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Amused teachers and public readers : empathy and derision in "student blooper" collections.

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AMUSED TEACHERS AND PUBLIC READERS: EMPATHY AND DERISION IN
"STUDENT BLOOPER" COLLECTIONS

By

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A Dissertation Approved on

July 28, 2016

by the following Dissertation Committee:

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Karen Kopelson

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Kiki Petrosino

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John Duffy

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the unnamed students whose writing, published online

and in print without their permission or knowledge, appears throughout this dissertation.

Their work inspired this project and inspired me.

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ABSTRACT

AMUSED TEACHERS AND PUBLIC READERS: EMPATHY AND DERISION IN
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Jessica Winck

August 9, 2016

This dissertation examines the long-standing tradition in education of sharing and publishing students' unintentionally amusing mistakes. Often called "bloopers," "boners," and "howlers," students' writing mistakes have been published in print since at least the early 20th century and more recently online. Using theories of reading student writing, academic discourse, ethics, and humor, this project analyzes the misconceptions that teachers and public audiences have of students, re-reads student writing for its potential, and explores the ethical implications of sharing student work with public audiences.

The first two chapters ground the reader in the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which teachers share or publish student writing. The culture of remediation, persistent in K-12 and higher education contexts, shapes readings of student writing that prioritize correctness. Collections of student "bloopers" imply aspects of teacher-student relationships; thus these relationships can be re-thought not only in terms of broader models like remediation, but also through the practices that help define those relationships, such as methods of reading and assessing student writing.

The third chapter reviews several frameworks related to ethical uses of student writing, such as those embraced by professional organizations and institutional guidelines. Through a closer look at the value of student writing from a research perspective, this chapter explores the tension between the treatment of student writing in research and the treatment of student writing in teaching. Meanwhile, the fourth chapter provides an extensive re-reading of several published student excerpts on the website *Shit My Students Write*. Through the application of humor theory, we can acknowledge the aspects of student error that prompt teachers to be humored while also interrogating the assumptions and misconceptions about error that inform why we are humored.

This dissertation concludes with recommendations for engaging with representations of students and student writing. Teacher education is an important site that can foster changes in the teaching profession. Further recommendations for advocacy through public rhetoric are provided.

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CHAPTER I

AMUSED TEACHERS AND PUBLIC READERS: EMPATHY AND DERISION IN
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Anne Hathaway

At the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway who I thought was the catwoman woman but I googled it and they were different people. But Shakespeare was still happy with her.

19 JULY 2013   #SHITMYSTUDENTSWRITE #EDUCATION #SHAKESPEARE

#ANNE HATHAWAY #SUBMISSION   ♥ 13842

Fig. 1. "Anne Hathaway." *Shit My Students Write*. 19 July 2013. Web. 7 March 2016.

If we believe the drama created by the popular blog *Shit My Students Write*, then we assume that this excerpt is from the writing of a student in an English class, likely in high school or college. We can assume the teacher found the passage humorous enough to share with others and then submitted it to *Shit My Students Write*. Since its publication in July 2013, this passage has accumulated 13,842 "notes," which indicate how many times Tumblr users have "liked" or reblogged the post. Even 13,842 people is an astounding number for the audience student writers traditionally have in the writing classroom, let alone that many interactions with the text: "likes" indicate approval, and reblogging indicates that viewers want to share the text with others.

The audience for this student text, along with the hundreds of other student texts on *Shit My Students Write*, is not limited to Tumblr users. Student writing published on

this site appears on Twitter, Facebook, and personal web pages and blogs. The most popular quotes appear in unexpected places. An excerpt titled "Let the Meat Cake!" has appeared on the professional Facebook page for a copyeditor, on a journalist's professional web page, and instructors' and academics' Facebook and Twitter feeds. A re-mix of the excerpt even appeared as an epigraph in *Deer Hunting in Paris: A Memoir of God, Guns, and Game Meat* by Paula Young Lee, a cultural historian and food critic. Student texts, in other words, circulate widely and rapidly, a phenomenon in itself compared to the more traditional means of circulating student writing: in print, and in the classroom.

Teachers of college writing probably recognize that digital publics like Tumblr are only the most recent platforms for sharing student writing for others' amusement. Several professors have related to me that in the past, professors posted their students' writing, replete with red ink, on their office doors. They copied and taped student writing over the copier or coffee machine. Student writing circulated in teachers' lounges and offices. At the University of New Brunswick, English teachers once maintained a collection of entertaining student writing, memorialized in a binder referred to as "The Albert Ross Memorial Prize," named after one student's gaffe writing about the albatross in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Glover).

Such a tradition has roots in late 19th century composition pedagogy. Sharon Crowley explains that composition at Harvard was "the site wherein students' writing was put on continuous display so that its lacks could be remarked" (74). Publications based on student writing in classrooms took on different forms. In the 1920s, English writer Cecil Hunt published "schoolboy howlers" from classroom papers and exams.

Following Hunt's example, Viking Press in the US published a series titled *Boners* that lasted for decades. In the 1930s, Illinois State's journal, *The Green Cauldron*, published "student boners" from papers in first-year writing classes. (Later, in 1950, *College Composition and Communication* reproduced a set of these boners and invited opinions from readers on whether boners should be a regular segment in the journal; for one reason or another, this segment did not continue).

While examples of sharing student writing are abundant within universities and departments, there may be more far-reaching implications of sharing student writing with the public. Into the late 20th century, a variety of print publications continued to reproduce student writing. Richard Lederer's publications on language humor, such as "The World According to Student Bloopers," frequently draw from student writing. Anders Henriksson's 2008 New York Times Bestseller *Ignorance is Blitz: Mangled Moments of History from Actual College Students* and his 2010 *College in a Nutskull* both show students' "revisions" of content knowledge in history and other disciplines.

With the growth of digital media, more student writing circulates online. The digital context, as I explain later, changes the way texts are published and responded to. Particularly, digital publications are noticeably more malicious toward students. The now-closed *Rate Your Students* was an academic group blog where, among complaints about students generally, readers find excerpts from students' papers that entertained, irritated, or offended teachers. The long-running academic group blog *College Misery*, which closed in early 2014, followed the lead of *Rate Your Students*, including publishing passages from students' papers and emails; *Academic Water Cooler* has taken the place of *College Misery* and promotes similar readings of student writing. The popular Tumblr

blog *Shit My Students Write*, created in 2010, invites teachers to submit excerpts from their students' writing. This list of print and digital texts, though comprising a massive set of data for any research project, is incomplete, as there are multiple spaces (for example, teachers' private social media pages) where student writing proliferates.

This dissertation addresses the mass circulation of student writing in print and online. Interestingly, scholarship in rhetoric and composition has not recognized these texts as being within the purview of our field's interests and concerns. A close look at these texts reveals a consistent history of ideological uses of student writing. However, in composition and elsewhere, the practice of sharing student writing with others, even public audiences, is frequently regarded as harmless and mostly good-natured. When teachers and scholars discuss the practice, their views circulate in what North calls "lore," the "traditions, practices, and beliefs" that characterize the knowledge of experience-based practice (23). I do not seek to discredit teachers' experiences that authorize this circulation, but I do challenge the conclusions we draw that permit us to circulate student writing without students' permission or knowledge. Instead of drawing conclusions (which are settled), we instead ought to read student writing for possibility and potential.

In this dissertation, I study this complicated tradition of publishing student writing for the public's amusement. To do this, I detail the history of this practice in print. Then I explore how the practice has changed and has different implications in digital contexts. I discuss implications these publications have for public perceptions of students and their writing, as well as implications for research in our field and the pedagogical practices of teachers. Finally, I offer a reading of digital publications of student writing through a pedagogical lens to model the practice of reading student writing for potential.

Toward this end, I address the following research questions:

- What is the genre of the "student blooper collection"?

- What can we learn from how early texts in the genre represent students and their writing for a public audience?

- How has the growth of digital media changed the ways that teachers publish student writing as well as how teachers, and the wider public, respond to it?

- What ethical concerns does online circulation raise? To what extent can existing ethical frameworks be of use?

- To what extent can student writing published online indicate student intelligence and ability? In what ways does student writing, originally published for its entertainment value, actually show potential *as* academic writing?

- In what ways might the circulation of unintentionally humorous student writing contribute to public narratives (particularly deficit narratives) about students?

Literature Review

Areas in rhetoric and composition and humor studies assist me in exploring these questions: representations of students and student writing; humor theory; antecedent genre and digital media; and the ethics of circulation.

Representations of Students and Student Writing

Traditionally, student writers and their writing have been represented in deficit-oriented terms. Mike Rose argues that in the language of remediation, a teacher's job is to "*diagnose* various *disabilities*, *defects*, *deficits*, *deficiencies*, and *handicaps*" (192, emphasis in original). Students' difficulties with writing, Marguerite Helmers shows, frequently took on the metaphor of illness in the field's early scholarship (64). No where

are these deeply-entrenched beliefs about remediation more prominent than in composition's long-term investment in identifying and correcting students' written errors. Student error historically has been the cause of great alarm, in schools and in the public. Several scholars identify the early years of composition, particularly in the 1890s at Harvard, as one source of deficit-oriented ideology about error in student writing, which still stands strong today.

In Susan Miller's history of composition at Harvard, the correctness or incorrectness of students' entrance exams were central to constructions of students, in particular the representation of a written exam as an unmediated indication of students' internal thought and ability. The entrance exams tested students' grasp of English, and the exams functioned to sort students according to preparedness (Miller 86). In the early 1890s, the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric, tasked with investigating the state of English A, treated students' entrance exams as self-evident representations of incoming students' abilities. In Miller's words, the "quality" of the student as an individual could be "identified with the correct or incorrect quality of that student's texts" (57). The Harvard committee claimed to know from students' papers which students were prepared for education at Harvard, as if, as Sharon Crowley speculates, "the papers were perfect representations . . . of the students' skills" (70). At the time this dissertation is written, there are many colleges and universities that rely on timed essay testing or grammar tests to place students in different composition courses.

A focus on error was also reflected in composition pedagogy in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Connors argues that teachers' pedagogies were shaped by large-scale changes in education that prompted reliance on composition textbooks. In

response to large numbers of underprepared teachers entering classrooms to teach a growing population of students, the textbook industry prioritized "basic mechanics-oriented texts" in an attempt to relieve teachers' workload (Connors, "Shaping" 86). What made these textbooks favorable is that they appealed to a popular teacher logic that made classroom instruction more manageable. The textbooks helped teachers "atomize" writing into the elements with which students struggled, then practice those particular elements with drills and exercises, which the textbooks provided in abundance (Connors, "Shaping" 97). This form of classroom instruction may have set the stage for the assessment of student writing within the classroom in front of other students.

Sharon Crowley argues that Freshman English was designated as the institutional location where student writing "was put on continuous display so that its lacks could be remarked" (74). Crowley's theory is supported by students themselves in the late 19th century. In his entrance exam, one student wrote about his prior experience in English classes, saying that his teacher "would correct these compositions out of the class and then read them at the next recitation at the same time calling attention to the pupils [sic] errors" (Brereton 512). Scholarship on the history of composition critiques this common pedagogical maneuver. Miller compares "the embarrassments that students were meant to feel" after their teacher corrected their writing in front of the class to the embarrassment one might feel in a bodily sense, as in having one's body exposed (57). The apparent purpose was to compare students against each other. Another intended goal, I assume, is that if humiliated in front of the class, students would not want to be humiliated again; consequently, they would try to avoid the errors that might be displayed to the class.

The remedial mindset toward students and their writing that developed over at least the last century is significant beyond the fact that it has been so pervasive. It produces representations of students that do not circulate only within the classroom or even within institutions. Claims about students' "illiteracy" are circulated publicly. Literacy educators are familiar with Merrell Sheils's 1975 Newsweek article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," which responded to, and inevitably also reproduced, national anxiety about student literacy (Trimbur, "Literacy"). Decades later, CNBC published "Why Johnny Can't Write, and Why Employers Are Mad," citing employers who are fed up with their new workers' inadequate literacy skills (Holland). David Gold cites the long-standing "rhetoric of complaint" about student writers and their writing, a rhetoric that belies students' actual abilities and creates more anxiety than is necessary (84-86). Claims about literacy crises are a familiar refrain, supported mostly by anecdotal evidence.

However, these claims are sometimes joined with replications of student writing to demonstrate what students do not know or cannot do. James Berlin explains how in the late 19th century, the Harvard committee, which was so disturbed by the student work it reviewed, published the writing it considered the worst, "some in facsimile" to put forward evidence of students' "carelessness" and messy handwriting; the results of the study were "widely publicized," according to Berlin, a move that led to national anxiety about literacy (61). The tradition of publicly lamenting over students' "lack" has carried on for the last century.

There is a difference, however, between sharing student writing because it is "bad" and therefore signals a literacy crisis, and sharing it because it is "bad" and

therefore funny. The teachers who published the student writing I analyze in this dissertation did so for the public's amusement, not to advance a serious critique of education. There are other genres (such as editorials and articles) that fulfill that purpose much better than anonymous submission to a Tumblr blog. However this is not to say that teachers have not believed their students' writing to be "bad." Although further research with teachers would confirm or disprove this theory, there is the possibility that teachers have been encouraged by educational culture – particularly the remedial mindset – to enjoy students' shame over their mistakes or errors. Miller argues that the error-hunting readers on the Harvard committee "gleefully" found and shared students' "grotesqueries of handwriting and of paragraphing," and that students' errors were "snickered over . . . so that they came to represent an Other" (55). Helmers adds that students' "[o]dd and often bawdy translations of common expressions and written gestures . . . became errors to be laughed at and treated with derision" (10). The ability to laugh at students in ways that make them "Others" assumes a

Dynamics in teacher-student relationships, as theorized by composition, help contextualize not only the derisiveness we might see in some student blooper collections, but also the fact that teachers have shared student writing and spoken so dismissively of students for at least the last century. Much of this behavior can be owed to the remedial mindset. The remedial mindset has been thoroughly challenged by basic writing research. The growth of this area of study gave rise to the notion of students as new members of an academic discourse community. Compared to the deficit model representation of students that appears in the Harvard Committee's reports, students who are new members of a discourse community may lack experience, but not ability. This research changed

perceptions of students because their texts were then "approximations" of an unfamiliar discourse rather than evidence that students are deficient (Shaughnessy, *Errors*; Bartholomae).

Hull et al.'s "Remediation as Social Construct" demonstrates how perceptions of students as remedial, and the dynamics of our relationships as a result, can shape students' own views of themselves as students and writers. Hull et al. describe the experience of one student, Maria, in a remedial writing class. Maria often volunteers her ideas, asks questions, and sometimes re-directs classroom conversation. Maria's instructor, June, believes that Maria's participation in class demonstrates a lack of understanding of classroom conventions, which for June are more teacher-directed and teacher-centered. Maria's participation style is an annoyance to June. While a teacher's annoyance with a student would affect their teacher-student relationship, the worst part is that Maria eventually internalizes June's perceptions (318). In effect, June's power as a teacher has a constitutive effect on Maria. If a teacher believes a student is remedial, and treats the student as if they are remedial, then the student may behave and write the way teachers expect remedial students to behave and write.

Basic writing research raises the possibility that teachers' perceptions of students can derive not only from teachers' misunderstanding of students and of their actual potential and ability, but also teachers centering their own ways of being, thinking, and writing, and relating to students through them. In "Underlife and Writing Instruction," Robert Brooke explains that teachers interpret students' "instructive, individual stance-taking" as "misbehavior," such as students maintaining private conversations and passing notes (232). The teacher-student relationship, even before student behavior is clarified, is

antagonistic and punitive. Indeed, this is the major pedagogical disposition that is prescribed by the remedial mindset, and it is evident particularly in the relationships we have with students through their writing.

Further research in this area of composition suggests that, because students are new members of the academy, we teachers and scholars should invite them to join us in the writing- and research-related activities that define academic work (Bartholomae; Horner, "Re-Valuing"). The teacher-student relationship that results from the construction of students as new members of the academy is one of mentor-mentee, or an apprentice relationship. More recently, scholars in composition have represented students as legitimate authors who can contribute meaningfully to academic discourse and discussion (Robillard). Joseph Harris, John Miles, and Chuck Paine's collection, *Teaching with Student Texts*, suggests that student writing is worth being read in college classrooms. In a classroom where student texts are the basis of the class's inquiry into writing, teachers and students would theoretically have a collaborative relationship, as well as one premised on respect. These sorts of relationships would seem to discourage the treatment of student writing that I study in this dissertation, particularly on *Shit My Students Write*.

As composition research has shown, teacher-student relationships shape the kinds of experiences students have with writing and learning in our classes (and possibly beyond). Historically, teacher-student relationships have been dominated by a preoccupation with identifying and correcting faults and errors in student writing. Several changes in the field, however, such as reflecting on our own assumptions about students, and recognizing the ways that students are attempting to acclimate to academic discourse communities, have shown more promise over the past few decades. These and other

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developments, which I discuss later in this introduction, may help us in the broader project of creating fairer, more accurate depictions of student writers and their writing. In the next section, I discuss contributions from humor theory.

Humor Theory: Naivete, Incongruity Theory, and Derisive and Empathic Humor

Student blooper collections, for all they may tell us about teacher-student relationships, are a humor genre. The genre is humorous because it appears to reveal alarming and laughable problems in students' writing abilities. *Shit My Students Write*, and student blooper collections more broadly, work almost like exposés, providing a voyeuristic look into the teacher's stack of student papers. In so doing, these collections draw attention to writing concerns or issues that teachers, but usually not students, are aware of. To understand the nature of this humor, as well as to understand how the humor constructs students and teacher-student relationships, I turn to three theories on humor: Freud's theory of the naive, incongruity theory, and two types of incongruous humor: derisive and empathic.

Naive humor has received very little attention in composition. In her article on students' intentional humor writing, Linda Bergmann contrasts intentional humor with Freud's theory of the naive. Bergmann notes that compared to intentional jokes, "howlers" (or bloopers or boners) would be classified as "naive," because the naive "transgresses inhibitions out of innocence," but jokes do so on purpose (141). Bergmann goes on to rely on Freud's theory of jokes in her analysis of students' humor writing; here, I take up Bergmann's initial classification of students' unintentionally amusing writing as a kind of naive humor.

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Freud's book on humor, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, addresses jokes, joke-makers, and how jokes circulate. He distinguishes between intentional humor (jokes) and unintentional humor (the naive). Naive humor is at work typically when someone observes another person doing or saying something unconsciously humorous. Freud points out that the typical relationship is between an adult and child (176). Adults' discovery of naive humor in children maps well onto the relationships between teachers and students within classrooms. John Trimbur describes the teacher-student relationship as *in loco parentis*: teachers occupy roles similar to parental figures in classrooms (192). As readers of student writing, teachers have a greater sense of correct and incorrect, which is, for Freud, what would constitute an "inhibition" that students may not yet share with adults. Normally, Freud says, we would be angry with another adult who openly ignores convention; but because we are aware that children (and younger students especially) are naive, our response is laughter instead (179). Historically, in the teacher-student relationship, teachers' discovery of naive humor in students leads teachers to share or publish student writing for others' amusement.

Other theoretical developments in humor theory help to explain why student writing strikes teachers as humorous. According to incongruity theory, humor is the outcome of two incongruous elements that are unexpectedly juxtaposed (Beattie; Billig; Morreall). The fact that the passages of student writing that were published in *Boners* come from tests and exams sheds some light on the situations in which teachers encountered these humorous errors – and so, why they found the passages humorous. From a rhetorical perspective, situation is key in incongruity theory, because the situation determines whether something is perceived as incongruous with something else. In the

case of *Boners*, a teacher's initial encounter with an unintentionally humorous vocabulary error occurs in the context of grading. That is, assessment of vocabulary tests assumes knowledge on which answers are correct and which answers are incorrect. Correct answers, because they are consistent with teachers' expectations for good work, are not exceptionable or noticeable beyond their correctness. The incorrect answers that appear in *Boners* disrupt teachers' expectations; but not every wrong answer is humorous. In *Boners*, the wrong answers are humorous because they violate social norms.

In a recent reconsideration of incongruity theory, literary critic Jerry Farber locates humorous incongruity in social norms. One element represents the norm while the other element defies it, knowingly or unknowingly. What pleases us is how "one meaning plays off against the other, with the result that…a need temporarily succeeds, not in eliminating, but in defying the restriction that governs it" (Farber 71). According to Farber, we want to be temporarily freed from the social norm and to embrace that which is not typically accepted. But how is the social norm defied in *Boners*? If we regard correctness in vocabulary or diction as the social norm, there are various ways that students' answers defy that norm. Some students' answers suggest an uncommon level of insight into adult matters. For example: "In Christianity a man can only have one wife. This is called Monotony" (Abingdon, *Boners* 33). In other instances, students unintentionally write something obscene, such as, "The solid wastes are excreted through the retina" (Abingdon, *Boners* 58). Such examples demonstrate that teachers were startled by the unexpected and incorrect answers, but also humored by them. Given how extensive the student blooper genre is from the 1930s to present, we can trust that, at least

in some respect, teachers have taken pleasure in momentarily suspending the social norm in favor of student error.

While naive humor and incongruity theory explain what we enjoy about collections of student writing such as the 1930s *Boners*, other student blooper collections do not take the more generous approach of enjoying innocent, humorous errors; instead, they mock students and their writing. Two types of incongruous humor are relevant to this project. Derisive humor occurs when another person's failing causes increased feelings of superiority. In Farber's words, "Someone is pushed down so that we ourselves can achieve our sudden glory" (75). Here we may remember the error-seeking Harvard Committee in the 1890s. The committee "gleefully" discovered students' errors in their entrance exams and "snickered over" them (Miller 55). The traditional teacher-student relationship, where the teacher is intellectually superior and has more disciplinary power, and the students passively learn from the teacher, seems to be an apt characterization of the preconditions behind the superiority theory of humor. This humor is evident in *Shit My Students Write*, the modern-day version of student blooper collections. The title of the website suggests a reality of "teacher-talk": students are the objects of conversation, but not participants. The title of the website restricts the actors in this text to teachers. This itself suggests an othering of students that may, for some, justify targeting students for our amusement.

In Chapter 4, I discuss how some of the student writing that appears on this website actually shows students attempting difficult academic discourse conventions, but their appearance on this website suggests that teachers may not recognize their potential. I want to return for a moment to the discussion on teacher-student relationships. They are

historically premised on teachers' assumptions about their students' writing abilities. If a teacher assumes that a student "cannot write" or does not possess writing ability, then the teacher is fulfilling the precondition of seeing oneself as superior. If viewed through the lens of derisive humor, *Shit My Students Write* shows teachers laughing at, and encouraging others to laugh at, the errors that make students inferior academic writers compared to their teachers.

On one hand, it is hard to believe that teachers would participate so enthusiastically in the public humiliation of their students. On the other hand, many teachers believe complaint about students is justified. Higher education is in the midst of great change, and the internet has made it possible to publicize, wider than before, the problems with labor conditions in higher education. Students and their writing are common targets however. Some instructors – some tenured, some not tenured – hold students in a great deal of contempt (see English, "Difficulty for Whom?"). Particularly in digital spaces, we see many adversarial relationships between teachers and students. According to Kelly Ritter, the website *Rate My Professor*, where students are either unkind or very candid in their reviews, can elevate students to "public critic," which many teachers, in their greater pedagogical expertise, find insulting (262). Sara Biggs Chaney adds that professors' responses to *Rate My Professor*, particularly the now-closed academic group blog *Rate Your Students*, might strain classroom relationships with students, or potentially change the way teachers perceive students and their writing (200). However, I hesitate to suggest, even with rampant online complaint about students, that there is no substantive approach to leveling with teachers who hold students in contempt.

As I discuss in Chapter 4 and in the conclusion, derision toward students is often a sign that teachers do not have the support they need. It is understandable (and is indeed a reality) that, for example, a teacher without job security who teaches several classes a semester for little pay may not be in a position to locate the most effective outlet for his or her teaching frustrations. In this sense, the frustration is very real and understandable. At the same time, scholars, particularly on social media, have urged teachers to reconsider the target of their frustrations. Jesse Stommel, a former professor at University of Wisconsin, suggests that we must "rant up, not down," and to remember that a teacher's job must involve advocating for students ("Dear Chronicle"). Kevin Gannon, a history professor at Grand View University, similarly warns teachers against "punching down" ("On Student-Shaming"). Together, scholars who have voiced a problem with student-shaming agree that teacher frustrations should be directed to programs and administration, not toward students.

While we may be drawing attention to the actual target of our frustrations (administrative policies, inadequate teacher support, the corporatization of higher education), it remains the case that students are easy targets for derisive humor. However, some student blooper collections prefer the empathic counter to derisive humor. While derisive humor highlights the failings of those we believe are inferior to us, empathic humor assumes that failure can be shared. Some humor theory focuses on humor as the release of excess energy, which relieves us of social tension (Freud; Spencer). Farber explains that empathic humor provides relief when we discover that "our individual failings are shared and therefore less shameful" (77). Empathic humor is what we see in *Boners*, where readers are invited to empathize with students. Unlike *Shit My Students*

Write, the editors of *Boners* make several mentions of the learning conditions under which students produced these bloopers. For example, exams are "the most uncivilized of mental tortures" (Abingdon, *Boners* vi). They also suggest that students are doing the best work they can, given their teachers' "uninspired" pedagogies (Abingdon, *More Boners* v). Such claims situate students not only as young people who understandably crack under the pressures of schooling, but also as deeply *relatable*. The empathic theory of humor would also suggest that the ideology of correctness is a burden that, from time to time, needs to be relieved.

Empathic humor, while not the norm on *Shit My Students Write*, does crop up in other modern-day student blooper collections. The 2008 New York Times Bestseller, *Ignorance is Blitz: Mangled Moments of History from Actual College Students*, compiled by history professor Anders Henriksson, offers some empathic humor in a postscript titled "The Meaning of All This." He directly addresses the question of whether these bloopers are evidence of an ignorant generation of students. While he acknowledges the public opinion that college freshman these days do not seem prepared to write and study at the university, Henriksson, like the *Boners* editors 80 or so years earlier, argues that student learning conditions are not ideal. In university courses, students are confronted by a "daunting swirl of unfamiliar ideas, names, places, and events," so who can blame students for getting them "jumbled" at times (141).

Further, Henriksson disproves the myth that bloopers demonstrate a lack of preparedness among today's students by admitting that some of the bloopers published in *Ignorance is Blitz* were written by students in the 1970s. The short book *F in Exams: The Very Best Totally Wrong Test Answers* reinforces a similar orientation toward students.

The introduction reads, "Pop quizzes, midterms, final exams – whatever the test every student has experienced that terrible moment: You're sitting at your desk, classmates all around, your test paper in hand, staring at the next question and drawing a total blank" (n.p.) This introduction similarly frames students as people with whom anyone can identify – and even calls on readers to remember this common experience in their own education. This approach resembles what earlier instantiations of this humor genre promoted: an empathic reading of people's unintentional errors.

Through an understanding of major threads in humor theory, we can gain a better grasp of student blooper collections. Because these collections are a humor genre, their perceived intention is to entertain, particularly entertain the public considering their mass circulation. Humor theory, then, can be crucial for bridging the content of these collections – namely student errors – and how these collections function in the culture. They do entertain. But because some of the humor arises from a sense of power and superiority over students, these collections warrant a closer look at the representations that they promote of students and their writing.

Antecedent Genres and Digital Media Affordances

Digital media has changed how texts are shared, circulated, and responded to. To explain some of these changes, we first need to understand the nature of the change. Old and new publications are not substantially different. Similarities are obvious in the conventions of both older print publications and more recent digital publications. For example, one convention in the older print publications of student writing is the inclusion of illustrations. In the popular *Boners* series from the 1930s, Dr. Seuss completed 20 original illustrations for student texts:
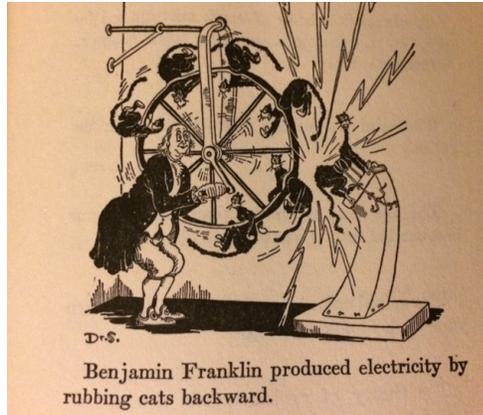
Fig. 2. Geisel, Theodor Seuss. "Benjamin Franklin." *Boners* ed. Alexander Abingdon.

New York: The Viking Press, 1931. 57.

We see this convention in print texts throughout the 20th century. Richard Lederer's "The World According to Student Bloopers, published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1998, shows a similarly cartoonish depiction of one student's unintentionally humorous syntax. More recently, this genre has been adapted with the affordances of digital media:

Fig. 3. "Votes for Women." *Undergraduate History Illustrated*. 13 May 2013.

Web. 21 Feb. 2015.

Genres have histories. They emerge in particular cultural and historical contexts. Kathleen Jamieson argues that genres "bear the chromosomal imprint of ancestral genres" (406). As cultural constructions, current genres bear resemblances to older genres. Bolter and G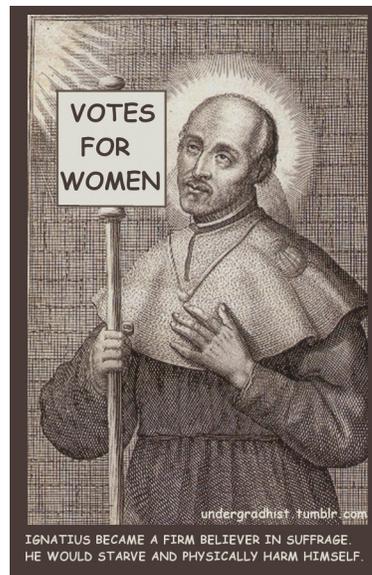rusin argue that old and new media might not have "conscious interplay," and that the differences between the old and new are obvious only to those who know they both exist (Bolter and Grusin 45). For example, I do not know whether the person who created *Undergraduate History Illustrated* is familiar with the *Boners* collections, which included illustrations of some excerpts to accentuate their humor. At the same time, ongoing genres related to error in writing over the past several decades provide a context for *Undergraduate History Illustrated* that makes it familiar to our culture, regardless of whether we have seen its specific antecedents.

Indeed, there are many antecedents that draw on and reconstruct themes around language, language-users, students, and education. One of the earliest language humor books is *English as She is Spoke*. Originally published in London in 1883 and republished in the 1960s in Detroit (after 10 other editions), the book borrows from a language guide for students in Portugal and Brazil who were learning French. The original guide is comprised of two-columned pages of common words and phrases with French on one side and Portuguese on the other. According to Leslie Shepard, who prefaced the 1967 edition, the original author of the guide persuaded a friend, Pedro Carolino, to translate the French into English to create a Portuguese-English guide. Shepard writes, "Carolino's knowledge of English must have run a little more than that furnished by a French-English dictionary" ("Preface"). As a result, many of the English translations are confusing and grammatically inconsistent with the language of the time.

The book was republished several times with the Portuguese removed, leaving the English translations. The earliest re-write of the original handbook from 1883, titled *Fractured English as She is Spoke*, includes an introduction by Mark Twain. Twain explains that this book "was written in serious good faith and deep earnestness, by an honest and upright idiot who believed he knew something of the English language, and could impart his knowledge to others" (Carolino vi). Apart from the term "idiot," at least in its connotations today, the introduction is not mean-spirited toward Carolino. It represents him as a sincere individual who wanted to help people learn English. Echoing Twain, Shepard explains in 1967 about the book, "It is wildly funny because it is unintentional humor" ("Preface"). Here we see a book that emphasizes unintentional language humor; this is a convention that appears in later collections, as well.

Jay Leno's 1992 book *Headlines: Real but Ridiculous Headlines from America's Newspapers* is one example of a successful genre in language humor. Leno's *Tonight Show* featured a segment by the same name. The common routine in these segments was for Leno to share newspaper headlines that he saw as humorous in some way, usually because they suggested unintended meaning. For example, "Ban on Nude Dancing on Governor's Desk" (76). As with this genre's antecedents, *Headlines* includes an introduction by Leno as the compiler. In the 1989 edition, Leno writes, "The reason these headlines appealed to me is because they were never intended to be funny in the first place," adding that he deliberately left out headlines from tabloids where double entendres appeared to be intentional (2). Leno echoes Twain's and Shepard's introductions to *English as She is Spoke*, suggesting that unintentional meanings are a significant part of the humor.

Books that point out humorous headlines and other excerpts from published writing are still popular. Ross Petras and Kathryn Petras's 2013 *Wretched Writing: A Compendium of Crimes against the English Language* is one such example. Organized thematically, the book presents several published examples of unintentionally humorous errors and meanings from newspapers, public figures, and even novels. Across the texts in this genre, unintentional meaning from written errors is valued and appreciated for its humor value. Language humor books, then, provide a precedent for online texts such as *Undergraduate History Illustrated*.

Regardless, as audience reactions online suggest, a number of people believe that this manner of circulating student writing is new. This belief may be a result of audience members' lack of familiarity with older texts, as I speculated earlier; or, these texts appear to be new because the technologies in which we encounter them are new to the genre. Research has shown not only how genres change with the growth of technology, but also how complex new media are based on older media. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins points out that "old media never die," instead the "delivery technologies," or the means for accessing content, "become obsolete" (13). Student bloopers, howlers, and boners commonly appeared in print publications such as newspapers, magazines, academic journals, undergraduate magazines and journals, self-published books, and other print media. Print was the primary delivery technology of unintentionally amusing student writing between the early to late 20th century, but print did not become obsolete in this venture. We still see books of students' unintentionally humorous writing from exams and papers, some even quite popular, such as Anders

Henriksson's New York Times Bestseller *Ignorance is Blitz*. However, the growth of digital media has shifted student writing to online contexts.

There are several qualities of online spaces that shape the publication, circulation, and response to student writing on the internet. Digital media has changed the ways that we participate in the creation of texts and how we consume them (Manovitch; Kress; Bolter and Grusin; Jenkins, et al.; Payne). Compared to print collections, student writing online bears almost no trace of an "author," one who receives credit for the publication, and it circulates faster and more easily. Teachers who post student writing and those who re-publish it exhibit rhetorical agency, the closest quality to authorship. "Rhetorical velocity" describes the composition of texts such that they are deliberately taken up and recomposed by other users (Ridolfo and DeVoss). Lankshear and Knobel call these "encoded texts," texts that have been "rendered in a form that allows them to be retrieved, worked with, and made available independently of the physical presence of another person," which necessarily requires that they become loosened from their original context (19). Student writing in print collections has also been taken from its original context and made available for circulation, which makes them more malleable and unfinished – a feature we do not expect in print. The digital context differs because the tools for reproducing text are now ubiquitous. Lankshear and Knobel say that "keying, clicking, cropping, dragging" now happen in almost "no time and at next to no cost" (7). In addition, popular culture, where student texts have been most popular, "engages in and celebrates the routine appropriation and reuse of material" (Williams 66). As a norm in digital contexts, the appropriation of text for unintended purposes has implications that we have yet to explore.

Fast and easy circulation is an affordance of new media, which do not rely on print and so are not bounded by materiality (Trimbur 2000; Cope and Kalantzis 2010). Between 1931-1952, a million and a half copies were sold of the popular *Boners* books (Abingdon 1). The conditions of print technologies – for example, "copies" – are insufficient for describing the products in online circulation. If online circulation is immaterial, it allows for "limitless participation" (Lankshear and Knobel 18). Such participation matters in the context of student blooper collections because, as I discuss in Chapter 2 and 4, there is something irresistible about sharing jokes. Freud goes so far as to say that when we hear a hilarious joke, the urge to share it overpowers any "weighty second thoughts" (138). Combined with the ease of sharing student writing online, the cultural status of jokes as *shareable* has implications for how we understand the role of teachers in this tradition.

As we see, there is more than technical change between print and new media. Lankshear and Knobel observe that the notion of an author is less stable online particularly because of technological affordances. They argue that print texts once "mediated social relations of control and power, as between author and readers, authorial voice as the voice of expert and authority, teacher/expert and student/learner" (Lankshear and Knobel 13). In print text, authors produce texts while readers, who are materially unable to participate in the text's production, only consume it. Cope and Kalantzis argue how changes in the "balance of agency," which used to weigh on the side of the producer with a limited role for the consumer, means that agency is more distributed, and new media is more participatory than print (90-91).

As a consequence, the notion of authorship that is so valued in print collections is more complicated online. In student blooper collections, the compilers typically name themselves. Richard Lederer and Anders Henriksson name themselves as compilers, while the editors of *Boners* used the pseudonym "Alexander Abingdon" as a placeholder while they searched for an editor with name recognition, to no avail (Abingdon, *Still More*, viii). Additionally, Henriksson includes a list of nearly 60 teachers, thanking as well "several others who have chosen to remain anonymous" (*College* 133). Similarly, the editors of Boners thank teachers by name, including as well the names of their schools, colleges, and universities (Abingdon, *More Boners* vi-viii). By contrast, anonymity, a regular feature of online participation, is a norm on *Shit My Students Write*. Names of students and of teachers are never given. This difference between online texts and print texts is significant because it draws attention to the reasons why teachers online might want to remain anonymous. The characterization of students on *Shit My Students Write* is not favorable; the characterization of students in *Boners*, *Ignorance is Blitz*, and other print collections is more generous and appreciative of students' efforts. Further, participation in this practice is open to more teachers rather than to one or a few compilers, especially if their identities are not revealed. Although further research with teachers might help support this claim, it would seem plausible that the teachers who submit student writing to *Shit My Students Write* as a form of stress-relief or even complaint may be the same teachers who do not have the cultural capital to reveal their identity without risk of damage to their professional lives. Only some compilers, it would seem, are able to be named authors. Issues of authorship and agency raise an additional concern: the ethical implications of taking ownership of student writing and circulating it.

Ethical Concerns in the Circulation of Student Writing

Ethical discussions in composition have often addressed the teaching of ethics (Duffy; Gale; Sipiora; Kinneavy) and the ethics of classroom teaching (Smith; Pemberton; Fontaine and Hunter). Ethical concerns have also risen in our research practices. The CCCC Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct in Research (formerly the Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students) provide some principles that are now more commonplace in our field: "composition specialists quote, paraphrase, or otherwise report unpublished written statements only with the author's written permission," and they do so while protecting the participant's identity with pseudonyms ("CCCC Guidelines"). These 2003 Guidelines, which are currently being revised, are a product of disciplinary conversations about the ethical use of student writing in our research.

Joseph Harris, as editor of *CCC* in 1994, insisted that student writing in our research be quoted anonymously and only with students' permission (439). Later, Paul Anderson echoed that it is best to obtain students' written permission before using their unpublished writing. Anderson acknowledges that in practice, this principle is met with some difficulty. Some teachers believe that students have ownership over their writing, while other instructors believe that students waive ownership when they submit their writing to their teachers for a grade (Anderson 80). More recently, conversations about ethics have taken into account the influence of digital media on these concerns (Sheridan and Nickoson; McKee and Porter; Whiteman). In particular, this research theorizes issues of ownership that arise around the use of text online. For example, if a student keeps a blog as part of class requirements, and that student's blog is public, the ethical considerations that should occur to us as writing researchers would be the student's

perception of her or his blog as "public" or "private"; the nature of the content and the potential risk to the student in being identified or otherwise harmed by the publication of this material in research; and the purposes with which we would cite this student's writing. Composition has addressed a range of ethical issues in research that maintain the dignity of our research and our research participants.

However, composition's scholarship on ethics, while providing a starting point, is not completely adequate for addressing how teachers share their students' writing for public amusement. The research on ethics in our field privileges the protection of participants in our research. Publishing student writing in our capacities as teachers – for instance, sharing it online in our free time – is regarded as not-research. At least, it is clearly not among the kinds of use that are circumscribed by the Guidelines. Haswell, Hourigan, and Sun point out that "a wide array of activities now falls within the purview of the Guidelines," for example, publishing research in online venues (87). Yet these accepted guidelines for research do not extend to student writing we publish outside research, even though sharing student writing with the public shares it with an audience that is larger than audiences for academic journals. Therefore the disciplinary conversations about ethics that we have had so far are relevant to the extent that they highlight an important contradiction: researchers are likely to follow these guidelines for working with research participants. But when we are teachers, it seems that our students do not qualify for the ethical treatment afforded to research participants.

The logic behind this contradiction relates back to the concept of ownership. In composition studies, we value the assumption that students have ownership over their own texts. We are invested in classroom practices that restore authorship to our students

(Horner, "Students"; Robillard; Harris, Miles, and Paine); in theoretical paradigms that maintain students' ownership (Adler-Kassner; Gorzelsky); in response practices that avoid appropriating student texts (Knoblauch and Brannon; Sommers; Straub); and, as I have elaborated, in research practices that reflect students' ownership over their own writing (Harris; Anderson). The scholarship of the field invests a great deal of value in student writing. However, the texts that I study in this project suggest that investment in student ownership is not as far-reaching as we would like.

To illustrate the extent of this disconnect between theory and practice, we might look to the "Terms of Submission" that teachers who submit to *Shit My Students Write* must agree to. Teachers who check the box labeled "I accept the Terms of Submission" give Tumblr the "right and license to use, host, store, cache, reproduce, publish, display (publicly or otherwise), perform (publicly or otherwise), distribute, transmit, modify, adapt…and create derivative works of the Content" ("Terms of Submission"). In other words, teachers transfer ownership (which, according to our field, teachers did not have in the first place) to Tumblr. Conservatively, we could call this a lack of professionalism; but if we consider what is at stake when students do not retain ownership over their own writing, submitting to *Shit My Students Write* and other venues may also be a gross abuse of power on the part of teachers. When schooling dominates, disciplines, and domesticates, the movement in composition to prioritize student ownership over their own writing is, at the very least, a subversive movement.

That our field has not addressed this practice publicly is, on one hand, difficult to understand. On the other, there are benefits to avoiding this issue. Teachers and scholars who are invested in the reputation of this field may not like to publicize this practice,

particularly if it appears to reflect upon composition, regardless of whether composition instructors share student writing publicly. It is also possible that this issue has not received the attention of our field because we prefer to see teachers who participate in this sort of practice as "outliers" and not reflective of the norms and values in the teaching profession. Considering the problematic status of composition in the university since its inception, drawing public attention to a practice that writing teachers may be participating in, could draw negative publicity. In the conclusion to this chapter, I discuss approaches to effecting change in how student writing is appropriated and shared publicly.

Methodology

The majority of data for this dissertation is student writing, in particular student writing that has been published in print collections and circulated online.

Analysis of Print Publications: Collections of Student Boners, Howlers, and Bloopers

Keyword searches in library databases for "student boners," "student howlers," and "student bloopers" return many print collections. When I initially gathered data, I tried to locate as many collections as I could to analyze changes and consistencies in the genre over time. To date I have gathered nearly 30 print collections published between 1900 and the present. About fifteen of these books were published before 1950, about five between 1950-1990, and eight between 1990 and the present. Since the start of this project, I have also gathered miscellaneous publications that include student "bloopers," for example as an ongoing segment in academic journals. Student bloopers also appear in newspapers, magazines, and undergraduate student journals. While these texts represent some of my interests in this dissertation – the teacher practice of publishing student

writing and the public's interest in that writing – I have found value in focusing on texts

whose sole purpose is to distribute unintentional humor in student writing. That value, I

have found, relates to the function of the genre over time. I have examined a

representative distribution of texts over the 20th and early 21st centuries, and I have

accomplished this while also conducting close readings of fewer texts. I still achieve the

purpose behind my initial plan, which is to identify consistency in the genre over time,

which suggests the consistent circulation of persistent ideologies about students and their

writing.

My selection of data was also determined by the compilers of these texts. In the

US, Viking Press published several collections in the *Boners* series. These were published

between 1931 and 2007, though with changing publishers. Focusing on the *Boners* series

is important in part because it was the most popular and best-selling set of collections, at

least before the publication of *Ignorance is Blitz*, the 2008 New York Times Bestseller. I

also assume these collections' popularity because they went through reprints, unlike

others from that time. Through reprints, many of the conventions of the texts seem to

have been settled by one of the last publications in 1961, and those conventions are

present in later print texts and online texts today.

I have focused the most on *Boners* also because, having been popular and having

been reprinted, this series is the most available in libraries and for purchase. Though the

books' availability was not the only factor in my decision-making, availability did affect

my access to other collections. Cecil Hunt published 10 "howlers" collections between

1900 and 1957, which were bestsellers in England. There is clear evidence that Viking

Press was familiar with or even inspired by Hunt's collections, as several passages from

Hunt are reproduced (initially without attribution) in the early *Boners* books. Later, the *Boners* editors thank Hunt for permission to draw on his collections (Abingdon, *More Boners* vi). While I credit Hunt as the clear predecessor, difficulty with accessing his collections in the US was one factor that dissuaded me from focusing on them. In addition, though *Boners* draws on Hunt's *Howlers*, it was *Boners* that popularized student bloopers in the United States; in addition, *Boners* emphasizes the context of compulsory education in the US, which has been the backdrop for my study.

Digital Publications

The digital texts I have gathered include Tumblr blogs, Facebook pages and posts, Twitter posts, personal websites, popular news, and internet users' reactions to student texts on their own blogs or social media accounts. My focus is on the Tumblr blog *Shit My Students Write*. I first encountered this website shortly after it was created in November 2010. At that time I was interested in the differences between cultural representations of student ability versus the potential I observed in my own students' writing. My research at the time consisted of locating scholarly and popular uses of the phrase "students can't write." I found *Shit My Students Write* after following a link on the website of an educator who had cited the blog as evidence that students "can't write."

I focus on SMSW for several reasons. First, it supplies an enormous amount of data. The creator of SMSW posted excerpts frequently in the first two years. Since 2012, he has posted excerpts almost every day. In addition, SMSW has grown in popularity, which I assume because the "likes" and "reblogs" have increased steadily since its creation over five years ago. Because it is popular, following the circulation of individual excerpts is fairly easy. This is significant because I make the argument in Chapter 3 that

the ease of sharing these texts has broader implications for the culture. Additionally, I gathered, coded, and analyzed all posts on this blog between November 2010 and April 2014, which is when I started to analyze the website with intent to research and write about it. Since April 2014, the blog has grown even more in popularity, and there are certain to be excerpts in this intermediary time that would be significant to my study. However, about three and a half years of student writing from the website showed me clear patterns in the writing that appears on this website. Put simply, I coded the excerpts according to what is assumed to be "wrong" or "bad" about the excerpts. I am assisted in recognizing these qualities by the blog editor's titles for the excerpts, which usually respond to the objectionable feature in the writing. Categorizing the student writing on this website has made it possible to determine the types of errors or missteps that appear most frequently. Additionally, a large set of data with multiple examples of different patterns in student writing illustrates what exactly is humorous about certain errors or missteps. Studying this large set of data led me to the theory that in actuality, instead of displaying laughable student writing, the website displays teachers' difficulties responding to student writing that perplexes.

Finally, recognizing these patterns has helped me recognize similar patterns in earlier print collections. *Shit My Students Write* adopts, consciously or not, many of the conventions of older print collections, especially the *Boners* collections. Periodically the blog editor includes illustrations that represent a student excerpt literally, as in the illustrations I included earlier; and much of what is humorous in the excerpts reflect what was considered humorous in earlier print collections.

Though I will focus on *Shit My Students Write*, I am also interested in responses to excerpts on this website. Because I can trace the circulation of particular excerpts, I am aware of the responses that people have when they like or reblog posts from this website. These responses would help me understand the nature of popular discourses about students and their writing that circulate today.

Analyzing this group of collections has enabled me to argue that this genre shapes public perceptions of students and their writing. In addition, I want to show that consistencies in the genre over time suggest that some assumptions and beliefs resist change.

Ethical Concerns in Methodology

The student writing I have gathered for this dissertation is published, but I assume that in the overwhelming majority of situations it has been published without students' permission, perhaps even without them ever knowing. These students certainly did not expect to have their writing analyzed in someone's dissertation. However, especially online where anonymity is the norm, there is no plausible way for a researcher to find the origin of particular excerpts, let alone the names of the students who wrote them. Obtaining permission from students to reproduce these excerpts in my dissertation is most likely impossible.

Since my goal is to put forward a more productive narrative about students and their writing, I will ensure ethical use by reading and reproducing student writing in order to learn from it, not to laugh at it. That is, I will read and reproduce passages to highlight the ideologies that informed their initial publication, and to acknowledge the academic

potential I see in them, potential that is easily identified if we are attentive to the field's scholarship on students' difficult entrances into the university.

Conclusion

My goal in this project is to address a gap in rhetoric and composition scholarship where we have overlooked a particular context in which student writing has been put to use in some fascinating – and concerning – ways. By exploring the publication of unintentionally humorous student writing, I aim to draw attention to how student writers have consistently been discredited by the circulation of their writing in the public sphere. If we teachers and scholars remain unaware of the extent of this circulation, then we lose opportunities to intervene in existing narratives about student writers and their abilities, and to construct fairer, more accurate narratives.

My project suggests a few starting points in this intervention. We are likely to notice the most recent iterations of this genre first, particularly *Shit My Students Write* and its derisive disposition toward students and their writing. SMSW utilizes the affordances of digital media in its circulation of student writing; Tumblr users, and other internet users outside Tumblr, also re-circulate student writing. Combined with the centuries-old rhetoric of complaint about students and their writing that circulates on the internet today, the circulation of student writing has created a well-worn digital footprint. We teachers and researchers who are invested in representations of the students we serve might learn from the way popular ideas and arguments circulate. Studies, formal or otherwise, of this phenomenon can show us the way in countering this rhetoric and constructing alternative rhetoric.

Further, in the project of restoring fairness to representations of students and their writing, we would benefit by looking at texts that represent students more generously. *Boners* in particular depicts students as learners who are doing sometimes the very best they can under inadequate learning conditions. Institutional and public rhetoric about students and student writing needs to be confronted with its own limitations. Students are in college because they have something to learn; we are their teachers because we are equipped to help them. In the words of Mina Shaughnessy, "The work is waiting for us" ("Diving In," 238).

This work, then, also invokes the continued project in our field and in education of eliminating the deficit-oriented, remedial model that has for so long been used to interpret student writing. It is arguably the most dominant paradigm for thinking of teaching, learning, and writing in higher education. Composition teachers and researchers, for their proximity to students and student writing in the university, are situated well to counter this paradigm. The underlying claim I make in this dissertation – that derision toward students and their writing is *learned* – suggests that it can also be unlearned. My hope is that teachers who might encounter this dissertation or related articles in the future would not conclude that we teachers need to adopt a humorless approach to student writing. Far from it. As teachers of writing, we enjoy language play, and unintended but humorous error is one of the oldest kinds. We can, however, control the conclusions we draw about what these errors tell us about students, their abilities, and their intelligence. Relying on basic writing research and teaching experience, I would personally conclude that errors confirm that students are human and that students are learning. Additionally, as I explore in Chapter 4, some errors on closer look suggest a

great deal of potential. That so many teachers apparently do not have the experience of observing another person's potential is a large part of what drives this project.

Consequently, a major implication of this dissertation relates to teacher education. Given that our national organizations do not address or repudiate the practice of sharing student writing with unintended audiences, it may be the case that this deeply historical but more or less ignored practice is best addressed through teacher education. I suggest in Chapter 4 the possibility of using unintentionally humorous error to teach teachers about what they may find in student writing. Reflective practice might begin with an exercise where we generate explanations for those passages of student writing that perplex us, explanations that do not comment on a student intelligence or ability. Further, beyond such an exercise, we have a great deal of work to do in helping teachers unlearn the habits of mind that we apply to student writing. I suggest in this dissertation, using the research of teaching and learning, that reflecting on our dispositions, and consequently adjusting our dispositions, can result in changed classroom practice and a better experience for students. Teachers and students deserve nothing less than mutually beneficial and intellectually enriching interactions through and across student writing.

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 2, "How to Laugh at Student Writing: Lessons from 1930s 'Student Boner' Collections," I identify an early text in the genre of student blooper collections, Viking Press's *Boners* published in 1931. Illustrated by Dr. Seuss, it was the 4th bestselling nonfiction book in 1931 and went through multiple re-prints and additional editions between the 1930s and 2007. I provide a history and overview of the series, particularly its interest in vocabulary error, along with educational context of the time

that suggests the prevalence of vocabulary testing. Next, I describe theories of humor that contextualize what we see in *Boners*, particularly Freud's theory of the naive. I elaborate on how naive error, combined with the editors' emphasis on the flawed learning conditions in which students write, leads to a generous view of students and their writing. Finally, I address conversations in rhetoric and composition about the ethics of sharing student writing, conversations that might benefit from an historical account of student blooper collections.

In Chapter 3, "Attribution and Ownership in Student Blooper Collections: The Limitations and Affordances of Digital Media," I discuss changes in the genre of student blooper collections over time. The change from print to digital texts has enabled faster, easier, and broader circulation of student writing, which raises ethical concerns about ownership. However, the changes are not only technical; they promote a different set of dispositions toward students. Because student writing is frequently circulated online without a compiler's or editor's rhetorical framing (such as the request to withhold judgment toward students), the excerpted passages of student writing come to represent faults and problems in students, thereby reaffirming the remedial mindset. As a result, student writing is circulated, published, and re-published, most often without attribution or permission from original editors or compilers. I analyze one particular case involving a passage of student writing originally published in 1928. Since then, it has re-appeared, sometimes with one or two words changed, and without attribution, in multiple other collections, including *Shit My Students Write* in 2013. A closer look at the trajectory of such excerpts and their circulation across texts and media allows us to rethink the concept of ownership in the composition classroom.

In Chapter 4, "Incongruity on *Shit My Students Write*: Considering Unintentional Humor in Student Writing," I focus on the popular Tumblr blog that has published student writing since 2010. A modern-day version of the student blooper collection, *Shit My Students Write* goes beyond the original genre by publishing not only naive vocabulary errors, but also student writing that shows students attempting to write academically but failing to meet their teachers' expectations. Using composition theories of academic discourse, reading, and assessment, I analyze a set of excerpts from *Shit My Students Write* that represent qualities or moves in student writing that are incongruous with teacher expectations: redundancy, contradictions, implausible arguments, obvious statements, and unusual analogies. I conclude with a discussion of how student bloopers might be used in teacher education to promote fairer, more helpful readings of and responses to student writing.

In the concluding chapter, I review the implications of this project, particularly for the public narrative that circulates about students and their writing. I provide recommendations for an energetic approach to confronting this narrative and constructing an alternative one. I also discuss limitations of this project, particularly the methodological choice not to interview teachers, which is a limitation that opens opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER II

HOW TO LAUGH AT STUDENT WRITING: LESSONS FROM 1930s "STUDENT
BONER" COLLECTIONS

A Tradition of Sharing Student Writing

Sharing unintentionally humorous student writing is a tradition in education. The story goes that while reading student writing, we teachers suddenly, unexpectedly, happen across an error that produces an unintended and humorous meaning. We share these moments with others, perhaps to brighten the otherwise serious practice of reading and grading, or perhaps because we so appreciate the humor that sharing it is irresistible. These moments have been situated in our professional lives from the start of our teaching careers, given how reliably students make errors in writing. And these moments were part of the professional lives of teachers before us.

Out of this tradition, a genre emerged: the student blooper collection. Instead of just reading a passage aloud to one's office mate, thousands of teachers in the early 20th century shared their students' writing with book publishers, who in turn published volumes of student writing. Originally published in 1931, the *Boners* series by Viking Press is a successful example of this genre. *Boners: Being a Collection of Schoolboy Wisdom* was the 4th best-selling non-fiction book of 1931 (Unsworth). Each individual book holds 100 passages of student writing from high schoolers and college students around the US. They are organized thematically and with 20 illustrations by a young Dr. Seuss. The student passages in these collections read almost universally like answers to

tests, particularly on vocabulary and content knowledge. *Boners* is a fascinating early example of a popular genre that neither Rhetoric and Composition nor English Studies has researched, but whose traces have been part of the professional lives of teachers for nearly 100 years. The books memorialize the experience of encountering unintentional humor in student writing as well as the inevitable urge to share it, and – what may surprise some readers – they characterize students generously.

These books are worth revisiting and analyzing in the context of our profession because today we have a shortage of positive representations of students. Out of the tradition of complaint, students' literacies and their identities as young people are maligned (Sheils; Trimbur; Gold). In popular culture, students are regularly the butt of jokes, and their writing is widely understood to be exceptionally bad. Yet, in the historical narratives that we accept in our profession, treatment of students was worse in the earlier days of composition. Revisiting *Boners* causes us to rethink that disciplinary narrative. If generous representations of students were very popular in the 1930s, then we have something to learn from them today.

In exploring *Boners* as an example of the student bloopers genre, I draw on theories of humor: incongruity theory and Freud's theory of the "naive" in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. In her article on students' intentional humor writing, Linda Bergmann defines Freud's theory of jokes by contrasting it with his theory of the naive. Bergmann notes that compared to intentional jokes, humorist Richard Lederer's "howlers" would be classified as "naive," because the naive "transgresses inhibitions out of innocence," but jokes do so on purpose (141). Bergmann goes on to rely on Freud's theory of jokes in her analysis of students' humor writing; here, I take up Bergmann's

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initial classification of students' unintentional humor as naive. The naive is a comic genre that emerges when someone, usually a child, effortlessly ignores an inhibition "because it is simply not present in him" (Freud 176). As opposed to jokes, the naive is "found" in someone's speech, particularly the innocent misuse of language or the unknowingly obscene (178). Such a relationship between a naive person and an observer impeccably describes the relationship between teachers and students. Teachers have power over students, and they read student writing with greater "inhibition" toward the English language – that is, a sense of correct and incorrect, what words are acceptable and what ones are not. They possess the power of knowing the "rules." This was certainly true in early 20th century US, where college preparation was in flux and news media, much like today, bemoaned fallen literacy standards. As such, it would seem that teachers and the popular audience for *Boners* would have had the opportunity to reinforce that narrative. Supported by hundreds of passages from student writing that readily demonstrate student error, the editors of *Boners* and the teachers-turned-contributors could have made the case that these passages of student writing show diminished literacy and severe ignorance. However, all evidence points to another interpretation: the editors, teachers, and audience took pleasure in these books because they represent the lack of inhibition in youth, who endured testing, the most common instrument of compulsory education. The resulting construction of students and their writing can help us teachers and scholars of writing counter inaccurate claims about students and their writing. It is more difficult to draw grand conclusions about students if we look at student errors as essentially common, and as a product of compulsory education. Such a move might help us keep these deficit models in check in the public sphere, such that students are represented more fairly.

To explain this argument, I first provide a history of the *Boners* series, including notable context in education at the time. Next, I describe the particular theories of humor that contextualize what we see in *Boners*, and from these theories I elaborate on how particular choices in these books and others like them promote a more generous view of students and their writing. Finally, I end with a discussion of how conversations in rhetoric and composition about the ethics of sharing student writing (which I take up more in the next chapter) might benefit from this historical account of *Boners*.

History of *Boners* as a Student Blooper Collection

The historical context of *Boners* sheds light on the genre of student blooper collections as a whole. Cecil Hunt published *Howlers* in 1928 in England, and inspired by *Howlers*, Viking Press published *Boners*. This genre also includes books such as Amsel Greene's *Pullet Surprises*, and continues with more recent texts like Richard Lederer's "The World According to Student Bloopers" and Anders Henriksson's *New York Times* bestseller, *Ignorance is Blitz: Mangled Moments of History from Actual College Students*. Today there are digital examples like the popular Tumblr blog *Shit My Students Write* (SMSW). As its title suggests, SMSW invites teachers to submit the "shit" they find in their students' writing. "Shit" here draws from the popular meme that follows a structure of "Shit [Name of Group] Says," which does not always mean that conventionally "bad" writing is published here – rather, the site seems to capture some of the surprising, unexpected, or humorous things that appear in students' writing – though with an emphasis on students' most blatant errors.

Teachers in higher education have begun to pay more attention to websites such as these. SMSW is mentioned on teachers' blogs, and usually in a disapproving manner

(Saavedra; Ching). The website, some argue, promotes negative perceptions of students.

In May 2011, after first encountering SMSW, I posted to the Writing Program

Administrators List-serv asking if other teachers and researchers knew about this website

and what views they had about it, considering that "this manner of circulating direct

quotes from [student] work has to be quite recent" (Winck). As this early approach in my

research demonstrates, sometimes concerns about the ethics of SMSW are approached as

if the practice of sharing and publishing humorous student writing is new, or is a product

of the growth of digital media. However, SMSW is only the most recent iteration of a

genre that has been around at least since 1928 in England and 1931 in the US.

Boners	February 7, 1931
More Boners	April 31, 1931
Still More Boners	August 4, 1931
Omnibus Boners	1931
Prize Boners for 1932	1932
The 2nd Boners Omnibus	1938
Bigger and Better Boners	1952
The Pocket Book of Boners	1941
Herrings Go about the Sea in Shawls	1997
Boners: Seriously Misguided Facts – According to Schoolkids	2007

Fig. 1: The *Boners* series, 1931-2007

The editors of the 1952 collection, reflecting on the 21-year-old legacy, explain

that almost 100,000 copies of the book were sold in its first two months in print.

According to the editors, between 1931 and 1952, a million and a half copies of the

Boners books were sold, including *More Boners*, *Still More Boners*, *Prize Boners*, and

the first and second *Boners Omnibus* (Abingdon, *Bigger and Better* 9). So popular were

these collections that when Viking Press published *Still More Boners* in 1931, the editors issued a statement in the introduction confessing that Alexander Abingdon, the named editor of the series who had been "invited to lecture, to sign books, to appear at benefits, to come to dinner parties," was not a real person. His name was invented as a placeholder while Viking searched for an editor with name recognition (Abingdon, *Still More*, viii). Alexander Abingdon's name stayed on all the subsequent books, signifying that the series enjoyed plenty of success without a famous editor.

Vocabulary Testing in Early 20th Century Schooling

One of the most important features of the *Boners* books is that they come from a variety of tests on vocabulary and content knowledge. This is suggested first by the title: *Boners, Being a Collection of Schoolboy Wisdom, or Knowledge as It Is Sometimes Written, Compiled from Classrooms and Examination Papers*. Around the turn of the 20th century, individualized testing of all common subjects was a norm, certainly in classrooms but also as entrance exams before college and at the end of coursework (Crowley 61). Most of the passages suggest a question-and-answer format of testing. For instance, the student who wrote, "A buttress is a woman who makes butter" might have been asked to provide definitions for a set of vocabulary words in complete sentences (Abingdon, *Boners* 6). Other passages even include the original test question, such as this one: "Write a sentence showing clearly the meaning of 'posterity,'" to which the student responded, "The cat leaped about and then sat on its posterity" (Abingdon, *Boners* 19). There is no doubt that the educational context of the time, along with curriculum and assessment, affected how the books were structured and what passages were included.

A particular word about vocabulary, what *Boners* categorizes as "definitions": though the passages are organized by theme, most of the boners are word choice and vocabulary errors. Such errors reflect the trends in composition teaching at the time. Teachers' pedagogies were shaped largely by composition textbooks and handbooks, according to Robert Connors. Connors notes that at the turn of the 20th century, "basic mechanics-oriented texts" were prioritized by the textbook publishing industry, whose goal was to provide textbooks to meet the need of large numbers of underprepared teachers teaching writing in college (86). Textbooks such as the *Handbook of Composition: A Compendium of Rules* by Edwin C. Woolley were so successful because they appealed to a popular teacher logic: "atomize" writing into the elements with which students struggle, then practice those particular elements with drills and exercises, which the handbooks provided in abundance (Connors 97). Other composition handbooks at the start of the 20th century emphasized vocabulary or word choice-related matters. William H. Maxwell and George J. Smith's *Writing in English: A Modern School Composition* has three major chapters in its table of contents that relate to vocabulary or correctness of word choice (8). Similarly, Isabel F. Young's *The Normal Guide to English Composition* devotes a chapter to "the use and misuse of words" (ix). Word errors, viewed by teachers and the textbook industry as only one element among other foundational elements in writing, set the stage for the creation of the *Boners* books, which catalog students' various errors that would have been very obvious to teachers.

Further, as published in a 1928 report, Syracuse University's English Department was "convinced that there is a direct relation between vocabulary test scores and specific aptitude for writing" (qtd in Berlin 67). This may be a statement that is generalizable to

what many in secondary and postsecondary education believed about assessment at the time. It certainly received some attention from one English educator in 1947. Amsel Greene, a high school English teacher in Montana, wrote that vocabulary building is "the most universal and the most imperative of all needs" ("The Problem of Vocabulary"). Greene herself developed a curriculum and a textbook for a course devoted solely to vocabulary. That need, she wrote, originates when students "daily misinterpret words that we assume they know," which can be verified by the "written word-tests given to juniors and seniors" (Greene, "The Problem of Vocabulary"). Later in 1969, retired and in the last years of her life, Greene and her sister compiled student responses to those written word-tests she assigned for years in her class on vocabulary (Smith). The result was *Pullet Surprises*, coined from a student blooper that read, "In 1957 Eugene O'Neill won a Pullet Surprise" (Greene, *Pullet Surprises* 15). Greene's example provides further evidence of connections between the conditions in classrooms, emphasis on vocabulary, and the formation of student blooper collections.

Though tests were a dominant means of assessment, the editors of *Boners* seemed to support exams only to the extent that they produced such remarkable mistakes on the part of students. In their first forward, the editors explained that the students whose writing is featured in the books are "only poor innocent harassed blunderers trying to find the right answers to the most uncivilized of mental tortures: the examination" (Abingdon, *Boners* vi). Such a statement is worth breaking down further. It is uncommon to see student writing used as evidence that students are victim to an inhumane educational system. More often, students' writing is evidence of their lack of ability, interest, educational commitment, or will – or, it represents lack of preparation in prior school

years. Less frequently have we seen methods of assessment critiqued for their role in students producing error-prone writing. This latter point might resonate with educational scholars today who have critiqued the growth of standardized testing in K-12 for this very reason. It is not something that we would expect to see today in a book that playfully critiques student writing for its unintentionally amusing shortcomings. Such texts would seem to have the opportunity to adopt a different sort of ethos. For example, we can look at websites like *Shit My Students Write* – the modern-day student bloopers genre – and wonder about the "target" of our laughter. *Boners* could have adopted an ethos that encourages us to laugh at students for their assumed ignorance, rather than laugh at students' *mistakes* because students are young, just like we adults used to be. Specifically, by focusing on students' humanity, the editors construct an audience for these texts, one that appreciates the wordplay that inevitably results from young people trying to learn the dominant literacies of the time. But in addition, as I discuss shortly, the editors construct an audience that remembers what school was like. When the editors call examinations "the most uncivilized of mental tortures," we are not struck with confusion over how exams could be characterized this way, nor are we meant to seriously argue to the contrary that tests are desirable, pleasurable, or somehow good. Instead, the reaction that these editors most likely intended to evoke is, "Yes, I remember what school was like, what tests were like."

Indeed, the editors were not shy about critiquing the conditions of student learning rather than critiquing students. In a satirical embrace of error, the editors say that students make boners to revolt against the "correct but uninspired teachings of their elders" (Abingdon, *More Boners* v). Here *teachers* are critiqued. Such a move is

interesting, considering that the editors appear careful to be diplomatic and fair to all parties. The books are dedicated to only three groups of people in the series, and on a seemingly rotating basis from publication to publication: "pupils," teachers, and contributors (the latter two are assumed to be the same most of the time). It may be of course obvious that the editors valued teachers-turned-contributors because they supplied the crucial material for these books. Poking fun at teachers, who teach correctness but can be "uninspiring," might actually be appropriate. In the fascinating drama of the teacher-student relationship, the teacher is assumed to have greater power and knowledge – and so can take the criticism. And in a sense, *Boners* fixates on the drama of that familiar relationship and imitates the strict teacher who corrects students to their faces, because correctness is good for them, but smiles fondly behind their backs. In the next section, I take a closer look at what we can learn from these teachers' reactions to student writing.

Incongruity Theory

Assessments are bound to show incongruities between teachers' expectations and students' responses. Incongruity theory can explain our reactions to wrong answers, but in particular wrong answers that are amusing. This theory assumes that speech acts that disrupt our expectations are inherently humorous. In *Boners*, where answers come from tests and exams, we are meant as readers to immediately detect correct and incorrect answers.

In a reconsideration of incongruity theory, Jerry Farber explains that the concept is premised on the juxtaposition of two incongruous elements. Farber refers to these as A (the social norm) and B (that which counters or defies the norm) (69). Observing the juxtaposition of A and B produces in us the effect of incongruity, which is pleasurable

and humorous. We experience a "reward-inducing shift" on account of "the favoring of the B" (Farber 69). Farber insists that the incongruous A and B derive their humor from their juxtaposition, not by one replacing the other. What is funny is that "one meaning plays off against the other, with the result that…a need temporarily succeeds, not in eliminating, but in defying the restriction that governs it" (Farber 71). "A" is a permanent fixture. We accept it as a reality and a norm; but we long for "B."

In the context of *Boners*, "A" is a particular restriction: the ideology of correctness, and it is enacted by the teacher's eye for correct and incorrect. The *Boners* editors acknowledge the role of teachers when they dedicate their *Prize Boners* collection to contributors, "without whose unfailing sense of other people's errors this book would never have been written" (7). In *Prize Boners*, which awarded prizes to contributors whose submission received the most votes, the teachers are turned into contributors. Let's take for instance the following passage: "An eavesdropper is a kind of bird" (Abingdon, *More Boners* 7). In Farber's formulation of the incongruous A and B, the passage would read like this: An eavesdropper (A) is a kind of bird (B). The declarative nature of responding to vocabulary questions requires students to make knowledge claims, to state their assumptions or guesses as truths. "An eavesdropper is" begins a knowledge claim. The student was not only wrong, but wrong in such a way that s/he was also "correct," only unconventionally and humorously so.

Meanwhile, the *Boners* editors call teachers "startled discoverers," suggesting that incongruity startles us and that teachers are, in a sense, privy to a "joke" that must be shared with others. Amsel Greene's collection of student bloopers, *Pullet Surprises*,

developed out of a way to interpret our own surprise as teachers. In the introduction, Greene explains why this term captures what student bloopers represent:

> "Here was the term for which I had been groping. As the teacher of a course in vocabulary building, I had jotted down hundreds of classroom misinterpretations, for which I had found no name. The terms *boners, bloopers, and boo-boos* imply stupidity or inadvertence, whereas student errors are often marvels of ingenuity and logic…Every misinterpretation is by nature a surprise; the word *pullet* is from the Latin *pullus*, meaning a young animal; the most engaging of young animals are those in our high schools. (*Pullet Surprises* 15)

Greene adopts an ethos similar to the editors of *Boners*. She appears to acknowledge the work of Viking's *Boners* when she considers the term "boners" but ultimately casts it aside in favor of the more generous "pullet surprises." Greene is aware of the tradition of collecting bloopers, and the ethos she builds as an educator reflects the ethos espoused in *Boners*. It is worth speculating about why early examples of this genre promoted these more generous characterizations of students. Along with making these subtle suggestions, editors of these collections issue more pointed cautions about what conclusions to draw about students' bloopers.

In the forward to *Boners*, the editors close by saying, "let us tell a parable which might prompt you to temper a too harsh judgment on the mental sins of these young," and proceed to explain how a mother, dismayed by her child's report card, calls him a "marron" (instead of, presumably, a moron). They warn, "'Let him who is without sin' – laugh too contemptuously at what follows" (Abingdon, *Boners* vii-viii). Similarly, Cecil Hunt insists that students' errors are made out of innocence rather than ignorance (Hunt, *Howlers* 5). The significance of surprise as a dimension of teachers' reading of student writing is that we are not meant to make hurried judgments about students. Such a call to

pause and reflect before making claims about students' intelligence is certainly relevant today.

Naive Incongruity

Why, exactly, we ought to avoid rash conclusions about the students in Boners has to do with their "innocence." The adults who read *Boners* are aware that the students did not intend to make those errors, and may have even believed that their answers represented their earnest work as students. Incongruity, a fundamental feature of humor, can be extended into theories of the naive. Freud distinguishes the naive from jokes, which are designed, constructed, or manufactured by a joke-maker. Naive humor, by contrast, is observed in others who are unaware that they have done, said, or written something humorous. The core of what makes the naive humorous is that the naive person has been witnessed crossing some sort of social boundary. They have misused a word, said something nonsensical, or said or done something unknowingly obscene (Freud 178). They believe they are using language normally while their observers know that they are not; the observer is aware both of the inhibition that the naive person does not have, and that this person unknowingly revealed his or her naivete. Normally, Freud says, we would become indignant with such a person, but our perception is that the person naively crossed a boundary, and so we are forgiving. The amount of energy that would normally have been channeled into being indignant is now released as laughter (Freud 179).

Naivete is most often found in children and "uncultivated adults" (Freud 176). In introductions to the books, the editors openly acknowledge the youthfulness of the students whose excerpts appear in the books. They say, "Out of the mouths of babes

comes the material of this book" (Abingdon, *Boners* iv). They call students "poor innocent harassed blunderers" who are forced into taking torturous exams; later they suggest that, if named, the authors of the boners might later, as adults, be embarrassed by their "youthful indiscretions" (Abingdon, *Boners* vi). Indeed, Freud articulates empathy in his description of what happens to observers when they encounter the naive. We "take the psychical state of the person into account, put ourselves into it, try to understand it by comparing it with our own" (Freud 180). The audience for *Boners* might have been able to empathize with students for two reasons: first, because we adults know young people and children. They make mistakes, and they do not always have the right answers. Second, we ourselves remember being children and the difficulties of being tested on unfamiliar material.

This focus on youth suggests that the editors put these passages into context. These are the mistakes that young people make, as if to say – can you blame them? Indeed, today we see this admiration for young people mostly for the very young, and in response to their *purposeful* cleverness. We regularly see circulated online young students' amusing answers to tests. For example, online stories such as "41 Test Answers That Are 100% Wrong and 100% Right at the Same Time" capture children's clever defiance in the face of unfamiliar or uninteresting material. However, it is puzzling how the playful yet overall fair representations of students in *Boners* could exist in a popular domain whose counterpart today is much less forgiving to most students. It might help to consider the differences in historical contexts between today and the 1930s. While there were social pressures to excel at education, we might note that education has been increasingly tied to success, particularly for working-class students and students of color

(Rose, *Lives*; Villanueva). A greater emphasis today on standardized testing might account for a correlating trend: today's students, encouraged to take education more seriously, are believed to risk more opportunities when they perform poorly. Where in the past we might have been more willing to see nothing but "youthful indiscretion" in students' humorous passages, we may be less willing to celebrate them the way *Boners* does. In the following sections, I discuss the roots of this willingness to celebrate students as youth.

The Pleasure of Suspended Inhibitions

Both Freud and Farber theorize that there is some kind of personal reward for the perceiver/listener involved in humor. For Freud, pleasure comes from witnessing the suspension of inhibitions that the naive person unknowingly crossed. In incongruity theory, the reward is witnessing the elevation of "B," the atypical, unexpected, or defiant element. This is because B usually represents some kind of hidden desire or longing, something that we wish to have manifested, but it is opposed by the norm. In the context of *Boners*, the theory might suggest that teachers read student writing without necessarily enjoying the inhibition that governs their reading: the ideology of correctness that we are charged with upholding through assessment of student work. Such an argument may be difficult to make to some teachers, who take immense pride in the duties with which they are charged. But it is not a stretch to suggest that the errors bring some reward or pleasure to the audiences for the book, including the editors who frame the student work to audiences.

This is suggested by the enthusiasm with which the editors embrace error. Pleasure, though not explicitly stated, is evident in student blooper collections. In *Boners*,

pleasure manifests as a satirical embrace of error as an escape from cold, depressing

scholarly dispositions and an embrace of the "bodily," the base pleasures of being

"wrong" and "unlearned." They revel in a counter-cultural embrace of error:

> America to-day faces a tremendous problem. It is in mortal danger of
> becoming surfeited with education. Accuracy is becoming a disease,
> factual information a form of religion . . . Belly laughs grow rarer, and
> people on the streets wear the lean and hungry looks of the scholar rather
> than the ruddy geniality of he who feeds on laughter . . . Into this Land of
> Learning, the Boner, like a little candle of pure, untramelled, abysmal
> ignorance throws its ever-widening beam of light. Thousands, too-long
> fettered by fact, are beginning to revel in the warmth of the NEW
> IGNORANCE . . . To every hamlet and farmhouse must go the message of
> hope and laughter that the Boner carries with it." (Abingdon, *2nd Boners
> Omnibus* vii-ix)

There is something to be said for the editors' comments on the culture's absence

of laughter and the scholarly seriousness with which the average person approaches daily

life. Similar critiques might be made today about young people. At the same time, the

editors were having a bit of fun with their irony and the extent to which they praise error.

On one hand, they seem to ask, why be correct when it gives no pleasure, does not make

us interesting, does not evoke laughter? On the other hand, their praise of error reaches

outrageous heights by the end of this passage. The irony implies that correctness may be

so valued by the culture that we find it funny when a counter-cultural stance disrupts our

expectations. We might even see incongruity theory at work in this passage, where we

readers expect adults to prefer correctness over error. While the editors hint at a culture

obsessed with correctness, which may reveal their true allegiances through the irony, the

incongruity in their statements is also what makes appreciating the students possible. If I

find the incongruous element pleasurable – that the editors embrace rather than criticize

students' errors – then it would seem that a more positive depiction of students follows from that incongruity.

Further, traditional theories of "error" describe flaws, lacks, inconsistencies, and deviations. It is negative. It suggests character flaws, a lack of attention, a lack of education. We need only look to what some scholars have called "grammar rants" to see that in the public and popular domains of our culture, unconventional grammar or blatant grammar errors are assumed to represent intelligence and the quality of one's character (see Dunn and Lindblom, *Grammar Rants*; Williams, "Phenomenology"). Additionally, the dominant cultural assumption has been that composition's goal is to diagnose, correct, and "cure" error (Connors; Rose, "Language"; Crowley; Berlin). This is where the *Boners* books do not line up with the ideologies of the time. Instead of marking and eliminating errors, the *Boners* books memorialize them in print, elevating them above the status of "error." Instead, a boner is now a "gem" (Abingdon, *Boners* vi). In inhibitions being transgressed, teachers and the audience for *Boners* find delight in the naive, perhaps because students' naive errors represent their youthfulness. Taken together, student blooper collections reflect students' inability to be *completely* reconstituted by mandatory, compulsory education in the 20th century.

It is possible that these editors may have been preoccupied with developing their own legacy, as this was the sixth *Boners* book to be published, and they have some precedence to draw from. But the moves are certainly consistent in the genre as a whole. Greene advises us not to speed-read through *Pullet Surprises*, but instead to pause and savor ("To the Reader"). In 2008, Anders Henriksson encourages us not to worry about whether bloopers signify the ignorance of today's youth, and instead invites us to "visit a

world remarkably different from the reality we think we inhabit" (Henriksson, *College in a Nutskull* viii). This is remarkably different from the typical treatment of error.

The Importance of Authenticity

The naive is so crucial in underpinning the pleasure derived from humor that there is a near obsession with the authenticity of the passages. At the end of the *Prize Boners* book, where readers may submit their own boners, they must sign a form that reads "I offer the following [boners] for the next boner contest. To the best of my belief and knowledge they are authentic (i.e. written unconsciously by a pupil, not 'made up') and have not been published before" ("Contest Form").

There is a move in this genre as a whole to protect it from fraud. Editors of texts in this genre, from *Howlers* to *Boners* to Lederer's work on student error, insist on the authenticity of the passages. Concern for authenticity is legitimate, considering that the excerpts are submitted by people who could revise them to accentuate the humor. But the extent to which editors of student blooper collections attempt to assure readers of the authenticity suggests something deeper going on. Cecil Hunt, editor of *Howlers*, was so concerned with his audience doubting the authenticity of the passages that he stated in an introduction that he had "many thousands of these howlers" in the "original school exercise books and examination papers" (Hunt, *Best Howlers* 6). The title of Henriksson's *New York Times* bestseller from 2008 promises that these "mangled moments of history" are from "*actual* college students" (my emphasis). Lederer assures readers that the bloopers in his book are authentic. They are "certified, genuine, and unretouched," and "[n]one has been concocted by any professional humorist" (Lederer viii).

A similar authenticity is guaranteed by *Boners*. Those editors, like Hunt, reserve some space in the introduction to anticipate the argument that the bloopers are manufactured or invented. Viking editors, addressing those "who read this book and believe it to be wholly or partly manufactured by professional humorists," say that "we have only the profoundest contempt, nay, antipathy" (Abingdon, *Boners* vii). The editors encourage people to "send in all authentic 'boners'" (Abingdon, *Boners* viii). In a later book, they warn, "Do not submit boners which have already appeared in this volume or in the three earlier volumes" (Abingdon, *Prize Boners* 6). In 1952, on the occasion of a new edition, the editors explain in order to re-introduce boners to the public: "Newcomers to the sport need only be told that Boners are *authentic* student errors, not made-up gags or wisecracks. Your true Boner fan can usually detect the synthetic article and will properly scorn it. The Boners quoted here have all come to us from apparently reliable sources" (Abingdon, *Bigger and Better* 9, emphasis in original). However, they add a caveat that "the science is still in its infancy – even after twenty-one years – and if any phonies have crept in by stealth, we can only apologize" (Abingdon, *Bigger and Better* 9-10). Though the editors do not explain why authenticity is important (apart from wanting to avoid publishing passages that have already been published elsewhere), we can infer some explanations from the genre as a whole. If readers were to discover that the editors of these different collections of student writing had written the passages themselves, they would not likely continue to find them humorous. The naive is essential to the humor in *Boners*, *Howlers*, and the others, because the naive seems to capture an *essential* quality that cannot be reproduced by those who are not naive. It is possible, as the editors allude to, that contributors may have tinkered with or themselves written some

of the passages in these books, because realistically, adults may be able to *perform* the

naive and pass as a child. However, there is a fiction that the editors of these collections

and surely the audience members find pleasurable to maintain: by documenting students'

innocent mistakes, we are able to witness the "pureness" of youth. The circulation of

these passages, as I discuss in the next section, make possible the chance to revisit this

picture of youth again and again.

Compulsive Sharing and the Importance of Written Bloopers

Freud emphasized speech over action in the naive. He says that naive remarks

work more like jokes than naive actions because speech is the normal expression of a

joke, such that kids' unconscious humor could be called "naive jokes" (176). This is

illustrated well in *Boners Schoolroom*[1], a theatrical adaptation of the *Boners* series that

was published in 1938. A teacher verbally quizzes her class on various kinds of content

knowledge, and the students respond with the answers featured in the *Boners* books:

> TEACHER: …Edward, describe the French flag.
> EDWARD: It's one half red, half white, and half blue.
> TEACHER: Exactly so. Quite correct. Alice, what is the chief cause of divorce?
> ALICE: Marriage.
> TEACHER: Yes, and speaking of marriage, Fred, do you know what revolution is?
> FRED: Yes, it's the form of government abroad.
> TEACHER: Yes, yes – well, we'd better hurry on. (40)

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1 *Boners Schoolroom* is reminiscent of the genre of vaudeville school sketches. *Fun in a School-Room* (1908) by Henry E. Shellend shows trouble-making students attempting to use wordplay to out-wit their teacher when he verbally quizzes them in class. The film *Horse Feathers* (1932), starring the Marx Brothers, includes a classroom scene where Professor Wagstaff alternately lectures and quizzes students, who misinterpret biological terminology and vocabulary as part of their roles as "class clowns." These examples of vaudeville school sketches reflect the teacher-student drama that plays out in the *Boners* books as well as the adaptation *Boners Schoolroom*. They also show that a combination of speech humor and physical humor (for instance, Wagstaff's flailing in front of the classroom) create an effect that is similar to but distinct from the experience of reading *Boners*.

Boners' Schoolroom is not nearly as humorous as the *Boners* books, in large part because we are invested in the actual context surrounding the books – that these were found in students' written answers. We believe less that they were heard in a classroom, and the teacher only replies "good," "that's right," and so on. It misses the point. Freud also hints at the importance of the written context.

Freud says that the naive, because it is more often found in speech, can be compared to jokes because the latter are typically expressed in speech, such that when we witness children's naive remarks, we may call them "naive jokes" (176). There is the "universal and familiar experience that no one is content with making a joke for themselves alone" (Freud 137). Freud goes on to explain the strong "urge" to share a joke, to have an audience for it, as if to test its validity or effectiveness (138). Here it is worth pointing out the material conditions surrounding the "naive jokes" in the *Boners* books. The practices of reading, publishing, and circulating jokes that made *Boners* possible are heavily influenced by the culture of writing in school. Few others besides teachers are in positions to regularly see, in young people's writing, what Freud calls naive jokes.

This describes well what happens when teachers come across unintentional humor in student work. *Boners* editors describe them as "gems" (Abingdon, *Boners* vi). Though sharing them might brighten the experience of grading, it might equally emerge from the "universal and familiar experience" of *needing* to share a joke. In addition, a complex, "back stage" culture of teaching already preceded the publication of these books. Richard Lederer once said that "teachers are compulsive sharers, which is what I do" (Pearlman). He may have meant that the culture of teaching lends itself to sharing: sharing student

writing, anecdotes, stories from class, lesson plans, assignments. On one hand, teachers commiserate, and sometimes they do so publicly, in ways that do not flatter the teaching profession (Gold 90). Sometimes we see this sort of display online today, on *Shit My Students Write* but also on sites like *Rate Your Students* and *College Misery*. On the other hand, we might also see teachers as rhetors, who stumble across passages in student writing that they know can be appreciated even by those who are not teachers. *Boners* is evidence that many teachers in the early 20th century had more than a one-dimensional persona when grading student work. Clearly, many took pleasure in the task.

Conclusion: The Ethics of Laughing at Student Writing

Publishing student writing as entertainment is historical and ubiquitous. A methodical analysis of collections of student writing shows that we have much to learn about it and its ethical implications. In rhetoric and composition and in other fields, the practice is regarded as harmless and mostly good-natured. It exists in what Stephen North calls "lore," the "traditions, practices, and beliefs" that characterize the knowledge of experience-based practice (23). In teacher lore, sharing unintentionally humorous student writing may be acceptable if the laughter is confined to the teacher's lounge. In these instances, humor, which we understand as a result of our shared positionality as teachers of writing, may even be a bonding mechanism. For other teachers, laughter at student writing is harmless if the writing is anonymous or points out what is "human" in students. Henriksson makes this point in his introduction to *Ignorance is Blitz: Mangled Moments of History from Actual College Students*: bloopers actually illustrate "the ingenious and often comic ways we all attempt to make sense of information we can't understand because we have no context or frame of reference for it" (viii). Other stipulations and

informal rules govern this ritual of sharing student writing. However, being a reader of student writing can reveal that there is a fine line between empathizing with students and criticizing them, for the exact reason that Henriksson points out: students attempt to explain knowledge that they may not have yet, and in a manner that suggests their inexperience in particular contexts that we value as scholars. To address the ethical implications of the teacher practice behind student blooper collections, I point out that *Boners* in particular models more generous treatment of students' errors, and an appreciation for students as learners who may be doing their best under "uninspired" assessments. The books accomplish these representations without implying that it is *unethical* to find student writing humorous.

The contribution *Boners* makes to our understanding of ethics is even clearer through the lens of humor theory. Farber discusses derisive and empathic humor as part of incongruity theory. These two types "can arise from the same comic stimulus and can even coexist…in a single individual's response to that stimulus," but with different rewards (Farber 72). Derisive humor originates from a sense of one's superiority over others. In Farber's words, "Someone is pushed down so that we ourselves can achieve our sudden glory" (75). Conversely, empathic humor is premised on shared failings. People we laugh at empathically are "like us," such that we do not actually want to see them fail (Farber 78). Amsel Greene, who decried students' vocabulary errors in her 1947 article, also explained in *Pullet Surprises* that her "respect and affection" for students prevents her from dismissing errors as "senseless"; instead, she privileges "the reasoning which may have led to unorthodox conclusions" ("To the Reader"). We would do well to follow this example.

Despite *Boners* being an exception to deficit-model narratives about students, the specific ethical considerations behind sharing and publishing student writing are plenty. These considerations appear in scholarship on the ethical treatment of students and their writing in our research, where the accepted practice is to seek permission from students before using their work (Harris 440; Anderson 78; Robillard 264-5). Among other position statements on research ethics, the "Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies" represents CCCC's stance on using student work in our research. These articles and position statements do not address situations outside research in which a teacher might use student writing. Paul Anderson comments on "composition's long-standing tradition of quoting unpublished student writing without permission," saying that student texts are used "as evidence, sometimes as objects of analysis, *sometimes as occasions for amusement*" (79, my emphasis). There is still much work to be done on this issue.

Articulating the genre of student blooper collections might lead us also to ask when in teachers' reading of student writing they move from being pleased by suspended inhibitions to feeling derision. More recent examples of student blooper collections, like *Shit My Students Write*, suggest that teachers are annoyed with their students and seek public sympathy and commiseration. This was not the project of *Boners*. We would do well to remind ourselves of these earlier examples, because though they were created in a different time, they provide us with a fresh perspective on how to be empathic yet humored readers of student writing. The books also remind that as teachers and members of a profession that is publicly known, discussed, and criticized at times, we can occupy

positions on error and correctness that insist on maintaining students' humanity – as *Boners* did so well.

Finally, we might ask why the series dwindled as it did. Re-publications, sometimes under different titles (such as *Herrings Go about the Sea in Shawls* in 1997), were not successful in making *Boners* a more modern household name. The dust jacket summary to the 2007 publication begins, "What on earth is a boner?" We are so far removed from the term's anachronistic meaning that it must be immediately explained to today's readers. Perhaps audiences today look on the collections and believe the term "boners" is used naively. The effort to market the 2007 edition as a children's book illustrated by Dr. Seuss would most likely fail today, as well, because the title reads as obscene. But the original audience for *Boners* was adult readers who could appreciate young people's learning mistakes, and perhaps adult readers today can appreciate the funny title of these books, along with the timeless humor they represent. As the editors said in 1938, "The Boner, in brief, is here to stay" (Abingdon, *2ⁿᵈ Boners Omnibus* ix). I do hope the editors were right.

CHAPTER III

HARMLESS HUMOR? ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLISHING STUDENT
WRITING FOR PUBLIC AMUSEMENT

"In Christianity a man can only have one wife. This is called monotony."
- *Howlers* (1928)

"Christians usually marry only one person for life. This is called monotony."
-*Shit My Students Write* (2013)

Introduction

The above excerpts were published 85 years apart. The first was published in

England in Cecil Hunt's *Howlers*, one of the earliest collections of student bloopers. The

latter excerpt was published on the popular Tumblr blog *Shit My Students Write* (SMSW),

which from 2010 to present has been the main online space for teachers to publish

students' writing. Given that SMSW purports to document "evidence of the true costs of

educational funding cuts," it might seem strange that an excerpt published 85 years ago

can apparently demonstrate the costs of underfunded schools today ("About").

This re-publication in a slightly different form of an excerpt from 1928 suggests

that we cannot take *Shit My Students Write* seriously as a representation of how and what

students write today. This is probably true, but it is not the point I wish to make in this

chapter. Researching the teacher practice of sharing and publishing student writing

attends to an unaddressed problem in education: the ethics of valuing student writing so

little. The "Monotony" example above, published numerous times in multiple venues

over at least 85 years, can prompt teachers and scholars to rethink whether publishing student writing for others' amusement is as innocuous as it may at first seem.

To address the ethical problems with publishing student writing, I ask three questions: Why is student writing published without permission in the first place? What relationships are there between this use of student writing and other uses? How should we teachers and scholars respond to the ethical concerns raised by the appropriation of student writing?

The Ideology of Authorship

There is a long history in English Studies of privileging the single author. While it has been criticized thoroughly, this notion of authorship remains a persistent part of the belief system in English departments. For Stygall, literature and the "author function" are in opposition to "non-literature" (321). The problem with this ideology, insofar as it relates to college writing students, is that it privileges certain identities and ways of being. One can be an author only if one meets certain requirements. Johannah Rodgers interviewed basic writing students on their perceptions of the term "author," and their perceptions suggested that "author" is "a high-status term applicable only to those who compose effortlessly and effectively, publish books, and write for a large audience" (139). The requirements to be an author, in other words, are not available to everyone. Being unattainable for most people (and it is most college students who take first-year writing classes), the requirements cause difficulty because they continue to be valorized through literary study – or at least, what people (the public and incoming college students) believe is happening in literary studies – and consequently, what they believe their English instructors expect from student writing.

The role of authorship as high-status writing grows even more complicated when we consider the relationship between the ideology of authorship and remediation. Like other historians of composition, Susan Miller locates the beginning of composition – and the beginning of remediation – in the entrance exams at Harvard in the late 19th century. Entering students were asked to write about literary texts while using correct grammar and spelling (Miller 31). While surface-level correctness was the focus of a series of reports on the status of incoming students at Harvard, the content of the students' writing would have created a stark contrast to literary texts. In Miller's words, the students in composition were part of a "traveling sideshow stationed beside 'great' texts" (36).

Considering that I am looking at instances where student writing is published without students' permission or knowledge, it is useful to consider the economic dynamics of authorship. This is another reason why students are not considered authors: students rely on others for help with their writing, and teaching writing to these students constitutes an expertise within a profession. In a changing rhetoric around higher education, where universities are often compared to corporations, students pay for the service of being educated. Needing help is what makes them not authors. Kelly Ritter makes this point about students relying on "paper mills," businesses that sell students originally-written papers in response to class assignments. In a sense, students "buy" authorship because it is not accessible to "the lowly student," who is outside definitions of authorship (613).

In sum, the ideology of authorship promotes "great texts" and "great writers," which has negative effects on students who struggle with writing. "Authorship" describes what counts as good writing, and it describes whose language and experience matter –

and consequently, whose texts are worthy enough to garner the same respect and treatment as literary texts.

Authorship and Student Writers

If the ideology of authorship creates standards by which we do or do not value someone's writing, then students do not have the same status as authors. Consequently, we value their texts as well as their language and experience far less than we do their more experienced counterparts. The status of student writing, in relation to authorship, has been a long-standing concern in composition studies (Carrick and Howard; Haswell and Haswell, *Authoring*; Horner; Robillard; Stygall). Historically, the lack of value assigned to student writing has meant that we are unable to comprehend it as *actual* writing. Its status as "not real writing" (relative to the texts of authors) makes it vulnerable. Its value suggests that mistreating or not regarding it with the respect owed to "authors" is acceptable given its status. In what follows, I explore the major reasons why student writing is assumed to have little value.

Student Identity

Student writing is not "real writing" because it is the writing of students. In our culture, "student" and "author" are mutually exclusive identity categories. Students are learning how to write but are not experienced enough to be considered authors. While Bruce Horner says that the problem with student writing, according to teachers, is students' lack of "authenticity, maturity, or ethical integrity" on display in their writing ("Revaluing" 11), I argue that it is students' identity as students (which invokes a whole host of qualities) that is the major problem to teachers.

Theoretically, "the student" is a construction created by schools as an institution. Students exist only as a result of the motives of the institution. Schools, through the instrument of exams, are complicit in defining students. According to Foucault, exams allow for "the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity"; schools as institutions demand that each student is "linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the 'marks' that characterize him and make him a 'case'" (106). By and large, the construction of students that is enabled by schools as an institution reflects a remedial mindset, where students are represented in terms of what they are assumed to lack. Mike Rose argues that the rhetoric of remediation suggests that a teacher's job is to "*diagnose* various *disabilities*, *defects*, *deficits*, *deficiencies*, and *handicaps*" (192, emphasis in original). The metaphor of diagnosis is historically persistent in education, and it aligns with what Helmers found in her study of representations of students in composition scholarship. Students are often assumed to have an illness or disease (64). We see this representation also in the late 19th century rhetoric where writing education was believed to be a form of "inoculation" against bad writing and errors (Paine).

As these depictions show, representations of students are derived most often from how teachers understand and interpret student writing. Historically, teachers and administrators have believed they can determine, based on student writing, students' preparedness for college; their skill set in general (Crowley 70); their "attitudes toward school, teachers, and life" (Helmers 4); and their "quality" as individuals (Miller 57). If the ideology of authorship provides a model for how to understand texts, then non-literature, as Stygall suggests, "will always fall short of the English department's highest

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value" (321). It is really quite remarkable what we believe we can know about students based on their writing.

However, literary texts are not the only texts that define standards for "good writing." Academic discourse has also played an important role in determining authorship. The distinction between student writing and "real writing" can be explored through basic writing research of the 1970s-80s. In this research (Shaughnessy; Bartholomae; Bizzell; Rose), the writing of the academy is reframed as the writing of a specialized discourse community. The writing of students during open admissions in the 1960s-70s perplexed and confused teachers, who did not know how to help the students in their classes. Shaughnessy helped teachers shift their mindsets and better understand the "logic" of the errors in student writing (13). Bizzell explained the sense of culture shock and amount of learning students have to do when they come to college ("When"). Bartholomae explained that students are approximating the language of the academy, attempting to "carry off the bluff" (135). This is consistent with what research on discourse communities and communities of practice concludes. Lave and Wenger theorize how newcomers to a community go through various stages of acclimation (*Situated*).

Further, the infamous Elbow-Bartholomae debate provides a counter to the notion that the goals of writing courses should be to help students acclimate to the language of the academy. Elbow posits that "life is long and college is short" (136), suggesting that given how most of our students will not become academics, we ought to be teaching them other kinds of writing in addition to academic discourse. In this sense, Elbow offers us another perspective on notions of authorship. In his view, we need an *expanded* notion of

authorship that includes many different kinds of writing, audiences, and purposes – which would necessarily include students.

As we can see from a discussion of representations of students and their writing in relation to authorship, there is a highly punitive aspect to teachers' relationships with students. Before moving on to a final reason why students are not assumed to be authors, it is important to discuss plagiarism's role in upholding the traditional notion of authorship as a high-status subject position.

Plagiarism and Student Authorship

One way that we know authorship is highly valued in English Studies is that we guard it by institutionalizing rules related to its protection. While everyone in the university (faculty, staff, and students) are held to these rules, the majority of conversations about plagiarism in the university center on students. Composition has staked a claim in this issue given how much writing we assign in our classes. Responses to student plagiarism over the past few decades have ranged from developing strategies for prevention (Cvetkovic; DeSana; Gilmore) to redefining plagiarism through the lens of pedagogy rather than prevention or punishment (Price; Twomey; Howard, Rodrige, and Serviss).

These scholarly discussions in composition about plagiarism, ownership, and authorship have not had much influence on institutions, however. The embrace of Turnitin shows us that. Scholars have criticized Turnitin for some time (Vie; Howard, "Understanding"; Donnelly), but one criticism in particular sheds light on how uses of student writing suggest its lack of value. To "check" student writing for plagiarism, Turnitin compares student texts to the texts it has in its database, which includes

everything available on the internet plus all the student writing that has been submitted to Turnitin. Its marketing has appeal to universities and individual instructors because the more it is used, the more "effective" it appears to be because the more extensive its database is.

Significantly, student privacy (names are not removed) is seen as a negligible casualty in the "war" against plagiarism. Retaining student writing without students' permission or consent (they cannot opt out of this feature if they are required to use the service) points to the ethical problems with the site: it assumes students are guilty of plagiarism by default (Spigelman). In 2007, high school students rebelled against the mandatory use of Turnitin for the reason that the website keeps their writing and students have no say. Parents who were in support of the students observed that "original, intellectual work produced in a public school is being transferred to, archived by, and utilized for profit by a private company against the student's wishes, but with the permission of the school administration" (qtd in Zimmerman). The parents' argument about profit echoes the important point about the economics of authorship: students are outside that benefit. Ultimately a judge ruled that Turnitin does not violate copyright laws; but importantly, such student protests (formal or otherwise) are significant because they show cognizance on the part of students about these issues of ownership, privacy, and authorship. It is also one of the only areas of scholarship that questions the use and treatment of student writing, raising the possibility that students are legitimate authors whose work needs to be respected.

(In)Authentic Writing Situations

So far I have discussed how the identities of students preclude their being authors, and how the writing they do produce places them outside what counts as an author in the academy. Students are not considered authors because the situations in which they write (the classroom) is so much regarded as an inauthentic rhetorical situation, outside the "real" situations that prompt "real writers" to write. From a rhetorical standpoint, writing is valuable when it does something in the world. It has a purpose and it reaches an audience, perhaps compels that audience to do something (Miller, "Genre"; Bitzer; Charland). Scholarship has addressed the need for authentic writing situations as a precondition for authorship. In composition this has meant providing students with "authentic" rhetorical situations. Several theorists have attempted to redress this problem by changing how we understand audience in the composition classroom. Ede and Lunsford's "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked" provides one approach. In the first model they theorize, what they name "audience addressed," a writer's audience is understood as existing concretely in reality, so an awareness of that audience tends to dictate a writer's choices according to "a sense of the audience's powerfulness" (156). This model is often posed as a corrective to the problem of teachers being students' primary audiences. Presumably, the "audience addressed" model is often regarded as the most "authentic" for students. An example of this model would be students writing in a genre that is directed toward a particular audience. They might write editorials, cover letters for jobs, and so on.

In the second model that Ede and Lunsford describe, the writer's goal is not to address a particular audience that necessarily exists in reality, but instead to invent or invoke one. For Ede and Lunsford, this model acknowledges that readers exist in reality,

but it privileges the notion that because writers cannot always know or predict these realities, they are impelled to situate hypothetical or future readers in the particular role of audience, providing "cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (160). Joseph Petraglia argues that this common writing situation leads to "rhetorical-writing," or writing that "is produced for its own sake for the purpose of instructing students in rhetorical response" (21). Drawing on a theory of pseudotransactionality, Petraglia argues that writing instructors must help students distinguish between audiences "which we naturally construct for ourselves in order to engage in transactions, and those which we construct in order to meet the goal of *appearing* as if we are engaging in transactions" (28-9).

The notion of authenticity extends further than situation and audience. In *Authoring*, Haswell and Haswell describe multiple experiences of working authors, such as "drivenness" and "pleasure" (15). Haswell and Haswell question whether students experience these qualities while writing in our classes. They compare working authors' experiences with expectations of students, contrasting, for example, "Drivenness" with "Most students will not write assignments unless required to do so" (*Authoring* 22).

Humor/Jokes

When teachers encounter unintentionally humorous mistakes in student writing, the humorous passages are suddenly imagined to serve a different purpose. Instead of seeing student writing only in terms of assessment (whether the writing is correct or incorrect, effective or ineffective), the teacher imagines a different purpose. For this student-writing-turned-joke to realize its new purpose, it must be shared. Sharing and

circulating are central to the genre of the joke. In his book on humor, Freud commented

on human reactions to an irresistible joke:

> The urge to communicate the joke is indissolubly linked to the joke-work;
> indeed, this urge is so strong that it will quite often ignore weighty second
> thoughts as long as it is realized . . . [C]ommunicating [the joke] to
> another person confirms the enjoyment, but it is not imperative; if one
> happens upon what is comical, one can enjoy it alone. On the other hand
> one is compelled to pass on a joke . . . something is left that tries to
> complete this unknown process of joke-formation by passing the joke on.
> (138)

Professionalism may emerge as a "weighty second thought" – whether one should

publicly circulate something a student has written. But I would like to question the idea

that some student mistakes are so irresistibly humorous that resisting the urge to share

them is impossible, or that the human part of us that enjoys language humor is powerless

against the ethical principles that would protect student writing from this treatment. As I

discuss later, we must do better; but for the sake of this discussion, I want to entertain the

value that student writing gains by circulating in the public sphere. What follows is a set

of frameworks that can inform us on the value of student writing once it is published as a

joke.

Jokes as Collective Property

The "Monotony" example with which I began this chapter gives us a

demonstration of how jokes come to be publicly or collectively owned. Below is a small

selection of dates and locations in which versions of this excerpt have appeared.

Date	Location	Exact Quote
1926	International Catholic News Weekly	"Christians are only allowed one wife. This is called monotony."
1928	*Howlers* by Cecil Hunt	"In Christianity a man can only have one wife. This is called monotony."

1928	*Selection of Schoolboy Howlers* by Colin McIlwaine	"In Christianity a man can only have one wife. This is called monotony."
1931	*Boners* by Alexander Abingdon	"In Christianity a man can only have one wife. This is called Monotony."
1938	*Boners Schoolroom* (a play)	TEACHER: Dorothy, under Christianity a man can only have one wife. What is that called? DOROTHY: Monotony.
2006	*Anguished English* by Richard Lederer	"Having one wife is called monotony."
2013	*Shit My Students Write*	"Christians usually marry only one person for life. This is called monotony."

Earlier in this chapter, I explained that my focus is not so much on the authenticity of the excerpts, but on what publishing them says about the extent to which teachers value student writing. Here I would like to entertain the issue of authenticity because it is an instructive concept when considering value. As I discuss in chapter two, naive humor – that is, observing someone being unconsciously humorous – is essential to finding boners, howlers, and bloopers funny. I believe that recognizing this, the editors of these many collections assure readers of the authenticity of these mistakes. An authentic howler or boner is not created by an adult who was trying to imitate a young person's writing. The boner must have been written by a young person in school. The editor of *Howlers*, Cecil Hunt, claimed to have "many thousands of these howlers" in the "original school exercise books and examination papers" (Hunt, *Best Howlers* 6). Similarly, the Viking editors who published the *Boners* collections claim that none of the boners were "wholly or partly manufactured by professional humorists" (Abingdon, *Boners* vii). And more recently, Lederer assures readers that the bloopers in his book are "certified,

genuine, and unretouched," and "[n]one has been concocted by any professional humorist" (Lederer viii).

Given the near obsession with the authenticity of the passages in these collections, it is striking that one would be re-published in so many venues, but also using different words. These many versions would not stand the test of verification through hardcopies of exams and papers. One way this can be explained is that jokes are seen as collective property. This may be especially true in the instance of student writing published as humor. Like some other "jokes," the excerpts are anonymous, making citing an original source appear unnecessary (or in some cases simply difficult). There is currently a corollary in popular culture that can inform us on how these student bloopers have circulated the way they have. In 2015, a professional comic, Olga Lexell, contacted Twitter after noticing that jokes she had written and posted on Twitter had been reposted by multiple Twitter users as if the jokes were their own (that is, without citing or referring to Lexell at all) (D'Orazio). Users may not have done this if the genre were something other than a joke. Elizabeth Bolles, a professional comic as well as a lawyer, suggests that there is a commonplace understanding in our culture that "jokes as a class" are "unworthy of standard legal protections" (238). They are considered a less serious genre. But further, given the "urge" to share jokes, we might not imagine that there needs to be protections. Freud suggests that we can enjoy a joke on our own, for instance, while scrolling through our Twitter timeline and happening upon a funny joke. But the "joke-work" is not complete; "something is left" that compels us to repeat or reproduce the joke to an audience (Freud 138). What I am describing here, while relevant to jokes on Twitter or other social media, as well as in stand-up comedy, is also relevant to student bloopers. As

I suggest in chapter 2, laughing at and enjoying language humor is part of being human. Teachers who enjoyed student bloopers in the 1930s and who demonstrated empathy in their construction of students were stepping outside the role of a teacher/grader. Submitting to *Boners* or *Howlers* served no pedagogical function. This is also the case today: student bloopers are published and circulated because they are part of the genre of language humor.

Now in the context of social media, jokes are beginning to gain more protections, which suggests greater reflection on the part of social media users and the general public about intellectual property. When Lexell contacted Twitter about noticing her jokes being adopted by other users, she explained, "I make my living writing jokes . . . and as such, the jokes are my intellectual property," and so other Twitter users "did not have my permission to repost them without giving me credit" (D'Orazio). Twitter responded by deleting the plagiarized tweets.

It is useful at this point to question whether student texts fall under these same copyright protections. Students are certainly considered a more vulnerable "class" in that they hold less power in practically all the contexts in which they occupy the role of "student." Bolles explains that the work of lesser-known comics are more vulnerable because they do not have the same material access to these protections (240). In Lexell's case, she had Twitter on her side because the social media platform claims not to protect those who plagiarize, and because there is documentation of the "joke theft."

Joke theft and copyright are relevant to comics, whether they are delivering stand-up comedy or writing jokes on social media. The concepts provide a context to draw upon when considering how and why student bloopers have circulated the way they have,

particularly without attribution or citation. But here is where we should consider the question of intention. The student bloopers published in print and online are *unintentionally* humorous. Students are not making a living from these bloopers. They do not lay any claim to them. They are likely completely unaware that their writing has been appropriated to entertain a wide public audience. When we circulate their writing, or when someone submits a slightly-differently-worded version of the "Monotony" quote to *Shit My Students Write* after seeing or hearing it in another collection, is anyone actually being denied credit?

Put simply, we do not see students as the authors of jokes. These bloopers became humorous only when the teacher observed them. In this sense, the *teacher* is the author. Or, the venue that publishes the bloopers, such as Viking Press's *Boners*, is the author. This suggestion is supported by a "word of thanks" in the editor's forward in *Bigger and Better Boners*. The Viking Press editors thank "Cecil Hunt . . . who has permitted us to draw on his volumes of what the British call "Schoolboy Howlers" (Abingdon, *Bigger and Better* 10). Here Cecil Hunt is the author or owner. We also see authorship shift from students to teachers on *Shit My Students Write*. When submitting student writing to that website, one must check the box labeled "I accept the Terms of Submission," which is hyperlinked to a longer description of the terms. Here I quote the relevant parts:

> . . . you grant Tumblr and this blogger ("Subscriber") a non-exclusive, worldwide, royalty-free, sublicensable, transferable right and license to use, host, store, cache, reproduce, publish, display (publicly or otherwise), perform (publicly or otherwise), distribute, transmit, modify, adapt . . . and create derivative works of the Content . . .
>
> You represent and warrant that you have all necessary rights, licenses, and permissions to grant the above licenses and that the Content submitted by you, and the submission of such Content, *do not and will not violate any*

> *intellectual property rights* . . . of any third party. ("Terms," emphasis mine)

Teachers who submit to this website may check the box without reading the terms of submission; or if they read this page, they do not consider themselves violating any intellectual property rights. Otherwise, how is it possible that so many teachers (and other users) have not been conflicted enough *not* to submit? Put simply, they likely see themselves as the "owner" of the joke because, first, they are a teacher who has more power than the student, and second, they "discovered" the blooper. The student who produced the text is outside the standard protections that we would extend to joke-writers, who intentionally create jokes for others' amusement. Here it would help to draw on Freud, who is clear about the difference between intentional and unintentional humor.

Compared to intentional jokes, which are created by the joke-maker, the bloopers, boners, and howlers that I study in this project can be classified as "naive humor." Naive humor occurs when someone observes another person doing or saying something unconsciously humorous (Freud 176). It appears that intention is crucial to the student mistake: *being a mistake*, the humor is unintentional, which shifts the power that writers and rhetors normally have in their intentions to the teacher who observed the mistake. A teacher's observation, and subsequent publishing of the mistake, are an exercise of power. Likely many teachers do not consciously enjoy this activity *as* power. They likely enjoy being able to share something humorous with an audience. Their power comes from having access to the unintentional humor, which they would not have if they were not teachers.

Now we are in a position to ask: what actual harm is done? In this discussion of jokes, I have explored how student writing takes on different kinds of value when it

enters the public sphere as humor. It is clear from the publication of student writing and the success of collections like *Boners* and *Shit My Students Write* that its value shifts when teachers observe unintentional humor. The student originally produced the text to fulfill a class requirement. Being "wrong" or being a mistake, by definition the "blooper" does not meet the expectations of the assignment. But in being observed as a humorous, unconscious mistake, it takes on a new value, and that value accrues as it circulates. Is this not a good thing? After all, what other examples do we have of student writing produced in a classroom context becoming as popular as, say, the "Monotony" passage?

The fact that student writing has so little value until its errors can entertain others should cause us writing teachers and scholars to pause. I explain above that the value shifts; but more accurately, the value *diminishes*. If we understand student writing according to how it attempts to meet the expectations of a situation, then the excerpts that circulate online bear the evidence that it has failed, in the eyes of teachers, the public, and the wider culture, to meet those expectations. The value we assign to student writing, when it amuses or perplexes us, is lowered compared to the value we assign to texts that meet our expectations for college writing. The value is counter or opposite the value we expect it to have (and the value we expect students to strive for) when we assign it.

Further, the above distinction I mention between jokes and naive humor draws attention to the problem of intention. Teachers appropriate student writing by taking control of its publication without the students' permission or knowledge. Much research on rhetorical delivery assumes that the agency the rhetorician takes is positive or at the very least neutral. The reason scholars write about different techniques, strategies, and concepts related to rhetorical delivery is so that we teachers can have a strong theoretical

basis for what we teach. We use the theories in our own development as teachers, which leads to curriculum design, assignments, and activities. All of this would be for the purpose of advancing student learning and ultimately helping students develop rhetorical agency. I believe that these theories have limited application if we are using them to help explain how teachers share student writing without students' permission. Most of the time that "student writing in the public sphere" is mentioned in composition and rhetoric scholarship, it is a *positive*. Take for example the collection *Public Works: Student Writing as Public Text*. While this title might also describe student writing published online for people's amusement, it is actually a book that explores opportunities for students to "go public" with their writing. In this scenario, students have agency.

Conversely, students lose agency when teachers appropriate their writing. It may not be useful to describe this practice as "publishing student writing without permission," which suggests that teachers need only ask for permission to post students' humorous mistakes. It may be obvious that the exigence that compelled teachers to publish these mistakes may be something that teachers wish to keep private, as suggested by their own and their students' anonymity; so they would not ask for permission. Such a dilemma suggests that scholarship on student writing in the public sphere needs at least to acknowledge that there are many instances where teachers make the decision to publish students' writing without students' knowledge. Exploring this ethical dilemma would enrich the scholarship and garner attention on the implications of how we have so far defined students' agency.

Public "Venting," Complaint, and Teacher-Student Relationships

Representations of students and their writing (the combination of beliefs, assumptions, and values related to them and their work) make certain treatments of student work permissible. In particular, we can circulate representations of students as well as their actual writing because we lack respect for their subject positions. Further, appropriating student writing, or engaging in so-called "student-bashing," is permissible because it is seen as a necessary form of "venting" – the often public release of frustrations about teaching. In this section, I discuss the ways that teacher-student relationships come to bear on public venting and complaint.

Types of Public Venting

Venting to a public audience has taken on several forms, namely publicly complaining about students, their work, and/or their behavior or academic performance. These complaints that enable a teacher to "vent" adopt the conventions of different genres. First, there are humor genres involving sarcasm and irony, where complaint is inferred or beneath the surface of humorous and dramatized representations of the teaching life. On the literary and humor blog *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, one finds several pieces on teaching and students. In "Lines from the Princess Bride that Double as Comments on Freshman Composition Papers," a college instructor lists lines from the cult classic film that express frustration, annoyance, irritation, or emphatic disagreement, such as "Inconceivable!" and "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means" (Simmonson). In another piece, "Rubber Stamps I Wish I Had for Grading Freshman Composition Papers," a college instructor imagines rubber stamping "RUN-ON" and "WTF" (Perry). These *McSweeney's* examples raise an important point. Complaint does not have to seem explicitly like a complaint; instead, it

is a familiar undercurrent across teachers' humorous texts on teaching and the teaching life.

However, some humor genres that teachers adopt as a form of venting are less easily categorized as humor. An example of this is the "Dear Student" column by Stacey Patton in the *Chronicle of Higher Ed*. Patton provided several college instructors and professors with teaching scenarios involving some communication with a student. Each column consists of a description of the scenario followed by the instructors' hypothetical responses to the student. For example, in response to a student's request to change a grade, one professor replies,

> Dear Student Who Must Be Out of Their Mind:
>
> I hope all is well with you. Are you, by any chance, related to the student who failed my class and asked that I give them an A because they "liked the class so much?" I'm just asking because this question you've posed is just as silly as that one. (Patton)

Responses to hypothetical students in this column suggest what college instructors *want* to say to students but cannot because professionalism bars them from doing so. "Dear Student" actually echoes a much earlier academic group blog, *Rate Your Students* (RYS). In November 2005, "The Professor," as he called himself, wrote the inaugural post on RYS:

> [A]s long as Ratemyprofessor.com continues to operate mostly unmoderated and with no real intention of limiting anonymous attacks from anyone who'd like to log in, we'll operate here on our little site. We will rate our students here. And we will do it without compunction . . . We'll still be poor academics. But at least those callous and ignorant "customers" of ours will know what it's like." ("Welcome!")

Like the "Dear Student" column, *Rate Your Students* referred to students as anonymous characters – or more derogatorily as "snowflakes" to reflect the ever-increasing

expectation that teachers treat all students as individuals. And like "Dear Student," RYS enabled teachers to vent their teaching frustrations, often playing out in fantasy what they *wish* they could have done or said in frustrating encounters with students. This humor genre represents itself both as humor and as complaint.

Next, there are genres that enable complaint such as editorials or opinion pieces, where complaint is embedded within analysis and critique of the conditions in higher education. The *Chronicle of Higher Ed* regularly publishes such pieces. One college instructor writes that "over the past five years in particular, students have become quite sure what we faculty members should be doing for them, which is essentially giving them the answers to the questions that we pose" (Lambert). We notice in such editorials the themes of decline in student ability or performance, as well as authors making large (often unsubstantiated) claims based on their own recent teaching experiences. Max Clio, a pseudonym for a writer at the *Chronicle*, writes that he saw "the decline of Western civilization" while recently grading a stack of student papers; he admits to the difficulty of reconciling his expectations with reality, the latter being "the vast sea of student mediocrity" ("Grading"). Clio teaches at an open-access institution, where, he complains, "anyone who graduates from high school can take a whirl" (Clio). Such opinion pieces, constructed with critique and analysis, appear to provide legitimacy to teacher complaints about students. Ultimately in this analysis, I view these genres as affording the conventions that deliver persuasive complaint about students and student writing to public audiences.

On one hand, such public texts seem very problematic and unethical. David Gold asks, "does any other profession so openly mock the population it serves?" (90). On the

other hand, while I agree with Gold that there are serious ethical implications of public

venting, it is not a senseless or illogical practice. To better understand the ethical

implications of this very public practice, we must first understand what in teacher-student

relationships influences a teacher's choice to vent publicly. Instead of just determining

that it is wrong and unethical, I want, as I do in other chapters of this dissertation, to get

inside the logic of this phenomenon. In the following sections I explore how different

contexts of the teacher-student relationship inform teacher venting.

The Public Nature of Classroom Teaching

Educators in higher education have looked with some concern on the success of

the MTV-owned teacher-rating website, *Rate My Professors* (RMP). This website invites

students' evaluations of their college instructors in the form of a rating and optional

comments. Because RMP allows students to be anonymous as well as public, teachers'

fears have been born out that students will post unfiltered evaluations of them as teachers.

College faculty often view RMP as a place where students can "bash" their teachers, and

on matters that seem inconsequential to student learning, such as how unattractively a

professor dresses. It is safe to say, then, that RMP has caused teachers to feel resentment

toward students – perhaps toward *actual* students who have posted unflattering

comments, but also toward future students who might utilize RMP.

Some of the anxiety caused by RMP comes out of what Sarah Biggs Chaney calls

the public nature of pedagogy. The growing ubiquity of new media may be responsible

for more recent phenomena that Chaney points out, such as students recording teachers in

the classroom and posting the videos on Youtube (191). In reference to this public nature

of pedagogy, Kelly Ritter points out that faculty want intellectual control over their

pedagogical choices, without being beholden to everything that students want in the classroom ("E-Valuating" 264); yet it would seem that with what has come to be a threat that our pedagogies are or will be made public, teachers have less of a choice.

We can see this play out in one example. "Professor X," a pseudonym for an adjunct instructor who wrote a widely-circulated article for *The Atlantic* in 2008, expresses anxiety that his teaching practices will be made public. Professor X spends some time describing a research paper by one student, whom he calls Ms. L. Here is how he describes her paper:

> There was no real thesis. The paper often lapsed into incoherence. Sentences broke off in the middle of a line and resumed on the next one, with the first word inappropriately capitalized. There was some wavering between single- and double-spacing. She did quote articles, but cited only databases . . . The paper was also too short: a bad job, and such small portions. ("Basement")

Professor X admits to failing this student, but only after considering defying academic standards. It suddenly occurs to him, because he says he is "paranoid," that perhaps this student is actually a plant, a reporter who will write a damning exposé about him. He imagines such headlines as "*THIS* IS A *C*?" and "Illiterate Mess Garners 'Average' Grade." Considering this, Professor X is decided. "No," he concludes, "I would adhere to academic standards, and keep myself off the front page" ("Basement"). Ironically, Professor X's dilemma about passing a student *is* publicized in this editorial that was widely circulated in the *Atlantic*. The obvious difference is that Professor X is a pseudonym – he himself limited the extent to which he would be "exposed."

This public nature of pedagogy is a dynamic that is relevant to the issue of public venting, because it is this public imposition that makes many teachers use a public forum to "speak back" to the anonymous students who rate them – or to the conditions that have

facilitated the publicizing of their pedagogies to begin with, such as the ubiquity of new media or the sense that teachers must deliver students ("customers") a "product."

As Ritter notes, RMP can "enact underlying disagreements between students and faculty over where and how to evaluate the classroom experience" (261). The implication over the public display of this disagreement is that students rather than or in addition to faculty shape public rhetoric about *what matters* in a college education. We see this disagreement play out in the blog *Rate Your Students*. Burned by students' public criticisms, some faculty believe that publicly criticizing students would level the playing field. Contributors to RYS believe that students are often unfair and mean-spirited on RMP. One contributor writes that RMP is "where students with no idea what it means to be a professor get to lay siege to people's teaching, research, even their life choices" ("Quick One"). Here public venting demonstrates the difficulties of reconciling with students the divergent expectations about the nature of the classroom. This public nature is part of what causes professors anxiety. We would do well to understand – perhaps even empathize with – the need to publicly speak back to students who have caused us public humiliation. In the next section, I explore how other recent changes in higher education shape teacher-student relationships.

Privatization of the University: Satisfying the "Customers" and Students' Material Conditions

In her analysis of *Rate Your Students*, Chaney traces several themes that emerge in the posts of anonymous faculty. The dominant theme is what teachers see as the "consumerist infringement on the classroom" (193). As a result, the underlying consensus on RYS is that solidarity with students against the forces of the corporate university is

impossible. Teachers and students are in "combative" relationships (Chaney 195-6).

Since privatization strains professors by demanding more of and from their labor, and

privatization strains students materially as paying participants in academic culture, there

are fewer opportunities for teachers and students to realize that their labor and tuition are

appropriated for reasons beyond effective teaching and learning. Instead, teachers may

resent students because helping them is more demanding than teachers wanted or

expected, while students may resent teachers because assigned work and lack of support

from teachers can interfere with the many other demands on their lives, such as part- or

full-time jobs, caring for family, or social events and obligations.

However, students also struggle with the privatization of the university, because it

has meant increased difficulties for students in meeting the material demands of being in

college. The student behavior that confuses teachers, such as lateness, absences, and late

papers, may relate to students' ability to fulfill the material conditions of being a student.

One faculty member on *Rate Your Students* complains about the "stupid little shits" who

"rarely come to class, text during my lectures, and hand [their] work in late" ("Like

Locusts"). Reasons why students might not come to class very often and hand in their

work late is because they do not care about school, they are lazy, they were up too late

playing beer pong, or some other explanation that falls in line with the stereotype of self-

obsessed youth. Conversely, some students may not make it to class because they were

working third shift and accidentally overslept.

Take for instance the example of Delores in Marilyn Sternglass's *Time to Know*

Them. Although Delores's "20 hours of work each week might not qualify as 'full

time' . . . they did fill up every hour that Delores was not attending class or preparing for

her courses" (Sternglass 102-103). That Delores had to work so much to pay for her education and support herself suggests that the student imagined by the university and by college instructors does not rely on paid work as much as Delores did. Such students, Tony Scott argues, intrude on the "aesthetic" of higher education: "When students' lives enter the picture in often inconvenient ways – for instance, with a child care issue, a transportation issue, or a conflict between a work schedule and an out-of-class activity – it is an intrusion on what is imagined as the proper work and aesthetic of higher education" (Scott 157). Though college education is represented as necessary and attainable, it actually demands certain conditions that a large population of students do not have access to.

It is possible that students' difficulties with meeting the demands of their lives outside of school account for at least some of what teachers do not understand in student behavior and performance. Several composition scholars are in agreement that lack of access to material resources is one of the largest challenges for today's college student. In this representation, students are highly capable individuals whose challenges come down to a lack of material resources. This is reflected often. Pageen Reichert Powell's student Connor was a good writer, "but a weak student: tardiness, absences, and late assignments began to threaten his grades in all of his classes" (664). Bruce Horner's student, who had the promise of an academic career, denied that it was possible because she and her family could not pay her tuition bill (*Terms* 31). Marcia Dickson's student Lewis, who returned to school after becoming physically disabled, suffered medical problems in his second writing course and eventually had to withdraw after being in the hospital (185). Tom Fox's student Greg "wrote reasonably well, certainly well enough to pass the course, but

[he] began to miss classes" and eventually failed the course (14-15). I do not mean to argue that students' financial circumstances, and their access to the resources that make going to college easier for privileged students, fully or completely explain complaint. However, the privatization of the university has caused greater financial strain on students and their families (Soliday). This is not a conversation that teachers on RYS had; and often when these dominant modes of venting *do* cite material conditions, they are embedded in complaint. Max Clio resents that at an open-access university, anyone can "take a whirl" at a college education ("Grading"). We need to consider why these very real conditions in students' lives are not explored in public rhetoric about students. Possibly, these conditions complicate the genre of venting, which privileges the teachers' frustrations.

We have looked at how the scripts for teachers' relationships with students figure into venting. These conditions – the public nature of pedagogy and the privatization of the university – contextualize teacher frustration as well as the reasons that students may not meet their teachers' expectations. However, while the need to vent is understandable, I must return to what David Gold says in his analysis of the rhetoric of complaint: "there is an important difference between venting by the photocopy machine among our colleagues and taking our complaints public" (84). In both circumstances, the need to vent is relieved; but in one circumstance, the audience is significantly restricted to colleagues and does not include a public audience, which holds future and current teachers, future and current college students, administrators, parents and family members of students, and many others whose perspectives on teaching and learning in college may be shaped by teachers who vent online. However, to be clear, I think that venting one's

frustrations is a necessary part of teaching or of any other labor that makes heavy intellectual and emotional demands. However, we have a choice as teachers whether to publicize our complaints about students and their writing. In the conclusion, I reflect on ways that we as a field might better support teachers.

Research Ethics and Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing

What I have suggested so far is that venting or sharing student writing is a choice. It is one that we can avoid because it has so many negative implications. In this section, I explore some possible frameworks that would help us approach more ethical treatment of students and their writing. Several frameworks already exist related to ethical treatment of student writing in research. Below I discuss them briefly then explain how they may be put to use in considering the publication of student writing.

One of the main principles in research ethics is to obtain permission to use the unpublished work of others, including students. In 1994, former editor of *CCC* Joseph Harris insisted that we use student writing in our research only if we quote it anonymously and with students' permission (439). These principles later appeared in the 2003 "CCCC Guidelines on the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing," which was later expanded and revised into the "CCCC Guidelines on Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies." The guidelines advise composition researchers to "quote, paraphrase, or otherwise report unpublished written statements only with the author's written permission," and they do so while protecting the participant's identity with pseudonyms ("CCCC Guidelines").

However, we tend not to place the publication of student mistakes in this framework. Indeed, there is a history in our field of trying to get researchers on board

with what Harris and the Guidelines advise. Paul Anderson discusses "composition's long-standing tradition of quoting unpublished writing without permission," suggesting that our field does not universally see students as owners of their writing (79). Anderson cites several views: students always own their writing, therefore we must always ask permission to use it; when submitted for a grade, student writing may be used without permission; US copyright law protects researchers if they use an amount of unpublished work small enough to fall under "fair use"; and since the classroom is already a public space, all the written work completed for the class is categorized as "public" and "needs no special treatment that wouldn't be accorded a book or journal article" (80). Granted, Anderson cited these views prior to the development of the CCCC Guidelines, which by now may have influenced discipline-wide practices related to using student writing. However, these views are significant in this discussion because we still do not see any professional guidelines discourage the publication of student writing for the public's amusement. Such views – that students do not own their writing, or that the classroom is a public space – may account for how freely teachers circulate student writing for amusement.

On one hand, composition's scholarship on research ethics would appear unable to fully address the problems with teachers publishing student writing. On the other hand, this scholarship provides a useful mechanism for evaluating a contradiction. Haswell, Hourigan, and Sun point out that "a wide array of activities now falls within the purview of the [CCCC] Guidelines," for example, publishing research in online venues (87). However, publishing student writing without permission (e.g., excerpting a line from a student paper and posting it on Facebook for one's friends) is regarded as something

other than research and so does not fall under these ethical protections for research participants.

Publishing student writing for public amusement also does not fall under the protections afforded to the use of student writing for pedagogical purposes. Anderson poses several ethical dilemmas about student privacy and the use of student writing for pedagogical reasons: students sometimes "spontaneously" disclose personal information in conferences with their teachers; teachers design assignments that ask and expect students to discuss personal experience; students may even be required to discuss these matters in front of other students in the classroom. Anderson relates these dilemmas to research ethics in this way: "Research ethics can make no judgment concerning the propriety of these instructional strategies, many of which seem to me to be fully justified on *pedagogical grounds* (77, emphasis mine). Later, Anderson explains that research ethics do not apply to the instances when a teacher may keep a student paper for the "purely pedagogical purpose of showing future students what a good response to a particular assignment looks like" (81). Anderson grants that *research* ethics demand a level of attention to issues of privacy and confidentiality that we do not give equally to pedagogical practices. Our field's theory of ethics in relation to using student writing appears to acknowledge only two purposes for which student writing is used: for research purposes and for pedagogical purposes. Publishing student writing for public amusement is neither research nor pedagogy.

The overwhelming amount of student writing that I gathered online and in print for this study suggests that there is an important context that has escaped our attention. Contrary to what might be implied by my analysis of the CCCC Guidelines, I do not

believe that our professional organizations should state clearly in our guidelines that we are not to publish student writing for amusement. As I discuss in the introduction chapter, such a move, while making a clear statement about how our field ought to regard that practice, draws attention to an unflattering aspect of teacher life. As Richard Haswell comments in *Comp Tales*, the practice of circulating students' humorous mistakes "casts a disturbing light on our profession, which prides itself as student centered" (72). Given how nebulous our professional status is already in the eyes of university administration and the wider public, we would be wise not to publicize this practice. In the conclusion chapter, I discuss other ways that improvements on this issue might be made. But for now, we might view these standards as if they apply to *all* uses of student writing. In this sense, we would merely be applying values that are already accepted to similar circumstances.

Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing: Approaching Strangers

There are other promising approaches in the field to adopting more ethical classroom practices toward students and their writing. In *Hospitality and Authoring*, Richard Haswell and Janet Haswell put forward hospitality as a guiding concept for the composition classroom. Hospitality invokes many connotations, such as hospitality in the service sector, where hotels adopt many hospitable practices toward serving customers; and vague notions of politeness and caring. Hospitality for Haswell and Haswell involves teachers (or hosts) welcoming students (or guests) into the classroom with openness and generosity. They further define *ethical or just* hospitality, which is enacted in three ways: 1) intellectual hospitality, which regards "true inquiry" as an outcome of "mutual exchanges," "mutual respect," and "reciprocity" with students (Haswell and Haswell 53);

2) transformative hospitality, or teachers' willingness to "become like the stranger" and be changed as a result of interaction with students (54); and ubuntu hospitality, which Haswell and Haswell cite from African traditions of hospitality. It is a "social frame enabling strangers to meet and act" toward togetherness and mutuality (Haswell and Haswell 55). Together, these three approaches can enact hospitality in the classroom.

Haswell and Haswell's theory of hospitality provides ways to forward our understanding of the ethical treatment of students and their writing. In attending to the composition class in its entirety, hospitality would affect all classroom practices. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to focus on one major aspect of the teacher's or "host's" job, which is to respond to student writing. Response is not just how many comments we leave in the margins of students' papers, or how we balance praise and constructive criticism. It is also the major way that we build relationships with students. In this sense, a theory of hospitality would have major implications for how we treat student writing in our response practices.

Hospitality suggests that we would avoid a remedial model for reading and assessing student writing, which is to read with an eye for error (Knoblauch and Brannon; Huot; Sommers; Ziv). Though a deeply-ingrained impulse, the remedial model is incompatible with hospitality because it assumes that teachers are the "controlling source of knowledge" rather than hosts who collaborate with their guests (Haswell and Haswell 52). Further, the notion that our job is to identify and correct errors causes teachers to approach student writing with a disposition that closes down the possibility of regarding the text with respect. Lad Tobin suggests that "the student essay" is the only genre that writing and English instructors "would or could not treat as a *text*" (23). We assume, with

a kind of arrogance, according to Tobin, that we can fully understand a student essay and "quickly identify [its] meaning, deficits, and needs" (23). If we are more hospitable, we would assume that there is something more to learn from student texts. In this sense, the teacher is the learner, or in Haswell and Haswell's terms, the teacher "become[s] like the stranger," open to being changed by interactions with others (54).

Becoming like a stranger matters in this discussion of the treatment of student writing. If we consider how student writing appears in the public sphere – as an anonymous excerpt – we understand that we have shared student writing with an audience of strangers. Being teachers, the ones assumed to be an authority on students and their writing, we model for everyone how to regard and respond to student writing. By publishing it for others' amusement, we not only demonstrate to others how to treat student writing. We also play into students' fear of exposure. In wanting to encourage students to write, Andrea Stover says that the desire to write "requires a delicate balance between privacy and exposure," and that writers need to "feel private enough to feel safe, yet public enough to be heard" (1). By exposing students not only without their permission but also without a pedagogical purpose, we confirm students' fears that audiences will react ungenerously to their work, thus discouraging rather than encouraging students to write.

It is useful to consider Haswell and Haswell's theory of hospitality in terms of publishing student mistakes. Such a theory highlights the stakes that are involved in publicly representing students through their writing and without their permission. We risk negatively shaping public discourse about students and their work such that other teachers and the wider public may respond even more uncharitably to students.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed some frameworks through which to understand the practice of publishing student writing: valuing student writing (the ways that we do not value student writing, the reasons why, and the treatment we believe is permissible toward students and their work as a result); the construction and circulation of humor, especially jokes, which we must analyze also in the context of venting and student-bashing; how the institutional and cultural forces that shape teacher-student relationships figure into venting and sharing student writing; and some alternatives to this practice that are more in keeping with composition's ethical principles related to using student writing in our research. Together, these frameworks provide a counter to the received wisdom that sharing student writing with public audiences is an innocuous practice (and one that may even be necessary in order to vent the frustrations of teaching). The troubling ways in which many teachers read, interpret, and use student writing point to a long history of appropriation.

This chapter also addresses the limitations of existing guidelines related to ethical uses of student writing. It would seem that, given the precarious position of composition in the public's imagination, we would not want to publicly reframe what appears to be a harmless practice as something actually quite harmful. Ethical dispositions toward students and their writing may be best promoted and learned in teaching seminars, workshops, and in the mentorship that our field values strongly. As I have tried to show in this dissertation, attitudes toward student writing manifest in our every practice, so there are many opportunities to prompt reflection on how the ways we value students affect our treatment of them and their writing.

There are theoretical and pedagogical approaches that space and time in this chapter did not permit. In future research, I might expand the analysis of the "Monotony" excerpt. The locations in which it has been published, when, and to what effect, are all important features that build a rhetorical context around this excerpt. And what might we infer about its long-term popularity given what it *says*? The aphoristic quality of the excerpt, and the truths it seems to reveal about marriage and monogamy, are rich with possibility for more discussion.

Further, we would benefit from an even fuller analysis of public rhetoric about student writing. While my main priority is to communicate with other teachers and scholars about our treatment of student writing, I also acknowledge that there is a public sphere that is rampant with complaint about students and criticisms of teachers and the educational system. This rhetoric needs to be interrogated because teachers, before and after they occupy the role of teacher, are in that public sphere; but just as important, students witness this rhetoric, and they recognize, or perhaps at some point discover, that teachers share the writing they find most entertaining or humorous, as well as the writing that they believe should be mocked publicly. Our practices should change for these students.

CHAPTER IV

INCONGRUITY ON *SHIT MY STUDENTS WRITE*: CONSIDERING

UNINTENTIONAL HUMOR IN STUDENT WRITING

Many of the statements in this paper are also noted as coming from a person only identified as "Ibid" in the footnotes. I am not skeptical of Ibid's view, but I would like to find his/her article and read it for myself.

-Anonymous student on *Shit My Students Write*

It is difficult to explain how this passage could be written unless the writer were a fairly new member of the university, not having seen, read, or been taught the convention of using "Ibid." My assumption is supported by scholarship that theorizes students' entrance into the university. What emerges as the most salient concern in this research is students' difficulty meeting the expectations of an academic "discourse community." Contrary to claims across higher institutions of learning and the wider public, students are not "unteachable," but rather are inexperienced in the ways of a specialized community. Like all who are new to a discourse community, students simply need to be taught its ways (Shaughnessy; Bartholomae; Bizzell; Elbow; Gee). Though the notion of discourse communities has been challenged, the concept is meaningful for identifying the tensions, frustrations, and challenges that students experience when they come to college. If we are to believe that institutions act on us, then nearly all students experience great change, sometimes the loss of connections to family and feelings of confusion and frustration (Rodriguez; Rose; Villanueva; Sternglass). Many of these challenges are brought on by incongruities in the students' and teachers' knowledge. The student quoted above

demonstrates that he or she does not share the teacher's knowledge. Why a student wrote something like this is the subject of this chapter.

In the most recent issue of *CCC*, Zachary C. Beare and Marcus Meade investigate hyperbole as a neglected feature of student writing. Drawing on the tradition in our field of conducting generous re-readings of student writing, Beare and Meade recommend viewing student "mistakes" as intentional rhetorical moves (65). Their article suggests a renewed interest in engaging in close, generous readings of student writing that help us re-think current perspectives on writing and learning. So, too, can students' unintentionally humorous writing offer us a reconsideration of reading generously. The "Ibid" example above, excerpted from a student's paper and published on the website *Shit My Students Write* (SMSW) to entertain those who are in on the joke, can provide us with important material for theorizing how students learn the writing and discourse of academia. Even very short excerpts of student writing provide us with fascinating material for theorizing academic writing. Just as important, they help us theorize *how students learn* academic writing, and consequently, how best to teach them. The popularity of SMSW, combined with the fact that the site reflects a reality of how teachers read student writing, should cause us to re-think how we make sense of students' writing.

"Student blooper" collections, though under-researched, are a particularly revealing genre. The genre of the joke points out incongruities that teachers, but usually not students, are aware of. Because SMSW invites teachers to submit student writing from the classes they teach, the incongruities are in academic discourse conventions. Following from the incongruity theory of humor, the "punch line" of the joke represents

the difference between what teachers know and expect from students, and what students actually write. In a recent discussion of incongruity theory, Jerry Farber explains that the concept is premised on the juxtaposition of two incongruous elements: A (the social norm) and B (that which counters or defies the norm) (69). Observing the juxtaposition of A and B produces the effect of incongruity, which we experience as startling and humorous. In the context of SMSW, "A," what is typically the social norm, is specifically the *academic* norm, or the teacher's expectations for academic writing. "B," the counter to the norm, is unintentional humor in student writing. In this chapter, I analyze incongruities on *Shit My Students Write* with attention to evidence that despite being incongruous with teachers' expectations, students sincerely attempt academic discourse moves. First, I describe the patterns in the writing on this website by focusing especially on how the website frames student writing. An alternative framework helps us re-read these excerpts pedagogically. Finally, I extrapolate from these readings about some possible explanations for these patterns more generally. These patterns are ones we commonly see in student writing; so, I will conclude by discussing how these excerpts might be repurposed in the education of writing teachers.

This chapter builds from other studies that produce taxonomies of features in student writing. Error studies in particular are relevant, such as Connors and Lunsford's and Lunsford and Lunsford's. Both studies document frequency of errors in student writing, and both rely on a taxonomy of features constructed by the researchers: "wrong word," "punctuation," and so on (Connors and Lunsford; Lunsford and Lunsford). Unlike Connors and Lunsford's and Lunsford and Lunsford's studies, this study does not privilege the *frequency* of patterns in student writing. *Shit My Students Write* is

moderated by one person who makes editorial decisions about what appears on the website; it is not a comprehensive data set that allows me to draw conclusions from the fact that, say, odd comparisons are the most frequent kind of incongruity published on the website. While I do not believe that conclusions can be drawn from which kinds of incongruities appear on SMSW most frequently, we can draw some conclusions from the regularity with which some passages appear and from recognizing the moves in our own students' writing. My focus, however, is on what we can learn from students' academic writing that teachers find so amusing that they publish it online.

How SMSW Frames Student Writing

SMSW suggests a particular disposition toward students and their writing. At times, the website promotes unnecessarily critical readings of students and their writing. Because student work cannot be fully divorced from the contexts in which it was produced, and because this website potentially affects teachers' practices, we are right to evaluate the website for its pedagogical merit. After all, SMSW is successful because it relies on teachers to share their students' writing – which, historically, many teachers have been eager to do. Teachers, in their capacities *as* teachers to the students whose work shows up on this website, have access to student writing because they assign it in their classes. *Shit My Students Write* works almost like an exposé of sorts, providing a voyeuristic look into the teacher's stack of student papers.

Here we might pause to consider an inevitable question about studying anonymous writing on the internet, one that should certainly arise when reading the student writing on *Shit My Students Write*. What if students did not actually write these passages? The possibility raises questions about the validity of this website as an

indication of how students write. Regardless of whether these excerpts were initially written exactly as they are represented on the website, a few important points highlight the value in interpreting writing from this website. First, SMSW performs "students" and "student writing," and performs them for a wide online audience. We should take interest in these representations of students and their writing, as we do elsewhere. In addition, if writing teachers were to take a quick glance over the website, they would no doubt immediately recognize the many different missteps that we commonly see in student writing. The representation of student writing, if not authentic, is nevertheless accurate. Finally, there is some historical precedence for trusting that students wrote these passages. Earlier versions of this genre, such as the *Howlers* and *Boners* series in the 1930s, indicate that their editors were nearly obsessed with the issue of authenticity. Cecil Hunt, editor of the *Howlers* series, was so concerned with readers doubting the authenticity of the passages that he insisted that he had "many thousands of these howlers" in the "original school exercise books and examination papers" (6). In keeping with the student blooper genre, the description of *Shit My Students Write* also suggests that the website offers something "authentic" and "real" that we would not have access to if it were not for teachers: "Evidence of the true cost of educational funding cuts: A Compendium of Reports from the Field" ("About"). In light of the tradition of the "student blooper" genre, I will suspend disbelief and assume, for the sake of the following re-reading, that the passages were written by students, or, if not by students, then by those who convincingly perform "student writing."

Reading Pedagogically

As teachers, we bring various habits of mind to the work of reading student writing. In this section, the habit of mind I put forward is informed by a few major assumptions: that a pedagogical purpose ought to inform the work of reading student writing, which means adopting the sense that student writing is open for interpretation; that we must believe that student writing *makes sense*, and that it is our job as teachers to seek out that evidence; and that there are also multiple potential explanations for choices writers make in their writing. Taken together, these two latter assumptions enact reading student writing as a pedagogical practice. An audience of *CCC* readers would quickly recognize the difference between reading pedagogically as I describe it here and the reading practices we see modeled on SMSW. As we know, reading student writing is intimately connected to assessment in that, at least historically, teachers read student writing to evaluate and correct it (Knoblauch and Brannon; Huot; Sommers; Ziv). My framework draws on Brian Huot's notion of "reading like a teacher," which involves "reading to teach" (113). However self-evident the concept may be, it actually suggests practices that are outside the norm of what, for instance, nearly all beginning teachers may do when they encounter a student text. Reading student writing, according to much public and institutional rhetoric, is the practice of identifying faults. Huot argues for deferring evaluation and looking critically at the processes we use to make sense of student writing. He argues that "the type of reading given by an individual reader actually controls what that reader can observe within a text" (115). Readers need to pay attention to the different lenses or frameworks that they bring to student writing because some readings become possible while others become impossible. We might instead adopt a sense of being open to generating multiple interpretations of student writing. Harris

observes that student writing in our scholarship is so often used to answer questions or explain phenomena rather than to raise questions or to be itself a phenomenon. Its meaning, in other words, is easily interpreted and thereby settled upon the teacher's reading (673).

One approach is to adopt a habit of mind where we assume before reading student writing that it *makes sense*, and that looking for evidence is part of reading pedagogically. Kevin Porter, drawing on philosopher Donald Davidson's principle of charity in philosophy, argues that we should read student writing with the assumption that the student who wrote it is rational. Porter contrasts a pedagogy of charity with a pedagogy of severity, which is characterized by looking for "faults and problems" in student writing (578). A pedagogy of severity also assumes that students are "error-prone, incoherent, and irrational" (587). A teacher reading charitably would read student writing while assuming that students "have reasons for their actions . . . [and] that what they believe and say usually represents accurately the state of affairs of the material world, and that knowledge or perception of this material world is shared by all of us" (585-6). Without these assumptions, Porter argues, we are unable to truly communicate. This kind of reading also realizes what Shaughnessy argued for – recognizing the logic of students' errors (13). In the following section, I re-read some of the most common types of incongruities on *Shit My Students Write*.

Incongruities as Sincere Attempts to Communicate

Redundancy: Attempts to Develop and Explain

Passages that express redundancy are a favorite on SMSW. These passages appear to be repetitive in their construction or language. They repeat words and ideas in a short span, producing the effect of being conceptually stalled or stuck:

> We fail because there is failure and due to it's existance we can fail. ("We Have Nothing to Fail but Fail Itself")

As we see, repetition of the word "fail" does not benefit the writer. The writer also repeats the concept of failure's existence: the word "and" joins the two main ideas, "we fail because there is failure" and "due to its existance we can fail," suggesting that the second idea offers an addition to the first. Instead, it repeats it. I do not contest that the statement is confusing, even humorous in how it repeats itself. As teachers, however, we are not so much concerned with making sure students effectively render every sentence as we are with theorizing why and how a student wrote a statement that we read as ineffective. We theorize and take interest in incongruities. As such, there are many factors in play. We can consider the writer's process – how such a passage might represent the writer's attempt to figure out a difficult concept. Based on this passage, we might say that this writer is trying to make a meaningful point about the existence of failure – perhaps people's awareness of the possibility of failure – playing a role in whether people fail.

Such passages also flag teachers' knowledge that students may attempt to lengthen their papers by repeating themselves. Since this might be the case, it would help us when reading the "failure" excerpt to wonder why students go to such lengths to write longer papers. In this case, redundant words, phrases, or sentences could suggest the particular challenge the writer could be having. It's not that the writer did not notice the redundancy (and therefore we help her/him by merely writing "redundant" in the margins); the writer could be confused about what move to make next.

What's more, the writer of this passage could be responding to the expectation that students must *explain* more in their writing. Students very well might have been receiving this kind of direction, considering that it also appears in major writing textbooks. In *The Everyday Writer*, Andrea Lunsford discusses the strategy of repeating key words or phrases to emphasize a point. The paragraphing strategy, which she calls "reiterating," is where a writer makes a point early on then restates it throughout the paragraph, "hammering home the point" (77). It is possible that students' attempts at one such rhetorically effective move are misunderstood as redundancy.

As evidence of some knowledge that writers must explain more in their writing, the word "because" often appears in these redundant excerpts, suggesting that students are attempting to explain the statements they make:

> The reason why the two views are so different is because they approached the view of languages differently due to the different views they had. ("Differences")

Student writing on SMSW, like this passage, frequently draws attention to the fact that passages are decontextualized, excerpted from the rest of a text. Why would a writer begin a sentence with "the reason why…" unless s/he were *asked* or felt expected to give a reason for something? The structure of this passage suggests that the student is attempting to provide an explanation. Perhaps that explanation is not so clear to the writer yet. Indeed, we often ask students to explain themselves more because it is in explanations that we assess comprehension.

Providing reasons and explanations is also a key part of institutional definitions of "critical thinking." The popular framework for critical thinking developed by Richard Paul and Linda Elder has been used in universities to promote universal intellectual

concepts associated with critical thinking. Part of being a "well-cultivated critical thinker," according to this framework, is to arrive at "well-reasoned conclusions and solutions" (Paul and Elder). Though the Paul-Elder framework describes the qualities of individuals whose thinking has been, in their words, already "systematically cultivated," there is much to be said for students' in-process critical thinking, which may not appear "systematically cultivated" (4).

There is evidence in the students' passage above that s/he has made an attempt at moves associated with critical thinking, according to the Paul and Elder framework. For example, we can choose to read the passage through the lens of what the student seems to say, where "views" refers to the same concept in both its uses. What if it does not? Then the writer is showing knowledge of the relationship between how our perspectives ("views") on different issues are shaped by our background knowledge and experience ("the different views they had"). The writer is attempting to account for divergent views on language between different groups of people (Paul and Elder 5). Reading this way opens the passage to interpretation and shows how this student is expressing one of the major tenets of critical thinking in humanities education.

In addition to seeing what the student *is* doing, reading this way enables us to better help the student articulate her/himself. If this passage is problematic because the repetition of the word "views" causes confusion, then we could advise the student to think of the different uses of the word in this sentence, and to ask whether s/he intended different meanings for that word, and so whether other words would be more effective, such as "perspective" or "prior experience."

Contradictions: Attempts at Nuance and Complexity

Contradictions are humorous because they present a kind of implausibility. Something cannot be one thing and its supposed opposite. However, work in the humanities has actually embraced contradiction as one inevitable outcome of complex thinking. There is evidence of this certainly in the Paul and Elder framework, but we can also look to frameworks developed by the field's national organizations. The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing "describes the rhetorical and twenty-first-century skills as well as habits of mind and experiences that are critical for college success" (1). Critical thinking is one of five habits of mind deemed essential for success in college. Among other skills, "explor[ing] multiple ways of understanding" adheres to the goal of working beyond "obvious or surface-level interpretations" ("Framework" 7). A student embracing multiple ways of understanding would resist either/or paradigms and might often articulate what sounds like contradictions. Despite the embrace of contradiction in higher education, students' expressions of contradictions in their writing have been published frequently on SMSW.

I find these findings, although factual, to be untrue. ("Facts")

What makes this excerpt humorous might partly be "I find these findings." We must grant that the repetition does not help the writer of this passage. The student might have written "I find" because it has an authoritative, academic ring to it. The central humor in this passage lies in the contradiction. The student claims that these findings are simultaneously factual and untrue. The use of these words begs the question of whether something being factual and untrue is actually a contradiction – that is, if they are actually opposites. That the findings are "untrue," according to the student, might suggest that the findings do not represent other verifiable findings, or what the student knows to

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be true based on experience. Also, we can look at the writer's use of the word "although," which explicitly acknowledges a contradiction – as if to say *despite* being factual, the findings are untrue. The student signals that s/he knows s/he is presenting what sounds like a contradiction. This authority was not, however, granted to the writer. Conversely, the authority was overlooked in favor of a surface-level interpretation that is more humorous.

Other contradictory statements on SMSW also present two seemingly opposing ideas as being actually the same. But there is something more going on that points to expectations teachers have for students to pick a line of reasoning and stick with it. Take, for example, this passage:

> I strongly agree and disagree with that statement to some extent.
> ("Both/And")

The writer of this passage expresses a strong stance but joins it with what is perceived as hedging: "to some extent." What is also humorous is the fact that someone could strongly agree and disagree at the same time. It is funny in a context in which students are expected to advance a single line of argument. Taking issue with this writer's statement suggests that academic authority comes from the assertiveness of a clear, unwavering position. Indeed, some writing textbooks advise students to develop thesis statements early in the writing process and to proceed with them, even if they are tentative and will be changed later. Lunsford advises students to "establish a tentative working thesis early on in your writing process" (58). The *Norton Field Guide to Writing* praises a student text where the writer "clearly states her position at the beginning of her text" (124). Later, in advice on beginning one's essay, the *Norton* textbook explains that "[s]ometimes the best beginning is a clear thesis stating your position" (301). Similar emphases on developing

clear arguments can be found in assignments across the curriculum (see Dan Melzer 60).

It is possible that some of the contradictory positions that appear on SMSW are students'

early, "tentative" theses. Alternatively, these contradictory positions might have appeared

in what teachers expected to be polished writing.

Implausible Arguments: Attempts to Commit to a Line of Reasoning

At the same time that we want students to stick to a line of reasoning and to be

clear in their stance, we are also humored by arguments students make when they *do*

commit so strongly, especially when they commit to implausible or oversimplified

arguments. Perhaps the requirement to advance a clear line of argument explains such a

passage:

> One solution for teen pregnancy is to make teenage sex illegal and put
> sexual teens in jail. ("Jail Bait")

A teacher could easily point out the lack of plausibility in such an argument. One might

ask how to regulate private sexual activity, how to pass the laws, and so on. Perhaps this

student really is attempting to propose a solution to teen pregnancy. One way to do that

would be to stop the means through which teens become pregnant. It is a nearly

understandable solution, even if implausible. Making teenage sex illegal would be

considered an oversimplified solution to a complex problem.

In this instance, the student might have been responding to an assignment

requirement to propose solutions to problems they have explored through research. Such

a requirement is common in assignments across the curriculum, as Dan Melzer's study on

assignments shows (24, 48, 91-93). We should note that such assignments tend to follow

a problem-then-solution paradigm, an assignment design that structures the order in

which students deal with each part. If the solution is meant to be addressed last, then this may account for solutions that appear rushed or oversimplified.

Stating the Obvious: Attempts to Begin

Some passages suggest that students are just beginning to write their text and are attempting the conventional moves for academic writing:

> Animals have been around for decades. ("Decades")
> Gender is a fun fact that I have noticed. ("Fun Fact")
> Hamlet is the story of a man named Hamlet. ("Eponymous")

These examples, recognizable for their similarity to "since the beginning of time" openings to some student papers, suggest that students were just getting started, trying to get a footing in their own text. As ineffective as these statements are, they might actually represent students' knowledge of the expectation to begin essays broadly in order to contextualize their argument. The *Norton Field Guide to Writing* advises students at the beginning of their essays to "establish context" (299), explain "the larger context of your topic" (301), and to provide "background information" (302). This is not to say that the passages above would read as effective openings. However, if this advice is reflected in textbooks and taken for granted as part of academic writing, then we can look closely at these passages and see that these are attempts at beginnings rather than hopelessly general and obvious statements.

Stating the Obvious: Attempts to Reflect

Other statements or insights may be new to a student but not to their instructor.

> And surprisingly, psychology is not just information that is made up. ("Shocking")
> Ironically enough, I think racism has a lot to do with white people. ("Isn't It Ironic")

These passages, while perhaps obvious to instructors, suggest that the writers are experiencing a changed perspective. The writer of the first passage might have been skeptical of psychology as a field of study, but became convinced by the studies s/he has read in the class.

The writer of the second passage, perhaps a white student, might have had her/his assumptions challenged by the content of the class. Possibly, the student developed a new perspective that includes the role of white privilege in society; but it appears that the student's new perspective falls below this teacher's expectations for reflection. In his discussion of moves in students' personal essays, Thomas Newkirk makes the argument that teachers have tacit criteria, particularly for what he calls "the turn": a writer shifts from explaining an experience to reflecting back on it in order to arrive at "a measure of self-understanding and moral growth" (12-13). Newkirk revisits a student essay previously published in Connors's "Teaching and Learning as a Man," noting how the subjectivity displayed in the essay about the student shamelessly shooting a horse was unacceptable to the teacher (12). The genre of the personal essay – and indeed any reflective genre, such as a "reflection piece" about a reading or a class – displays a trajectory that involves a more learned, experienced self looking back on a less experienced, perhaps even foolish self (Newkirk 13). In other words, growth, particularly moral growth, is expected in this genre.

The student above who wrote "Ironically enough, I think racism has a lot to do with white people" might have been asked, perhaps in a sociology or women's and gender studies course, to reflect on a reading, an event, or a class discussion. It would seem that the student has reached a new understanding, signaled by her/his use of the

words "ironically enough." But this insight, assuming it was sincerely experienced and rendered, was below the teacher's expectation, such that it was laughable – hence its publication on SMSW. We should question this response to students' reflective writing, where we may tacitly expect them to make an appropriate "turn," but one where the growth we want them to write about is something we already have in mind as teachers of the class and experts in the subject area. In this case, an ideal reflection would read something like this: "As a result of this class, I have understood much better the role that white people, like myself, need to play in undoing systems of oppression. That begins with examining my own privilege." Certainly every teacher who assigns reflective writing on race wants to receive a response such as that.

We can also entertain the possibility that the student is "faking" this personal growth. Then we could look at his/her statement as a representation of that student's knowledge of this special "turn" in reflective writing. Except, his/her approximation of it is not as pivotal as the teacher might have expected.

Unusual Analogies: Attempts to Be an "Insider" with the Audience

I end with a discussion of students' analogies because they are different in one particular quality from passages that fall under other categories. Analogies on SMSW seem to reflect teachers' *appreciation* of the students' writing. More than other incongruities, analogies suggest evidence of students' cleverness with and control over discourse:

> Much like using a quote, paying for sex is not only a convenience but it's a way of showing that you couldn't have said/done it better yourself. ("Couldn't Have Said It Better Myself")

Linda Bergmann, in her work on students' humor writing, says that joking can be "a means of determining or marking who is inside and who is outside a community" (142). Someone acclimated to a community comes to learn the conventions of speaking and writing in that community, which could involve using as well as poking fun at those conventions. The passage above that compares using a quote to paying for sex is a good example of this. We can note the students' version of the "not only, but also" construction, a way for the writer to illustrate that using a quote has more than one purpose: it is convenient and perhaps practical for the writer at the same time that it acknowledges deference to a more authoritative source of knowledge. Certainly, teachers of composition might want to complicate this student's claim a bit further and say that quoting others is a move that happens within the larger "conversation" that is carried on in scholarship; however, the publication of this excerpt may show an appreciation for the students' cleverness.

Bergmann goes on to say that some students' humor writing suggests a rejection of the hierarchy inherent in classrooms between teachers and students (143). It can be off-putting at first if a student treats a serious subject with a humorous response, especially if that subject is the instructor's expertise. Take, for example, this passage:

> The Christian cross truly is the McDonalds of religion. ("Christ the Burger King")

We cannot know how this student went on to explain this claim, or whether s/he contextualized it in a way that rendered it humorless. But such a statement might offend some readers. It may be this fact that led the instructor to submit it to SMSW. The instructor may have recognized the social politeness boundary that the student traversed and appreciated the cleverness with which he or she did it. After all, the comparison

operates on a few levels. The terseness and abruptness of the passage allows a reader first to register that there is a likeness being drawn between a major religion and McDonalds – a comparison whose impoliteness is, for some, irresistibly humorous. On another level, the student may be suggesting that as a symbol, the cross is like the "golden arches" that represents McDonalds. Both are recognizable and carry symbolic weight in culture. This simply observational comparison between two powerful symbols allows for another layer of meaning: that Christianity, among other religions, is like a powerful, criticized, and even despised corporation. That these layers – and likely others I have not accounted for – are all bundled within one short, declarative statement is what makes the writing so humorous.

We can look at these examples as subversive because students may control, and make humorous, the moves of academic discourse in order to avoid becoming fully appropriated by it, in Bartholomae's words (273). These excerpts might show students resisting subject matter, time constraints, even teachers themselves. Teachers may at least see passages like this in student writing as deliberately, consciously humorous. The fact that this sort of humor writing is published on SMSW suggests that the website does not deal *only* in the sorts of unethical bashing that David Gold calls the "rhetoric of complaint." There is no other profession, contends Gold, that "so openly mocks the population it serves" (Gold 90). When teachers post student writing that they appreciate as clever, they are not so much "openly mocking" students. Rather, SMSW might be promoting, in addition to problematic readings, other, more positive readings.

In particular, publishing students' humor writing on SMSW is much like circulating an irresistible joke. Freud commented on sharing jokes in *Humor and its Relation to the Unconscious*:

> "The urge to communicate the joke is indissolubly linked to the joke-work; indeed, this urge is so strong that it will quite often ignore weighty second thoughts as long as it is realized…[C]ommunicating [the joke] to another person confirms the enjoyment, but it is not imperative; if one happens upon what is comical, one can enjoy it alone. On the other hand one is compelled to pass on a joke . . . something is left that tries to complete this unknown process of joke-formation by passing the joke on." (138)

Ethical concerns about professionalism may be part of those "weighty second thoughts" that teachers ignore when they post student writing on the internet. By ignoring these concerns, and publishing student writing outside the context of the classroom, teachers channel students' "joke-work" and give in to the compulsion to share.

Conclusion: *Shit My Students Write* and Teacher Education

The first part of this chapter dealt with the assumptions behind SMSW and ways we might re-read amusing student writing. In closing, I suggest that unintentionally humorous excerpts of student writing would be uniquely suited to helping new teachers see common moves in student writing. The humorous part of the passages represent incongruities between what students wrote and what teachers expected and wanted students to write. So, what might unintentional humor tell us about teachers as readers? Our amusement at student writing can derive from our own difficulty as teachers to reconcile actual student writing with our expectations. Using these passages in the education of new writing teachers might help them practice exhausting explanations – or at least come up with new explanations – to account for what we see in student writing. Thus we might have more informed, more helpful responses to students.

Further, this activity would give us the opportunity to put into action what Shaughnessy argued for: we need to understand not only "what is missing or awry but of why this is so" (6). However, we might adapt Shaughnessy's sentiment so that we can apply it to choices students make in their writing that do not fall under the category of "error." Various stylistic choices, though ineffective on a first reading, hint at students' awareness of expectations for academic writing. We still have more research to do to better understand the implications of teachers' expectations for students.

This chapter has suggested adopting a particular disposition toward students, one where we consciously and deliberately read student writing with more charity than severity (Porter). My goal, rather than to scold teachers, is to create some pause so that we might be reflective about our reading practices. With that said, we should not adopt a humorless approach to reading student writing. As the editor of one student blooper collection has said, "To err, sometimes with hilarious results, is a feature of the human condition" (Henriksson 142). Certainly, we may be both reflective teachers and amused readers.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This project began out of concern with negative rhetoric about students and student writing. While composition studies has challenged representations of students and their work that derive from misunderstandings about teaching, learning, and writing (Sternglass; Helmers; Adler-Kassner), the field had not studied the long-term tradition of teachers publishing unintentionally humorous student mistakes. This tradition implicates issues in pedagogy, in how our field understands teaching and learning, and in cultural understandings of student writers and writing. My project developed as a response to the gaps in these areas.

Several themes emerged throughout the course of this project. One of the most important contexts in which to understand unintentionally humorous student mistakes is the remedial model, which is arguably the most dominant paradigm for understanding students and student learning. The remedial model emphasizes students' perceived "*disabilities*, *defects*, *deficits*, *deficiencies*, and *handicaps*" (Rose 192, emphasis in original). This context is especially important for considering two of the major texts I studied, the current Tumblr blog *Shit My Students Write* (SMSW) and the 1931 bestseller *Boners*. SMSW publishes a broad range of what many teachers would generally think of as errors in writing or thinking – redundancy, contradictions, generalizations. The website assumes that students produce "shit" (a tongue-in-cheek term of course, but one that nevertheless suggests unacceptable writing). The excerpts that appear on the website

highlight often petty and unreasonable objections to students' choices or mistakes. *Shit My Students Write* depicts the remedial model in practice.

Meanwhile, *Boners* is a collection of students' vocabulary mistakes. In chapter 2 I explain how the educational context in which *Boners* existed would seem to promote a negative disposition toward students and their errors, a context that might bemoan fallen literacy standards and the perceived deficits of the youth at that time. *Boners* had the opportunity to reinforce the remedial model; but surprisingly, instead of framing students as error-prone youth whose mistakes need fixed toward developing more acceptable "skills," the editors of this collection represented students as *human*. That is, students make mistakes not because they are deficient or somehow flawed. They make mistakes because people, when they are learning, make mistakes. The fact that some of these mistakes are humorous is something that we can enjoy for the unintentional language play as well as for the unexpected insight that young people bring to the task of learning. Comparing texts such as these can help us recognize some of the more dominant dispositions toward students informed by the remedial model, as well as the potential in alternative dispositions that empathize with students.

As might be expected, teacher-student relationships are informed by the kinds of dispositions that institutions and the wider culture promote toward students. Teacher-student relationships are so often represented as antagonistic, in large part because composition's historical investment in identifying and correcting errors places teachers in a position of power over students. Thus teacher-student relationships can be re-thought not only in terms of broader models like remediation, but also through the practices that help define those relationships, such as methods of reading and assessing student writing.

Throughout this project I explore how the habits of mind that we teachers bring to student writing control the kinds of readings we do of student writing, as well as control to what extent we can recognize student potential. Reading with an eye toward potential means that we look for evidence of student awareness of expectations. At times, teachers misunderstand the ways that students respond to either a tacit or explicit expectation, and as a result teachers may see only laughable errors.

Reading and assessment are only part of a larger context in which we must question the ethics of publishing student mistakes. I review several frameworks related to ethical uses of student writing, such as those embraced by professional organizations and institutional guidelines. Through a closer look at how we value student writing from a research perspective, I explore the contradiction in teachers publishing student mistakes outside research. Because this is an illicit practice outside both research and teaching purposes, teachers would not try to obtain student permission to publish their mistakes. If we would not be comfortable informing students that we wish to publish their humorous mistakes, perhaps we should not publish them.

Finally, I used humor theory throughout this dissertation to better understand an unfamiliar but persuasive perspective on the publication of student mistakes. SMSW and earlier collections are routinely defended *because* they are humorous. For many, humor appears to provide a license to treat student texts in ways that they would not treat texts that they took more seriously or whose authors they respected more. Becoming more familiar with humor theory enabled me to understand this counter-argument while also pointing out that our responses to humorous mistakes (to laugh or to mock) can also suggest troubling dispositions toward students that we need to challenge and change.

Methodological Implications

My methodological focus in this project was on published student mistakes and public rhetoric about students and student writing. I suspected, based on my initial analyses, that these texts would supply me with an immense amount of material. I was not disappointed; over the course of this project, I gathered over 30 print collections published between 1900 and the present, and almost a thousand passages of student writing gathered from the website *Shit My Students Write*. I coded all posts on this blog between November 2010 (the beginning of the blog) and April 2014 (when I began this project in earnest). While I did not include analysis of all these print and digital student texts, gathering so many allowed me to notice patterns in what the teacher-readers found humorous about them. As my chapters demonstrate, there is more to these passages of student writing than is suggested by their assigned function as public entertainment; yet their publication constitutes them as entertainment, and similarly constitutes students and their writing in general as error-prone and lacking in intelligence.

As a result, I wanted to tell the story of this writing. It had been excerpted, published, laughed at, often mocked, and frequently used as evidence that there is a literacy crisis in the US. However, the excerpts also tell us about teaching and learning – how a student learns academic discourse, for instance. They also tell us about the teachers who published them – how they must have valued the student writer or the writing.

Ultimately, I focused on two major collections: *Boners* and *Shit My Students Write*. *Boners* so appealed to me because the editors' introductions to these popular collections were so striking in their generosity to students. I was astounded to find such

rhetoric from 1931. I ended up focusing on *Shit My Students Write* as opposed to other digital texts because there are no digital collections as popular or long-running as SMSW.

I have some remaining questions about my ethical dilemma as a researcher who reproduced and used student writing that should not have been published in the first place. In the introduction chapter, I said that I would ensure ethical use by reading and reproducing student writing in order to learn from it, not to laugh at it. I believe I successfully managed to do this, considering that my motive was to inquire about what the student writing could tell us about teaching and learning. However, this dilemma still troubles me. At the beginning of this project, and at various points while writing it, I considered, out of respect for students, not quoting any student writing. Avoiding using student writing would have been difficult indeed, since one of my chapters is devoted to close readings of published student mistakes. In conversations about the ethics of using student writing in research, one of the considerations is *how* students and their writing are portrayed and for what purposes (Harris; Anderson; Robillard). Since student writing already had value before it was published, I sought to restore the value it lost when it was published.

Though several researchers suggested that I consider interviewing teachers for this project, I opted to focus on the student writing and on how editors or compilers framed the student writing rhetorically. Interviewing teachers would pose its own challenges, ones that I would be willing to take up in the future. For example, I would need to ponder what interviewing teachers would afford this project. I might learn what teachers think about this practice, which could lend even more plausibility to my discussions on ethics and professionalism. I might also do survey research to gather a

broader sense of what many teachers think about this practice. This practice is not discussed in our field's scholarship and is not addressed in national conversations on teaching and learning; so it is difficult to know what everyone thinks about this practice – and so, what work there is to do. Surveying may be the most expedient method for finding out.

Surveying may accomplish something else, too. I would like to talk with teachers who have actually submitted student writing for publication to one of these venues. Whether respondents have submitted student writing could be one of the survey questions, and respondents could also indicate whether they would be willing to be interviewed in the future. Particularly on professional listservs such as WPA-L, there are discussions about the ethics of laughing at student writing, but fewer discussions about publishing and circulating it in the first place. I think this would be a crucial piece of data to have: the reflections on this practice from teachers who have participated in it.

A final methodological implication: when I wrote about issues of student identity and teacher-student relationships, I constructed the figure of "the student," which I fear is similar to the representation Richard Ohmann saw in old composition textbooks. Ohmann writes, "'The' student . . . is defined only by studenthood, not by any other attributes. He is classless, sexless though generically male, timeless" (145). In reality, normative aspects of identity – those that are not associated with oppression and marginalization – are "unseen," such that someone who is middle-class seems "classless," and white people appear not to have a race. While I focused in this project on "the student" who is constituted by discourses of remediation, I did not explore the ways that this constitution occurs along lines of race, gender, ability, class, sexuality, and language.

Such attention to these issues is crucial because websites like *Shit My Students Write* tend to view all students as being the same; no matter their actual social and cultural differences, publication on that website attempts to reduce students to a similar lowly status, which is possible because we audience members do not have access to any information about the backgrounds of these students. However, several raced, gendered, and classed markers, as well as indications of language difference and potentially disability, are evident in the writing published on SMSW.

Take, for example, this excerpt from SMSW, which at the time of this writing has the second largest number of "likes" and reblogs out of all the posts on the website:

Let the meat cake!

Mary Antwinet is famous for saying "let the meat cake." She was a leader of the French revelation. She was very popular and fashionable until she died from guilty.

24 JANUARY 2012   ♥ 4537

Fig. 1. "Let the Meat Cake!" *Shit My Students Write*. 24 Jan. 2012. Web. 11 July 2016.

I can imagine teachers as well as the general public reading this passage and making assumptions about the student who wrote it. This is a student who does not know how to write. He or she is probably also a bad student. The student lacks basic historical knowledge. And so on.

Such criticisms might change if we had knowledge of the student's background. For instance, ESL and multilingual specialists might speculate that English is not this student's first language. The phonetic spelling ("Antwinet" for "Antoinette"), "wrong word" errors ("revelation" instead of "revolution"), and approximations of words the student may not have been able to spell ("guilty" for, perhaps, "guillotine") support the

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speculation that the student is multilingual. If this is the case, the teacher would have a more informed perspective on the kind of guidance that would best help the student, depending on the goals of the assignment and the class.

If, however, we decide upon this reading that the student is merely a "bad writer" and we continue to derive amusement from its flaws, then we ignore the actual challenges that particular populations of students face when they write for school. The notion of a "bad student," represented apparently by this excerpt, overrides students' complex identities, experiences, and challenges. For these reasons, it is important for research on student error in the public sphere to explore the roles of social and cultural difference.

Pedagogical Implications: Methods of Reading Student Writing

I have argued that student writing circulates the way it does, and at different points in history has been wildly popular, in large part because of how teachers read and interpret student writing. Here I mean to evoke a kind of disposition. For student writing to circulate *as humor*, what must be the mindset of the teacher who read the student writing and published it? My project offers a few answers to this question. In many but certainly not all instances, student writing may strike teachers as humorous because teachers have been trained, either explicitly or by our culture, to read student writing in order to identify its flaws. That mindset positions teachers in a more powerful position compared to students, whose most notable characteristic, apparently, is their ability to make mistakes. I outlined, using scholarship on reading student writing, a realistic and generous method for reading student writing with attention to potential (Huot; Knoblauch and Brannon; Porter).

There are other answers to the question of how teachers' mindsets might be informing this reading of student writing. Humor theory became indispensable, because it prompted me to explore some explanations for what I was seeing besides blatant lack of professionalism. One explanation came from incongruity theories of humor, which suggest that much of what we find humorous comes from disrupted expectations: we were expecting X, but we got Y, and the juxtaposition of X and Y is of such a sort that we cannot help but laugh. For example, as a teacher I was expecting a serious academic paper, but on the first page I stumble upon a word usage mistake that suggests something quite obscene.

Imagining student mistakes as incongruities, which seem perfectly in line with the meaning of a mistake, made me think of teachers differently. Anders Henriksson, the editor of a 2008 New York Times Bestseller *Ignorance is Blitz*, said the following about students: "To err, sometimes with hilarious results, is a feature of the human condition" (142). It follows that it is human to laugh, also. It is understandable that teachers find some of their students' mistakes humorous. I tried to investigate what this means for how we read; but the other angle is the subsequent treatment of student writing: how we respond. Some teachers (many historically) respond by sharing or publishing the mistakes. I learned through doing this project that it is important to distinguish between these two practices.

In terms of the latter practice, how we respond, this project also implies that there may be pedagogical usefulness for students to engage with unintentionally amusing mistakes with recognition of humor and language play. Collections such as *Jay Leno's Headlines: Real but Ridiculous Headlines from America's Newspapers*, which frequently

feature ambiguous headlines or double-meanings, which can be used to teach clarity in writing as well as considerations around audience. Further, it matters *whose* humorous mistakes are showcased and why. A teacher might display the "bloopers" of former students. But what if the teacher were to share her or his own past writing mistakes? Such an exercise would help build a relationship between teachers and students that assists with student learning. It demonstrates that *everyone* – even teachers – make mistakes in writing.

Implications for Composition Studies: Teacher Education

This project is premised on how teachers read and respond to student writing. Because I have explored the implications of certain methods of reading and responding, it follows that aspects of this project imply some approaches to teacher education in our field.

Reading, Assessing, and Responding to Student Writing

As I have discussed, there are no professional documents that include the guidelines not to share or publish student writing for others' amusement. In Chapter 3, I go in depth with the guidelines for use of student writing in research, where it is unacceptable to publish student writing without permission. As I say in that chapter, I do not believe we should actually state such a recommendation in our guidelines. Given that English teachers across the nation are criticized for the perceived quality of people's writing in nearly every context, it is not a good idea to publicize that teachers – in composition but also in many other disciplines – share and publish student writing to humor people. Publicly admitting to blatant lack of professionalism may have negative

consequences. A more effective approach would be to integrate these concerns in teacher education.

In this project I discuss the assumptions, beliefs, and dispositions that we bring to the work of reading, assessing, and responding to student writing. How these assumptions, beliefs, and dispositions develop varies across teachers and contexts. For example, some teachers begin their teaching careers by adopting many of the pedagogical practices that they thought were effective when they were students. Because it is the case that many if not most current college faculty were themselves "good students" in the sense that they met or exceeded the expectations that were set for them, a beginning teacher with that experience might struggle to understand students who do *not* meet expectations. If doing well as students was for these new teachers only a matter of trying, then they may not understand how to interpret student behavior that involves, for instance, missing class frequently, not turning in work on time, or misunderstanding assignment expectations. Consequently, there are many opportunities for new teachers to develop a sense of expectations that are appropriate for the context. And how this can be done is by helping teachers, through teacher education and mentoring, to get a sense of these expectations and how to respond when students do not meet them. Such perspectives develop through recognizing the many options we have as teacher-rhetors for developing relationships with students. This kind of education may happen within teaching seminars, where new teachers would read and discuss scholarship that highlights the implications of some of the more traditional models for regarding students and student writing (for example, the remedial model where students are "broken," error-prone, and need to be "fixed").

This project also implies the need for larger changes in the culture of teaching. The field has debated the value of pedagogy as an area of study and practice through debates on theory and practice. Some have criticized, for instance, the tacit requirement in scholarship in rhetoric, writing, and composition studies to address a "pedagogical imperative," or how a particular theory translates into specific, practical applications in the classroom (Vitanza). Some scholars call for rhetoric and writing studies scholars to distance themselves from pedagogy. Our historical association with teaching, and the historical reputation of first-year writing as a perceived remedial course, cause damage to our scholarly reputation and hinder disciplinary progress (Dobrin). These developments in the field suggest that many scholars in this sub-field of English want to transform the role that pedagogy plays in our discipline.

Through completing this project, I would suggest that these calls ignore the roles that institutional contexts play in how pedagogy has developed as an important scholarly focus in the field. According to the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education, there are 334 doctoral institutions, varying by highest, higher, and moderate research activity ("Custom"). The total number of higher education institutions in the US classified on Carnegie is 4665, making doctoral research universities about 7% of all higher education institutions. Presumably, the other 93% of colleges and universities in the United States have less intensive research purposes and likely have teaching as a more central part of their missions. This is all to say that for the majority of professionals teaching writing or composition courses to undergraduates, distancing themselves from pedagogy is not possible.

We also have to pay attention to the fact that historically, many professionals who have not been trained in rhetoric, writing, and composition theory have taught composition and first-year writing courses. Over the past several decades, rhetoric and composition has grown to the extent that it is completely plausible for composition courses in the future to be taught only by people trained in the research and theory of this field. I make this prediction not to convey a hope that one day we will put an end to literature and creative writing faculty teaching composition courses. Instead, this is to say that many people who have not *wanted* to teach composition courses have nevertheless been required to teach them. Being required to teach outside one's specialty, and to teach a course that is disliked historically, can cause resentment, and may be linked to the expression of that resentment in a public context.

What I describe here is an array of institutional and departmental factors that determine cultures of teaching on campuses. In regards to teacher education, there are moves we can make to improve the culture of teaching, no matter the institutional context. I believe this begins with how we regard teaching in our rhetoric as professionals. We have choices for how to represent teaching within departments, institutions, and the wider public. We are certainly free to represent teaching as undesirable labor, a necessary but resented activity that distracts scholars from their research. In representing teaching in this way, we risk alienating future professionals who might otherwise have *chosen* to study writing, teaching, and learning in a higher education context. I believe that ethical dispositions begin from such a choice.

There is more we can do, as well, to help current teachers consider the implications of their practices. Important parts of developing an ethical disposition are

the acts of reading, assessing, and responding to student writing. Two particular activities strike me as relevant to what is implied by the work in this dissertation. Lad Tobin's essay, "How Many Writing Teachers Does It Take to Read a Student Essay?" suggests that student essays are far more complex, and deserve far greater attention, than teachers traditionally have been expected or encouraged to give. Knowing that this is likely the situation of new teachers, too, as they are also part of this system, it would help to give assignments to these new teachers that encourage them to practice with methods of reading that may be new or unfamiliar to them when applied to the work of students.

Further, in chapter 4, I suggest that new teachers would benefit from looking at the unintentionally humorous mistakes that I gathered for this project. Following from the incongruity theory of humor, these examples of student writing are humorous because they surprise or perplex the reader. It is in these moments that many teachers are not sure how to respond. I do not mean to imply that one can read a sentence or two and know, then, how to respond to the paper in which that excerpt first appeared; but it would be useful to engage with these short passages as examples of the kind of writing that causes a particular moment in our teaching: we may be confused, unsure how to respond, or, depending on a variety of other factors (our mood, what we had expected from a particular student, etc.), we may choose a response that is not as pedagogically sound as we are capable of.

Public Rhetoric about Students and Student Writing

As I have argued throughout this project, there are potentially very serious implications for publishing and circulating student mistakes. A long history of negative representations of students and student writing continues to inform national rhetoric and

discourse about literacy and education in the US. So many of these representations, I believe, come from misunderstandings about teaching and learning. Composition studies has the knowledge, experience, and scholarship that attest to effective conditions for learning to write in a variety of contexts. Yet the voices from our field rarely appear in popular and public dialogues about teaching and learning writing. There are many reasons for this, one being that our field is surprisingly not very well known. Despite being part of English Studies, and theorizing the teaching and learning in but also beyond the one course that almost every single college student in the United States must take, we are not perceived as authorities or experts on teaching and learning. More often, English and writing teachers are blamed for the writing that students submit in other classes as well as the writing that employees do on the job (see "Why Johnny Can't Write, and Why Employers Are Mad").

This is to say that several dynamics shape our public participation as teachers and scholars. As David Gold has said, "Unfortunately, contemporary debate about student writing and language and literacy education is not driven by academic journals" (90). Research developments might appear in our journals, but the wider culture outside academia is unaware of them. Gold calls for public discussions about "what is right with student writing," suggesting that scholars should write for the popular journals and newspapers "for which the naysayers write – and that a wide audience reads" (90-91). I agree with Gold. Perspectives from rhetoric, composition, and writing studies would contribute to public discourse about students and their writing.

In addition to faculty participating in these public discussions about teaching and learning, we also have the opportunity to help students convey the worth and value of

their own work. In chapter 3, I explore how the commitment in our field and in others to helping students find a public audience for their work is sadly contradicted by the practice of publishing student mistakes – a form of making students enter the public sphere without their consent or even their knowledge, thereby depriving them of the agency that other rhetors exercise. Re-committing to helping students find public purposes and public audiences would address at least two major problems that I studied in this dissertation. Publishing student mistakes both negatively shapes how the public views student writers and writing and denies students agency over their own work. Encouraging student publications has been one important approach in helping students write for public audiences (Grobman; Robillard). I would suggest that this approach indeed helps shape public perceptions of the work students do in college classrooms. Further, the growth of celebratory events for student writers over the past fifteen years suggests increased commitment to expanding the rhetorical situations in which students write, as well as building curricular opportunities for students to have agency over their work (see Adler-Kassner and Estrem).

However, there may be another overlooked area that also shows potential in helping to shape public rhetoric. Gold suggests that when strangers, upon learning that we are English teachers, begin to rant about the writing of young people today, "[w]e need to stop smiling our tight, polite, tolerant smiles" (91). Gold does not continue on this point to explain what this intervention might look like; but I have some ideas. This is part of some of the important rhetorical work that we can do as a field, in one-to-one moments when we have the opportunity to shape an alternative narrative. We might just smile and wait for the interaction to be over, but we may have missed an opportunity. Admittedly, I

myself do not jump into these conversations every time; and though I might smile a "polite, tolerant smile," I also try to speak from experience about the great work that I *do* see in my classes. I noted earlier that in national conversations, scholars in composition are not be cited or referenced as experts in teaching and learning; but in one-to-one moments with strangers, we may momentarily represent college teaching. The opportunity is there; what will we say?

Finally, this project implies the need for a kind of reckoning with our work as teachers and scholars. On a daily basis this project prompted me to reflect on what, foundationally, makes me want to be in this profession. As teachers in literacy education, we risk reproducing and enacting some of the most harmful social and cultural problems that students can experience in schooling. Sharing, publishing, laughing at, or mocking student mistakes are bound up in that risk. We also have the opportunity to enact the most rewarding aspects of teaching and learning, particularly observing other people's potential and supporting them as they work toward it. Every student text, no matter how well it meets expectations, demonstrates the writer's potential. If we can embrace this essential part of teaching writing, and encourage other teachers to embrace it, as well, then we not only subvert the deficit model; we also reaffirm our commitment to serving all students.

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> at the City University of New York." *Journal of Basic Writing* 30.1 (2011): 130-

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>   New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.

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>   *Methodologies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. Print.

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>   Freshman Composition Papers." *Timothy McSweeney's Internet Tendency*. 23 Feb.

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    Freshmen." *Key Works on Teacher Response: An Anthology*. Ed. Richard Straub.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

PhD, Rhetoric and Composition
University of Louisville, 2016
Dissertation: "Amused Teachers and Public Readers: Empathy and Derision in 'Student Blooper' Collections"
Committee: Bronwyn Williams (Chair), Karen Kopelson, Brenda Brueggemann, Kiki Petrosino, and John Duffy

MA, Written Communication
Eastern Michigan University, 2012
Emphasis in Teaching of Writing
MA Project: "The Celebration of Student Writing: Practical and Theoretical Perspectives"

MA, Women's Studies
The Ohio State University, 2010
Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization in Literacy Studies

BA, Writing, Literature and Publishing
Emerson College, 2008
Minor in Women's and Gender Studies

RESEARCH

Publications

"ClarissaBlogs: Narrative, Writing, and the Self." With Debra Journet, Steve Cohen, Rachel Gramer, Megan Faver Hartline, Keri Mathis, Tony O'Keeffe, and Kendra Sheehan. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*. 19(2): 2015.

Conference Presentations

"Challenging the Voice in Writing Center Sessions." With Carly Johnson and Mariah Douglas. Southeast Writing Center Association Conference. Nashville, TN. February 20, 2015.

"Students Can Write: Changing the Narrative of a Deficit Model." With Beth Shaum, Kevin English, and Kirsten LeBlanc. National Council of Teachers of English Conference. Washington, D.C. November 21, 2014.

"Potential Over Failure: Re-Reading Ridiculed Student Writing." Writing Program Administrators Conference. Normal, Illinois. July 19, 2014.

"Pedagogy in the Writing Center: Mentoring Pre-Teaching Graduate Student Tutors." Writing Program Administrators Conference. Normal, Illinois. July 18, 2014.

"The Circulation of Student Writing Online: Ethical Implications." Research Network Forum, Conference on College Composition and Communication. Indianapolis, IN. March 19, 2014.

"Self-Diagnosis as Agency in Trans Health." National Women's Studies Association Conference. Cincinnati, OH. November 9, 2013.

"Are We Free to Circulate Student Writing?" WIDE-EMU. Ypsilanti, MI. October 12, 2013.

"'I Am Sincerely Confused and Disillusioned': An Analysis of Back-Stage Teacher Discourse." Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference. Savannah, GA. July 19, 2013.

"Online Constructions of Students: An Examination of Teacher-Generated Discourse." Conference on College Composition and Communication. Las Vegas, NV. March 14, 2013.

"Writing Center as Partner: Effective and Ethical Activism Across Campus." With Ann Blakeslee, Becky Morrison, Beth Sabo, and Sarah Primeau. International Writing Centers Association Collaborative @ CCCC. St. Louis, MO. March 21, 2012.

"Generalist Tutoring in Practice: Using Heuristics to Promote Reflectiveness in Writing
Center Clients." East Central Writing Centers Association Conference. Kalamazoo,
MI. March 4, 2011.

"*Precious* and the Politics of Literacy." Michigan College English Association Conference.
Dearborn, MI. October 15, 2010.

"Education as Liberation?" Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association
Conference. New Orleans, LA. April 9, 2009.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky
English 101: Introduction to College Writing (4 sections)
English 102: Intermediate College Writing (4 sections)
English 306: Business Writing (1 section)
English 373/Women's Studies 325: Women in Literature (1 section)

Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan
English 120: Reading and Writing the College Experience (2 sections)
English 121: Researching the Public Experience (2 sections)

The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
Women's Studies 110: Introduction to Women's Studies (1 recitation section)
Women's Studies 367: American Women Writers (5 sections on quarter system)

ADMINISTRATION

Assistant Director of the University Writing Center
University of Louisville, 2013-2015
- Mentored graduate student consultants and assisted in practicum course
- Consulted with undergraduate and graduate students
- Assisted in planning and leading annual Dissertation Writing Retreat
- Led in-class workshops across disciplines on writing center services and academic
  writing
- Developed assessment project on retention and strategies promoted in writing center

TUTORING

Writing Consultant
Annual Dissertation Writing Retreat, University Writing Center, University of Louisville,
May 2014 and May 2015

Writing Consultant

University Writing Center, University of Louisville, 2013-2015

WAC Writing Consultant

Writing Across the Curriculum Institute, Eastern Michigan University, April 30-May 3, 2012

Bridge Program Writing Consultant

Summer Incentive Bridge Program, Eastern Michigan University, Summer 2011

Writing Consultant

University Writing Center, Eastern Michigan University, 2010-2012

SERVICE

Assessor, General Education Curriculum Committee's Assessment Program, University of Louisville, March 5, 2016

Assessor, General Education Curriculum Committee's Assessment Program, University of Louisville, May 7, 2015

Founder and Facilitator, Teacher Support Group for MA and PhD Students, University of Louisville, 2014-

Coordinator, Peer Mentor Program, Department of English, University of Louisville, 2014-2015

Peer Mentor for MA and PhD Students, Department of English, University of Louisville, 2013-2015

Participant, Master's Degree Consortium of Writing Studies Specialists Roster-Building Initiative, Summer 2012

Presenter, "Supporting Student Writers Across the Disciplines: Writing Consultant Perspectives," Writing Across the Curriculum Institute, Eastern Michigan University, May 3, 2012

Peer Mentor, University Writing Center, Eastern Michigan University, 2011-2012

Writing Consultant, Faculty Development Center Writing Workshop, Eastern Michigan University, May 2011

First-Year Writing Committee, Eastern Michigan University, 2010-2012

Celebration of Student Writing Planning Committee, Eastern Michigan University, 2010-2012

Co-Chair, Graduate Student Interdisciplinary Seminar in Literacy Studies, The Ohio State University, 2009-2010

M.A. Representative, Professional Development Committee in Women's Studies, The Ohio State University, 2009-2010

HONORS AND AWARDS

Faculty Favorite Award, University of Louisville, 2013

Faculty Favorite Award, University of Louisville, 2012

Distinguished Graduate Student in Teaching of Writing, Department of English, Eastern
        Michigan University, 2011-2012

Outstanding Tutor in the University Writing Center, Eastern Michigan University, 2011-2012

Most Valuable Professor Award, Women's Basketball Team and Department of Athletics,
        Eastern Michigan University, 2010

Most Valuable Professor Award, Men's Basketball Team and Department of Athletics,
        Eastern Michigan University, 2010

MEMBERSHIPS

Conference on College Composition and Communication

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