literature by considering the social, historical, and ideological forces that affect it and make it the way that it is" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary).

students an opportunity to experience good writing, the impact that it has on the world around them, and a chance to replicate and further the literature through their own writing.

Similar to Tate and myself, Clayton Zuba teaches literature and writing hand-in-hand. Zuba taught Shelley's *Frankenstein* to his university students and assigned several short, graded writing assignments to encourage his students to evaluate human characters versus "the creature." He asks questions like "Does Shelley blur the difference between 'the creature' and human characters in the novel?" in order to guide student thinking to the constructs of what makes a monster and how this idea correlates to race in modern society (Zuba 362). His goal is that "...students will carry their new understanding of race, and their critical thinking skills gained from the course, beyond the academy when reading, writing, watching films, and entering dialogues and debates about race and racial inclusion in American society" (366). English professor John Goshert agrees with Zuba saying that his purpose of academic engagement is to obtain "...more complex and politically disruptive literacies" (Goshert 17). Goshert's purpose plays hand-in-hand with the WPA outcomes of critical thinking and rhetorical knowledge.

The ideologies of Goshert and Zuba are very similar to my own goals for my FYC classroom. By teaching Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I hope to guide students through the 1937 text and relate the issues present in the novel to modern society. In addition, my goal is to help students develop organized, written commentary on how these issues persist in our society today. It is of equal importance that I highlight Hurston's style and instances of first encounters as Mangiavellano does when teaching Austen. Teaching these concepts moves from simply showing students a "model text" to applying the ideas in Hurston's writing to current issues and having students emulate the writing techniques that engage her

audience to also engage theirs. Having students emulate these techniques will ultimately lead to their success as writers regardless of their discipline.⁴

⁴ See Chapter Three to read about my rhetorical analysis essay assignment linking writing to Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Chapter Two: Teaching First-Year Composition Courses with Feminist Pedagogy Practices

Because my classroom goal of relating issues from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to modern day issues may be uncomfortable and/or challenging to some students, it is particularly important for me to practice feminist pedagogical practices to ensure that students are not pushed too far and shut down. Feminist pedagogical practices do not explicitly teach feminism or feminist theory to students, but instead use feminist strategies (such as removing oneself as the authority and giving the power to the students to encourage critical discourse and engagement). Activities such as journaling and revision portfolios can also be used to encourage student and instructor reflection, another key practice of feminist pedagogy. Carolyn Shrewsbury defines feminist pedagogy in the *Women's Studies Quarterly*:

...a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes. These evaluative criteria include the extent to which a community of learners is empowered to act responsibly toward one another and the subject matter and to apply that learning to social action. (166)

Shrewsbury discusses collaborative learning environments where there is shared power between instructor and students. Decentering the power from the instructor leads to more student empowerment and learning overall. Feminist pedagogy practices will lead to a successful fulfillment of the CWPA Outcomes of critical thinking and rhetorical knowledge, ultimately preparing students for active engagement in public discourse.

To further the conversation about the repositioning of the instructor, Shrewsbury expresses that "at the core of feminist pedagogy is a re-imagining of the classroom as a community of learners where there is both autonomy of self and mutuality with others that is congruent with

the developmental needs of both women and men” (170). There is no prioritization of men over women or women over men in feminist pedagogy. Everyone is equal in these classroom environments. She also claims that “the feminist teacher is above all a role model of a leader” (172). The instructor is no longer the voice of authority in the feminist classroom; student voices lead classroom discussions without the instructor validating their ideas or giving any indication whether they are right or wrong. For example, in my ENGL 111 classes, I often plan for Socratic seminars about the texts that we read. I have found that students are more willing to participate when given the freedom to choose a topic within the text to discuss and to discuss them in the order that they choose rather than respond to specific prompts provided by me. The students enjoy talking to each other and making personal connections to the text, so I remove myself as the authority and sit among them in the circle. I will chime in occasionally if the conversation is moving away from the text or any misguided remarks are made.

Similar to Shrewsbury’s idea that an instructor practicing feminist pedagogy does not have to explicitly mention feminism in class, feminist scholar Cassandra Woody coins the term procedural feminism as, “...the distillation of feminist rhetorical practices and theory within curricular development that does not make feminism a topic students will directly engage” (481). Woody encourages instructors to move away from having students write specifically about the feminist movement or women’s issues, but rather to encourage them to examine their own identities and values (483). Woody suggests that this feminist pedagogical strategy may limit the amount of student backlash that an instructor may face throughout the course (483). Woody’s procedural feminism is a feminist teacher tool to keep students in the zone of learning where they are still challenged but are not so overwhelmed by so many new ideas and perspectives that they may be unfamiliar with.

To understand how to avoid major student backlash that may accompany a student's discomfort, it is important to understand the different zones of learning. There are three major learning zones: the comfort zone, the stretch zone, and the panic zone. All instructors should strive for the "stretch zone" where students are challenged yet still feel comfortable participating in class (Samu-Vissar). The "comfort zone" is where students are a bit bored and just follow through the habitual motions because they are used to it (Samu-Vissar). The "panic zone" is the zone instructors should try to keep their students away from. The "panic zone" causes anger, confusion, and disconnect in the class (Samu-Vissar). When students reach the "panic zone," they will often shut down and not want to learn anything. It is the job of the instructor to ensure that students do not reach the "panic zone" as Samu-Vissar describes. In order to keep my students in the "stretch zone" instead of the "panic zone," I provide them opportunities both outside of class and inside of the classroom in the form of free writes and journals to reflect upon their feelings towards controversial topics like gender roles, racism, and stereotyping. Most of my students are honest in their journals but seem to value respect over heated classroom debates.

Continuing this idea of power sharing, Stanton also makes the statement that "feminism should not be communicated to students as truth" (33). Similar to Woody's idea of procedural feminism, Stanton argues that feminism should not be placed as a position of power in the classroom (32). Preaching feminism as the correct way of thinking may move students from the "stretch zone" to the "panic zone" of the comfort-stretch-panic model as their ideals and beliefs may be challenged by feminist values. It is not the role of the feminist composition instructor to "save" their students; this idea is problematic since many patriarchal figures also adopt this "save their souls" tactic when trying to persuade individuals to believe their ideology (qtd. In Stanton 34). The goals of composition instructors should be to encourage critical thinking and rhetorical

knowledge, not change every student's mind about politics and society as a whole.

In my FYC classroom, I provided a brief presentation on the feminist movement around the time Hurston was writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (while it is not necessary to teach feminist content while practicing feminist pedagogy, I chose to include some historical background on the feminist movement for my students). They could draw parallels between women's issues then and women's issues now, but feminist values were not communicated as truth. I communicated the information in a way that offered some historical context for the novel, while keeping the discussion and writing activities open for students to experiment with ideas if they wished.

While it is important to defy the patriarchal norms relating to gender using procedural feminism in the "stretch zone," it is equally important to defy the norms of white hegemony within the classroom. Multicultural education is inherently a feminist pedagogical practice according to feminist scholar Estela Mara Bensimon (9). Similar to William Jones' article, "Basic Writing: Pushing Against Racism," Bensimon explains how the world of academia is centered around white males:

...a curriculum based on social criteria is concerned with awareness, whereas a curriculum based on academic criteria is concerned with knowledge. In this binary scheme multicultural education merely contributes social awareness while all else – which tends to be white and male – presumably contributes academic knowledge. (10)

Multicultural education can lead into student-centered discussions of who gets to decide what instructors teach and what students learn. Shifting the power from the dominant race's point of view to the point of view of minoritized races in the first-year composition classroom will create

a blend of both academic knowledge and social awareness that many first-year students may have never experienced in their secondary school settings.

Sharing the power in the classroom can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

Composition scholar Courtney Stanton discusses the specific kinds of questioning that would allow for an equal power dynamic in the classroom suggesting:

If power is granted to students as well, the teacher's questions would have to be of the kind that require students to validate the arguments they have chosen, rather than those that imply another argument might be more suitable; such an implication suggests that the teacher knows best and believes that a universal truth is available if only the student could dig deeper and think differently. (32)

It is important for the instructor to be sure they are not adding in confirmations or opposing statements after each student response. Even though the questions may be more open-ended and geared more towards giving the power over to the students, the students do not truly have the power until the instructor ceases to validate each idea. Students need to be comfortable validating their own ideas and listening to other students validate their thoughts in order for the classroom to correctly use feminist pedagogical strategies. Instead of using tone and other guiding questions to lead students to a certain answer, Stanton suggests that instructors instead validate students and let them discuss among themselves rather than leading a back-and-forth between instructor and student.

Catherine Lamb adds to this idea saying that feminist instructors should practice "mediation" rather than monologic argument to shift the power from the instructor to the student; this way students see that an argument cannot be "won" or ended by only viewing one side (18). I often tell my students that there is no one correct answer; this encourages them to "think out

loud” with each other to hear other interpretations. Discussion board activities using a forum-like platform where students respond to each other online can also aid in their understanding that learning is communal and that we can all build on each other’s ideas.

While students are participating in activities designed using feminist pedagogical strategies, it is important for all students to understand the purpose of the discussions they are having and the assignments that they are completing. In my teaching experience, I have found it helpful to always give a brief rationale when assigning a new assignment for students. According to Brett Jones’ MUSIC model, students seem to be more willing to do the work if they feel that there is a researched or academic reason for the assignment. If students understand why an assignment is important to both short- and long-term goals, they are more apt to engage and take interest in the material (Jones 10). Students hate “busy work,” so providing reasoning for assignments and classroom discussion topics help them to see the value within each task. When teaching women writers, I make it explicit why I am including women’s voices in the curriculum. I tell my students that these voices are the ones that are often excluded from the secondary school curriculum. I explain the value of reading literature through multiple perspectives and why it is necessary at the college level. Then, I will relate the task to a specific course goal and either tell or show students how completing the task may be useful to their specific careers or majors. Lisa Nunn agrees with my method of pedagogy rationales and even suggests adding these rationales to the syllabus so students can refer back to them when needed (15). During my first semester teaching ENGL 111 as the instructor of record, I assigned authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Zora Neale Hurston to introduce both Chicana and Black women’s experiences. The students seem to engage more with the texts after I give them my rationale for including those specific texts and many told me they had never heard of these authors before my

class. Providing rationales for students is another way to decenter the instructor's power in the classroom.

Perhaps the most important part of feminist pedagogy is being transparent with students about the course goals for the FYC class. In FYC, students will learn how to become better writers as well as better critical thinkers. However, as scholar Megan Boler suggests, "It must be made clear to students that they are not being graded or evaluated on whether or how they choose to 'transform,' or whether they undertake 'radical' pedagogies of their own" (198). It is the responsibility of the instructor to ensure that there is no student who feels that their identity, beliefs, or values are threatened. If students feel like their values or beliefs are threatened, they may be pushed out of the "stretch zone" and into the "panic zone." While a little discomfort and challenge is necessary for growth, students should not feel as if their instructor is trying to change them or grade them based on their beliefs. Once again, the instructor should shift the power from themselves to the students, validating student ideas and beliefs in order to maintain a productive learning environment.

Furthermore, Nunn also takes note of another strategy beyond assignment justification that will strengthen the transparency of the curriculum and pedagogical strategies. She suggests that first-year instructors make it clear within the first few weeks of class the best ways to study and take notes in that specific class (Nunn 11). Many first-year students have not had the time to develop the executive functioning skills necessary for success in the FYC classroom. Being transparent about helpful ways to close read and study can help students stay on top of their work and be successful in other situations beyond the FYC classroom. Staying open with students and removing the "scary professor" disposition is a practice of feminist pedagogy.

Another practice of feminist transparent pedagogy is defining terminology before it is put to use in lessons. Zhang and Dodwell both agree with this idea. They both describe teaching situations where the instructor is using feminist terminology and explicitly teaching about feminism (though, as I mentioned above, a class can still be taught using feminist pedagogical strategies without doing this). I chose to do both in my ENGL 111 course. Zhang highlights the importance of making the FYC classroom safe and welcoming, but he claims, “However, in order to achieve this ‘safe space,’ it is important for teachers to provide students with the proper, basic terminology they will need to discuss and research the feminist and social justice topics teachers wish them to be involved with” (200). Dodwell agrees and suggests terms like “feminism, intersectionality, and feminine should all be defined in the early stages of the course” (239). These are all terms that not all students will have been exposed to coming out of high school. Defining these feminist terms will be especially important for instructors like me who teach in more conservative, rural areas.

In ENGL 111, before beginning to read any of our women writers or talk about the feminist movement, I created a list of terms for students to read and refer back to as we continued in the course if they were ever unsure about the terminology being used in discussions. In addition to defining feminist terminology, the sought-after “safe space” must be created after explanation of what non-sexist language is. Madeleine Pownall claims that non-sexist language must also be explained to students (144). She explains, “...the terms sex and gender were often used interchangeably which, at times, was problematic for the constructiveness of the discussion. The beliefs about interchangeability of these words can be a useful teaching moment to explain wider debates and discussion in feminist psychology” (144). This feminist pedagogical strategy strives to make students more comfortable discussing controversial issues in a respectful,

academic way. Using this feminist tactic will hopefully encourage more students to speak during class discussions and share their ideas to create a more well-informed “safe space.”

As discussed in Chapter One, validating students in the FYC classroom can occur in the form of journal writing. Journal writing has become a fairly common practice and encourages students to add their personal experiences and beliefs into their writing. Because writing is such a vulnerable act, many instructors believe that informal journal writing assignments help students gain the confidence they need to move on to bigger, more high-stakes assignments. Journal writing also has the potential to alleviate some of the discomfort students may feel when discussing topics they may not be as familiar with when in the “stretch zone.” This alleviation of discomfort relates back to Bartholomae’s idea that informal writing typically results in less grammatical error overall (17-18). When students write in a way that they are familiar with, the focus becomes less on grammar and more on the important ideas they need to include in their writing.

Because of the ample positive outcomes of journal writing discussed by both composition scholars and feminist pedagogy scholars alike, I use journal writing frequently in my ENGL 111 and 112 classes. They are low-stakes assignments designed to get students writing without the panic and stress often caused by big, high-stakes assignments like research essays or rhetorical analyses often assigned in first-year composition courses. While I still include a large essay towards the end of the semester, journal writing shows students that they possess important ideas and experiences that we could all benefit from learning about. Composition scholar Mary Jane Dickerson agrees with me writing, “When students begin to regard themselves as writers who make meanings, their attitudes toward writing can undergo radical changes” (131). She also claims that journal writing can help move students past the formulaic “five-paragraph” way of

thinking about writing (135). Many of my first-year students struggle with their first papers because they have been taught strict rules about essays, and they stress when their ideas do not fit into a five-paragraph essay with five sentences each. Journals are a way to help students branch out and try new organizational structures and genres of writing.

Some scholars do not agree with my beliefs about journal writing. Scholar Cinthia Gannett discusses the controversy surrounding using journals in the first-year composition classroom. She claims, “Some fear that journal writing may not foster the same quantity or quality of complex intellectual thought as other kinds of academic writing tasks, while others assert that journal writing is ‘dangerous’ because they can be used for political indoctrination, or because their so-called personal nature constitutes an ‘invasion of privacy’” (Gannett 21). The nature of the type of journal writing is up to the individual instructor. Some may give prompts to help guide students towards a topic that the class will be discussing that day; others may choose to give students the complete freedom to discuss whatever they want on that particular day. When students have the freedom to express their ideas on paper using informal language, it solidifies their identity and helps them to see themselves as writers. The students get to choose, for the most part, what “private” information they write. From my experience, getting students used to the act of writing increases their confidence in their writing abilities.

It is a feminist pedagogical practice not to try to transform the opinions and beliefs of students, so when I attach a prompt to a journal writing assignment, I make sure to leave the questions open-ended to encourage critical thinking. When I respond to student journals, I try to validate their ideas whether they align with my own or not. It is not my job as a composition instructor to form their ideas for them; it is my job to help them convey their ideas in an organized way through writing. In terms of invading students’ privacy, I am the only person that

reads the student journals. I make this explicit to students from the very first journal assignment. For instructors that would like to incorporate student journals into classroom discussions, it may be best to ask for volunteers in case any student does not feel comfortable sharing a certain experience with their peers.

While I have described a less-structured personal journal assignment, there are many other methods to incorporate journal writing into the first-year composition classroom. One way is to design journal activities that cause students to reflect on the readings and discussion topics for specific class sessions. Janet Auten writes of teaching Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the success she has had with assigning sequential response journals instead of more creative "free write" journals. She describes the sequential response journals as an activity where students respond to the texts every few paragraphs with their initial reactions and any personal connections they have to the story (Auten 132). Making personal connections to the text creates a context for reading, as Auten puts it (135). Having students make personal connections creates opportunity for more productive classroom discussions and aids in creating a close classroom environment as students realize the similarities in their experiences. Gary Tate understands this importance of the blending of the public sphere and private sphere: "It is the 'conversations' of these private and public lives that interest me far more than the 'conversations' of the various academic disciplines" (321). Rather than rooting all conversation in the world of academia, Tate and Auten see the benefits of connecting academic reading to students' outside lives as they carry the knowledge from the readings with them outside of the classroom. Once these classroom conversations have taken place, a reflection journal is helpful, according to Auten. She asks questions such as: "Look back at your responses. How and why did this story affect you? How did your feelings and your attitude change as you read through the

story?” (Auten 137). These reflective questions are framed in a way that adheres to feminist pedagogical practices that avoid forcing instructor values on students. It matters what the students think and how their own thoughts and beliefs have shifted after reading the text.

Another popular method of journal writing is Ann Berthoff’s dialectical journals. These journals are also more structured and paired with class readings similar to Auten’s sequential response journals. The ultimate goal of Berthoff’s dialectical journal is to monitor how students’ ideas are progressing throughout the reading of the text (Berthoff 11). Tracking students’ progress through a text can be an early indicator of whether students need more help with reading comprehension. If instructors notice that students need more assistance with reading texts, writing a dialectical journal together in class may be beneficial before delving into complicated academic reading and writing. Berthoff describes the dialectical journal as “...a double-entry journal with the two pages facing one another in dialogue. On one side are observation, sketches, noted impressions, passages copied out, jottings on reading or other responses; on the facing page are notes on these notes, responses to these responses – in current jargon, ‘meta-comment’” (12). I completed dialectical journal assignments in both my undergraduate and graduate career. In my ENGL 300: Intro to English Studies course, while we read Susan Glaspell’s play, *Trifles*, we were required to keep a dialectical journal noting significant passages, quotes that made us think of personal experiences, and any questions that arose while reading. Keeping these annotations while reading helped me to be able to add more to class discussions and recall more detailed information about the play later. The practice of dialectical journaling made me slow down and critically think about the text. While we completed the dialectical journals on paper in ENGL 300, in graduate school we used a shared Google document. We could add comments in the margins, highlight significant quotes, ask each

other questions, and respond to others' thoughts and ideas. This shared dialectical journaling assignment made reading much more enjoyable since we could interact with and learn from one another. From a student's perspective, I can attest to the effectiveness of Berthoff's dialectical journals.

As a teacher, I do dialectical journals a bit differently. I assign groups in my classes and give each group specific passages or a specific set of questions to answer from whatever text we happen to be reading. Each group must record their answers on a sheet of paper and turn them into me by the end of class for a participation grade. Grading these journals provides students with more incentive to think critically about the text and make annotations while reading. Berthoff explains, "...dialectic is an audit of meaning – a continuing effort to review the meanings we are making in order to see further what they mean" (12). It encourages students to look back on the texts and see what they thought was most important, what they had questions about, and/or what connections they had with the reading. This practice of reflection meets the "reading strategies" outcome in the Radford University REAL curriculum and makes the text a bit more accessible for students during classroom discussions.

In addition to the potential for idea development about a text, journal writing can allow students to practice using rhetorical knowledge, one of the CWPA outcomes for composition courses. Agency is one aspect of writing that journal writing in the FYC classroom can foster, according to feminist composition scholar Nedra Reynolds. Without a sense of agency, writers may never be able to successfully enter the public sphere of rhetoric. Agency, to Reynolds, is "...not simply about finding one's own voice but also about intervening in discourses of the everyday and cultivating rhetorical tactics that make interruption and resistance an important part of any conversation" (59). Journal writing should create a dialogue of ideas whether it be a

structured dialectical journal or a more creative low-stakes assignment. Reynolds suggests that instead of holding students to rigid academic writing guidelines, like Bartholomae suggests, students need to have more freedom to examine their own beliefs and values, which, in turn, will make their writing stronger and prepare them to enter into a world of politics (71). In my own teaching experience, students will often go over the word/page count when given less strict academic guidelines and the opportunity to pull in aspects of themselves to develop agency as writers.

Giving this freedom to students to help them develop agency as writers worries some composition scholars, as Gannett suggests. However, reflecting on their thoughts about a text and reviewing how their values have changed after classroom discussions strengthens the critical thinking and rhetorical knowledge skills necessary for success across the disciplines. Cassandra Woody agrees expressing, “Even students whose essays do not accomplish all the goals of the assignments have employed feminist practices by engaging with research and thinking about personal experiences in new ways – ways that demonstrate the value of understanding before moving into argument” (491). Even if student grammar is not perfect, it is more important for students to engage with the main ideas of a discussion or class reading and be able to participate in a respectful, educated conversation about those topics. It is crucial to be clear about the goals of journal assignments to students before beginning to encourage more thoughtful responses.

Feminist scholar Dale Bauer agrees with this idea of transparent pedagogy and reflection (381). Transparent teaching methods and opportunities for students to reflect on classroom activities and assignments both in writing and in class discussions will allow for each student to understand their role as rhetorician. If students can view themselves as rhetoricians, all students will have equal opportunity to speak up about their experiences and opinions about the private

and public realms of their lives. Rhetoric and feminism go hand-in-hand, according to Bauer. She argues, "...we can think of feminism as a rhetorical criticism, an act by which we teach students how to belong, how to identify, as well as how to resist" (391). Journal writing is an important first step of developing writer's agency before leaping to making claims about research in high-stakes assignments, which is why I usually begin the course with ample amounts of journaling activities before moving into high-stakes academic writing.

While reflecting on one's personal experiences and developing agency in the FYC classroom is important, it is equally important for students to reflect on their writing process. Feminist composition scholar Susan Osborn shares her thoughts on feminist writing classes claiming that revision is of utmost importance to the success of writing students. In "Revision/Re-Vision': A Feminist Writing Class," Osborn brings Adrienne Rich into the conversation writing, "Rich suggests that women's collective identity is dependent upon revision, the constant, recursive examination of what she calls 'old texts'" (261). In journal writing, there is student reflection. The reflection on one's writing process is yet another inherently feminist pedagogical strategy. Old essays serve as Rich's "old texts" in my FYC classroom. For example, my students are assigned a revision portfolio that lasts all semester long. They must include three original texts, three revised texts (with tracking changes), and three 300-word reflections about what they revised and why for each original text. I give my students the freedom to select which essays or journals they would like to revise for their portfolio. They also have two in-class workshops to work on these portfolios and ask me questions. I also practice transparent teaching when I explain my rationale for assigning the portfolios saying, "Writing is a continuous process. There is always something to be done to make it better." Using class time to work on these signifies their importance to students as well.

The art of revision incorporates a feminist act into the FYC classroom without explicitly discussing feminism.

Students reflecting through journals and revision activities is only part of feminist pedagogical strategies of reflection. Instructors need to reflect and revise their teaching strategies consistently. Nunn provides a strategy to give students a voice in teacher evaluation well before the end of the semester. Nunn's suggested activity is to complete a KQS activity in class where students receive index cards and write one thing they want the teacher to keep doing, one thing they want you to quit doing, and one thing they want you to start doing (82). Nunn suggests giving this activity to students around midterms since they have had multiple weeks to be exposed to an instructor's teaching style and interact with them on multiple occasions inside and outside the classroom.

In past FYC classes, I have structured this activity as a free write where I write these same questions about my teaching performance on the board and give students 10 minutes to write several paragraphs to respond to the questions. It is also important to be transparent with students about why their feedback is important and why it is being collected at midterms. I often give my students a rationale for why what they are completing is important. The practice of transparency continues to shift the power from the instructor to the students in a practice of feminist pedagogy.

As instructors incorporate feminist pedagogy practices of teaching revision, it is beneficial for instructors to consistently reevaluate their own ideas and beliefs. Relating back to William Jones' article "Basic Writing: Pushing Against Racism," he claims that "...we should not overlook the need for instructors to examine themselves, to understand the value of reflecting the nature and quality of their relationships as instructors and adults to their students" (77-78).

Though he is not specifically writing about feminist pedagogy here, he shares in the idea of the importance of instructor self-reflection, which is a feminist pedagogical strategy mentioned by many of the other scholars mentioned in this thesis. Instructor self-evaluation is important to examine beliefs not only related to gender equality, but also to instructors who choose to incorporate multicultural education into their first-year composition classrooms. In order to shift power from instructor to student, instructors must first take the opportunity to examine the relationships already in place in their classrooms, as Jones suggests.

Furthermore, it is imperative to the success of the FYC classroom that instructors identify areas of privilege and evaluate their own identities and how these identities and privileges may impact their students. For example, I identify as a white, straight woman. I need to keep my white privilege and identity in mind as I teach multicultural texts and use feminist pedagogical strategies. However, my identity as a woman falls into the minority, which changes how I present myself in the classroom slightly. For example, I have to assert myself a bit more than some male instructors due to preconceived notions that I am not an authoritative figure, or that I am more lenient with deadlines and course policies. I stick to course policies strictly unless a student has extenuating circumstances. Though I decenter myself during class sessions, I make expectations clear and deadlines firm.

According to Catherine Lamb, as a woman teaching feminist theory or having discussions about feminist issues, it is crucial to continue examining the power dynamics of the classroom (12). She warns against conducting a class where women hold too much authority saying, “A feminist composition class could easily be a place where matriarchal forms are as oppressive as the patriarchal ones once were, even if in different ways” (12). Once again, this highlights the importance of Woody’s procedural feminism where the focus is not on feminist

issues, but instead employs practices of feminist pedagogy where all students are equal. The same goes for teaching multicultural texts; as a white instructor, I have to evaluate my teaching to be sure that I am not devaluing the experiences of my minoritized students.

While instructor self-reflection is important throughout the time teaching a FYC class, it is essential to acknowledge that there may be some unavoidable challenges to teaching depending on gender and race. Scholars like Heather Graves warn female composition instructors that by sharing the authority with their students, students begin to expect a warm, friendly professor that lacks authority (6). She fears that students will not show the same amount of respect to a female instructor as they would to a male instructor. Schell agrees that female instructors should not shift back into a “woman-as-caretaker” role, but rather practice feminist pedagogy while continuing to “reevaluate the ethic of care” in the classroom (92).

Within the first couple of weeks of the semester teaching ENGL 111, I saw this student expectation for me to serve as a “caretaker” rather than a professor becoming more prominent. We started with smaller, low-risk assignments so students would have an opportunity to get adjusted to college. They took my patience and kindness as weakness and were upset when I graded their first “big” essay more harshly, paying attention to thesis statements, organization, and grammar. When they did not receive the “A” completion grades that they were hoping for, they treated me coldly, attendance dropped, and more and more students became disengaged with the class material. They did not like the fact that I held them accountable for the essay deadline and revision activities. What was particularly interesting about this was when my male mentor professor came to observe one of my class sessions, they participated more than they ever had and had thoughtful contributions about our topics for the day. My mentor sat in the back and

did not say anything or move about the classroom, yet his presence alone encouraged more accountability and participation from my students.

To further the contrasts between student interaction with male and female professors, Schell sheds some light on how this contrast is reflected on teacher evaluations at the end of the year. She shares that “Neal Koblitz reports that if women teachers give challenging assignments and exams and follow rigorous grading policies, students are more inclined to give them lower ratings” (Schell 78). Students expect an easy “A” when they take a class with a female instructor. They see their female instructors as a nurturing, or mother-like, figure that is going to go the extra mile to ensure they pass. When female professors hold their students to deadlines and set clear grading standards, students feel discomfort since this is not the gender norm. This truth has become evident to me in my three semester of teaching FYC when students stop coming to class or submitting assignments when I refuse to accept late work when an extension was not asked for beforehand. They expect me to be “motherly” and react negatively when I am not.

Beyond the challenges of teaching based on instructor gender, there is also the challenge of race. In *The Feminist Teacher*, Derek Stanovsky explains a teaching tactic for teaching about topics outside of one’s identity. He claims that a great teaching tactic for race, gender, and sexuality is to “speak with” rather than “speak for” (13). For example, as a white female instructor, I should not “speak for” BIPOC individuals or men or any intersection of these identities. When reading texts, it is important to help students understand, that the speaker or narrator may not be able to represent all intersections of culture or highlight all experiences in one single text (15). Every experience is different; there is no one true representation. Stanovsky says that when he teaches he does the following: “When I, a man, speak in class on feminism, I lend credence to the idea that feminism is valuable through one of the very mechanisms which

feminism seeks to contest” (18). When I, as a white woman, teach Hurston in my FYC class, it will be important for me to be transparent with my students that Hurston does not represent all Black voices or all female voices. Showing students the value of her work is key. It is important for me to “speak with” rather than “speak for” Black women writers, but I also need to point out to my students that, though my experiences are different from Hurston, it is my responsibility to engage with her works in an attempt to understand and learn from her experiences as a Black woman writer in the early nineteenth-century South.

Well-known feminist Audre Lorde agrees with Stanovsky that there is a need in education to shift the work from the oppressed to the oppressor. Lorde expresses that she feels exhausted always having to be the one to teach her children’s teachers about their culture and how, more generally, minoritized groups are tasked with teaching the white hegemony about their beliefs and values (1). Lorde claims the following about the inclusion of literature by women of Color in literature courses:

All too often, the excuse given is that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot “get into” them because they come out of experiences that are “too different.” I have heard this argument presented by white women of otherwise quite clear intelligence, women who seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Moliere, Dostoyefsky, and Aristophanes.

Surely there must be some other explanation. (3)

Without the inclusion of BIPOC literature, racism persists. Instructors show which voices they value the most by what is included in their reading lists and what is not. Lorde argues that by teaching literature by women of Color, we teach students that their voices matter too. There is

value there, just as Stanovsky teaches that there is value in feminism, even though he is a man. Even though I am a white woman, by teaching Hurston in my FYC course, I am teaching that there is value in the voices of Black women.

One way to prevent the devaluing of experiences is to get to know students better when beginning FYC. For many students, the first year of college is overwhelming as they are bombarded with new perspectives and knowledge. As mentioned in Chapter One, FYC is more than a writing class. It serves as the “impossible” course that prepares students for academia and beyond. At Radford University, ENGL 111 is the only required course that all students are required to take to graduate. Therefore, fitting all of the important aspects of college composition is quite the challenge. Lisa Nunn, an expert on teaching first-year and first-generation college students, suggests that FYC instructors “...build a few 10- to 15-minute get-to-know-you activities into your syllabus” (31). These activities will help build the classroom community necessary to keep students in the stretch zone and ensure adherence to Shrewsberry’s definition of feminist pedagogy where all learners possess “an autonomy of self” and a “mutuality with others” (Shrewsberry 170). In my own FYC course, I usually start with an attendance question about something trivial and fun such as “What’s your zodiac sign?” or “What’s your favorite pizza topping?” in order to get students talking to me and to those around them. I usually just go around the room to give each student a chance to share their answer. This activity allows students to find common ground with other students, but it also allows them to get to know me better as I also share my answers with them. In my experience, even starting with this simple attendance question helps students to feel more comfortable participating in the classroom discussions and activities for the rest of the class session. This warm-up activity is an opportunity for me as the instructor to learn about each of my students and reflect upon ways to incorporate

their interests into future lesson plans. It shows my students that I care about each of them as individuals.

Another strategy that Nunn suggests is scheduling individual meetings with students. Not only is it important for the students to interact together, it is also important to schedule one-on-one meeting times with each student during week one so teachers can get to know their students and show they care about them (42-43). These meetings could be 10-minute office hour conversations or over coffee to find out about their learning styles, interests, families, challenges, etc. (42-43). Short one-on-one chats with students will give instructors the opportunity to reflect upon the varying identities present in the FYC classroom and keep these in mind when planning future lessons and participating in classroom discussions. I assign student information sheets to obtain information about my students, but conversing with them individually would increase their comfort levels when coming to me for help with class materials later.

Though instructors can do their best to create a safe, respectful classroom environment where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions, there is always the potential for discomfort in the FYC classroom where discussions of controversial issues are present. Discomfort is very different from resistance. When a student is feeling discomfort, they still have potential to grow through uncomfortable emotions. They may be challenged, but the challenge is not paralyzing. Resistance, on the other hand, is when students act out in class, disrespect the teacher and other students, and/or refuse to complete assignments. In order for students to grow and learn, their ideas and opinions should be challenged, but it is important to not push students out of their “stretch zones” into their “panic zones.” Stretching students too far can result in resistance. Scholars such as Heather Graves agree with me arguing that there is a necessity for student discomfort. Classrooms where feminist pedagogy is used are not always going to feel

like a comfortable place for students, even if feminist content is not taught (Graves 7). When ideas are challenged and new perspectives are brought to light, some feelings of initial discomfort are natural. Sherry Linkon writes in “From Experience to Analysis: Using Student Discomfort in the Feminist Classroom” regarding her students, “They have learned particular ways of being students, and these habits are understandably comfortable and consequently hard to break” (58). However, when these habits are broken in the feminist FYC classroom or any feminist classroom, and the feminist instructor uses student discomfort for learning, “...this discomfort can also help raise students’ sensitivity to issues of power, politics, and silence” (57). This discomfort can lead to successful teaching of the critical thinking and rhetorical knowledge WPA outcome and an overall development of strong rhetoricians.

Chapter Three: Teaching Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in a First-Year Composition Course Using Feminist Pedagogy

As discussed in Chapter Two, it is important to take notice of the zones of learning. Instructors should strive to keep students in the “stretch” zone where they are learning but are not so overwhelmed that they shut down (Samu-Vissar). Throughout my first semester teaching as the instructor of record for an ENGL 111 course at Radford University, I have had experiences with students in all three zones of learning: comfort, stretch, and possibly panic. Because I taught Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, students were exposed to dialects different from their own, ideas of racism, sexism, and sexuality, as well as comparisons of the novel to real-life events. The reason I use the word “possibly” when referring to my students' position in the panic zone is because I have no true evidence to present that suggests my students were uncomfortable talking about issues relating to gender roles, sexuality, or race. In fact, I received student writings that demonstrated respect and understanding of others' perspectives during our time discussing the novel. These student writings and discussion demonstrating respect for one another and myself are no help in explaining why my attendance rates were so low and why students, particularly the male students, stopped turning in assignments after the first month of classes.

To explain in more detail, I taught two sections of ENGL 111 using the same syllabus incorporating Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into the curriculum. My 8:00 a.m. class was comprised of fifteen students, with only two males. My 9:00 a.m. class was also comprised of fifteen students, seven of whom were males. After about a month of classes, I began noticing my male students were becoming less attentive in class and many stopped coming at all. The assignments that were being submitted by my students were mainly being submitted by my

female students, while my male students' grades continued a steady decline.

At first, I attributed this decline in male attendance and assignment submission to be one caused by my male students existing within the "panic zone." I thought they were upset about our discussions about women's sexuality, traditional gender roles, and masculinity. These are big, controversial topics for any student to encounter, especially during their first semester of college. However, I assigned a journal activity that invites students to reflect on their feelings about discussing topics such as feminism, gender roles, masculinity, race, sexuality, etc. Here are some of the encouraging responses that I received from my male students:

Male Student A: "Personally, I am very comfortable with talking about sexuality, sex and race in the classroom. As someone who is very comfortable in how they identify, others' opinions don't really affect me that much when it comes to gender and sexuality. Most of the time, when people do say something offensive, it's largely just them misunderstanding the topics at hand or based on their own experiences with the topics but I don't usually let it affect me."

Male Student B: "I would not feel discomfort talking about those various topics in the classroom. Like I said before, I feel like everybody should have a wide understanding of gender, sexuality, and race, because learning about it can possibly help you in the future. I was always taught to always keep an open mind when learning about difficult topics in the world. I enjoy learning about those things and getting to know more about History."

Male Student C: "I do not really handle my discomfort, but if a teacher would ever call on me, I would just suck it up and say my opinion then just stay quiet the rest of class because I would see people give me a nasty look because it is not what society wants me to believe. I truly feel like nowadays if you do not believe what society does then you are

just automatically wrong. I know in classrooms it is like a safe space but if I did ever have to say my opinion to the class no one would say anything, but I would see people look at me in a weird way and judge me from across the class. I would not mind if I talked about my opinions on things in a paper that only you would see, but I would not like to share in front of the class.”

Male Student D: “In the classroom I have mixed opinions about talking about race, gender, and sexuality in the classroom. At some points when talking about the topic I feel fine like talking about the history. I can go for a while when we go through the timeline of how the movements started, important people, and specific points in time. When it comes to talking about personal experiences or even trying to relate my own situation to a topic I do not feel as comfortable. I do place in the middle of the political spectrum, but there are a lot of things I just don’t have a strong opinion on. I would not want to say something that could possibly upset someone or even have a debate due to the fact I really wouldn’t have to many points on the topic.”

Overall, these responses show students want to experience respect in the classroom and learn about different perspectives from their own. Male Student A has an understanding that sometimes misinformation happens and that is okay. Classroom discussions seem to be a place to learn for this student. Male Student B agrees with Male Student A and possesses a respect for learning and an open mind. Male Student C has some reservations about discussing controversial topics in class but has no problem discussing these topics on paper for various writing assignments. Lastly, Male Student D does not like to participate in controversial discussions about race, gender, sexuality, etc., but his reasoning shows respect for others’ feelings as well as his own. These excerpts from their journal assignment show promise for classroom discussions

and writings within the “stretch” zone, so I felt confusion as to why my male attendance and assignment submissions started dropping once we began the novel and having discussions about the gender roles Janie was forced to conform to in Hurston’s novel.⁵

A possible answer to my questions regarding male academic performance in my class is that there is a gap in male performance, not only in my class, but in university performance overall. In a 2015 Washington Post article, “Why men vs. women decide to go to college: intellectual curiosity, money, marriage,” opinion columnist Catherine Rampell writes about the increasing gap in performance between males and females at the college level. She provides data from college freshman surveys that show that women possess more intellectual curiosity than men. Her ideas are supported by Paul Wilson and Na Zao at the University of Arizona where they found that women surpass men in both college enrollment and graduation rates (32). A possible answer to why women seem to be doing better in college than men is due to their high affinity for “non-cognitive” skills including “self-motivation, class attendance, ability to pay attention in class, time management, exam preparation, collaboration, and appropriate behavior” (Wilson & Zao 33). Scholars also suggest that women use college as a means to economic parity (33).

Women are striving to achieve equal pay with men, something men do not have to think about. In addition, a UCLA study was conducted to study the habits of college men and women. The study found that “...college females are more likely to spend their time reading, doing homework, participating in student groups, and doing volunteer work while their male counterparts are exercising, partying, watching television, and playing video games” (34). The

⁵ My ENGL 111 final evaluations showed that many students were just overwhelmed by Hurston’s use of dialect in the novel and had a hard time understanding her writing. This could explain attendance and assignment submission concerns.

extra weight on women's shoulders may be the cause of their better attendance rates and overall grades. Perhaps the lack of male participation in my course had nothing to do with their discomfort with the material. The lack of male participation could have been due to their lack of "non-cognitive skills" and a fear of not being masculine enough to fit in with their video-gaming male peers. However, what do you do when students experience discomfort when discussing race, gender, sexuality, or other controversial topics?

Many freshmen may not yet possess the emotional intelligence it takes to fully understand their comfort levels discussing controversial topics. Understanding student discomfort requires constant self-evaluation and revision as students may tell me what they think I want to hear in regard to their comfort levels discussing and writing about certain issues. Student discomfort can be a positive aspect of student learning, though. As Alice Brand believes, if teachers can redirect students' emotions into their writing, they will produce better results (711). Using emotion as a step in the writing process may be useful in a first-year composition classroom, or any writing classroom. Laura Micchiche agrees with this idea in "Feminist Pedagogies" relating it back to the importance of self-reflection in the feminist classroom. She writes, "...emotions are relational and social rather than exclusively interiorized and private" (Micchiche 137). Having students bring their emotions into their writing rather than being disrespectful in classroom discussions can help students process what they feel and respond in mature ways along with furthering their critical thinking skills.

If instructors do not invite students to engage their emotions in the intellectual work of our classrooms, they are cutting off a powerful means of making sense of the world. Janet Bean explores the emotions of working-class students in her article "Manufacturing Emotions: Tactical Resistance in the Narratives of Working-Class Students." The students that I teach in

ENGL 111 at Radford University include some working-class students like Bean's. Bean claims, "When students use emotions in their writing, they often open up spaces that call for interpretation and exert pressure on dominant ideologies. Emotional rhetoric can allow the writer – and the reader – to occupy conflicting positions within a text" (168). Demonstrating to students how to think critically about why they feel the emotions that they do in response to a particular stance on a topic is a learning opportunity for students to understand the mature ways to demonstrate discomfort and/or disagreement. Through writing, students have more time to think about their own responses and begin to understand their feelings about a given topic. Giving students time to write about their emotions and beliefs about controversial issues reinforces the idea of writer's agency.

Scholars such as bell hooks have found that when given the freedom to voice their opinions and feelings in writing, students are more apt to immerse themselves in learning. bell hooks explains, "They are willing to surrender to the wonder of re-learning and learning ways of knowing that go against the grain. When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve" (44). This "willingness to surrender" is evident by the open-mindedness of many of my students in the excerpts from the journal entries I included above. They like to learn about differing opinions in a safe environment. Teaching students multicultural texts in FYC is one way to recognize the existence and importance of our multicultural world. While students are open-minded, bell hooks recognizes that there is the potential for backlash when the "...experiential knowledge of students is being denied or negated that they may feel most determined to impress upon listeners both its value and its superiority to other ways of knowing" (88). Therefore, one of the best ways to combat student discomfort is to set up the classroom in a

way that avoids it. No student should feel that their ideas are invalid or “wrong.” While each class member should be respectful, keeping the class student-centered and allowing spaces for opinions and values that are considered the “dominant” belief system should not be torn down. Using these student discussions as tools to show how there can be different interpretations of texts helps the growth of student critical thinking skills, once again meeting the WPA outcome for FYC courses.

If students do begin to enter the “panic” zone, Karen Dodwell suggests moving past the emotion at least for a short time. She “...told them to put distressing new ideas ‘on the shelf’ and to take them down later when they could assimilate them into their lives” (Dodwell 241). When a student makes an offensive comment in class, Dodwell recommends keeping a positive tone and to not pass judgment (244). She claims that practicing this method of teaching allows students to model that same non-judgmental behavior (244). Keeping a positive tone and not passing judgement is important, though I would not encourage students to save the critical thought of their emotion for later.

In my FYC classroom, if I anticipate any student discomfort, I will usually have my students write about their feelings and thoughts on the class material before our discussion begins. Having them reflect helps them collect their thoughts and reflect on their beliefs and understandings of the material. This activity is an inherently feminist pedagogical strategy that can be used to prevent student discomfort, but it can also be used to deal with the discomfort as it is occurring in the classroom. Instead of instructing students to bottle up their emotions like Dodwell, I suggest having students write about what they are feeling on the spot. Asking students to reflect on their beliefs and begin to understand how the class discussion topic relates to their own lives as well as others gives everyone a chance to regroup and cool off a bit. It also

provides me with a chance to provide comments and suggestions on their writing and redirect them in a private manner; this strategy for combatting student discomfort is suggested by Spencer as he highlights the importance of responding to students in a way that encourages them to think deeper about their personal experiences and connections to class material (204). Responding to students prevents them from automatically shutting down in entering the “panic” zone; and redirects them into the “stretch” zone.

During classroom discussions, Mary Beth Krouse suggests creating a toolkit for students to use when discomfort occurs. The biggest part of the toolkit is simply modeling behavior for students (Krouse 3). Leland Spencer agrees with this idea in “Engaging Undergraduates in Feminist Classrooms” explaining that the guidelines for classroom discussions should be established on the first day of classes (203-204). The way that instructors respond to student comments in the classroom sets the tone for how students will respond to each other in the classroom when they have differing opinions from one another. For example, in my classroom, regardless of what a student believes, I will ask prompting questions to each student asking why they believe the way they do. I will not give an indication whether I agree or disagree with what they are saying; I will simply ask how they arrived at their particular idea. I might ask a question like “How did you come to that conclusion?” or “That is an interesting idea. Can you unpack that a little?” to lead them towards further evaluation of their ideas.

However, if students begin to make discriminatory comments, I will shut those down immediately. Because I am a white instructor, it is important for my BIPOC students to know that I will not stand for racism in my classroom; this reassures everyone that my classroom is a safe space for every student. In respectful, productive whole-group discussions, I usually offer validation of their experiences through the form of head nods, affirmation statements, and/or

comments that use their ideas to connect to the discussion topic of that day. I try to keep my comments as well as student discussions away from the us versus them mentality, like Krouse suggests (Krouse 5). Finding common ground when there is student resistance is helpful (5). This makes the classroom more inclusive for all. Many students may be learning about and grappling with concepts that uproot prior belief systems, so it is important that they have a foundation to know how to cope with these new ideas.

Another suggestion for dealing with student discomfort is part of teaching using feminist pedagogical strategies. Sherry Linkon writes about the importance of sitting on the same level with students: “In a circle, all seats are equal. No student can hide, nor can any claim a seat of special prominence. Similarly, when we continue to change classroom arrangements during the term, even during single class periods, students’ comfortable habits will be continually challenged. Students’ negotiating strategies fail in this setting, and this creates anxiety” (Linkon 59). Practicing this equality in seating helps achieve the feminist pedagogical strategy of keeping the classroom student-centered.⁶ The teacher does not place herself at the front of the room in place of authority nor does she stand over the students to demonstrate power. The instructor is on the same level as everyone else; no one has the “special” seat. This is a contributing factor to why Socratic seminars work so well; instructors sit level with their students. Even when students are completing a writing activity in my classroom, I sit at a desk along with them and write, too. By practicing my own writing, it shows students that writing is important and that the assignment that they are completing matters. With everyone sitting on equal ground, students feel more comfortable sharing their ideas and are less likely to enter the “panic” zone due to discomfort.

⁶ See Chapter Two for more information on feminist pedagogy.

In terms of classroom discussion, Linkon suggests a “rotating chair discussion method” (62). Linkon describes this discussion method saying, “I will present an opening question and then each speaker calls in the next person to speak. At the start of such a discussion, people may be reluctant to raise their hands, so the speakers must call on people who do not volunteer to talk” (Linkon 62). Activities like these create less of a chance for students to rely on the teacher to discuss the content and essentially “give them the answers.” There is more of an interchange of ideas between students; the discussion is primarily student-led. This discussion is an example of feminist pedagogy and serves as a way to combat student discomfort.

During these types of discussions, “...students should be encouraged to ask questions of each other and of their professors” (Shah and Kopko 40). There should be open-ended questions and discussion of questions that instructors may not know the answer to (40). Shah and Kopko also bring up the art of the Socratic method as a means “...to empower students rather than [to be used] as a tool to privilege certain voices and reinforce certain ‘truths’” (41). Furthermore, in a display of transparent teaching, Shah and Kopko suggest explaining to students why the Socratic method of classroom discussion is being used. I have done this with each of my ENGL 111 courses before beginning a Socratic discussion and get good results each time. None of my students have ever been disrespectful to one another or to myself when discussing controversial issues this way. When students understand the “why” behind the lesson plan, they are less likely to show resistance to the material being covered.⁷

When students understand the “why” of an activity or assignment, they are also more likely to develop trust with the instructor. According to Mar Pereira, ultimately dealing with student discomfort comes down to time and trust (132). Mar Pereira’s viewpoint on the

⁷ See my discussion of transparent teaching in Chapter Two.

importance of trust is similar to Krouse's perspective. Developing relationships with students is particularly important in any classroom environment, but especially when teaching powerful and sometimes controversial subjects like gender roles, race, sexuality, etc. Mar Pereira explains that holding office hours outside of class or small study groups can be beneficial to expanding a student's learning (132). In order to create more time to discuss student discomfort, she suggests "cutting back on the amount of material that we cover in a course or session to create time for class discussions about discomfort" (Mar Pereira 133). While I do not have small study groups, I do encourage my students to come to my office hours to discuss concerns they have about the class material. Usually, they do not take me up on my offer, which is why I also incorporate time to reflect on emotions in the classroom.

When designing my ENGL 111 course teaching Hurston, I took Mar Pereira's advice and cut out some of the other texts I wanted to teach and the other writing topics I wanted to cover. Since FYC is "an impossible course," according to Yancey, it is difficult to decide what to include, but students do need "processing" time throughout the course. By cutting out some of the other lessons I had planned for my FYC students, I was able to fit in more reflection time to allow my students to tell me about their concerns about the content of the course and invite them to explain how they process their emotions. I used their journal entries to gauge their reactions to the content presented in the class and determine if there were any changes I needed to make to my course or the way that I was presenting it. By doing this, I ensured that my students did not reach the "panic" zone. This practice is an example of the "faculty member check-ins" that Shah and Kopko suggest in their research of student discomfort (47). This act of both student and instructor self-reflection falls into line with the goals of feminist pedagogy and the personal goals I set for myself when teaching ENGL 111 at Radford University.

With these goals of incorporating feminist pedagogical strategies into my FYC curriculum, I knew I wanted to choose a text that highlighted issues that sometimes get ignored in society like gender roles, race, sexuality, masculinity, etc., but I wanted to accomplish it while managing any student discomfort strategically. Choosing Hurston as the ENGL 111 class novel was significant due to the strong use of Southern Black dialect and the silencing of women's voices throughout. As Brenda Greene suggests in "Addressing Race, Class, and Gender in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Strategies and Reflections," "...a reluctance to raise controversial issues sends a message that polemical subjects are not part of the literature that is representative of the human experience" (Greene 269). This falls into line with feminist pedagogical strategies. Being transparent with students will avoid feelings of discomfort from the start. By not including some material in my curriculum, I was sending an implicit message to my students of what is and is not important to know about. The texts that I include in my curriculum tell my students which voices are worth listening to. Because of Zora Neale Hurston's experiences as a woman, but specifically her experiences as a Black woman, I knew that by teaching her work I was giving a voice to Black women writers; I was shedding light on a plethora of traditionally ignored experiences.

In recent years, there has been an increase in teachers including multicultural works in their curriculum. A specific example comes from four BIPOC educators that started a hashtag in 2018 called #DisruptTexts (Ebarvia et al. 100). A text that aids disruption is one that "...addresses the stereotype or narrative guiding students to make observations throughout the readings" (101). While it is important to teach these disrupting texts, it is equally important that instructors consider how they teach the text and through which critical lens they teach it through (101). I knew that by choosing Hurston I needed to focus on issues of race, gender, and class

when teaching the novel. Using the ideas of Ebarvia et al., I decided that it was imperative for me to teach intersectionality alongside the novel to show students how different identities and experiences can overlap and create an all-new experience.

While I developed my Hurston-centered FYC course, it was necessary to participate in some self-reflection. As a white female instructor, I needed to be sure I was not “speaking for” BIPOC individuals, as Stanovsky suggests (13). It was important for me to be able to hold class discussions in a way that did not alienate any student and did not allow room for racial discrimination. Ibram Kendi’s definition of anti-racism helped to shape my class discussions about race in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. His definition is as follows: “An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences – that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group” (Kendi 20). During our class discussions on Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and our discussions about “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” I made sure to address the different experiences that Black people had in the 1920s and 1930s when each of these texts were written, but I made the effort to ensure that no comment that I made nor any comment that a student made suggested any superiority of one race over another.

Along with discussions of intersectionality, I like to draw my students’ attention to how Janie’s identity changes throughout the novel. Just as college freshmen are forming their identities, so is Janie. Having students find common ground with Janie helps them to engage more closely with the text. As Deborah Clarke says in “‘The porch couldn’t talk for looking’: Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” “As the title of the novel indicates, Hurston is interested in far more than the development of one woman’s journey to self-knowledge; she seeks to find a discourse that celebrates both the voices and the bodies of African

Americans” (199). By teaching Hurston, I am disrupting the traditional narrative and having my students listen to voices previously unheard. There is individual identity formation for Janie, but there is identity formation for whole groups of minorities within the novel. Janie moves from “self-sacrificing” to “self-affirming,” which aligns with my pedagogical goal of affirming both historically silenced voices and the voices of my own students (Clarke 203).

Moving from giving voice to silenced writers in FYC, it is imperative that my students know that their voice is valued in my classroom in classroom discussion. Students can continue to develop critical thinking skills by seeing others’ perspectives. College freshmen may be asked to share their ideas and opinions with a large group for their very first time, so college classroom discussions may be daunting to them at first. They may not be comfortable sharing their thoughts on controversial topics like race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. One solution to this issue is to start with smaller, less controversial topics before moving to larger, more controversial topics (Dodwell 236).

Starting with something like age discrimination in *Their Eyes*, for example, and then moving into discussions of intersectionality of race and gender may be best for classroom discussions. Starting small in discussions gives students time to gain more comfort with their peers and speaking in class. Karen Dodwell suggests, “Introducing texts that focus on young women’s experience growing up in different times and cultures would enable students to share but also decenter their own experiences and place them in the context of other stories” (239). I have observed this in my own ENGL 111 classroom reading Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Students are more inclined to talk about the experiences that Janie goes through in the novel because they can remove themselves from the equation initially. They talk about the experiences of Janie and Hurston’s purpose in writing *Their Eyes* in 1937. However, as they

warmed up to their peers and to me, they eventually became more comfortable relating the experiences of Janie to modern day issues concerning race and gender.

In order for students to make the initial observations about Janie and Hurston's purpose for writing, they must have an understanding of American life in the early twentieth century. Genevieve West calls for an inclusion of historical contextual information to supplement students' understanding of a text (22). Using West's idea of including background information, I chose to dedicate one ENGL 111 class session to biographical information about Hurston and another class session to discussing the history of the feminist movement. None of my students in either section of ENGL 111 had ever read Hurston or learned about the feminist movement before. They appreciated the context for the novel the further we got into it.

Along with the contextual information, we also discussed canon formation. Because no one in my classes had ever read Hurston before, I asked them why they thought that was. One of my male students immediately replied, "Because she's a woman!" This reply led to a good discussion of the kinds of texts we read in public school and the people that decide what we read. West discusses how to prompt student discussion about why we teach what we teach and what makes literature worth reading. To continue the conversation about "transparent teaching," West expresses "the importance of acknowledging the ways in which our identities and personal values shape interpretations of what we read" and the importance of asking why certain literature is included in education (23-24). Some example discussion questions are: "Who decides what is good, and how are such decisions made? What responsibilities does a minority author have to promote or protect members of his or her own group?" (24-25). These types of activities work best when discussion and writing are combined in some way.

Having students examine the text is important through discussions and writing but merging the text with technology can allow for collaborative thinking. In my FYC courses, I have found Padlet and shared Google documents to be the most useful; Pownall has had similar positive experiences using Padlet and Google Docs with her students (114). When practicing writing a rhetorical analysis, I separated the class into assigned groups and gave them specific passages of Hurston to analyze. Each group had to write one to two paragraphs analyzing their assigned passages and then add them to the shared Google Doc. It was up to the students to decide how they would organize the essay. My students did well with this assignment, and it gave them a model to use when writing their own rhetorical analyses.

When I use Padlet, it is with the goal of hearing all voices. I will ask them to post a passage they found significant to the Padlet board online and then have them explain the significance of their chosen passage to the class. I also use it as a way of anonymously checking in with students to see if they have any questions. Each student can post questions to the board without identifying themselves and then we can answer the questions together as a class; that way no one feels anxious about asking me questions during class out loud or coming to my office hours. These collaborative technologies provide new ways of interpreting Hurston's texts and planning lessons using feminist pedagogical strategies.

Scholars Susan Osborn and Nancy Schneidewind both suggest incorporating collective or collaborative assignments into writing classes using feminist pedagogy (Osborn 266; Schneidewind 75). Group assignments where all group members have to contribute equally work best. Equal contribution leads to a more supportive classroom overall where students feel safe and can encourage them to participate in other activities even more. As far as holding students accountable, Schneidewind says, "Students work in small heterogeneous groups toward a

common goal. A student obtains her goal if, and only if, others with whom she is linked obtain theirs. In other words, students sink or swim together. Learning is structured so that individual competitiveness is not helpful to a student's success; cooperation, however, is" (75). Small groups can also help introverted students because she found that "members of cooperative groups made attempts to encourage other members to contribute" (Schneidewind 76). Each student can use their strengths to help each other succeed.

In my FYC classroom, I usually assign students to specific groups and then assign a specific role to each student. Each group will have a specific list of questions about Hurston's novel or whatever text we happen to be reading at the time. Each person has to complete their job before receiving credit for the activity. For instance, one student will be the recorder, writing down their group's answer, while another student is in charge of being the discussion leader, starting off the conversation about the group's questions and pulling passages from their notes whenever the conversation seems to lull. Usually, the groups record their answers on a giant Post-It note to present to the class or on a separate sheet of paper to be turned into me by the end of class. The other group member, if in a three-person group, will serve as the speaker when it comes time to present their ideas to the whole group. I monitor each group as they work and check off who is completing their group task and who is not. This is reflected in their participation grade at the end of the semester. An example set of discussion questions that I use when teaching Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* involves the characterization of Janie. I try to relate the questions back to aspects of writing along with reading comprehension. The discussion questions about Janie are as follows:

Janie Character Analysis:

- How does Hurston use show-not-tell writing to describe Janie's character? Find at least

four quotes from Chapters 2-3 that illustrate show-not-tell writing. Cite page numbers on your giant Post-It.

- What are Janie’s views on marriage? Is it the same as her idea of love?
- What shapes Janie’s beliefs/values of marriage?
- What is the significance of Janie’s connection to the nature imagery throughout the chapters? Give **one specific example** of how Janie’s character is connected to nature.

Cite the page number.

Using these types of collective writing assignments allows the instructor to shift the position of authority from themselves to the students. The students then have opportunities to help each other find passages, understand the plot, and practice simple in-text citations together to prepare them for undertaking larger individual writing assignments.⁸

While it is important to support students while they discuss difficult issues in class, sometimes for the very first time, it is equally important to encourage them to break out of the “comfort” zone and into the “stretch” zone because “...when issues of race, class, and gender are entirely suppressed in informational texts, as they often are, it is not so easy for students even to see that an argument is underway, let alone find a way to enter that argument” (Bruce et al. 85). One way to support students and help them make sense of complicated topics like race and gender is to make them write about it, which is perfect for a first-year composition course using Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

A writing assignment that may be beneficial beyond just comprehension of the plot events in *Their Eyes* involves code-switching. The dialect in Hurston’s novel is one of the

⁸ For more examples of discussion questions I use to teach *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, see Appendix A.

biggest obstacles to students understanding the text. My students in ENGL 111 often complain about having to read slower to understand the dialogue and having to look words up. Their complaining is an example of them being in discomfort. Their comfort zone is their own dialect that may or may not be reflected in the novel. They struggle with having to slow down and focus on the words since Hurston uses a Southern Black dialect that most of my students are unfamiliar with.

One way to incorporate discussions of dialect into the classroom and help students understand Hurston's reasoning for writing the majority of *Their Eyes* in dialect is to assign journal entries relating to code switching. In my ENGL 111 class, each journal entry is worth 25 points. I offer 1000 total points throughout the semester, so each individual journal entry is only worth 2.5% of their final grade. Keeping these assignments low stakes gives students the authority to experiment with their writing and ideas without the fear of being "wrong." One journal prompt that I assign after a brief lecture on code switching when we begin Hurston's novel is as follows:

Discuss the following in your journal entry:

- Do you have a dialect? If so, what kind of dialect?
- How did you develop your dialect?
- Do you have to code switch when you come to school? Why or why not?
- Do you code switch when you are with your friends vs. when you are with your parents? Why or why not?
- Do you code switch differently when you are with different groups of friends?

These types of questions cause students to reflect on their own experiences using their own language. We then discuss as a whole group why we think Hurston uses a Southern Black

dialect. Many students say, “Because it’s where she’s from,” but with slight guidance I can move students towards thinking about how these Southern Black voices were often silenced. We end our whole group discussion with the idea that by incorporating dialect into *Their Eyes*, Hurston is giving a voice to those who did not have one. I bring this idea up often as we read through the novel in the following weeks. Finding common ground through discussions of dialect and code switching brings students together though they may be different.

In my ENGL 111 class, I found that my students loved to talk about their own experiences and identities in the code-switching lessons, so it was only fitting that I continued the reflective strategy of feminist pedagogy by assigning a personal narrative writing assignment. Karyn Hollis agrees with the potential of the alternative essay assignment to the typical academic research essay. She argues, “...the exploratory essay, autobiography, and journal are good alternatives to the academic essay. Perhaps a sequence of assignments that progresses from the personal modes of journals or autobiography to the expository would ease young women’s transition from invisible silence to public writers” (Hollis 343). She claims that it may even be useful to have students experiment with voice going to “...an intimate, subjective voice rather than an impersonal, rational one” (344). The personal narrative is a great starting place for college freshman writers because they can explore their identities and reflect on their experiences while they are adjusting to writing in a college setting. I would extend Hollis’s idea to more than just young women’s transition from the private sphere to the public sphere, though. The personal narrative essay can benefit all students as they adjust to writing at the college level. This writing assignment also aligns with Hurston’s feminist ideas. As David Holmes explains in *Revisiting Racialized Voice: African American Ethos in Language and Literature*, “...her evolving feminism stems in part for her larger desire to reconcile formal education with informal

experiences” (84). Using the personal narrative essay as way to join formal academic writing with informal out-of-the-classroom experiences is inherently a feminist pedagogy strategy and what Hurston strived for in her career as well.

While students were in the process of revising their personal narratives in my ENGL 111 class, they had the opportunity to participate in peer review. Peer review is a common practice in composition courses. There are many different ways to conduct peer review. The first time that I conducted peer review in my FYC class was through a partner worksheet activity. The worksheet asks specific questions relating to various aspects of the paper including the strength of the introduction, use of show-not-tell writing, and overall essay structure. Each student chooses a partner and swaps their papers with them. They can write comments on the printed copies of the drafts. I require the completed peer review worksheets to be shown to me by the end of class in order to receive participation credits. One way to improve this peer review activity, according to Hollis, is to create “mixed gender groups.” Assigning partners beforehand can be helpful, but if there is a larger proportion of one gender over others, this could be difficult.

By incorporating multiple revision activities like peer review into the FYC curriculum, it demonstrates the importance of revision and the necessity of the ongoing writing process. Another assignment that I incorporate into my FYC course is the revision portfolio. Students are free to choose any three writing assignments from the semester to revise and include in their portfolio. I have them complete a reading of Joseph Harris’s chapter on revising from *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts* and then incorporate his revision strategies by using Microsoft tracking changes to show me where they revised. Then, they must write a 300-word reflection explaining their revision choices. Both the act of revising and reflecting are feminist pedagogical strategies. There is also a tie in between my students’ need to revise and the way that Janie

revises herself through *Their Eyes* as she interacts with men, Nanny, and Pheoby. In order to make connections between the revision portfolio and the novel, it is important to point out the feedback that Janie receives from society. For my students, this portfolio is worth 100 points out of the 1000 total points possible. I do not grade my students as heavily on the portfolio compared to Yancey's graded weight of 80% for her students' portfolios (339). The majority of her grade is based on the revision portfolio, while the other 20% is based on class participation (Yancey 339). I like to place more of a focus on the informal assignments like journals in order to ease my students through the transition into college-level formal writing and develop their writer's agency first; this is why only 10% of my students' grade is made up of the revision portfolio.⁹

Arguably the most important writing assignment of my ENGL 111 is the *Their Eyes Were Watching God* rhetorical analysis essay. This assignment is my students' most heavily graded assignment of the semester. They have the most time to work on this assignment, and they spend an entire week peer reviewing and revising. They also have the option to revise this paper again to include it in their revision portfolio.¹⁰ My students are tasked to analyze one or more characters' use of rhetorical appeals and their purpose for using the appeals. Analyzing the characters in this way ties in lessons of audience awareness into their own writing as they locate and interpret instances in Hurston's novel where characters interact with their audience in different ways. Many of my students chose pathos to analyze Janie's quest for love and her interactions with other characters. Other successful rhetorical analyses looked at Nanny's use of ethos and logos to convince Janie to marry Logan Killicks. Some students preferred looking to Janie's other two marriages to compare Jody's use of logos and ethos to Tea Cake's frequent use

⁹ The assignment sheet that I created for my ENGL 111 class is located in Appendix B.

¹⁰ Appendix C shows the assignment sheet and rubric provided to my students.

of pathos. Having students explore the characters' interactions in Hurston's novel brings students to a deeper understanding of the intentions behind certain dialogue and actions. It also aids in their understanding of formal academic writing and APA citation methods as they cite from the text. In addition, I require them to find two secondary sources about the novel to back up their major points about the rhetoric of the characters. Incorporating research into this assignment is a great way to get freshman students used to citing their sources, explaining quotes, and using university resources for research. The *Their Eyes* rhetorical analysis writing process is the culmination of all of their work in ENGL 111 and prepares them for future college courses and writing and critical thinking in their own fields.¹¹

¹¹ For a list of other teaching activities and resources, please see Appendix D.

Conclusion

Teaching women writers in first-year composition has many challenges, yet the rewards outweigh the obstacles. Amplifying the voices of those once silenced and teaching students to amplify their own voices through writing is one of the most rewarding experiences for me as a first-year composition instructor. FYC is many things; it is the “impossible” course. Voice, dialect, code-switching, audience awareness, grammar, style, organization, agency — all of these are just as important as the next. Teaching Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can accomplish all of these goals for FYC, while encouraging critical thinking and rhetorical knowledge.

Though some student discomfort may arise when teaching women writers and/or discussing controversial issues like race, gender, sexuality, etc., it is important to design the course with feminist pedagogical strategies in place. Using these strategies will lead to a more successful FYC course overall. Being transparent with students and decentering oneself from a traditional “authority figure” place of power can be a good start. Showing students that their instructor is trustworthy can eliminate some of the hard feelings that may accompany discussions of difficult issues. Also, providing opportunities for students to incorporate their own personal experiences into their writing through journaling and the personal essay can help students process their emotions before ever bringing them to the classroom. Encouraging students to constantly evaluate their feelings and opinions in writing highlights the importance of revision in the FYC feminist classroom. Students not only revise their writing, but they rethink their perspectives on important issues.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers numerous opportunities for discussion of race, gender, and sexuality. Her use of a Southern Black dialect can be challenging

to some students, but it shows that not all texts must conform to the Standard English dialect to be considered a “good” piece of writing. For many students, reading this novel in FYC may be the first time that they have felt their voices have ever been heard. It is this overarching reason that I do what I do. Pairing literature and writing in a composition classroom provides an outlet for students to explore the world and explore themselves. A quote often attributed to Hurston claims, “If you are silent about your pain, they will kill you and say you enjoyed it” (Hurston qtd. in Jennings). This quote highlights my goal for my FYC courses. I hope that each student leaves my class with a strong sense of writer’s agency, voice, and an improved way to communicate their ideas, challenges, and passions in writing.

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Appendix A

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Sample Classroom Discussion Questions

The Setting:

- Where is the setting? Be specific. Cite page numbers.
- How does Hurston use show-not-tell writing to describe the setting? Find at least **four quotes** from Chapters 2-3 that illustrate show-not-tell writing. Cite page numbers on your giant Post-It.
- Why is the setting important to the plot?
- Would Janie's experiences be different if Hurston had changed the setting? If so, how? If not, why?

Nanny Character Analysis:

- How does Hurston use show-not-tell writing to describe Nanny's character? Find at least **four quotes** from Chapters 2-3 that illustrate show-not-tell writing. Cite page numbers on your giant Post-It.
- What does Nanny believe about marriage? How about love? How do we know this?
- What shapes Nanny's beliefs of marriage/love? Cite **one specific example** from the text with page numbers.
- What is the significance of the following quote from Nanny on page 14: "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out" (14)?

Logan Character Analysis:

- How does Hurston use show-not-tell writing to describe Logan's character or his relationship to Janie? Find at least **four quotes** from Chapters 2-3 that illustrate show-not-tell writing. Cite page numbers on your giant Post-It.
- Whose point of view are these descriptions of Logan in (Janie's, Nanny's, etc.)? What is the

significance of this?

•What aspects of Janie's identity develop due to her relationship with Logan? How do we know this? Find **two specific quotes** illustrating your point. Cite page numbers.

Appendix B

Revision Portfolio Assignment Description

Assignment Description

Throughout the semester we have written many different pieces of writing including personal essays, rhetorical analysis essays, journals, and other smaller assignments. You may choose three of any of our assignments to revise and edit and then resubmit. In one single Word document, you will include the original copy of the paper, followed by the revised copy including tracking changes, followed by a 300-word reflection explaining how you revised and edited and why you choose the specific assignment to revise. You will do this for at least three assignments. We will cover this in-depth in class.

On each revised copy, you must mark your changes with the Microsoft tracking tool or by using Harris's revision methods. For more information about the Microsoft tracking tool, please review [Microsoft Mark-Up Instructions](#)

The Harris chapter on revising is located under "Readings" on D2L.

Criteria

3 original copies included

3 revised copies included with tracking comments and notations

3 300-word reflections explaining your revision and editing choices

Appendix C

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching* Rhetorical Analysis Essay Assignment Sheet and Rubric

Their Eyes Were Watching God Rhetorical Analysis Essay Assignment

Due Date: Final Copy due 11/18 by 11PM

Point Value: 250 points

Course Goals and Outcomes

- Students engage in the recursive writing process, including pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading to improve written communication.
- Students use appropriate vocabulary, mechanics, grammar, and style.
- Students are able to produce a unified, developed essay that supports a thesis.
- Students use rhetorical principles as they write for appropriate audiences and purposes.

Assignment Description

For this assignment, you will apply the knowledge you have acquired about research, the writing process, rhetorical appeals, and audience to compose a thesis-driven rhetorical analysis essay on a topic of your choice within Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Your claim must be **debatable**, but should not be too broad or too narrow. For example, your thesis should not be "There are farmers in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that use logos." Instead, you should tell what the characters' use of rhetorical appeals accomplishes. Try saying something like, "The farmers' use of logos in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* challenge racist Southern beliefs." We will work together as a class to develop focused research questions and thesis statements that work for your topic of choice. **You must have your paper topic approved**

by me before beginning your research. I will indicate my approval on your rhetorical analysis proposal feedback.

Criteria

Length: 1000-1250 words

Double-Spaced

Times New Roman size 12 font

at least 2 sources utilized; both sources must be from the RU databases

APA Formatted References Page

Submitted as a Word Document

Their Eyes Were Watching God Essay Rubric

Name:

Introduction	Weight	Assigned
The introduction has an excellent hook that is vivid with detail, thoroughly engaging the reader.	0-15	
The thesis statement is significant, focused, and compelling. It makes a clear debatable claim identifying at least one rhetorical appeal and how it is used in <i>Their Eyes</i> . It is also easy to identify.	0-30	
The forecast previews the main points and sets the structure for the rest of the paper.	0-10	
Content & Organization		
Paragraphs are fully developed, unified, and coherent. The writer includes substantial information in each paragraph and analyzes at least one rhetorical appeal in depth. The reader is able to follow the writing with ease.	0-35	
Topic sentences are clear and body paragraphs progress in a logical order that matches the structure set in the forecast. Transitions are present and well executed.	0-25	
The essay includes a counterclaim or alternative view to the thesis statement. This is evaluated fairly. A rebuttal to defend the thesis statement is also included.	0-20	
Conclusion		
Conclusion effectively wraps up essay, demonstrates thoughtfulness about the novel and rhetorical appeals, and overall leaves an impression on the reader.	0-15	

APA		
A minimum of two sources from the RU databases is met. The essay uses sources skillfully to support the writer's claim and acknowledge the counterclaim.	0-25	
Quotes, paraphrases, and/or summaries are integrated properly with the appropriate use of APA in-text citations. The writer explains the significance of each quote, paraphrase, and/or summary in relation to the main point.	0-25	
Paper is formatted in APA style. References page is included and follows APA guidelines. References page includes all necessary information for APA.	0-15	
Paper Mechanics		
Punctuation, grammar, and spelling adhere to college-level standards.	0-15	
Length: 1000-1250 words (exclusive of title and reference pages) Font: Times New Roman 12 point Spacing: double spacing only (Select Paragraph tab and check the box next to the sentence "Don't add space between paragraphs of the same style.") Margins: 1 inch	0-20	
Total Score out of 250 Points:		

Appendix D

Other Resources and Teaching Activities

- Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. One World, 2019.
 - Explicitly teach Kendi’s definition of antiracism to students.
- Osborn, Susan. “‘Revision/Re-Vision’: A Feminist Writing Class.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1991, pp. 258-273. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.radford.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=edsjsr.465911&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
 - Moving beyond who decides which types of literature should be taught in schools, it is also beneficial to locate instances of characters being silenced in novels.

When teaching *Their Eyes*, my students gravitated to pointing out instances where Janie is silenced by all three of her husbands. Osborn suggests looking for these instances through a discussion activity called “Who Does the Talking?” (263). She challenges her students to “...locate scenes of encounter and to note points of resistance in a text...” (263). One of the outcomes she hopes her students will take away from this activity is to see how language is affected by our gender system (Osborn 265).