Self-Determination Theory and Authenticity: A Response to Power Inequities within Higher Education

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Healthy identity formation influences an individual's social and emotional well-being, and reflective writing processes that bolster self-compassion, autonomy, competence, and relatedness can positively affect authentic self-actualization. The present study makes use of a participant action research methodology consisting of a collaborative learning community, focus groups, and personal narratives to investigate ways to ameliorate labor practices and institutional barriers to student and instructor autonomy and authentic self-actualization in writing programs. Tangible solutions for curricular design to improve students' and instructors' well-being and quality of life are presented.

Introduction

Authenticity is one of the most commonly endorsed character strengths in the world (Park et al. 126; Seligman et al. 411). Research in psychology suggests that socio-contextual factors that contribute to an individual's authenticity also positively influence their well-being across multiple dimensions including openness to experience, life satisfaction, and non-neuroticism (Sheldon et al. 1391). From a developmental perspective, authenticity among individuals invariably centers on meaningful understanding of the self. Peterson and Seligman summarize the work of several scholars, including Rogers, Deci and Ryan, and Pennebaker and Keough, to show that the function of authenticity may thus serve accurate self-regulation, improved task performance, and a reduction of chronic stress and autonomic activation (Peterson and Seligman 253).

If we are living authentically, we are in tune with our internal states, emotions, and socio-contextual environments, and we have the ability to respond effectively to those emotions and the social contexts within which we live. Thus, authenticity may well serve a highly adaptive purpose in human development and social functioning.

We believe that cultivation of authenticity, self-compassion, and unconditional positive regard represents a strategy of humanitarian social justice that

may help to ameliorate epidemic levels of disordered mental health among adolescents and young adults that have arisen in part because of suboptimal educational policies that perpetuate rigid power inequities within higher education and that value rankings, test scores, and social comparison to the detriment of quality of life and well-being of students and teachers. Modeling and encouraging these character strengths from the beginning of the class can support students' cultivation of wellness (Gurung and Galardi). Scholars in writing studies are increasingly supporting a focus on well-being as an integral aspect of writing classes (Yagelski and Collins).

Authenticity can be defined in several different ways. Peterson and Seligman define authenticity as "a character trait in which people are true to themselves, accurately representing—privately and publicly—their internal states, intentions, and commitments," and they distinguish authenticity from closely related strengths like "honesty" and "integrity" by suggesting that authenticity refers to "emotional genuineness" and "psychological depth" (249-250). Ryan and Deci define authenticity as involving the following two aspects:

1. One's behavior is authored or endorsed by the self (i.e., it is autonomous), and
2. It is not self-deceptive but reflects a considered, meaningful, and open grappling with what is actually occurring. (396)

Drawing on these definitions, our objective is to present labor practices and tangible solutions that may be useful in postsecondary writing contexts to facilitate optimal identity status development of students and instructors. To accomplish this, we use a participant action research methodology that was implemented at a large research intensive university in the American Southwest. Our methodology includes focus group discussions with and oral narratives by instructor/co-authors related to identity development and self-actualization (Hall). Specifically, we aim to investigate the intersectionality of identities with labor practices and policies as well as curricular strategies to cultivate authenticity, self-compassion, and unconditional positive regard as an act of social justice to resist dominant neoliberal forces that influence postsecondary writing programs.

Humanitarian Social Justice in Education

Paradoxically, education that seeks to foster authentic learning and the development of authenticity among students seems, at first glance, diametrically opposed to the autonomy and intrinsic motivation Ryan and Deci suggest is necessary to foster authenticity. Bialystock addresses this paradox, eloquently writing:

. . . organized schooling, however, takes as its starting point the mandate to influence children in particular directions and produce some degree of conformity and standardization across individuals. In fact, if it were assumed that students already had well-formed individual identities, much institutional education would constitute direct coercion and forced inauthenticity. (22)

How can a student be authentic in a social organization that by its very nature coerces those students to adopt normative ways of being? Furthermore, how can we as instructors in a writing program cultivate our own authentic teaching, and indeed our own authentic selfhood, when policies and practices undermine our autonomy, competence, and relatedness?

Bialystock points to Haji and Cuypers, who argue for a relational view of authenticity that provides motivational knowledge to individuals who must then act volitionally. This is a profound reconceptualization for how we might learn in Western civilization. It emphasizes the importance of collaboratively learning motivational theories that are then supported by unconditional positive regard of students' and instructors' autonomy as we act on those theories.

Self-Determination Theory

Similar to Bialystok and Haji and Cuypers, Deci and Ryan address the paradox of developing authenticity in coercive systems like education by "drawing on existential and relational literatures" in defining "authentic aspects of personality as those that are fully self-endorsed, volitionally enacted, and personally meaningful to the individual. In this perspective, when acting in accord with authentic interests and values, people's motivation, quality of experience, and well-being are enhanced" (433-434). Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (SDT) comes from an organismic and adaptive perspective regarding the purpose of a phenomenological self and posits three innate motivations that drive the self: autonomy (i.e., freedom from coercion, manipulation, and control), competence, and relatedness. They write:

A growing body of research on identity formation within SDT clearly shows that: (1) persons have multiple identities; (2) these identities vary in their relative autonomy and in their integrity and coherence with one another; (3) more autonomous and integrated identities are facilitated by need-supportive social contexts; and (4) the more integrated an identity is, the greater its benefit is for individuals' flourishing. (392)

Self-determination theory is especially relevant in regard to labor practices in postsecondary writing contexts with implications that transcend writing pro-

grams and bear relevance on the current state of neoliberal higher education. That is, the degree to which policies and practices in higher education support (or thwart) autonomy, competence, and relatedness of graduate students and contingent faculty has tremendous importance for the future of higher education and on how we learn, teach, research, grow, and thrive.

As such, in the focus groups and narrative to follow, we will discuss how we might draw from self-determination theory and self-compassion to resist dominant norms. In so doing, our objective is to foster authentic identity development to shape policy and practice discussions regarding equitable and humane treatment of graduate students and contingent faculty.

Collaborative Learning Community

Our current study is part of a larger participant action research (PAR) project underway at the University of Arizona to develop an ecological model for well-being in the Writing Program (WP). As part of this PAR, we have developed a Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) of graduate students and non-tenure eligible faculty (referred to as "career-track" faculty at our institution) in the WP to develop curricula designed to improve student and instructor well-being. The CLC was composed of seven graduate students and five non-tenure-eligible faculty that met bi-weekly during Fall Semester 2019.

Each CLC meeting centered around readings, discussions, and curricular development drawing from prominent theories of well-being such as Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan), Self-Compassion Theory (Neff), and Seligman's model of the five measurable elements that contribute to well-being, or PERMA (Seligman 24). Our objective was to design low-stakes writing activities, readings, major writing assignments, and autonomy-supporting grading measures that could be implemented in first year writing courses taught by the CLC members and that might improve student and instructor well-being.

One extension of the CLC was a focus group that emerged specifically to address autonomy, authenticity, and positionality influenced by labor practices in our WP. The focus group consisted of the co-authors of this article: Nick is a non-tenure-eligible faculty member at the University; Sally, Michelle, and Sydney were graduate students at the time of the focus group; and Stacey was both a graduate student and a non-tenure-eligible faculty member. We were especially interested in the topics of authenticity, autonomy, and policies that support or thwart authentic learning and authentic teaching. The conversation regarding authenticity and autonomy and their influence on graduate students' and non-tenure eligible faculty members' well-being began in the formal CLC meetings but also consisted of informal discussions outside of the CLC. We decided as a group to meet separately to form a focus group in order to discuss

labor practices that influence autonomy, authenticity, and consequently our individual and collective well-being.

Focus Group

One of the first questions that our focus group responded to was "How is our autonomy supported or thwarted given our positionalities as grad students or contingent faculty in our institution?" Nick Halsey noted that the sheer size of our program contributed to his sense of autonomy as a career-track faculty member:

> We have so many graduate students and specifically in this program, so many graduate students, so many career-track faculty … within the Writing Program, I think that actually lends itself towards us having a good degree of autonomy because with the ratio of instructors to admin, it would be pretty impossible I think for the admin to strictly regulate what we're doing as instructors. I've worked in other programs where the ratio was much closer to one to one, and in those cases, I had less autonomy as an instructor.

Nick seems to be suggesting that a large program the size of the one at Arizona lends itself, at least in the case of career-track faculty, to more autonomy because the administrators are unable to closely monitor and regulate what the faculty are teaching in their classes.

Sydney Sullivan, a graduate student teaching in the WP, agreed with Nick regarding the autonomy she felt as an instructor teaching First-Year Writing, but she identified a key difference between being an instructor and being a student:

> As a graduate teaching student, I feel as though my autonomy similarly, I don't feel monitored, and I feel that I'm free to guide the classes as I please … and that allows me to get a better sense of who I am as a teacher in addition to how my students feel … and what they're happy with. So I feel that in that sense, I have a lot of autonomy when it comes to my job. When it comes to being a student, I actually think I feel less so at times, just because there is a kind of role you play as a student in a university and especially with traditional teaching or maybe stricter regulations when it comes to teaching, it can be difficult at times to feel like I'm able to express myself or have like a growth mindset when I'm in my student position.

This led us to speculate that as an individual progresses forward through an institution of higher education (IHE), they may be granted increased autonomy. Incoming first year students may have the least autonomy in an

IHE, graduate students increasingly more autonomy, non-tenure faculty even more, and presumably TT faculty and administration ever more autonomy. This tiered restriction of autonomy – the prohibiting of goals, behaviors, and actions – may have negative health implications on individuals who have less freedom in higher education.

Sally Benson, a doctoral student teaching in the WP, noted that the annual teaching portfolio and student evaluations of the classes she teaches influence her freedom and willingness to take risks as an instructor, "The threat of the annual teaching portfolios and performance reviews and the TCEs tend to put a little bit of a damper on my sense of freedom or risk-taking in the classroom." As a doctoral student, Sally noted that strictly defined paths to degree completion thwarted her autonomy, and she suggested the potential of self-compassion in ameliorating the harmful effects of autonomy-thwarting labor policies and practices:

> As a graduate student, it's similar when you get on UAccess and you look at the schedule of what you are doing and what you're supposed to be doing in this trajectory. Are you in good standing? Check, check, check. This feels oppressive to me. We talked about having self-compassion. And some of us perform differently than others. And so you want to be able to have self-compassion, but you also want to be able to actually have the room to perform the way you perform. But when you go back and you look at that checklist, it's very hard not to be comparing yourself against some standard. I find that emotionally challenging.

For Sally, the experience of being a graduate student seems to be one of having her autonomy systematically thwarted, and the implication is that autonomy-thwarting institutional practices have a negative influence on her well-being. Mindfulness as represented in self-compassion training may help, but it may not be an adequate response to the kinds of systematic oppression felt by graduate students and those who have less autonomy and freedom in higher education.

Stacey Cochran, a non-tenure-eligible assistant professor in the WP, noted his concern that enduring fifteen years without the opportunity to earn tenure had contributed to serious mental health consequences. His situation is complicated by virtue of being married to the former director of the WP who is a full professor with tenure:

> As someone who has been non-tenure faculty for 15 years in two different institutions, it's easy to develop sort of Stockholm Syndrome and not realize how oppressed we are, and think, okay, things are

pretty good, right? Seeing the other side of the curtain and seeing what academic freedom affords some people to say and do is a nice contrast for me to think about the differences between what academic freedom can provide in terms of autonomy. That's not to say that having tenure and academic freedom is just "the grass is greener on the other side." There's a lot of stuff that you have to deal with, that we as non-tenure-track faculty don't have to deal with. So this is an issue that I wrestle with a lot. I think trying to cultivate more autonomy contributes to more psychological well-being for myself, and I think it also then transmits to better teaching and a better experience for students.

Stacey seems to be expressing his concern that over time, he has become numb to academic labor practices that perpetuate systematic oppression, even using hostage-like rhetoric to describe his positionality as non-tenure-eligible faculty amidst faculty who have tenure and exercise the power that comes with tenure and academic freedom. On a more optimistic note, he suggests that cultivating more autonomy for himself may be a path toward improved mental health and psychological well-being. The implication is that labor practices that afford one population (i.e., tenure-track faculty) academic freedom and greater autonomy, while denying that freedom and autonomy to other faculty (i.e., non-tenure faculty) and graduate students, have serious health consequences. Furthermore, the increase in autonomy he has begun to cultivate for himself has not only improved his own psychological well-being, but it may also contribute to better teaching and a better learning experience for students.

Michelle Silvers, a doctoral student in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies, noted that she felt less autonomy as a student and more autonomy and freedom when she was participating in a summer internship and as a teaching assistant:

> As far as autonomy and my own studies right now, that's something that I'm definitely struggling with and battling with as I am trying to make cases as to whether or not I need to take specific courses versus what is required ... the only time I've actually felt autonomy within my program of study was when I developed my independent studies this past summer with going down to Guanajuato [Mexico] and working down there and within the classes that I a T.A. for.

The responses in our focus group suggest that students must endure systematic oppression that comes from autonomy-thwarting institutional policies

and practices, and that these autonomy-thwarting policies and practices have negative psychological health outcomes.

Another question that our focus group considered was "What is authentic teaching? Authentic learning?" Stacey approached this from an institutional perspective saying:

> There seems like there's varying degrees of autonomy that then contribute to one's development, their authentic voice, based on these hierarchies that are in place within the institution. I look at that and I see barriers to autonomy presenting challenges to one's psychological well-being and to the development of one's authentic self.

Sydney addressed authentic teaching and learning from a feminist perspective, noting that women face challenges to their authority connected to their identities as women and how that authority is often challenged by male students:

> When I was an undergrad, I saw other women teachers who were younger get maybe perhaps by like male students, or anyone who thought that they could act up in the classroom, get not necessarily bullied but definitely get disrespected, because they were too nice or that they couldn't hold down their authority in the classroom.

And she pointed to a need for increased institutional support in preparing graduate students for teaching in the WP:

> One of my biggest problems was that I feel there wasn't enough guidance. When I came in and we did teacher training, and we had 10 days to learn everything that you need to learn to be a "teacher." And in reality, like we never, we don't practice, we don't go up in front of each other and pretend like we're running a classroom. The first day I entered into the classroom and became a teacher was the first time I had ever done that in my entire life. And so it's a very overwhelming process that you don't while I think there are people attempting to show you the ropes, there is no kind of implementation of what you need to be doing. And so you kind of have to fill in the blanks for yourself of who you think you need to be. And that became really difficult for developing authenticity. I think in trying to cultivate myself as a teacher because I didn't have enough guidance on what you're supposed to look like.

For Sydney, institutional support that gave her practice teaching in front of her peers, of thinking more autonomously about the teaching philosophy

that felt most authentic to her would have improved the experience of teaching for the first time.

Nick addressed authentic teaching and authentic learning as deeply intertwined issues:

> One thing that comes to mind in terms of authentic teaching is teaching something that I would want to learn . . . that I really want to hear the students help me figure out and, and so I feel lucky that I'm able to at least, you know, bring in, you know, themes, subjects, texts that I feel I'm still figuring out and the students can help me through that process. I think some of the best moments of teaching have involved that kind of experience.

Stacey followed up by asking Nick, "Authentic teaching involves the teacher learning and demonstrating that he, she, they are learning the material in collaboration with students in the class?"

Nick elaborated, "Yeah, I think in the best moments that happens . . . I think authenticity is served through a good degree of exploration, and going beyond the familiar and self-growth, particularly when you're still a young adult."

Sally agreed with Nick that authentic teaching and authentic learning are intertwined, and that teachers who are actively demonstrating that they are learning from and with their students may positively influence students' authentic learning, "I don't actually think you can really make the distinction between authentic learning and authentic teaching because when you are doing something as a teacher, and you feel that flow, you're also learning right?" She elaborated that programmatic policies and practices that thwart her autonomy act as barriers to authentic teaching and learning, and that by contrast the Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) that our focus group emerged from had helped her to take risks and be true to herself:

> All of my [previous] teaching was informed by the person in front of me – the one person in front of me. Teaching to a classroom of 25 students when I arrived here was kind of overwhelming combined with the top-down instruction we were getting: These are your assignment sequences; these are the textbooks you use. Yet, we were not able to go and shadow anybody regularly. How do they set up their grade site, for example? How do they decide on their grading? We do have a preceptorship, but I did not feel like that prepared me for what I was in for. Now that I've been doing this [the CLC and focus group], I feel like maybe I can take risks to be more aligned with my pedagogy without being fearful of somebody coming down. I'm trying to cultivate authentic learning in my students as well and try-

ing to allow them to have enough space to be informed from within for what's meaningful for them to write about.

Elaborating on the Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) model for professional development, Sally noted that she felt empowered by seeing a movement taking place on campus to support the well-being of students:

I think being in a room with people who are asking similar questions, who actually care about the well-being of the students… if that's part of your pedagogical approach to figuring out why you teach, then I'm down with that, because that's always been the way I teach. The fact that this has gotten funding, the fact that it's a legitimate group to be a member of at the University of Arizona as a graduate teaching associate, and also the fact that I'm seeing in many other academic institutions Centers for Compassion Studies, Centers for Mindfulness, it's becoming a thing we are actually having to address. And so I feel like that is what has empowered me.

Sydney followed up by addressing the institutional norms of behavior that inform our identities as teachers and how those norms often prevent authentic caring for students in crisis:

I think a lot about barriers institutionally, when I think about being emotional in the classroom. I had an instance where a student had told me that his best friend had died and that's why he was kind of struggling in class and he started crying. And like I had to ask, I was like, "Can I hug you?" and even then I felt, I felt as if there's a level of inappropriateness that you feel as a teacher when you are attempting to be vulnerable and emotional with your students because of the fact that you are a figure of authority. And I think that sometimes I, as a teacher, worry about that in the classroom, as I'm sure male teachers could speak better to this—male and female relationships in the classroom—and how to develop those kinds of connections with students without feeling as if you're crossing some sort of boundary. And so that is really something that I think many people struggle with as teachers who are trying to cultivate emotional and personal spaces in classrooms that aren't designed to be robotic, and just teaching them something that really connected to those people.

Michelle later asked if there's a "switch" that goes off for students regarding their authentic selves and their identities, when they walk into a classroom due to tacitly understood behavioral norms:

So kind of what you're saying is that you feel like there's almost like a switch that goes off with them, the students when they walk into a classroom? And I guess this for me kind of touches on identity. There's this pre-ingrained identity of what is expected as a student and to be a good student. And so from what I'm taking from you, is you feel like that switch of taking on and putting on that identity mask and being a good student occurs right when they walk through the classroom door, and attempting to break through that to make meaningful learning occur is a barrier in and of itself to even begin the process of experiential learning.

The barrier Michelle addresses is at the heart of the problem as we see it in our current educational model. There exists a power dynamic wherein teachers feel a need to be seen as an authority and wherein students have something to learn from said authority, but it is exactly this power inequity that hinders authentic human connection, self-determination, autonomously-supported growth, and an ability to discover one's authentic self and meaning in life.

As students, we take on a role as subordinate to authority, we "put on a mask" that is fundamentally inauthentic to self-actualization. We become less than, acquiesce to power, and surrender our authentic selves so that we may learn from an authority. This power dynamic is embedded in our educational system; attempting to shape the identity of students to fit a mold of what a good student and good scholar should be in order to be successful within the system.

In order for a system so reliant on rigid and institutionalized mechanisms of power to change, in order for authentic learning and autonomous growth and innovation to occur, we must radically transform what it means to teach and learn not only in Western civilization but around the world. We position that a humanistic model of unconditional positive regard, compassion and self-compassion, and perhaps most importantly, self-determination holds the most promise for reimagining how we might learn, teach, love, grow, and flourish. In the next section, we offer one example of an approach to well-being and authenticity in the classroom that was refined through the conversations of the focus group.

Stacey's Approach to Writing and Well-Being

Unit 1: Gratitude, Compassion, and Unconditional Positive Regard

For the past few years, I have begun each semester with a unit of writing and research about gratitude. The empirical evidence on reading a letter of gratitude to someone who has made a positive impact on your life suggests statistically significant boosts in positive emotions, social connectedness, and

prosocial behaviors (Seligman et al. 417). In actual classroom practice, I have additionally observed that composing letters of gratitude and sharing those letters with classmates for feedback creates an atmosphere of compassion, empathy, and positive emotions that I hold are the building blocks of Writing to Flourish. I routinely comment with what I hope is radical compassion that judging a fellow's expression of authentic gratitude is counter-productive, and that instead we should support one another with unconditional positive regard. Again this is in keeping with the radical transformation I believe needs to be at the heart of reconceptualizing how we learn, teach, and thrive in humane educational contexts.

In our Collaborative Learning Community (with WP instructors during Fall 2019), this radical transformation led to considerable discussion. A few instructors voiced concern that the writing students should be more rigorous and prepare them for other classes where, in the minds of these instructors, the professors will be less compassionate and expectations will be higher. In my personal memos on these discussions, I noted that this seems to be how legacy models of learning perpetuate. We hold this tacit belief (or fear) about what students will later encounter and that compels us to make it hard on students because we believe that's what will be expected of them later. Over decades this "hammer down" approach has grown increasingly intense at the expense of students' and instructors' intrinsic enjoyment of learning and their well-being. By contrast, the radical liberal ideal I support would be to reject that (understandable) fear in favor of fostering new discourse that may nurture an ecology of well-being for students, instructors, and administrators.

The theoretical and empirical literature on gratitude is robust, and I hesitate to go into depth regarding that literature here. That said, a cursory review seems in order. Fitzgerald identified three components of gratitude: "(1) a warm sense of appreciation for somebody or something, (2) a sense of goodwill toward that individual or thing, and (3) a disposition to act which flows from appreciation and goodwill" (120). Regarding outcomes of gratitude development, Emmons and McCullough noted a daily gratitude journal-keeping exercise with young adults resulted in higher reported levels of the positive states of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, attentiveness, and energy, writing that "[t]he advantages are most pronounced when compared with a focus on hassles or complaints, yet are still apparent in comparison with simply reflecting the major events in one's life" or when writing about others in a downward social comparison (386). Further, Baron conducted experimental research that suggested gratitude inhibited destructive interpersonal behavior, while Vaillant theorized that gratitude was essential to mature adaptation, replacing self-destructive emotions resulting from bitterness and resentment with healing and restoration.

Students routinely describe this unit as their favorite, with some commenting in remarkable terms that writing the letter of gratitude saved them or that it led to the most meaningful conversation they'd ever had with a parent or loved one following the reading of their gratitude letter to their loved one. Students have routinely expressed gratitude to me for creating a context for them to have these kinds of conversations with their loved ones and suggested they may never have otherwise talked to their parents or loved ones this way.

Unit 2: On Motivational Theories, Kindness, and Self-Compassion

For those instructors who find beginning a student's first semester of college by writing (and reading) a gratitude letter too soft, they may find the second unit I have constructed using the Writing to Flourish conceptual framework more in keeping with the norms of academic rigor.

The second unit of the course centers on reading and research centered on well-established theories of motivation. I have decided to align this unit with popular and scholarly readings on the theories outlined in the assignment sheet below and a workbook on Mindful Self-Compassion (Neff and Germer 2). The MSC workbook involves a wide array of reflective writing activities intentionally designed to foster strengths-based (i.e., asset-based) learning, self-compassion, common humanity, and mindfulness. During this unit students will keep a weekly journal on various theoretical and applied aspects of kindness and altruism, while also considering ways to develop loving-kindness towards themselves.

The culminating project for this unit is an oral presentation on a theory of human motivation and an analysis of one scholarly article that has made use of the theory in its research design.

Unit 3: Identity Formation, Authenticity, and Self-Actualization

Perhaps the most tangible solution I've ever created to support students' autonomy, authentic learning, and self-actualization, the third unit of the course culminates with an Authentic Self Development Project, which operationalizes Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, Marcia's Identity Status Theory, Peterson and Seligman's Values in Action Inventory of Strengths, and Snyder's Hope Theory.

This assignment has emerged over the last year or two, as students have regularly commented to me that authenticity is one of the most important character strengths they would like to see featured in the courses they are considering at the University of Arizona. Perhaps it's the strange political winds of our time, but it seems that young adults desire more authenticity in their lives and in the ways that we learn. I first co-presented with Susan Miller-Cochran on the preliminary draft of this assignment at the 2019 Western States Rhetorics

and Literacies Conference in a workshop titled "An Interactive Symposium on Writing to Flourish."

On the plane flight to Bozeman and on the return flight to Tucson, I sketched out the details of this assignment, first with pencil and spiral-bound journal, and then later in a Google Doc. I am indebted to the attendees who came to our workshop in Bozeman and took part in the writing exercises and discussion built on harmonious passions, identities, character strengths, goals, pathways, and hope.

Unit 4: Unconditional Positive Regard and Achieved Identity Status

The fourth unit of the course "broadens and builds" (Fredrickson 219) on students' Authentic Self Development Project by asking them to share the ideas they developed regarding their identities, character strengths (as cataloged by Peterson and Seligman), and future goals (Snyder) with an unconditionally loving (Rogers) family member or friend. This assignment takes as its theoretical grounding Marcia's Identity Status Theory by asking them to share details regarding their authentic self exploration with another person and then to analyze how the other person responds. The students should analyze their unconditionally loving family member, mentor, or friend's response to determine whether it is supportive, ambivalent, corrective, etc., and thus whether the response contributes to achieved identity status development or would thrust them into a diffused identity status.

I ask students to then write a reflective essay on the experience of sharing details about their authentic selves, strengths, hopes and goals. I ask students to consider how the social support (or thwarts) of who they are and what they want to do influences their well-being, their authentic self development, and how their perceptions of these kinds of exchanges shape them.

All of this is in service to understanding our autonomously-endorsed identities, strengths, and hopes for our lives. It is my belief that frequent meaningful exploration of authentic selfhood, and the communicative exchange of social support (or thwart) an individual experiences when developing their authentic selves has life-long consequences that are deeply intertwined with social and psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

Discussion and Implications

At the outset of our article, we presented the thesis that cultivation of authenticity represents a strategy of humanitarian social justice regarding students' and instructors' well-being and quality of life. It has been our objective to articulate a theoretical framework, labor-based discourse, and tangible solutions to address how we might support authentic self-actualization within college writing contexts. Given established data that suggests a significant

decline in adolescent and young adult mental health over the past two decades, we feel one frontier for labor-based social justice must be to address the well-being and quality of life of students and instructors in college writing programs and higher education at large.

It's important to note that first year writing courses among institutes of higher education in the United States are often required classes that most incoming students must take, and thus fyw represents an extraordinary context to address a large-scale challenge, that of improving the social and emotional well-being of a large segment of the young adult population in the United States. We believe that college writing represents an optimal context to nurture well-being by developing authentic self-reflective writing and asset-based learning. Several professional statements and guidelines offer the possibility for establishing shared language and goals around social and well-being in writing classes, such as the *WPA Outcomes Statement* and the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing." Developing shared language in prominent professional statements such as these can be an important step toward institutionalizing the a focus on well-being in writing classes, and such a shared vision is essential for creating lasting change (Curry 53).

The limitations of our present study are likely obvious. First, we are constructing novel approaches to apply established empirical and theoretical research developed in sociological and psychological contexts in writing contexts. While the calls to operationalize applied educational strategies to do what we have begun to embark on are many and urgent, we don't yet know how effective these emerging strategies will be on a larger scale. Future research must investigate the qualitative and quantitative outcomes related to first year writing policies and practices like those articulated in the *WPA Outcomes Statement* and the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" on student and instructor well-being. Such research might consider questions such as:

- Can therapeutic asset-based writing processes influence students' well-being?
- How does a student's well-being affect their resilience, sense of belonging, prosocial behaviors, graduation rates, and academic achievement?
- How do we foster autonomously-endorsed curricular change?
- What influence would changes to address well-being and quality of life in codified language like that articulated in the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" or the *WPA Outcomes Statement* have on adoption of programmatic learning outcomes to address these very issues?

Such research could lay the foundation for developing systemic change in First-Year Writing curricula that would profoundly and positively impact students' well-being.

Acknowledgments

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