On the first morning of her summer break, Meghan bends over a ruled composition book. She writes continuously, lifting her head only briefly to read prompts projected on a screen: What do you need to get better at in your writing? What do you want to learn about writing during the next two weeks? Along with forty-nine other high school students, Meghan is part of an elective two-week academic writing workshop. Each day begins with a freewrite exercise like this one, designed to help students develop what the workshop directors call “fluency.” In her first entry, Meghan confesses: “I have a hard time writing anything other than poems. . . . I hope [this program] helps me overcome the mental blocks I get when I write academic essays. I mainly like to write poems.” Meghan’s division of writing into two contrasting categories—enjoyable (poems) and “hard” (everything else, but particularly academic essays)—matches the attitude of many students in our composition classrooms who find academic writing more challenging and less pleasurable than the personal writing they do (Addison and McGee; Hidi et al.). Like Meghan, many students write prolifically in other composing environments, but their enthusiasm for writing often disappears in schools.

One response to this “disconnect in writing practices” (Yancey 27) is for teachers to align in-school and out-of-school writing tasks—to design in-school writing experiences that share qualities of the out-of-school writing students prefer. Equally important is the need for teachers to bridge the two writing domains by asking students to reflect on the writing skills and strategies they use in out-of-school writing and to consider how they can connect those to the less familiar arena of academic writing (Reiff and Bawarshi). A third response, and the focus of this article, is to help students capitalize on what Jenny Rice calls para-expertise, or knowledge gained through lived experience that students carry in their bodies without necessarily being able to articulate.

Students possess many kinds of para-expertise. For example, Rice argues that students understand school architecture and design because they repeatedly move through classrooms, hallways, gymnasiums, and lunch rooms. This embodied experience imparts knowledge that is different than the disciplinary expertise of the architect or designer or engineer. It doesn’t replace those expertises; it simply offers something to lay beside (para) them. Similarly, students develop educational para-expertise from years of schooling. Their knowledge of pedagogy is not the same as a teacher’s, but their lived experiences in classroom activities, routines, and practices have given them pedagogical para-expertise. They can say quite a bit about teaching and learning, and they know even more than they can say.

The goal of a para-expertise perspective is not to reject traditional forms of expertise but to draw on students’ full range of competencies. Because para-expertise is often tacit, teachers face the challenge of recognizing, validating, and nurturing the...
experiential and embodied knowledge(s) that students possess alongside the more easily discernible categories of expertise our rubrics measure. This article explores the concept of para-expertise in the writing classroom using Meghan’s freewrite journal as a limited case study. Situating Meghan’s text in a discussion of para-expertise and reading it through that lens, I suggest how a writing teacher might respond to Meghan’s writing and her self-diagnosed writing “blocks.” I also consider practices that can help students productively use their para-expertise in academic writing.

EXAMINING PARA-EXPERTISE AND STUDENT WRITING
Rice conceptualizes para-expertise broadly—in her definition, almost any embodied experience leads to para-expertise. Yet as a writing teacher and researcher, I find that students most often use para-expertise they have developed through involvement in visual and performing arts. This is perhaps not surprising since writing bears similarity to these other forms of composing (Palmeri 25). The para-expertise of the dancer or musician doesn’t match models of expertise common in writing pedagogies. It is not disciplinary knowledge that writing teachers pass to students, nor is it writing skill that students acquire through practice. Rather, para-expertise opens an additional category of writing expertise—not replacing but resting alongside traditional notions of expertise. Thus, students who lack conventional writing knowledge and skills are not empty. Even if they can’t articulate their para-expertise, they know something about composing with sound, movement, and physical materials because of their lived experiences with other creative endeavors.

By traditional measures, however, most students in the workshop Meghan attended lack writing expertise. Many have failed a language arts course, scored at or below proficient on standardized language arts tests, or been identified by a teacher as potentially benefiting from intensive writing instruction. The workshop, a collaboration between a public school district and a large research university, offers these students a chance to improve their writing skill and earn recovery credit. I observed the workshop’s instruction, worked with a small group of students as they wrote argumentative essays, and conducted an IRB-approved study of students’ experiences in the workshop. I invited all students to voluntarily donate their daily freewrite journals to my research. Twenty students (40 percent of participants) contributed their journals.

Because Meghan was not in my small group, I learned what I know about her from her journal. I chose her journal for this analysis because she consistently expresses doubt about her ability to succeed in the workshop. Meghan’s journal is one of six that I coded “writer’s block.” I applied this code when writers mention mechanics, bodily dispositions, sensations, cognition, or emotions that interfere with the writer’s ability or motivation to write. While 30 percent of students reference writer’s block in some way, Meghan is the only student who does so repeatedly. Altogether, I labeled six segments in her journal with the code “writer’s block” (compared to two segments for another student and just one segment for the remaining four “blocked” students). Additionally, the segments I coded in Meghan’s journal were significantly longer than other students’ segments. Sometimes entire entries focus on writer’s block—interrupted only occasionally by other topics.
In foregrounding her writing struggles, Meghan paints herself as a writer who lacks expertise. Yet by one measure, Meghan conquers her writer’s block. In the end, she produces 3,019 words, well above the journal average of 2,290; only five students write more words than she does. Still, Meghan is never convinced that she has overcome her problem, and indeed her longest entries are notable for their unrelied attention to writer’s block and their incessant repetition. For example, the clause “I don’t know what to write” does not appear in her first two journal entries, but in her last six entries Meghan uses the clause 104 times, 38 of these in her second to last entry alone, where those six words account for 32 percent of the total.

Significantly, Meghan does not try to overcome her writer’s block by using strategies she learns during the workshop (templates for forming paragraphs and essays). This is especially surprising since in an early journal entry she writes, “I hope taking this class will help me learn how to over come the mental blocks I get when writing structured essays because I did really bad on the one Monday” (a timed writing assessment on the workshop’s first day). She also writes appreciatively about learning the templates “more in depth.” But when faced with a writing task similar to the one she “did really bad on,” she does not use the things she learned. This passage from a late journal entry is typical of most of her entries:

I don’t know what to write. I don’t know what to write. What should I write. I hope lunch is good. I don’t know what to write. What should I write. I don’t know what to write. What should I write. I hope this ends soon. I don’t know what to write. What should I write. What should I write. My hand hurts. I hope we get a second guitar player so we can play songs with guitar harmonies. I don’t know what to write. I hope I finish my essay today @ least the first draft. I don’t know what to write anymore.

After a brief response to the daily prompt, Meghan launches into a lament about her “mental block.” Over and over, day after day, she says, “I don’t know what to write.” And even as her entries grow longer (one sign of “fluency”), that length is unlikely to help Meghan on a computer-scored essay since the computer may recognize (and discount) her abundant repetition. From a human-reader standpoint, this text appears equally ineffective.

However, as Lad Tobin reminds writing instructors, students’ texts should be “interpreted, discussed, [and] marveled at” because “writing students [are], amazingly enough, writers” (6). So I approach this text again, looking for the strategies Meghan uses rather than those she avoids. This orientation helps me see that Meghan explores solutions to her writing problems by drawing on para-expertise she has developed in other composing contexts. Focusing on Meghan’s para-expertise helps me lay aside, for now, my expectations for Meghan to demonstrate disciplinary expertise she has not yet acquired. Instead, I see Meghan using her para-expertise as a form of invention, a way to work around her “mental blocks.”
RECOGNIZING A STUDENT’S PARA-EXPERTISE

To discover what this text reveals about Meghan’s para-expertise, I draw on everything I know about Meghan, gleaned from ten freewrite journal entries. I remember that she writes poems. I also know that she is a musician. In fact, she makes some mention of music—songs she is learning, musicians she admires, “gigs” with her band—in all but one journal entry. This suggests that Meghan is almost always thinking about music while she writes. At most, sentences about music account for just 17 percent of any entry, but sentences about music tend to be longer and more complex than those about other topics. In her second to last journal entry (the source of the passage above) sentences about non-music topics average 6.21 words. Music-focused sentences are more than three times longer, with an average of 19.25 words. Music is on Meghan’s mind as she writes, and it appears to also be in her body.

Returning to the passage above, I see evidence that Meghan uses compositional devices more closely associated with music and poetry than academic writing—notably repetition and rhythm—to address feeling defeated by the task she has been assigned. Thematically her pattern of repetition juxtaposes lines expressing frustration with questions and wishful statements:

- I don’t . . . /I don’t . . . /What should . . . /I hope . . .
- I don’t . . . /What should . . . /I don’t . . . /I hope . . .
- I don’t . . . /What should . . . /What should . . . /My hand hurts
- I hope . . . /I don’t . . . /I hope . . . /I don’t (anymore)

Because Meghan writes this passage as continuous text rather than separating it into lines and stanzas, I suspect that she creates this pattern of repetition intuitively rather than consciously. From her prior experiences with poetry, repetition may resonate in her body below full consciousness. Significantly only one of her “I hope . . .” clauses specifically refers to academic writing. Furthermore, none of her “wishes” are about overcoming her immediate obstacle—that is, she never hopes that she will “know what to say.” This suggests that she is only partially writing to the task at hand, which may explain her cursory answers to the prompt questions. In its use of repetition, then, her writing seems more affective than cognitive.

The interjection of the short sentence describing Meghan’s unpleasant physical sensation (“My hand hurts”) supports this claim. Her aching hand represents an affective response that has risen to the level of conscious awareness. The embodied experience of writing may have provoked additional involuntary mental, emotional, and physical responses. She is conscious of her hand but perhaps insensitive to the other ways writing registers on her body. Nevertheless, the interjection of this sentence affirms the affective quality of Meghan’s writing.

In addition to repetition, Meghan seems to also intuitively employ rhythm. The contrast between the iambic meter of the repeated first line (“I don’t know what to write”) and the consecutive spondaic feet of the following line (“What should I write?”) emphasizes Meghan’s unexpected appeal to an audience and highlights the rhetorical aspect of her writing. The addition of “anymore” to the last line punctuates this declaration. In fact, it is this sort of linguistic exclamation point that prompts my decision to consider this passage a textual unit. Again, Meghan’s compositional choices may be things she feels in her body, not things she consciously decides. If so, her experiences with poetry appear to have given her para-expertise in the way repetition and rhythm capture and lead an audience’s attention. In reproducing those strategies here, she links her para-expertise to academic writing.

The repetition and rhythm in Meghan’s text reflect her experiences with music as well as poetry. Across many musical genres, composers rely on three basic chords to create harmonic patterns. Because Meghan similarly relies on three repeated sentences (I don’t . . . , What should . . . , I hope . . . ), I suspect
that she may be repurposing her musical knowledge as she writes. In fact, when I assign common chord symbols from the key of C major to each sentence of her text, the result resembles a 16-bar (measure) pattern typical of blues music:

\[
\begin{align*}
| C | C | F | G | \\
| C | F | C | G | \\
| C | F | F | Dm | \\
| G | C | G | C |
\end{align*}
\]

The strongest way to close a composition in the key of C major is with a G-C chord cadence. Meghan repeats this cadence structure twice, after preparing her listener for that resolution by inserting the unique “my hand” line (represented above by the D minor chord). The compositional similarity between Meghan’s text and a harmonic pattern that she appears to have internalized through embodied experience provides additional evidence of her para-expertise. Furthermore, read as music, her composition gains flow, cohesion, and the sense it lacks as an academic text.

Meghan seems to rely on her para-expertise as she struggles with an uncomfortable composing task. Her use of repetition and rhythm—qualities that are felt in the body—suggests that Meghan draws on compositional moves she has learned in other contexts to “maneuver through the expectations” of a new composing situation (LeMesurier 313). Her experiential and embodied knowledge guides her writing. And even as she complains “I don’t know what to say,” she says something by forging connections across the affective compositional spaces she inhabits.

### Using Para-Expertise to Move a Writer Forward

Yet pedagogy is more than appreciation. A para-expertise framework must also help Meghan improve her text, must guide more productive connections between the affect and competence she feels in music and poetry and a writing context in which she feels incompetent. The following recommendations can help teachers use para-expertise to improve student writing.

### Ask Students about Their Para-Expertise

Because a para-expertise approach to pedagogy concentrates on the ways students “existing habits can be made differently productive” (Boyle 550), teachers must recognize existing habits. Although I didn’t know Meghan and had limited access to her writing, she provided important clues about her para-expertise. Like Meghan, students will sometimes mention hobbies, talents, or experiences that teachers can connect to their writing. But students don’t always offer textual clues about para-expertise, and teachers usually see texts in isolation rather than as part of a series, like the journal entries, that hints at ongoing compositional influences. Perhaps most critically, teachers responding to 180 essays often do not have time to search for that kind of evidence.

A possible solution is to enlist students in identifying their own para-expertise by asking them to write about their out-of-school activities or to list all the ways they “compose.” Teachers might ask students to reflect on the non-writing experiences or activities a particular writing assignment reminds them of and to describe the skills and abilities they developed in those prior activities. Teachers can also introduce students to the concept of para-expertise and ask them how they come to know what they know in non-writing fields (Rice). While Meghan wasn’t prompted in any of these ways, she nevertheless provided information that helped me recognize her para-expertise. In my research and teaching, I am surprised how often students, even without prompting, tell me that writing an essay reminds them of some other way of composing—sculpting, acting, music, painting, etc. We can learn much about students’ para-expertise simply by asking questions and listening.

### Apply the Lens of Para-Expertise to the Text

My background in music and literature helped me appreciate Meghan’s para-expertise, but we won’t always have the knowledge to make sense of our students’ knowledge. Our expertise, however, is not the focus. The teacher-generated analysis I provided above is only one way to incorporate para-expertise
in the writing classroom. Many pedagogical applications of para-expertise can be student driven. Consequently, students and teachers do not need to have the same expertise to realize the pedagogical benefits of para-expertise.

For example, besides asking students to identify their para-expertise, we might have them also analyze their own texts, looking for evidence of that para-expertise. After students complete a draft, we might ask them where the writing resembles another activity in which they participate. Students may point to places where they add syntactic or thematic layers (as in sculpting), leap back and forth (as in dance), or cut to a new scene or idea without warning (as in filmmaking). Significantly, students may see the influence of para-expertise in places where the text doesn’t yet meet conventional academic standards (as in Meghan’s case). Guided by a lens of para-expertise, teachers and students can evaluate these textual features more positively as markers of diverse compositional competencies and as resources borrowed from various composing domains. This kind of analysis keeps students engaged with their texts beyond first or even final drafts. Conversations about para-expertise can thus extend the writing process, guide revision, encourage reflection and meta-cognition, and help students see their own texts as worthy of sustained attention.

GUIDE STUDENTS IN TRANSLATING THEIR PARA-EXPERTISE

As they analyze their writing, students may discover that they, like Meghan, have drawn on para-expertise intuitively and automatically, without much thought for contextual appropriateness. In short, they have transported, but not necessarily translated, their para-expertise. Successful translation of para-expertise, like successful language translation, requires that what gets transported feels right in the new domain. Teachers can help students create a good match between their para-expertise and academic writing. Individual conferences with students are an ideal forum for this translation work, but teachers can also use scaffolded instruction to help students evaluate their translation of para-expertise.

If I were conferencing with Meghan, I might explain how academic writers—like poets and musicians—use repetition and rhythm to create prosody and to enhance rhetorical effect (anaphora, mesarchia, isocolon, etc.). Together we might review how, in any composing domain, repetition and rhythm alone cannot sustain an audience’s attention. Successful music, like academic writing, also requires variation and melody. I might suggest that Meghan create a “melody” (or thesis) for her composition by answering a variation of her repeated question: Why don't I know what to say?

A scaffolding activity might include leading the class through an analysis of a text, looking, as I did in Meghan’s text, for strategies that seem to come from the writer’s non-writing experiences and then evaluating the effectiveness of those strategies in an academic essay. Together students and teacher can decide if the writer has successfully translated or merely transported para-expertise. The class might then discuss how the writer could improve the match between para-expertise and academic writing. Having practiced together on a sample text, students can then turn the lens of para-expertise on their own texts. Teachers might ask students to write a few paragraphs analyzing and evaluating their own use of para-expertise. This scaffolded process improves the text while expanding students’ writing knowledge and reflective abilities.
IDENTIFYING THE PAYOFFS OF PARA-EXPERTISE

The pedagogical activities outlined above are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. Rather, they represent some of the ways teachers can use Rice’s theory of para-expertise in the writing classroom. Perhaps more importantly, they illustrate why teachers might want to do so. At the heart of Rice’s theory lies appreciation for “the experiential, embodied, and tacit knowledge” students bring to their writing (119). Para-expertise helps teachers understand and validate students’ writing choices as evidence of composing experience and skill. Applied pedagogically, para-expertise can increase students’ academic writing skills and knowledge.

By aligning the students’ and teachers’ knowledge and skill, a para-expertise approach to pedagogy is additive in both directions of the student-teacher relationship. The students’ expertise helps teachers reconceptualize writing, and the teacher’s expertise helps students productively adapt their existing expertise to academic writing—to more successfully “sell” the knowledge they already have (Nowacek). Used as a framework for reading student writing and for creating pedagogies that capitalize on students’ strengths, para-expertise can benefit both students and teachers.

WORKS CITED


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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

This lesson asks students to reflect on their writing process and helps the teacher learn more about students’ habits and techniques as writers. Students begin by reading and analyzing the poem “The Writer” by Richard Wilbur, particularly discussing the use of extended metaphor. Students then reflect on their own writing habits, compare themselves as writers to the writer in the poem, and brainstorm possible metaphors for themselves as writers. Finally, students complete one of several recommended projects to extend the metaphor describing themselves as writers. Throughout the process, students share their work in small groups. http://bit.ly/IJ4TqVs