

Reflection-in-Motion

Reimagining Reflection in the Writing Classroom

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Prologue

November 2020—Tallahassee, FL

Flour, butter, ice water. My hands move methodically—scooping, measuring, and dumping into bowls. Scanning Grandma’s handwritten recipes quickly to confirm what my body already knows, using the embodied memories of baking pies for the last 30 years as my guide. Cutting together flour and butter first to make a crumbly mixture, I relax into the familiar rhythm of the pastry cutter. Push, twist, rock. Push, twist, rock. Running my hands through and satisfied with the texture, I start to add small splashes of water. “We can always add water, but we can’t take water out,” my grandmother’s voice says soothingly in my memories. Push, twist, rock. Push, twist, rock. I allow the repetitiveness of the movement to calm me, to quiet my busy brain. I run my thumb over the unevenness of the pastry cutter’s chipped wooden handle; my mind wanders, entering a reflective state—projecting forward. I subconsciously add a splash more water, and then go back to my rhythm. Push, twist, rock. Push, twist, rock. My mind is remembering baking with Grandma for my parents’ all-are-invited Thanksgiving dinners. Grandma always flew in to help in the kitchen, being sous chef for my mom. For the desserts, though, Grandma took the lead, taking me under her wing as a baker-in-training. My mom stepping in to help too, if we had gotten all the other prep done. Three generations of love in the kitchen.

I consider whether my 6-month-old daughter, Parker (who is asleep in her carrier strapped to my chest), will enjoy helping bake as much as I enjoyed helping Mom and Grandma. Push, twist—pause. I smile with my eyes as I imagine a future, toddler version of Parker clumsily pouring ingredients into bowls next year, wondering if she will hate the feeling of flour on her hands

like I do. On autopilot, I check the dough and decide it's ready to form into a ball and roll out. As I sprinkle water on the counter, I let out a stifled laugh (remembering last minute to hold in the big belly laugh that was about to emerge so I don't wake Parker). I can imagine my mom laughing loudly along with me, as I reflect upon the first time we tried my great aunt's "plastic wrap method" for rolling the dough—a method Grandma suggested we try so I didn't have to flour the counter and thus my hands (a method I now use by sprinkling a touch of water on my countertop, laying plastic wrap on the barely glistening countertop, setting my round ball of dough down atop the plastic wrap, layering another piece of plastic wrap on top of the dough, and then rolling the dough out while it's sandwiched between the two layers.) We put so much water on the countertop that first time that the pie crust went flying off the counter and landed on the floor with a splat—only to be met with our laughter and Grandma's lighthearted suggestion to "try again." We did not get it right the second or the third time, but after years of "trying again," I move through the steps without a conscious thought: just enough wrap for the plastic to cover the rolled-out dough, just enough water for the wrap to stick to the counter, just enough pressure and patience for the wrap to stay as the top layer while I roll.

The peacefulness of this moment contrasts with my overall affect. It's November 2020, and we're in the first 6 months of the Covid-19 pandemic (a timing that I'm constantly reminded of, as I celebrate each milestone of my daughter, Parker, who was born 2 weeks after the World Health Organization named Covid-19 a global pandemic). I have gotten through quarantine with more joy than most because of Parker's birth and my consequent parental leave. However, tomorrow is Thanksgiving, and while our family knew we would feel some lingering loneliness as we remained separated for the holiday (the whole country was still waiting for vaccines, so we weren't alone in that), our family did not know that we would be consumed with grief.

Grandma—though as careful as she could be, only leaving her house masked to get groceries—was diagnosed with Covid-19. She was in the hospital. And we were terrified. It was so hard to move through the fear on the day we should have been welcoming Parker to our family tradition—four generations of love should have been laughing in my kitchen. Doing the tradition anyway, though, without Grandma or my mom's physical presence but with the warmth of Parker on my chest, inspires a glimmer of reflective activity that gives me brief respite from my grief.

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As I bake, using Grandma's recipes, imagining Grandma's voice and Mom's laugh, feeling the rhythm of the pastry cutter, combining ingredients, rolling the dough, reliving memories, feeling Parker's body against mine as she rests in her carrier—all of it works to make me reflectively project forward, think back, gain perspective, and then project forward once more. My reflection makes me realize that no matter what happens with Grandma's health, her love will live on through this tradition. I can share this tradition of baking with my daughter and have her too experience a bit of Grandma's kind of love, the kind of love that is pure and joyful, full of unabashed forgiveness and unrelenting gratitude. Regardless of what happens next, my mom, Parker, and I will carry this tradition on together. Parker will feel Grandma's love no matter what.

This book shares stories about reflection, and I want to begin by acknowledging that sharing of these stories is intimate, raw. Reflection is deeply personal; it emerges from the sedimented rhetorical hauntings of our pasts. I hope that in starting this book with sharing my own experiences of reflection, I honor the risk that it has been for my participants to teach me so much about reflection. In the opening example above, I share a story about a time that I reflected during my data-collection period for this book. The materiality, affect, and embodiment within this moment worked together to produce something I defined, identified, and practiced as reflection; I found reflection in the weight of my daughter on my chest, the rhythmic cutting in of water to my butter/flour mixture, and the melancholy of the moment. Reflection meant a sort of deep introspection, a self-excavation that resulted in some sort of realization. In this case, reflection brought me comfort, but it certainly was not something I saw as necessary for reflection to take place.

My ideas about reflection were shaped, largely, by my past as an athlete. As a child and young adult, I spent upward of 20 hours a week figure skating. I often found reflection in the monotony of doing a figure skating routine over and over. Even now when I no longer skate, if I can get into a mindless rhythm of movement (e.g., walking, folding laundry, rowing, baking, etc.), I am more likely to have rhetorical factors work in synergy to make room for reflective thought. Based on my past experiences of reflection, I often find reflection as introspective. I was a synchronized figure skater, which involves 16–20 people working in coordinated movement choreographed to music, and my reflective practice in that athletic environment shaped my reflective activity

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inside the ice-skating arena. Together as a team, we often practiced what I came to identify as “reflection” by watching tapes of our practices and competitions to critically analyze and project what we would do differently the next time. To me, then, reflection could be a kind of deep consideration about the way I viewed the world—or it could be a way of learning from the past to improve the future. My version of reflection was perhaps something closer to what researchers specify as “reflexivity” at times but closer to “metacognition” or “transfer” at others. I locate reflection and name it as such in the above example, then, because it made me rethink a familial tradition, which in turn inspired me to reconsider how I would be passing that tradition down.

That rhetorical action of reflection, the agency of my baking-turned-reflection, was distributed across many factors—the time, the current events, the place, the embodied sensations, the materials, the emotions, the relationships, the memories, the people, and so on. For my reflection to work, they all had to be there, working together in concert to lay the conditions necessary for that reflective activity to emerge. Though my reflection was done in seeming isolation because I did not have to communicate it to another person for the reflection to happen, my reflection was interactive all the same, entangled with the contextual factors within my rhetorical situation. The reflection had rhetorical effect—I made pies—but it also brought self-actualization and spiritual growth. I found solace in realizing that my daughter would get to know Grandma and how she showed love through baking with me in the kitchen. But, even now writing this book about reflection, I wonder, would another reflection researcher in writing studies consider this moment to be reflection?

I started researching reflection because my own definition of it did not map onto rhetoric and composition's traditional notions of reflection. When I was a 1st-year MA student 10 years ago, sitting in the second row of my TA orientation, I avidly took notes, hoping to commit each word of our writing program administrator (WPA) to memory. This was in part because of the kind of student I was—an overeager 20-something who brought my own lunch to eat in our orientation classroom during the hour break—but it was also because I had never taken a composition theory course. My student aptitude combined with my inexperience left me consumed with anxiety, not knowing how I could possibly be prepared to teach first-year writing (FYW) the next week. (It probably did not help that I was neurodivergent but did not know it yet; it took years of wondering why my brain worked differently in graduate school before I finally sought help and learned I had clinical depression, anxiety, and ADHD.)

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All I remembered about my own FYW course was that my teacher complimented my evidence incorporation and analysis—but (as reviewers like to remind me even now) I should be more careful about my grammar. (Thank goodness for my copy editors, or you, my reader, might notice my inability to remember and execute prescriptive grammar rules. ADHD is not a friend to details, in my case.) Perhaps my FYW teacher did not feel like she needed to give me much instruction on her expectations of “good writing” because I grew up with privilege; I was upper-class, white, and steeped in the discourse conventions of academic writing in my home and schools.

According to my WPA (Anis Bawarshi), who began our orientation with a lecture situating our FYW program in the larger context of composition history, part of my job as a FYW instructor was to disambiguate the academic discourse conventions that had come so naturally to me, that seemed to be part of my bones. Throughout the lecture, I realized that much of what we were teaching—genre awareness, rhetorical awareness, argument, revision—all seemed to map onto my ways of knowing and doing writing. As a feminist and antiracist pedagogue who hoped to welcome students’ literacies and honor the goals they had for this class, I was happy to learn that our WPA encouraged an inclusive pedagogy: to teach genre awareness but also encourage students to break conventions for rhetorical purpose, to teach academic argumentation style but also encourage communication as a form of rhetorical listening, and to acknowledge the word count requirements dictated by the university, but also to encourage all modes of communication in our pedagogy. I am grateful that my first introduction to the field was a relatively progressive view of what FYW pedagogy can be.

Yet, as I went through orientation and reviewed the sample course materials to get ideas for developing my own, something seemed odd to me: All the samples of prompting for reflection that we reviewed happened through writing. There were sample prompts for reflection that included written free-writes to brainstorm for projects, written explanations of multimodal assignments, written letters that documented learning throughout the course, and so on. Though I agreed that reflection was important to the writing process, and these writing activities could be useful catalysts for reflection for some students, I struggled with the idea of only incorporating formalized written reflection in my course—and only reflection about writing itself—because I knew that it was not all-encompassing of what students named, identified, and practiced as reflection. Even me, a white woman steeped in privilege,

could not consistently practice reflection in these genres; they often felt flat and performative to me in my undergraduate experience.

The exception to that overwhelming distrust of “reflective” assignments happened in my third year as an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan. Professor Anne Curzan used reflection to powerfully reshape my view of language in her course Introduction to the English Language—an innocuous title for a course that shaped my worldview and the trajectory of my future. Curzan’s course served as a requirement for secondary education teachers, providing foundational linguistic knowledge so students understood language variation, acquisition, and change. I started the course as a dual English and history major, while getting a certificate in secondary education. I started the course with a worldview that I was an eloquent academic writer and speaker because I was an avid reader; I thought that was why academic communication came naturally to me. Finally, I started the course believing that it was up to the writer or speaker to accommodate to the listener or reader. I left the course as an English and linguistics major who wanted to pursue an honors thesis and attend graduate school to learn more about linguistic variation and antiracist writing pedagogy. I left the course with a reality check that the language that I used was Standard American English (or what April Baker-Bell recently coined “White Mainstream English,” to showcase standard language’s relationship to systemic racism—a term I will adopt throughout the remainder of this book). I had access to White Mainstream English because of my privilege: the languages that my parents spoke and their parents spoke, the languages in the books that I read, and the languages that most closely resembled my home languages. I left the course realizing that communication is a relationship between interlocutors—and that breaking with genre and audience expectations can and should be done for rhetorical effect.

My core ideologies about language and how it worked were transformed. Sure, that was because of an exposure to the course content that opened my eyes to both linguistic diversity and linguistic discrimination—we engaged with smart and important work from scholars like Rusty Barrett, Deborah Cameron, Penelope Eckert, Kira Hall, Don Kulick, William Labov, Robin Lakoff, Rosina Lippi-Green, Sally McConnel-Ginet, John Rickford, Geneva Smitherman, Deborah Tannen, Peter Trudgill, and so many more¹—but it was

1. Note that this course took place in 2010, so contemporary work from scholars like Jamila Lyscott, April Baker-Bell, Carmen Kynard, H. Samy Alim, Adrienne Lo, Angela Reyes, and others were not as popularized at the time. I am truly indebted to their scholarship about antiracist pedagogy and raciolinguistics in my current understandings of race and language, and I will be using contemporary work throughout this book as well.

also because of the reflective nature of the pedagogy. We started each day with teaching Curzan one new slang word, we wrote personal narratives about our language ideologies, created hypothetical letters to the editor about current events related to sociolinguistic topics of our course, imagined how we would interact with school administrators' language policies, and so on. We were tasked to think deeply about how we used language, reflect upon our deep-rooted ideologies about language correctness, reflect on how what we “knew” about language might be more complicated than we originally thought, reflect on how what we were learning was related to current events, and hypothesize how we might apply what we were learning to our future careers.

As I recount this foundational experience about my understanding of reflection, it may seem like the static, written assignments that I was describing as the samples that I saw in my FYW orientation. However, for me at least, the reflection I did in that course was so much more robust than the isolated reflective writing assignments: Reflection was integrated into our everyday movements, the daily fabric of the course. They mapped onto my experiences of reflection; I was a synchronized figure skater who viewed reflection as a way to both learn from mistakes and capitalize on strengths by creating a mindful awareness of embodied actions. For me, reflection was something that happened continuously, a series of small moments linking together to help achieve a larger goal. We used reflection constantly at practice, dissecting our movements after program run-throughs before doing another—and then using mindfulness to help perform the desired changes. This practice was interactive and dynamic, a verbal communication with the team and the coach—while also being internal in that we each had to use our reflection to share with the group our perspectives, try to apply what we learned in the next practiced program, and report back what worked in our body and what didn't.

I was able to map that definition of reflection onto my experience in Curzan's course. In her lectures, Curzan always engaged us with interactive moments where we paused to consider questions she posed, talked with those around us about our ideas, and then offered her our own perspectives on class topics. I reflected within our “discussion” sections; our graduate student instructors (GSIs) facilitated engagement with our peers in small-group activities where we imagined applications of our learning, peer-reviewed each other's assignments during class workshops, and considered opposing viewpoints within class debates. I reflected in the collaborative conversations in office hours; Curzan's thoughtful questions and suggestions for outside reading always left me buzzing with excitement. I reflected on my own; I

mentally outlined our papers on walks to class, chatted with loved ones about our latest lecture, reconsidered my ideologies about language during any of our monotonous drills during a skating practice, and so on. In other words, the course material, the assignments, and just the overall pedagogy of the course did certainly set me up for reflective thinking—but it was also the synergy of those factors with Curzan's teaching persona, my burgeoning friendships with students in the class, the inclusive and accessible class dynamic of feeling like my thoughts were welcomed and valued, the technologies working with my learning preferences, the past experiences I had with reflection, and the fact that my most pressing physical needs were met, so I had time and energy to do reflective work.

My lived experiences taught me that reflection was integrated in my own daily practice, as well as the course design. My inspiration for teaching, bell hooks, wrote, "Critical reflection on my experience as a student in unexciting classrooms enabled me not only to imagine how the classroom could be exciting but that this excitement could co-exist with and even stimulate serious intellectual and/or academic engagement" (hooks, 2009, p. 150). I knew that I was a white woman walking through the academy with an immense amount of privilege, and I thought that I could and should think back to what worked (and what did not work) for me as a student, so I could try to make my pedagogy capacious and welcoming to the variety of students that I would serve. My hope was to make my classroom an "exciting place, never boring" (hooks, 1994, p. 7), and I knew that I could start with what I knew to be true about reflection, and then learn from my students how to adjust my pedagogy to better include what they knew about reflection.

As I sat in my FYW GSI orientation nearly 5 years later, overwhelmed and anxious about designing my own FYW course, I decided that I wanted to design pedagogy that honored reflective activities students already did throughout their writing process. Maybe my pedagogy could make space for students who tend to reflect while moving (like I did at skating practice) by accounting for that labor in a low-stakes comic. Maybe my pedagogy could make space for students who tend to reflect through interaction (like I did in class discussions) by requiring students to submit recordings of student-peer brainstorming meetings. Maybe my pedagogy could make space for the students who reflected through self-prompted reflection (like I did with attending office hours) by asking them to turn in the drafting materials they generated to prepare for the time we spent together or because of our time together.

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My burgeoning ideas about reflection, built from my embodied knowledge of how reflection worked in my own life—about how reflection could take different mediums, could integrate different modalities, could take place throughout the writing process, or could emerge from different rhetorical contexts for varying rhetorical effect—were not revolutionary. As I would come to learn in the coming years through my research about reflection, reflection has the potential to facilitate learning; it has the potential to create new knowledge. However, I am careful here to hedge—to repeat *it has the potential to*—because I think it is imperative that we recognize that reflection does not always have to result in learning in the Western, mainstream sense of mastery or growth (Li, 2012). As my research participants have taught me, reflection can, and often does, just involve *sitting with*—a time to be present, to notice, and to acknowledge. I can't wait to tell you all about it.