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Student Affective Responses to “Bringing the Funk” in the First-Year Writing Classroom

Writing educators have long sought to disrupt academic convention. However, we currently know little about students’ affective experiences when they are asked to compose differently. This article explores the results of a research study to illuminate the feelings and attitudes students experience when convention is disrupted and offers pedagogical suggestions based on the results.

In his highly praised 2015 CCCC Chair’s address, Adam Banks calls on us as a field to “bring the funk” into our classrooms, departments, programs, and universities by embracing “boldness, complexity, and even a little irreverence and messiness” (272). He suggests that since comfort and tradition typically define these spaces, we, as scholars and teachers of writing, should embrace innovation. Specifically, with his tongue-in-cheek promotion of the essay to “dominant genre emeritus,” he, like many others before him, encourages us to embrace alternative intellectual genres, especially multimodal and digital ones (272–73).1 Similarly, Patrick Sullivan in his recent CCC article advocates for creativity in all writing classrooms by developing...
“a more capacious and inclusive model of academic writing” (21). While he details his “unessay” assignment to demonstrate what creativity might look like in writing classrooms, he points out that different genres and activities can achieve similar goals. The enthusiastic response to Banks both during his address and immediately after on social media and listservs as well as Sullivan’s position as the lead article in *CCC* speaks, I believe, to our strong desire to disrupt not just the ideological but also the textual status quo within the academy.

This desire has been and remains productive for writing studies, allowing diverse voices and genres to permeate our classrooms and scholarship, exposing limitations of academic tradition and convention, and inviting students and teachers to flex our rhetorical acuity within public and private spheres. Certainly these developments merit our enthusiasm as well as our continued support. But are students in our classrooms, particularly our first-year writing (FWY) classrooms, as enthusiastic as we are to embrace other intellectual genres? What do students report experiencing when we disrupt the textual status quo and ask them to compose differently? And how might we use this knowledge to further our pedagogical goals?

This article takes up these questions by exploring the results of an empirical research study conducted in a FYW class that sought to disrupt academic convention and encourage innovation. While students in this study were invited, but not required, to compose innovative texts, their responses to the unit provide insight into the affective processes students may experience when we “bring the funk” in our classrooms. Drawing from observation and interview data, I explore how the habitual nature of academic convention informs students’ affective responses to disruption and textual innovation in the FYW classroom. I then describe students’ affective responses to the unit, detailing their move from confusion and distrust to comfort, and the curricular factors that contributed to this change. I conclude by offering pedagogical suggestions for how teachers of writing can work with student affect to create productive learning environments that embrace both convention and innovation. Ultimately, I argue that a fuller understanding of affective responses to convention and disruption affords teachers of writing knowledge of the feelings and attitudes that surface for students and that, with this knowledge, we can work with students’ affective responses rather than resist, be disappointed by, or even ignore them as we “bring the funk.”
Textual Disruption and Student Affect

As Banks suggests, adherence to tradition and convention rather than their disruption typically defines spaces within the academy. However, as Banks also points out, writing studies has a long history of disrupting the status quo, and in recent years, our disruptive energy has become even more focused on expanding notions of writing within the classroom. One impetus for this stems from scholars who call for multimodal composition and multiliteracies within writing classrooms to prepare students for uncertain futures within an increasingly technological world (e.g., Cope and Kalantzis; Kress; New London Group; Takayoshi and Selfe; and Yancey). With developments in digital technology, writers are, as Kathleen Blake Yancey states, “everywhere” (Writing), and the acts of writing and composing continue to change, as reflected in the updated “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition” (CWPA). Our field, it appears, widely acknowledges that we cannot predict what genres our students will write or in what mediums they will compose years from now, but we can work today to prepare students for the future by incorporating print, multimodal, and digital texts into our classrooms and by developing students’ rhetorical knowledge and flexibility so that they can respond to evolving written texts and composing processes.

Another impetus for disrupting academic convention can be found in rhetorical genre studies, particularly Anis Bawarshi’s work on uptake. Bawarshi observes that how we respond to texts is “the result of learned recognitions of significance . . . that over time and in particular contexts becomes habitual” (200). In other words, we learn “what to take up, how, and when” as we interact with texts over time (Bawarshi 200). For example, when students receive a writing prompt in a FYW classroom, they most likely will write an academic essay in response because they learned to do so in prior educational settings. They also most likely will not think about why they are writing an essay or how because, as Bawarshi argues, the habitual nature of certain textual responses often leads us to perform them unconsciously and deeply hold them as attachments (200). Responding unconsciously with academic convention usually serves students well within the academy, but the results of Mary Jo Reiff and Bawarshi’s cross-institutional study reveal why the habitual power of convention can be rhetorically limiting. They found that students primarily drew from academic genres when encountering a writing task that did not dictate a
specific genre in a FYW classroom despite reporting a wealth of prior genre knowledge and experience writing various non-academic genres (see also Rounsaville et al.). These results suggest that although students have at their disposal a wide range of genres and diverse discursive resources, they typically do not employ them in the classroom, which, in turn, shapes their meaning-making possibilities to what academic convention allows and privileges. Given the possible limitations of students’ habitual responses, Bawarshi calls for interrupting them “long enough for students to examine critically their sources and motivations, as well as for students to consider what is permitted and what is excluded” by them (201). While useful for all students, Bawarshi finds this kind of disruption especially important to validate and encourage multilingual students.

Whether one finds inspiration for textual disruption in preparing students for uncertain rhetorical futures or encouraging students to use more of their available discursive resources, many in writing studies have enthusiastically accepted that we should not just teach academic convention—we also need to disrupt it. Yet, as Reiff and Bawarshi’s study reveals, students typically respond automatically to writing tasks with academic convention, and, as such, they most likely hold deep attachments to it, as Bawarshi argues. If students do hold attachments to academic convention, we currently do not have much data about what these attachments entail, especially in terms of affect, or how these attachments may influence their rhetorical choices or responses to textual disruption. If we want students to embrace textual disruption as much as we do, we would benefit from empirical data on how students affectively respond to academic convention and its disruption.

Currently, writing studies has limited data on student affect—defined by Susan McLeod as noncognitive phenomena, including emotions but also attitudes, beliefs, moods, motivations, and intuitions (Notes)—because, as many scholars have already observed, the field primarily focuses on the cognitive rather than the affective domain (Brand; Fulkerson; McLeod; Micciche; Richards). However, as these scholars also point out, affect is a particularly fruitful site for writing studies research since, as McLeod observes, “writing is an emotional as well as a cognitive activity—we feel

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as well as we think when we write” (“Some” 426). Recent interdisciplinary research in the fields of psychology, education, computer science, and neuroscience supports McLeod’s observation and confirms prior theory and models that posit a link between affect and learning (D’Mello et al. 670). Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and Antonio Damasio, for example, draw from neuroscience research on brain-damaged patients to find that “emotions, which play out in the body and mind, are profoundly intertwined with thought” (116). In fact, emotions, they explain, support cognition since “emotions help to direct our reasoning into the sector of knowledge that is relevant to the current situation or problem” (125). While interest in affect studies is flourishing and demonstrates much promise, Sidney K. D’Mello et al. note that research into affect-learning connections is relatively new and needs to be expanded to “track emotions in the wild (i.e., in classrooms, school labs, and online courses) . . . and for extended periods of time” (679). Likewise, Immordino-Yang and Damasio encourage empirical study on the role of emotion in education to create more productive learning environments. Writing studies seems well positioned to take up these calls, and some research has begun to do so.

Researchers interested in multimodal and digital texts have started to explore students’ affective responses and have discovered that not all students may be as enthusiastic as writing educators are to embrace multimodal and multimedia projects. Beth Powell et al., for example, report that nine out of fifteen students (60 percent) surveyed in FYW classes across two universities reported high levels of motivation for their multimodal projects. Jeannie C. Parker Beard arrives at similar survey results, finding that half of the students in her FYW class indicated moderate to high interest in creating multimedia texts while the other half did not. She also finds that students reported feeling anxious or frustrated while composing a video documentary essay because it was difficult and intimidating. Similarly, Ellen Evans and Jeanne Po in their study of students’ experiences reading digital narratives in a literature course discover that students reported in interviews feeling discomfort and frustration reading digital texts because the experience was too dissimilar from their experiences reading print texts. Of course, student discomfort or frustration should not stop writing teachers from inviting students to engage in unfamiliar writing or reading tasks since, as these and other studies indicate, students gain valuable learning from these experiences.
These studies begin to reveal students’ affective responses to textual disruption; however, when writing teachers incorporate disruption of academic convention into our classrooms, we would benefit from empirical data that further probes students’ attitudes and emotions toward textual innovation and academic convention. This essay seeks to bring together these two conversations—textual disruption and student affect in the writing classroom—and build upon previous work by exploring some results of my empirical research study.

**Methodology**

The primary aims of my IRB-approved study, put simply, were to examine what happens in student writing and what students report experiencing when a teacher disrupted academic convention and encouraged innovative writing over the course of a four-week unit within a FYW classroom. To study the effects of disruption on these students, I employed multiple qualitative research methods, including classroom observation, surveys, interviews, and text analysis. In this section, I describe the study’s context, elements of its disruptive design, and the observation and interview methods.

I conducted my study in a FYW class at a large, public midwestern university over the fall 2009 semester. The class, English 101, is part of a two-year writing program and is primarily taught by graduate Teaching assistants (GTAs). At the time of this study, the goals of English 101 were to promote rhetorical flexibility and awareness by composing a minimum of three formal papers, completing a final project, and performing in-class writing. Lily (all research participants’ names are pseudonyms) taught the English 101 section that was the site of this study. She was a GTA in her second year in the program and had three years of prior experience teaching at the university level. The class was composed of twenty-two students, ten of whom volunteered to participate in this study. For all ten of these students (six female and four male), it was their first semester of college, and, overall, the demographics were fairly homogenous.

Lily structured the course around a rhetorical genre theory–based pedagogy and curriculum (the genre awareness approach advocated by Amy J. Devitt in *Writing Genres*) that utilized the textbook *Scenes of Writing*. The course had four units, each culminating in a writing project: in writing project 1, students imitated multiple genres from different contexts and
then described the reasons for and effects of the differences among these genres in a descriptive paper; in writing project 2, students analyzed the differences between multiple texts written within the same genre in an analytical paper; in writing project 3 (the one that I developed), students critiqued a genre and then composed a critique text in a genre of their choosing and a self-reflection piece; and in writing project 4, students revised one of their previous papers and composed a self-reflective piece. Lily designed the topics and goals for each of these units and the writing projects with criteria for evaluation and daily activities for the first, second, and fourth units. Again, I designed the writing project and daily activities for the third unit. In this unit, students were exposed to the concept of genre critique (defined in Scenes of Writing as questioning and evaluating to determine the strengths and shortcomings of a genre as well as its ideological import) to learn how to critique a genre.

I designed unit 3 around a writing project that provided students with specific tasks but did not provide a specific genre in which they would undertake and complete the tasks (see Appendix A). In this way, the project was similar to Jody Shipka's task-based multimodal framework for composing in which students determine "the purposes and contexts of the work they produce" and assume responsibility for what she calls "action sequences" (following Edwin Hutchins) that "guide [students] through the successful accomplishment of each assigned task" (286). While similar, ultimately the project in this class was more directive in terms of purpose and context than what Shipka proposes, as students were asked to select any genre that interests them, critique it, and then present a critique of that genre by "alert[ing] others to one or more weaknesses" and were informed, "you will choose how you will present the critique." In addition to these critique texts, students composed self-reflection pieces—similar to the "heads-up statements" Shipka describes (287)—in which they explained how and why they made particular choices as they composed their critique texts. Since I wanted both to invite students to innovate and demonstrate what innovation can look like in the classroom, I presented the writing prompt in the genre of game rules rather than in the traditional genre of an assignment sheet. Overall, the third writing project was meant to be disruptive on two fronts: first, it disrupted student reading processes since it did not take the conventional form of an assignment sheet, and second, it disrupted their composing processes since it did not specify what genre they would
critique, what critique they would present, or how they would present the critique (like an analysis paper, for instance).

I designed unit 3’s class activities and out-of-class assignments to further disrupt business as usual. For example, Lily regularly invited students to respond to in-class prompts with freewrites, so on the first day of the unit, Lily asked the students to respond to a prompt with images. In a second example, instead of presenting students with examples of one kind of critique, students reviewed and evaluated many examples of published critiques produced by various professional writers, artists, comedians, and journalists that spanned multiple genres, including posters, songs, blogs, websites, artwork, poems, short stories, comics, speeches, creative nonfiction, video clips, newspaper articles, editorials, and academic articles for an out-of-class assignment. The following class period, students shared their evaluations of these examples and then generated a “class list” of all the genres that could be used to present their critiques. Class activities and out-of-class assignments like these were meant to disrupt students’ expectations of what occurs within a writing classroom and what counts as writing.

My classroom observations focused on the students’ lived experiences. While I attended all class meetings, Lily was the primary and only visible teacher. I recorded all classroom activity, including their physical reactions, such as facial expressions and body language, and their verbal reactions in talk, laughter, and silence. I also conducted one-hour individual interviews with participants one week after unit 3 concluded to capture their overall perceptions of and responses to the unit. I developed a set of twenty-five questions to ask all students and additional discourse-based questions for each participant. The common questions asked students to reflect on their experiences during the unit, and for the purposes of this article, I am especially interested in student responses to questions that probed their affective responses, such as:

- What was your first reaction to the writing prompt?
- How comfortable did you feel with this unit?
- How did your comfort change over the course of the unit?
- At the end of this unit, do you feel more or less comfortable responding to assignments in different ways?
Since my study sought to uncover multiple effects of textual disruption, not just affect, interview questions that inquired about affect focused on how students experienced comfort even though other emotions and attitudes surfaced during interviews as I explore below. While perhaps somewhat narrow in scope, the affective data I collected proved valuable; however, future research would benefit from exploring more nuanced understandings of affect than I pursued in this study.

**Student Responses to Disruption**

Lily “brought the funk” in unit 3, and students had strong reactions to it. They responded to the assignment in a variety of genres, but regardless of genre, students initially experienced confusion and distrust. This kind of immediate response to disruption is, perhaps, not surprising. As discussed above, prior research in writing studies also finds that students experience anxiety or frustration (although not distrust, as this study uncovered) when presented with unusual writing and reading tasks. Additionally, D’Mello et al.’s research has found that confusion, frustration, and anxiety along with boredom, flow/engagement, delight, surprise, and curiosity are the major emotions students experience during learning (674). These students’ responses to disruption, however, become interesting when coupled with students’ prior attitudes about writing in educational settings and English classes that this study reveals.

All ten students referenced the “essay” or the even more generic “paper”—similar to what Janet Giltrow et al. refer to as the “schoolroom genre” (xi)—in their interviews, noting that they wrote primarily only these in high school English classes and continue to write them in college classes. Given their past and current experiences, students believed they understood and could perform essay conventions with little thought about the genre. As Ashley puts it, “Everyone writes essays. Like, we all know, you know, how to write it. We know the format. It is how it is. That’s how English class goes.” English class, for these students, mostly means essays or papers with clear guidelines and few choices, or as Lauren comments, “usually in English classes you never get that much freedom. It’s structured.”

For some, like Ashley, Lauren, Lucy, Amanda, and Bradley, this familiarity brings positive feelings. Ashley, for example, says: “I’ve always really enjoyed writing essays . . . so in high school, I didn’t really mind. We would just write. We would just get the assignment. Write the paper. Get it back.
Here’s what you did. And then we would go on with reading a book or something.” While only Ashley and Lauren explicitly state that they “enjoy writing essays,” these five students report that they feel very comfortable writing essays and following guidelines, even if it, as Bradley notes, makes them “robots”: “I feel comfortable being a robot. But who doesn’t? Especially being a freshman in college, you’re given a certain way to do things, and you want to do them just to get it right.”

Others, like Michael, Derrick, Mallory, Veronica, and Ryan, also report familiarity with the essay, but the genre brings negative feelings for the same reasons others have positive feelings. Derrick, for instance, finds writing papers “every week boring” because “You’ve been doing it for forever. It’s like instinct.” These five students also express a general dislike for writing, and two explicitly stated that they prefer to compose in other mediums. For example, Veronica explains, “I will write a paper if I have to, but if I do not have to, I would rather express my ideas in a different way because I like it and it’s just a lot easier for me. I am a very visual person. I like photography and art stuff.”

What we see here are two distinct responses to the habitual nature of academic convention: either students appreciate—even enjoy—the comfort and familiarity it brings or they do not. Linda Brodkey’s claim that “composition instruction appears to have succeeded best at establishing a life-long aversion to writing in most people, who have learned to associate a desire to write with a set of punishing exercises called writing in school” appears to be at least somewhat true for these students (135–36). All of these students have powerful attachments to academic convention, and half of the students express an aversion to writing based on them, as Brodkey suggests. However, the other half do not express an aversion—in fact, they appreciate and even like it. Whether students experience a positive or negative attachment to academic convention becomes important as teachers introduce textual disruption because it influenced in this study how students selected their genres for their critique texts, how they experienced the affective progression from confusion and distrust to comfort throughout the unit, and how they defined or experienced comfort at the end of the unit.
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**Textual Responses**

Students produced critique texts in a variety of genres, some less typical to the English classroom than others but none as typical as the essay. The critiques included a magazine article, business letter, recipe, blog, advertisement, PowerPoint, oral speech, and magazine cover (see Table 1). To ascertain the students’ perceptions of typical and atypical genres in the classroom, I asked them in interviews to identify their own and classmates’ critique texts on a continuum from most to least conventional genres for the classroom. From the students’ perspectives, the genres more typical to the classroom are PowerPoint with the oral speech and without, business letter, and blog. The genres less typical are recipes, advertisement, magazine

<p>| Table 1. Genres That Students Critiqued and Genres That Students Selected for Their Critique Texts |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Genre Critiqued</th>
<th>Critique Text</th>
<th>Students’ Perceptions of Critique Texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Syllabi</td>
<td>Business Letter</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Recipes</td>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>CD Covers</td>
<td>PowerPoint</td>
<td>Typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Movie Posters</td>
<td>PowerPoint and Oral Speech</td>
<td>Atypical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Women’s Magazines</td>
<td>Magazine Article</td>
<td>Atypical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley</td>
<td>Fast Food Advertisements</td>
<td>Recipe</td>
<td>Atypical</td>
</tr>
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<td>Derrick</td>
<td>Movie Reviews</td>
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<td>Mallory</td>
<td>Weight Loss Advertisements</td>
<td>Advertisement</td>
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<td>Michael</td>
<td>Vehicle Consumer Reports</td>
<td>Recipe</td>
<td>Atypical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>Music Magazines</td>
<td>Magazine Cover</td>
<td>Atypical</td>
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cover, and magazine article. As I demonstrate throughout the remainder of this section, students’ affective responses to the unit, particularly how they experience “comfort,” help to account for which students chose typical or atypical genres.

**Affective Responses**

Given the prevalence of the essay in their high school writing experiences and the fact that the first two units in this class asked students to compose conventional academic genres, students did not expect those conventions to be disrupted in the third unit. A brief snapshot of the first day of unit 3 from my observation notes illustrates their visible responses to disruption:

Lily began the class by asking students to draw critiques of their roommates, using only images and no words. No one immediately began to draw. Instead, this task caused confused looks with one student asking ‘draw the critique?’ and another wanting clarification, ‘with, like, pictures, you mean?’ A few students started to draw, but before others began, they canvased the classroom, peering at other students’ papers, as if to make sure this was really what they were supposed to be doing.

Again, not surprisingly, students responded to this unusual task in a writing classroom with confusion. But what is surprising is that students who later professed during interviews an aversion to academic convention did not outwardly or enthusiastically embrace the task. For example, Veronica, who reports preferring to compose visual texts, explained that she found the exercise “strange” because “when I’m in English class, we do things. And then when we switch to drawing, it’s like ‘this is not what we are supposed to do.’” One might expect that a student who explicitly states preferring to compose visually would embrace a task that invites the use of images. Yet her understanding of what “we are supposed to do” is so strong that her preference for visual texts seems disregarded.

Since Veronica and four other students stated an aversion to academic convention, we might expect those five to embrace the opportunity to compose differently in this unit. However, regardless of whether students associated positive or negative feelings with academic convention, their reactions to disrupting convention first demonstrated confusion, discomfort, and distrust rather than enthusiasm and comfort.
reactions to disrupting convention first demonstrated confusion, discomfort, and distrust rather than enthusiasm and comfort. In fact, students demonstrated a similar affective progression throughout the unit, moving from confusion and distrust to comfort, although they did so at different rates. Additionally, while all students reported that their comfort levels increased by the end of the unit, different levels of comfort remained. So how does "bringing the funk" feel for students over time? Or, in other words, what are the affective processes students might experience over time when we ask them to compose differently?

Confusion, Trust, Comfort
Nine of the ten students reported confusion in response to the assignment throughout the first one or two weeks of the four-week unit. The confusion stemmed from three issues: the presentation of the writing project, the concept of critique, and the lack of an assigned genre. The presentation of the assignment sheet in the genre of game rules caused initial confusion, as Veronica explains: the game rules "confused me. Like I am used to getting a prompt from her, and like it included these are the things you need to do and these are the things you need to include in your paper. I was like, 'what is this?'" Since this was not the typical way of receiving a writing prompt, students, like Derrick, reported they had to read it several times: "I read it like three times . . . I was like 'what is going on?'"

The concept of critique also caused some confusion, which makes sense since critique was a new concept to many students, and Lily provided the writing project assignment on the first day of the unit prior to learning about critique. Ryan, Mallory, Veronica, and Lucy specifically mentioned that they did not understand critique at first so they could not imagine what the writing project would look like. Other students experienced confusion because the assignment did not designate a specific genre or provide specific criteria, as previous assignments did. Students needed to make several decisions to complete this project, as Michael nicely sums up: “[you] had to go find what [genre] you wanted to critique, then you had to find how you were going to critique it” and “then you had to find a way to present it. Just kinda like you were on your own and making your own curriculum. You weren’t, but you were.” The idea that they had options and needed to make choices seemed especially confusing for most.

In addition to confusion, five students reported they initially expe-
experienced distrust of the assignment. Derrick, for instance, explains that “I thought that at first [we could use genres other than the essay], but I didn’t really think that is what Lily meant.” Similarly, Ashley felt as though the writing project was “almost a trick” “because we had so much freedom . . . I don’t think I was thinking we really do get to pick whatever we want.”

While confusion and distrust dominated the first two weeks of the unit, they lessened throughout the unit (most precipitously during the third week) and were mostly eliminated by the unit’s end. All ten students identified at least one of two experiences as central to reducing confusion and increasing trust: 1) viewing multiple examples of critiques and 2) creating a class list of possible genres for their critique texts. During the second week of unit 3, Lily asked students to review and evaluate a wide variety of critique texts that included posters, songs, blogs, websites, artwork, poems, short stories, comics, speeches, creative nonfiction, video clips, newspaper articles, editorials, and academic articles. Overall, viewing and evaluating these diverse examples appears to have provided students with a broader understanding of what they could compose for their critique texts. For example, Amanda explains that she was less confused when “I got to see so many examples and saw so many examples of things I never would have considered to be part of an English class before. So it just widened my, it just caused me to notice things around me . . . it’s broadened my understanding of what to expect, what’s to come, what’s really considered English, what’s considered a genre, things like that.” Of course, viewing examples may influence and limit students’ rhetorical choices to some extent, but students in this study claimed to affectively benefit from viewing and evaluating diverse options. Providing options then may be valuable the first time students encounter a more innovative writing task but more limiting in later assignments.

After viewing and evaluating examples, students generated together a class list of possible genres to use for their critique texts, including academic essay, advertisement, movie/book review, wedding announcement, freewrite, song, video, poster, magazine, newspaper article, syllabus, letter to editor, mission statement, video game, game rules, political cartoon, blog, email, PowerPoint, speech, rubric, recipe, and art. At the conclusion of this activity, Lily asked, “so how can you present your critique?” to which Bradley responded, “lots of different ways, more than what we listed here.” This class list and the resulting discussion of what their critiques could
look like—“it could be anything” as Derrick remarked during class—eased many students’ distrust and confusion. Ashley explicitly refers to the list as a major turning point for her because “after we made the list, it made me realize, ‘ok, we really do [get to choose whatever we want].’ . . . it’s not what I was expecting at all. So once it became really clear we could do whatever we want, I was like ‘I am going to do whatever I want.’”

While cited less often than these two activities, students also mentioned the emphasis on peer interaction in this unit and Lily’s classroom persona as decreasing confusion and increasing trust. Four students indicated that seeing and hearing examples from peers during in-class activities increased their understanding and provided them with confidence. Students reported relying more heavily on peers for feedback throughout the unit as compared to the first two units because, as Michael comments in his interview, “I didn’t know what I was doing, so I relied a lot on my peers.” In addition, two students (both women) specifically cited Lily’s classroom persona as contributing to their comfort. Both perceived Lily as an open, cheerful, young teacher.

As demonstrated above, students initially responded to the disruption of convention in this classroom with confusion and distrust. Confusion is an understandable response, but student distrust of the assignment was unexpected. This distrust seemed to stem more from the power of academic convention rather than from the assignment itself. In other words, students did not necessarily distrust the assignment; instead, they distrusted the idea that both textual innovation and academic convention is valid and viable in the classroom.

Students did not necessarily distrust the assignment; instead, they distrusted the idea that both textual innovation and academic convention is valid and viable in the classroom. Based on student reports, it is clear that it took time, classroom activities, and peer interactions to overcome the power of academic convention, which, in turn, lessened student confusion and distrust and increased comfort levels.

While all ten students reported increased comfort levels, differing levels of comfort with the assignment and unit remained at the end of four weeks. Amanda and Michael report feeling “very comfortable.” In fact, Amanda remarks that she felt more comfortable with this unit than the prior two “because I got to choose, that privilege of the critique topic and the genre, I think helped me better personalize it and do something I
was most comfortable with.” Four other students felt “more comfortable” or “pretty comfortable.” Mallory, Veronica, and Ashley cite similar reasons as Amanda for their comfort. Mallory, for example, reports, “I felt pretty comfortable in this unit because I felt more able to be myself.” Derrick provides a different reason for his comfort, remarking that he felt comfortable by the unit’s end because “I’m succeeding in [composing something other than an essay]” and “I feel like I have the tools, what it takes to do it again.”

While six students reported feeling very or moderately comfortable, four students—Lauren, Lucy, Bradley, and Ryan—reported feeling comfortable throughout the first two units but never reaching a high level of comfort in this unit, or as Bradley puts it, “I felt comfortable but not 100%.” All four also reported high levels of comfort and satisfaction with conventional academic genres, specifically the essay and PowerPoint. Despite never reaching the levels of comfort that he experienced in the first two units, Bradley states that “I feel better about [the unit]. I realized there are more ways to present your ideas . . . you don’t just have to write a paper . . . I realize there are more options than a paper and a PowerPoint.”

As this data demonstrates, all students’ comfort levels increased over the course of the unit enough so that even those who experienced lower levels of comfort at the unit’s end reported that they were now more comfortable responding to assignments in different ways. Students primarily attributed the increase in comfort levels to certain class activities and peer interactions, but the open-ended nature of the writing project also appears to have increased comfort. As Mallory explains, Lily was “letting us figure out where we feel comfortable as a writer.” While some students find comfort in freedom, others find comfort in safety, which appears to influence students’ rhetorical choices, as I demonstrate in the next section.

**Freedom and Safety**

Five of the six students who reported being very or moderately comfortable in this unit—Veronica, Michael, Derrick, Amanda, and Mallory—expressed an explicit appreciation for and comfort with the level of freedom this writing project and unit granted. These students appreciated the freedom because it allowed them to think in different ways and express themselves. Amanda, who describes unit 3 as one “of exploration and giving us a little more freedom to figure out what our strengths and weaknesses are,” explains that “by giving us more responsibility, [this unit] is kinda forcing us to grow
a little bit. To go out and find not only the critique you wanted to do. You had to go out and figure out what best suited your topic and then go out on top of that and pick the best genre to present it in. So you got a lot more chance to express yourself.” Derrick has a slightly different take, offering that this unit was a “new way of doing stuff. I mean in high school it was research papers and the five paragraph essay. I mean, [this unit] allowed us to think outside the box” and develop “more creative thinking skills.”

Other students found the freedom to move away from academic convention allowed them to express hidden talents. Most likely because of this, these five students composed critique texts that students identified as being atypical within the context of this class. Veronica, for example, explains, “When we got the chance to . . . make our own critique in any form possible, I chose to do it [as a magazine cover] not only because I was doing a magazine critique but because I am more creative and I wanted to let that out. And that’s why I liked it a lot.”

Not all students, however, expressed comfort with the freedom granted by this assignment but, instead, found comfort in safety. Lucy, Ryan, Lauren, Bradley, and Ashley expressed this sentiment, and all but Bradley composed their critique texts in what students identified as a more typical genre. Bradley composed his critique text as a recipe, but he did so after he saw drafts of two of his classmates’ recipes, so even though students identified the recipe as atypical, it still allowed Bradley, in his own words, to “step . . . outside my comfort zone but still stay . . . within it,” or in other words, he felt safe because other students already used the recipe as a critique text. Additionally Lucy, Ryan, Lauren, and Bradley all reported increased but low levels of comfort with this unit at its conclusion, and while Ashley indicated she was comfortable at the unit’s end, she composed her critique text in a typical genre that she also imitated during the first unit. As she explains, “I wanted to do something I know I can do,” and “I didn’t want to stray too far” because “I figured, like, if we did [the business letter] in class at the beginning of the year, then, like, I did fine on that one, so I was like ‘I should probably stick to this.’”

Like Ashley, Ryan and Lucy found comfort in not “straying too far” from what they had previously composed in English classes. Lucy, for instance, explains that “I just always do PowerPoints” because “they’re easier to do and, like, and more pleasing.” She clarifies, they are easier “because we’ve already done them. Already have background and know how to do them.
Instead of like a blog or something never done before.” Lauren too finds safety in typical genres because as she explains “I have two learning disabilities, and writing is one of the only [subjects] that I don’t get affected in, in English. So before I was diagnosed, I just spent hours writing . . . I don’t need any handicaps in [English] class.” Lauren feels comfortable with academic convention because this is where she feels, in her own words, “safe” and “normal.” Lauren’s choice of the blog to present her critique works particularly well for her because, as she says, she still could employ academic convention and be “just a little creative” in her presentation.

As demonstrated in this section, students in this study expressed finding comfort in either safety or freedom, which, in turn, influenced their choice of genre. Figure 1 identifies four quadrants, each of which indicates whether students found comfort in safety or in freedom and whether their resulting text was typical or atypical. Michael, Amanda, Mallory, Derrick, and Veronica, for example, all reported appreciating freedom in writing and composed atypical texts, while Lauren, Lucy, Ryan, and Ashley all reported appreciating safety in writing and composed typical texts. The size of the circles indicates the degree to which they felt comfortable by the end of the unit, with Michael and Amanda feeling very comfortable and Lauren, Lucy, Ryan, and Bradley feeling less comfortable.

As Figure 1 indicates, most students followed a typical and, perhaps, unsurprising pattern: those who appreciate freedom in writing composed atypical texts and felt very or more comfortable at the unit’s end while those who appreciate safety in writing composed typical texts and felt less comfortable by the unit’s end. Bradley, however, stands out as an interesting (and, I think, promising) outlier. Bradley indicated experiencing high levels of discomfort during unit 3 and reported feeling lower levels of comfort at the unit’s end primarily because he feels safe and competent while performing academic convention. Still he selected the recipe, one of the genres students judged as atypical, for his critique text. While he is the only outlier in this study, Bradley provides a bit of hopefulness for writing instructors—it seems that students can be persuaded to take risks, break academic convention, and compose atypical genres regardless of their affective responses and even see the value of doing so.
compose atypical genres regardless of their affective responses and even see the value of doing so. The question then becomes how can we, as writing instructors, encourage all students to innovate in the writing classroom and see its value despite discomfort, confusion, and maybe even resistance?

**Pedagogical Implications and a Look Forward**

Elizabeth Wardle in her recent *CCC* review essay states that “there is a lot to know about both writing and teaching, and our ability to effectively help our students learn depends a great deal on our understanding of language and language users” (671). One aspect of language users that we currently
do not know much about is their affective experiences. We have ideas about student affect based on observation and theory, but we have little empirical research that investigates those ideas by studying students’ perceptions of their affective experiences. This article brings to light through a small empirical research study the affective experiences that language users report experiencing in one FYW classroom. In doing so, it reveals how the habitual nature of academic convention informs students’ affective responses to disruption and textual innovation and how this, in turn, influences students’ rhetorical choices and learning experiences.

By the end of unit 3, students reported increased comfort levels with the disruption of academic convention and textual innovation. Additionally, nearly all students stated that the unit was a valuable learning experience. Four students even claimed that they learned more in this unit than the other two units. Perhaps, because, as Michael puts it, “Like with the first and second unit, she did a lot more teaching. And in the third unit, I felt like she had us learning more. She wasn’t teaching as much as we were learning if that makes any sense.” Specifically, students reported: 1) an increased understanding of critique and analysis; 2) an increased ability to critique texts as well as their own and others’ ideas; 3) a development of their critical thinking skills or, as many put it, their ability to “think outside of the box”; 4) an increased understanding of the importance of audience and purpose; and 5) an expanded idea of what counts as writing, genre, and English class.

A few students also found the unit to be valuable because it asked them to do something with which they were uncomfortable. For example, Bradley explains that the unit benefited him “because I was able to do something that I wasn’t comfortable with. Now I know that I can do this and that I am capable in case given the option.” Overall, despite—or perhaps because of—initial discomfort, students perceived the unit as beneficial not just because of what they learned but also because of how they learned.

Overall, despite—or perhaps because of—initial discomfort, students perceived the unit as beneficial not just because of what they learned but also because of how they learned.
for example, draw from the reflective judgment model and research as well as Barry Kroll’s work to find that “intelligent confusion” rather than “ignorant certainty” can lead students to use evidence to support their judgments, and that “intelligent confusion is a developmental advance over ignorant, dogmatic certainty and . . . it paves the way for more thoughtful, reasoned judgments that may follow” (167). Similarly, cognitive disequilibrium theory posits that learners experience confusion and cognitive disequilibrium yet also deep learning when they “face obstacles to goals, contradictions, incongruities, anomalies, uncertainty, and salient contrasts” and then regain cognitive equilibrium after “thought, reflection, problem-solving, and other effortful deliberations” (D’Mello et al. 672). While D’Mello et al. find that research studies have confirmed this relationship, they point out that confusion itself does not promote deep learning; rather, the cognitive activities that accompany confusion do (674). Thus, confusion alone is most likely of little value to students’ learning but can be productive when writing teachers encourage students to embrace “intelligent confusion” and work through it by providing curricular support structures that aid cognitive activities, as the unit in this study did.

My study confirms that disrupting academic convention and encouraging innovation within the FYW classroom can be a valuable experience for students. But this kind of work is not without its challenges because, as this study also reveals, students have strong attachments to academic convention whether they “enjoy” it or not. The rhetorical transition from typical to atypical genres within the classroom at any level is not always smooth for students, as others have demonstrated (DePalma and Alexander; Powell et al.; and Williams). The affective transition for students also is not always smooth, as this study demonstrates. Students entered this FYW classroom with very clear expectations of what would happen and what they would write within this space, and, to varying degrees, they felt comfortable following academic convention even if writing was not their preferred medium or they did not identify as “strong” or “good” writers. When confronted with disruption and innovation, students (even those who ultimately chose atypical genres) seemed to rhetorically and affectively cling to academic convention they learned in high school, such as the essay and PowerPoint. While not all may “enjoy” academic convention, students in this study believed they understand and can perform it often
with little thought or effort and found some comfort in this familiarity. The habitual power of academic convention is, indeed, strong and potentially problematic. If students automatically perform academic convention with little attention to composing processes or the writing itself, then we should question the efficacy of relying solely on academic convention in the classroom beyond the need to prepare students for uncertain rhetorical futures.

It is important to remember that this is the kind of audience to which we introduce unexpected and, at times, unfamiliar genres, including multimodal and digital ones. As we work to disrupt convention and encourage innovative writing within our FYW classrooms, then, we will surely find that not all students are immediately enthusiastic about the prospect, despite our own enthusiasm for textual innovation. As Parker Beard, Powell et al., and I find, a little over half of students are motivated and enthusiastic to compose atypical texts within the FYW context, while the other half are not. My study builds on these findings to elucidate why students may have these affective responses. As such, writing teachers should be prepared for and not be discouraged or disappointed by the range of affective responses students may have as they move from what they perceive as familiar into unfamiliar genres. We also should remember that student affect may inform students’ rhetorical choices, but it does not need to dictate them, as we saw in the case of Bradley.

With this in mind, my study reveals at least four steps that writing educators can take to work with students’ affective responses rather than resist, ignore, or be disappointed by them so that, in McLeod’s words, “[students’] emotions work for them rather than against them” (“Some” 433). First, we may want to openly acknowledge and discuss students’ affective responses to both convention and innovation within our classes—that is, we might work to cultivate a meta-affective awareness. While this was not a component of unit 3 in this study, in hindsight, students would have benefited from in-class discussion about their prior experiences with and attitudes toward academic convention as well as their experiences of confusion and
distrust in response to the disruptive assignment and unit. These kinds of meta-affective reflections would frame the classroom as a place to discuss the value of being disrupted and left uncertain in its wake both for their immediate futures in the university and their distant futures outside of it.

Second, writing instructors, too, need to take risks and experience disruption themselves within the classroom context. For instance, presenting the writing prompt in the atypical genre of game rules rather than the conventional genre of a writing prompt allowed students to see Lily innovating, while, at the same time, reinforcing that the assignment still had guidelines and clear goals. Asking students to take risks and compose atypical texts while the teacher sticks to business as usual sends a mixed message. The chance of students seeing the value of atypical genres is less likely if a teacher continues to demonstrate academic convention and, thus, implicitly suggests its superiority or "rightness."

Third, we can incorporate curricular support structures that assist students with both the rhetorical and affective transitions they will encounter as they adopt atypical genres. While Michael perceived Lily teaching less in this unit, as noted above, I carefully crafted and orchestrated activities to support students throughout the unit. A lot of teaching was still occurring—it was just behind the scenes. Out of these activities, students reported that viewing and discussing multiple examples of critique texts greatly increased their comfort levels with the unit and their confidence in their abilities. As mentioned above, while providing examples may limit their rhetorical choices, the affective benefits may outweigh this risk at least the first time students encounter a more innovative writing task. They also reported that peer interaction, review, and support were essential. When introducing innovative genres, then, students might benefit from incorporating these elements as well as exploring others.

Fourth, allowing students some choice in terms of what kinds of genres they compose in response to an assignment seems useful as students move away from academic convention. What students in this study report learning reinforces Shipka’s findings that the multimodal task-based framework in which students have choice provides many rhetorical benefits. The results of this study build on these findings, suggesting that choice also might provide affective benefits. Several students reported that since they could choose the genre of their critiques texts, they were able to select atypical
texts they felt more comfortable composing. This means that while some students selected typical genres and others atypical to the classroom, all students engaged in some level of risk taking, disrupted academic convention, and felt more comfortable with innovation by the unit’s end. Allowing student choice when first disrupting academic convention rather than dictating a specific genre might aid students not only in their rhetorical but also their affective transitions.

These are just a few examples of how writing instructors, especially those within the FYW context, can work productively with students’ affective responses to the disruption of convention and textual innovation. In addition to further considering pedagogical implications of student affect, we continue to need more empirical research on students’ affective experiences in writing classrooms. That research should engage findings in affect studies and employ multiple methods, including surveys, observations, self-reflections, and interviews, so that we gain detailed insight into how students experience affect in the classroom and how affect influences their learning. As mentioned above, future research focused solely on affect should pursue more nuanced understandings of emotions related to comfort, such as anxiety, fear, enjoyment, and relief. Finally, future research should probe other elements of student affect—specifically their attitudes, beliefs, and motivations toward writing, convention, and innovation—as this study just begins to scratch the surface. Ultimately, my hope is that both educators and researchers will build upon these and others’ findings regarding student affect to make better use of “the funk” in their own classrooms so that we and students can both rhetorically and affectively follow Banks’s encouragement to “take flight into intellectual, pedagogical, and programmatic places that we might partially see, but cannot yet fully know” (272).

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Writing Prompt for Unit Three

Critiquing a Genre Rules / Instructions

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<th>Critiquing a Genre Game rules</th>
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<td>Average Price: Priceless</td>
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<td>Playing Time: 4 weeks</td>
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Object of “Critiquing a Genre”:
Your goal is to move through the steps of the game by developing a critique of a chosen genre, writing something that shows others why your genre needs to change, and reflecting upon what you wrote to show your critique. The player who demonstrates the most rhetorical savvy wins the game.

Contents of “Critiquing a Genre”:
Your “Critiquing a Genre” game should consist of 1) a chosen genre to critique, 2) a worthy and insightful critique of your chosen genre that you present in a manner of your choosing, 3) a self-reflection piece in which you explain—with detailed evidence and analysis—how and why you chose to present the critique as you did.

Game Preparation:
You will choose a genre (one that is of interest or is familiar) and critique that genre using box 4.1 in Scenes of Writing. You must then decide what critique of the genre you will use throughout the remainder of the game.

Game Play:
The official “Critiquing a Genre” game rules state that each player must participate in and complete the “game preparation” before beginning the game and each individual step of the game before moving onto the next. If a player fails to do so, he or she will be declared rhetorically unfit and is out of the game. Each time a player completes a step, he or she receives a kindly nod and daily writing points from the teacher. The rules also state that all players must begin the game October 20th and end the game by November 12th.

Notes
1. See, for example, “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures” (New London Group); Passions, Pedagogies, and 21st Century Technologies (Hawisher and Selfe); “Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Scholarship”
(Ball); Writing New Media (Wysocki); “Thinking about Multimodality” (Takayoshi and Selfe); Writing in the 21st Century (Yancey); and “New Media Scholarship and Teaching: Challenging the Hierarchy of Signs” (Cushman).

2. Sullivan acknowledges that “there is already a considerable body of scholarship suggesting we develop a more capacious and inclusive model of academic writing,” specifically referencing the work of Heard, Nicotra, Petraglia, Rankind-Robertson et al., Summerfield and Anderson, Wardle (“Mutt Genres”), and Yancey (“Made”) (Sullivan 21). What Sullivan adds to the conversation is a focus on creativity and creativity scholarship.

3. Please see McLeod’s Notes on the Heart for her exploration of the relationship between emotion and cognition during the writing process.

4. See D’Mello et al.’s chapter in The International Handbook of Metacognition and Learning Technologies for their overview of affect-learning connections theory and research.

5. Refer to “Capturing Individual Uptake: Toward a Disruptive Research Methodology” (Bastian) for a detailed description of research study design and methods.

6. Eight students were eighteen years of age, one was nineteen, and one was twenty-seven. Eight students identified as Caucasian, one as Latino/Hispanic and Caucasian, and one as Asian. Eight students reported English as their only language spoken fluently, and one reported speaking both English and Korean fluently. Eight students reported that parent/guardian annual income exceeded $60,000 a year, with four students falling between $100,000 and $250,000, one student reported income of $10,000–$19,000, and one student omitted a response. Six attended public schools, and four attended private schools for elementary, middle, and high school.

7. Shipka also finds that the multimodal task-based framework for composing is frustrating and time-consuming for students (291).

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