

# Rewriting Roles in Social Work:

*Rhetorical Conflicts  
across Educational  
and Professional  
Contexts*

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## Our initial research question

How do students in a Master of Social Work program negotiate writing demands as they transition between workplace and academic contexts?

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How do writers' **identities and self-perception** facilitate/complicate these transitions?

Up to **87%**



of social workers'  
time is spent  
**writing**

[W]riting is a **high-stakes activity**. Writing in social work education courses . . . is the main form of student assessment, and students pass or fail depending on their success in producing the writing required of the institution. Writing is also a core activity in professional practice, central to processes of assessing people's needs and in making the case for particular services to meet these needs.

(Lillis et al., n.d.)

(Lillis & Gray, 2016)

# Our Project

- Longitudinal case studies
- Focus on individual experiences
  - Not comprehensive; depth rather than breadth
- Interested in following students moving between **contexts**
- Data collection nearly complete; beginning analysis



3 participants over 2 years  
in MSW program

## Data Collection



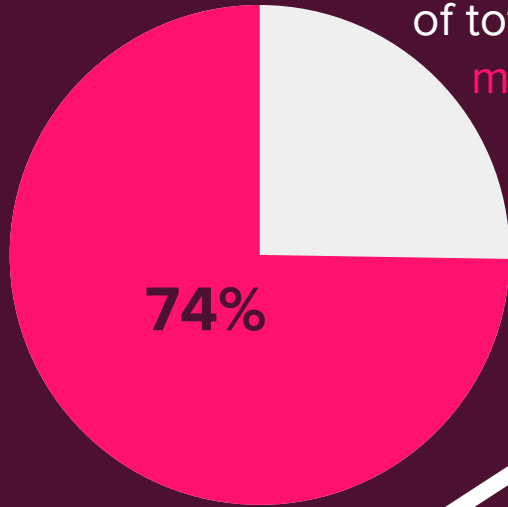
Interviews with  
participants, faculty,  
supervisors



Collection of  
academic and  
workplace  
documents

Nearly **three quarters**

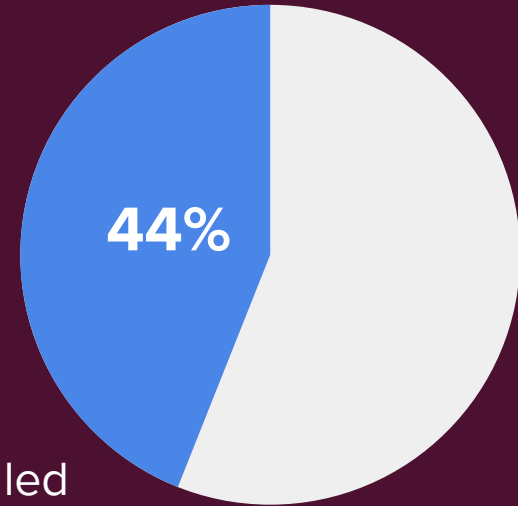
of total graduate enrollment was in **master's programs** during 2016-2017.



Graduate enrollment in public administration and services (92.6%) was heavily concentrated in master's/other programs.

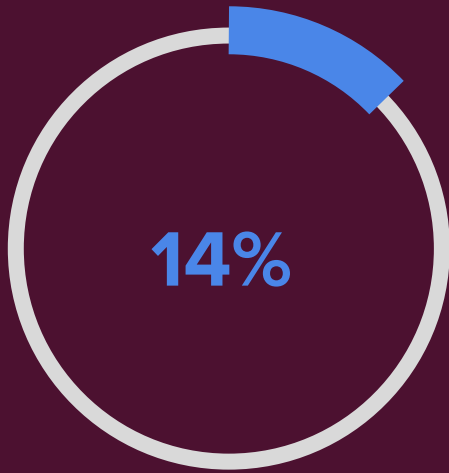
*Graduate enrollments have been steadily on the rise.*

**44%** of graduate students in public administration and services are enrolled **part-time.**

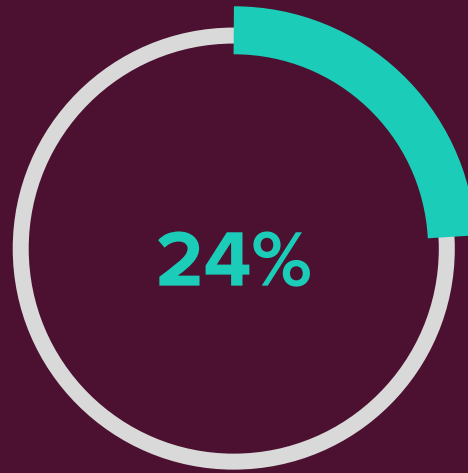


(Okahana & Zhou, 2018)

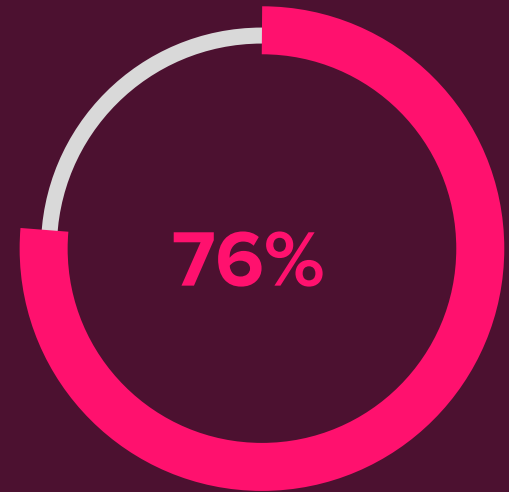
# Northeast State College



Graduate students make up **14%** of student body.

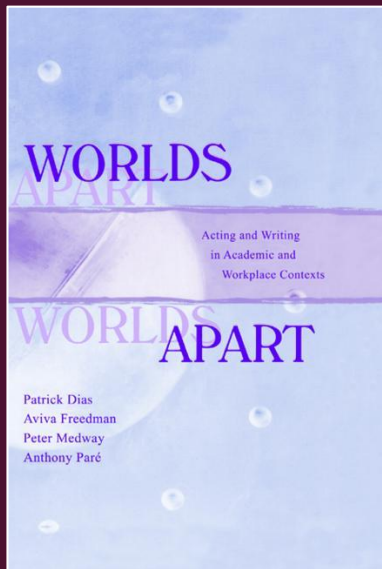


Nearly **1/4** of graduate students are enrolled in the **Master of Social Work** program.



**3/4** of those enrolled in graduate credit are enrolled part time.

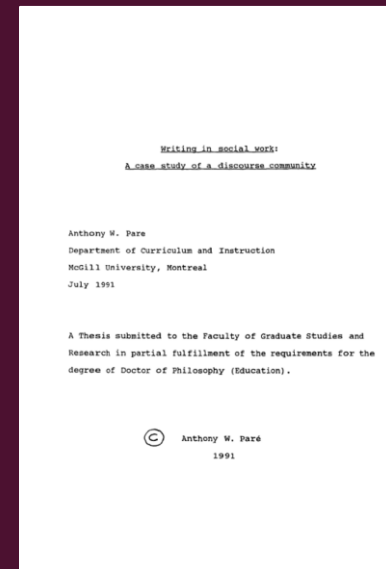
# Other Research



Dias et al: *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts* (1999)

The image is a screenshot of the WiSP (Writing in Social Work Practice) website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the WiSP logo and three menu items: 'Project news and updates', 'Spotlight on methodology', and 'Social Worker Views'. Below the navigation bar, the main content area has a dark blue background with a faint image of a person's face. The heading 'Welcome to WiSP' is in yellow. Below it, the subtitle 'Writing in professional social work practice in a changing communicative landscape (WiSP)' is also in yellow. The main text is white and describes the project's goals. On the right side, there is a section titled 'Our Aims' with three bullet points. At the bottom, there is a search bar with the text 'Search.....' and a magnifying glass icon.

Lillis et al: *Writing in Social Work Practice* (ongoing)



Paré: *Writing in Social Work: A Case Study of a Discourse Community* (dissertation, 1991)

# Methods

## Study Design/Data Collection

- Qualitative case studies
- Basic interpretive research

## Analysis

- Typological analysis
- Narrative analysis
- Corpus analysis



# Why we won't be talking about **transfer**

(Or maybe we will be,  
but we're thinking  
about it differently.)

Expanding the frame for both the **entrance** to an opportunity and the **exit** from that particular opportunity enlarges the site for students to find **personal connection**, **imagine future selves**, and immerse themselves in researching, writing, and learning content, actions vital to strengthening agency, engagement with people and materials, and learning for transfer.

(Eodice et al, 2016)

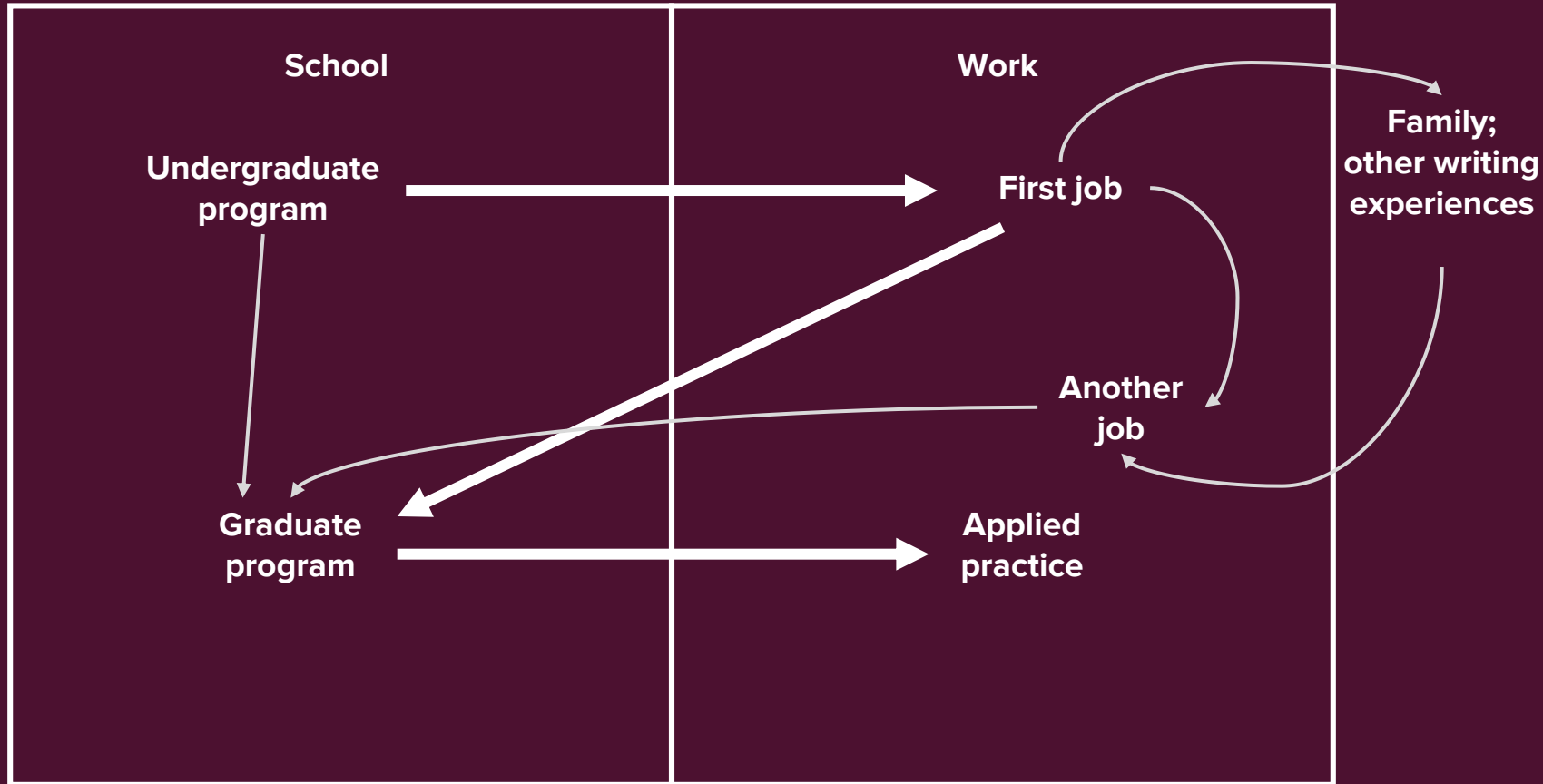
**School**

**Work**

**Undergraduate  
program**



**First job**



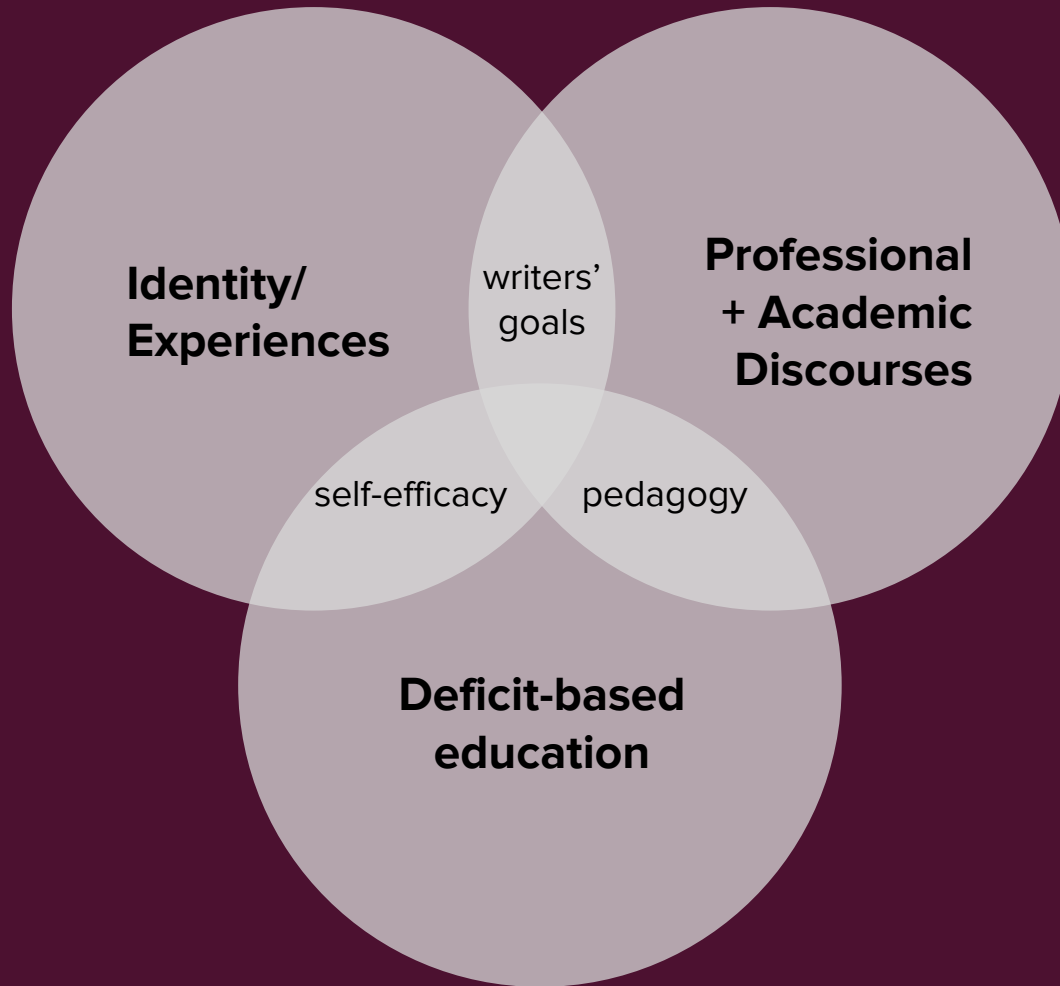
# Why we won't be talking about **transfer**

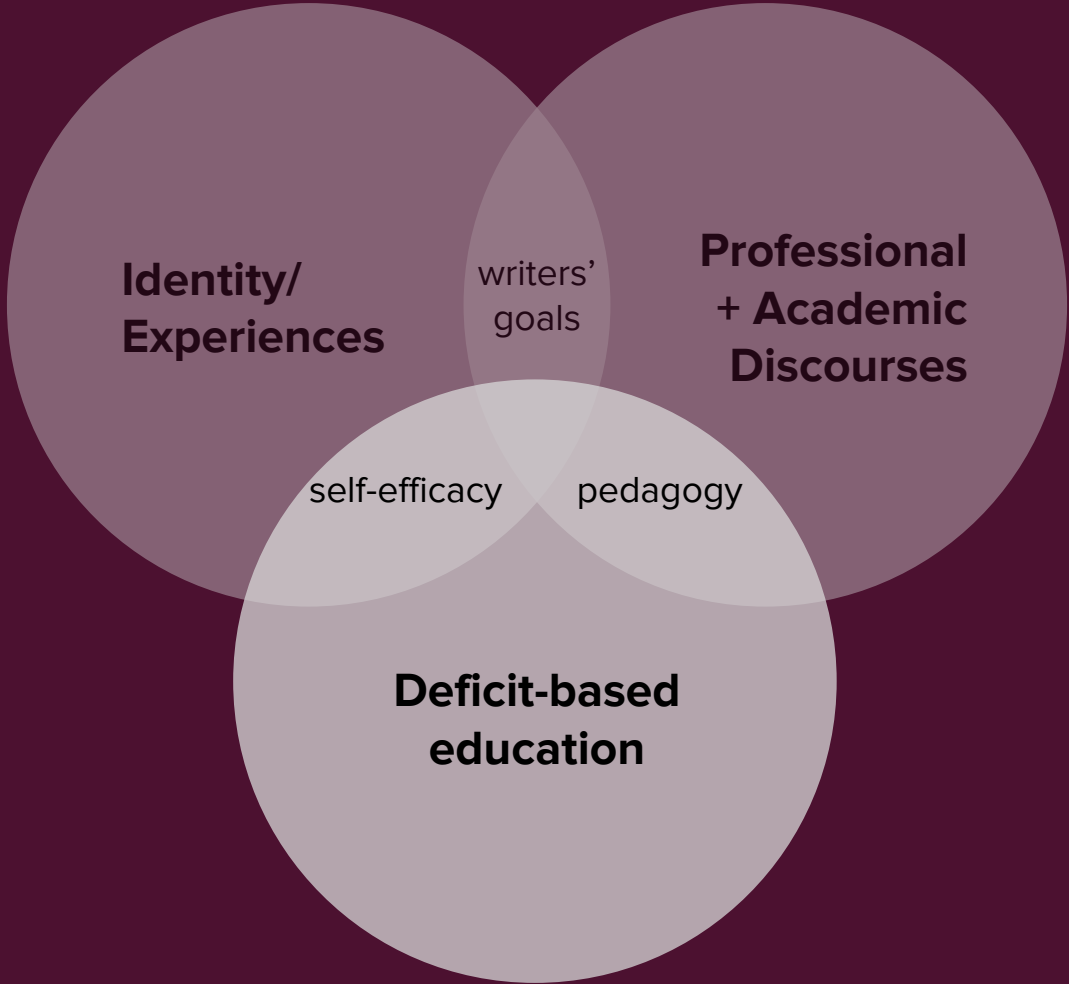
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(Eodice et al, 2016)

Some of  
what we'll  
be talking  
about  
today:

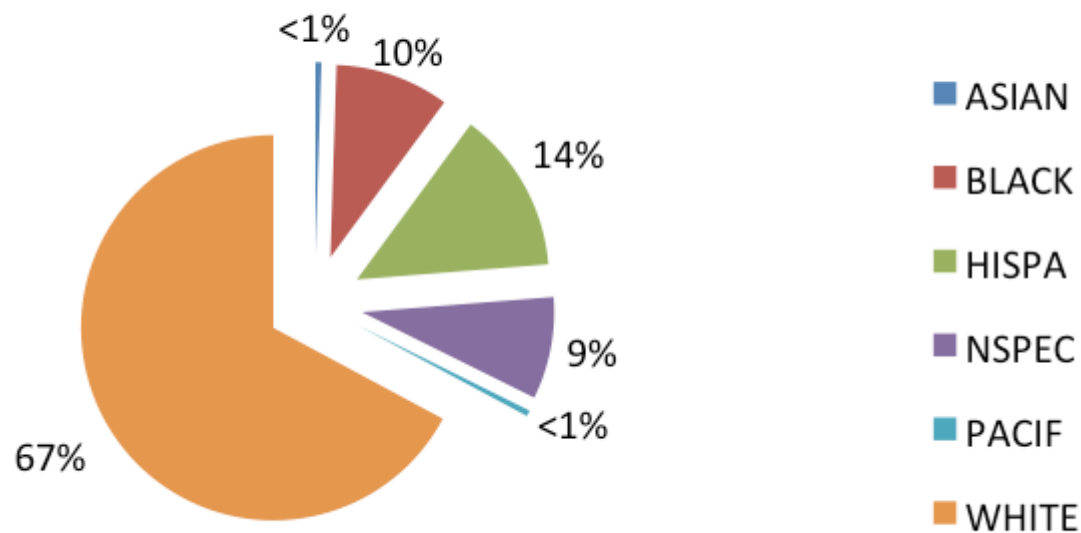




**Autonomous and deficit accounts of writing and literacy are pervasive in social work contexts of education and practice** — as in all public domains — with the 'problem' of writing often being construed as an individual deficit and in terms of widely used, but not necessarily meaningful, categories such as — spelling, grammar, style, clarity.

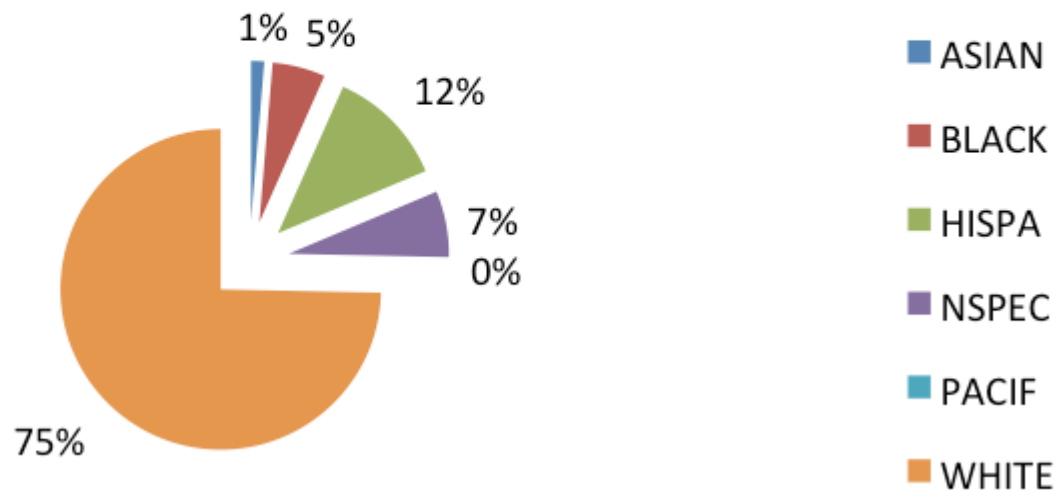
(Lillis & Rai, 2011)

## 2017 MSW Applicant Ethnicity





## 2016 MSW Full Time Student Ethnicity



**Interviewer:** [W]hat are some of your general feelings about writing at this point? And experiences?

Um, I hate it. I absolutely — like, *I honestly hate it more than I've ever hated anything*. Because it's so — it's so difficult. Because I am — I have to erase everything I learned, obviously, because what I was doing was complete crap. So it's almost, I mean... I have to — I have to look at other people's writing to understand how my papers are supposed to look. And even then, it still doesn't make sense to me because, I mean, how do you take somebody else's work and try to put it into your own words so you're not plagiarizing it — to try to get the way they want the paper. So if they want the paper a certain way, they want you to use certain words. So how do you take other people's — not other people's samples — but take your information, apply it the way they want it, and not make it sound plagiarized.

Okay, so... nontraditional student. You know, I got my GED. I dropped out, got my GED, went back to school. So it's been a long process, as far as like getting my Bachelor's, and then especially getting into my Master's program — I never thought that I would do it. Like ***I'm figuring that people will tell me that "you don't belong here."*** Especially since my writing in grad — ***my writing in undergrad I never had a problem with really, but I've come here and they've completely ripped it apart.*** I had to start all over again.

—Eva

[Professor Carver] was my professor. And he totally ripped my paper apart. **He was like, "This is not an MSW paper."** And then he had asked me . . . because he has access to all those, like, applications stuff . . . he had asked me: **Did someone help me with my paper for the application to get in here?** . . . he actually asked me if someone had written it for me.

—Eva

“My expectations are high. I don’t think unrealistically high, but they’re high. And I think that students who have me and who’ve had me will say “he pays a lot of attention to writing.” And maybe more than some of my colleagues . . . I know this sounds like a cliché, we’ve all heard this a thousand times: ***I think poor writing, sloppy writing often reflects poor thinking and sloppy thinking.*** So I believe in that, and I think sharpening writing skills can enhance the quality of people’s thinking.

—Professor Carver

I'm training people who are going to be working with people who are clinically depressed, abusing heroin, abusing their kids, struggling with poverty, have no place to live and I know that clear thinking matters, it makes a difference. I don't like sloppy thinking, so I do what I can to sharpen people's thinking and in addition to cognitive skills, I think writing is one piece of that. ***We're getting people to think about how precise they need to be with their words, how carefully they need to craft a message, they need to proofread. To me it's not just about the writing, it's about the process and being a very careful practitioner and I think being careful means that you care about your writing as much as you care about what comes out of your mouth in a meeting, when you're talking about a client's life, your recommendations for a client.***

—Professor Carver

What [Professor Brooks] is finding is that the students who are having the most trouble with writing and all those things are students of color, or students that have come from, you know, depressed backgrounds. . . . It actually moved me. They've been aware of it, but they haven't done anything about it. . . . You know, that first paper that I wrote... internalizing that grade and having the knowledge that they know that people with my background are having issues, and they still haven't done anything about it... Who knows what my experience would have been? It's been a very traumatic... I don't even want to go to graduation. Like, I'm just that hurt about it.

—Eva

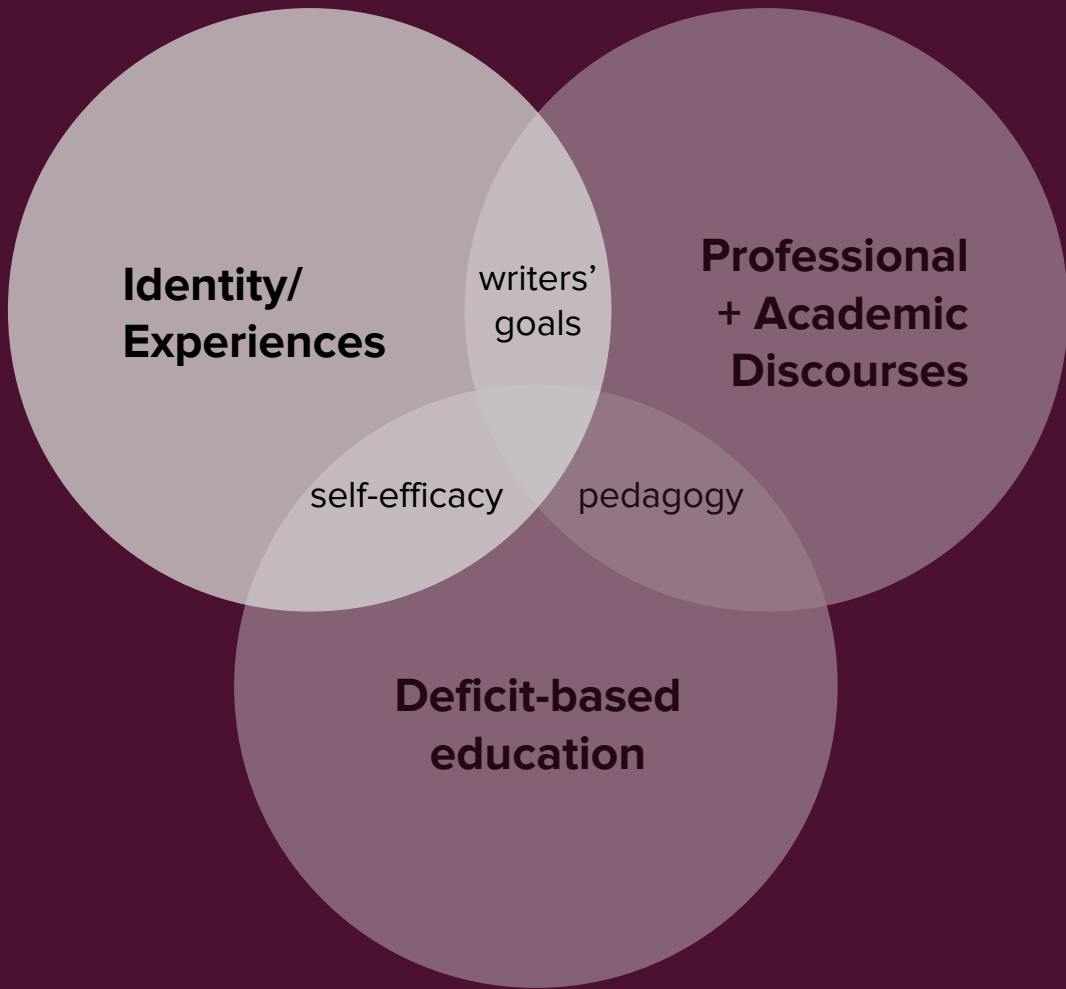
[O]ne day I was talking to [a professor] and she was like, "You know your GPA is a little under three. And I'm thinking, okay, if you get a B-, if you pass the class, you pass the program. And when she told me that, I just broke down in tears. I was like, **I can't do this anymore.** I can't . . . . I was done. I was like, I don't have any more fight. I don't have any more fortitude to be like, all right, let's go. . . . I'm done pulling myself up from my bootstraps.

—Eva



Professor Brooks's class is the first class I ever got an A in. . . . [W]e talked about the whole internalizing the grades and, you know, they haven't been my fault, and I am supposed to be here. I changed my ideas about myself. I should say -- not so much about myself. The things that have gone wrong while I've been here haven't been my fault. It's been the system. And I'm not -- you know, I got here, so... And before, remember, I used to be like, "I got here accidentally." . . . I never thought that it was systematic. I never thought that other people were having this. I thought it was just me. And I thought that it was just me, and I didn't belong here.

—Eva



Asking a person to write a particular type of text, using particular media, materials, and resources, and particular discoursal and generic features, in a particular context, will be requiring that person to identify with other people who write in this way.

**Writing demands in educational settings are also identity demands.**

(Burgess & Ivanič, 2010)

“—*In high school—writing was not a big priority*, so I didn’t learn how to do this. *I went to a state school like UConn* where it takes a while before you find the smaller classes. It’s like multiple guess exams, and *writing was just not part of the process in most courses*. I remember this one particular professor who said, “great ideas, I can tell you’re really thinking, you really need to shape this into a much tighter discussion where you focus in on this point and that point” and this was the first time that anyone had ever given me feedback on writing, like, “Oh, there’s a better way to do this.” It seems ridiculous now, of course, but if it’s never happened, then it’s never happened. I remember that and that was a pivotal moment. And *I think as a result I started to pay more attention to my writing because I got the message, “Ooh, writing matters,”* but I never got any training really.”

—Professor Carver

“They just want you to spit back the stuff and being able to — being able to just — that's why I said like when I — I think — I had to go back into the notes, and I felt like the paper needed to be completely about the notes. And I think that's where I feel like I'm not — I feel uncomfortable with my writing now, because I'm not accustomed to writing like that. ***I'm accustomed to writing about what I think and what's in my head.***”

—Eva

“...that's the thing with this program: You have to spit back certain things. Like, they want you to spit back certain things. For that paper, and for the papers I did for my undergrad, it was more enjoyable, because I was able to put it in my own words and kind of — and a lot of it was my own understanding of it”

—Eva

Eva using “this researcher rather than “I” in papers, perhaps as a way to distance herself from the writing.

Concordance Concordance Plot File View Clusters/N-Grams Collocates Word List Keyword List

Concordance Hits 56

Hit	KWIC
1	d participants (child only). Data Collection This researcher alone will be collecting data from both
2	so far that with each meeting this researcher attends it can build valuable trust with
3	Harmon refuses to release FRG contacts) this researcher cannot precede to the next step (i.
4	this researcher will disclose only that this researcher children have a veteran parent. Upon termination
5	The first limitation is that if this researcher does not secure permission from a participant (
6	view of several witnesses, to protect this researcher from liability issues This researcher will repeat
7	before the climax of the crisis. This researcher has identified and has compensated for any
8	for sample interview questions for child). This researcher presentation will follow these steps, this resear
9	respondent a copy of consent form, this researcher's contact information and research supervisor (if
10	respondent distress. One plan is utilizing this researcher's expanding personal knowledge of military cultur
11	in order to prove or disprove this researcher's hypothesis. Also, a considerable limitation is
12	due to interviewer's body language. This researcher's plan to control subconscious body language
13	is no way to identify truthfulness this researcher's plans will not eliminate respondent bias
14	study unless all participants are involved. This researcher's study would be unethical and extremely
15	these steps, this researcher will disclose this researcher's veteran status, this researcher will explain
16	notify them of the attendance of this researcher. This researcher will share the details of
17	FRG board president for permission for this researcher to attend the meeting in order to
18	will be brought into the interview . This researcher will also add that the child can
19	stop the interview at any time. This researcher will also clarify that if at anytime
20	culture to connect with the child. This researcher will also consult a military families trained
21	of the interview questions for review. This researcher will also inquire if the FRG social
22	volunteers would participate in this study. This researcher will also offer a five dollar gift
23	prior to the child's interview. This researcher will also reiterate that the interview will
24	will not be grouped with parent. This researcher will also reiterate that the child's

“I think that growing up, writing was not something that was always a priority. I can remember being in middle school. My middle school english teacher was really the first person to introduce me to the structure of writing and really begin to implement the importance of writing correctly. From that point on, I went through high school and ***it really wasn't something that was a priority, and then I realized when I went to college that I struggled with writing.***”

—Shawn



“In high school, writing was not a big priority... I went to a state school... writing was just not part of the process in most courses.”

—Professor Carver

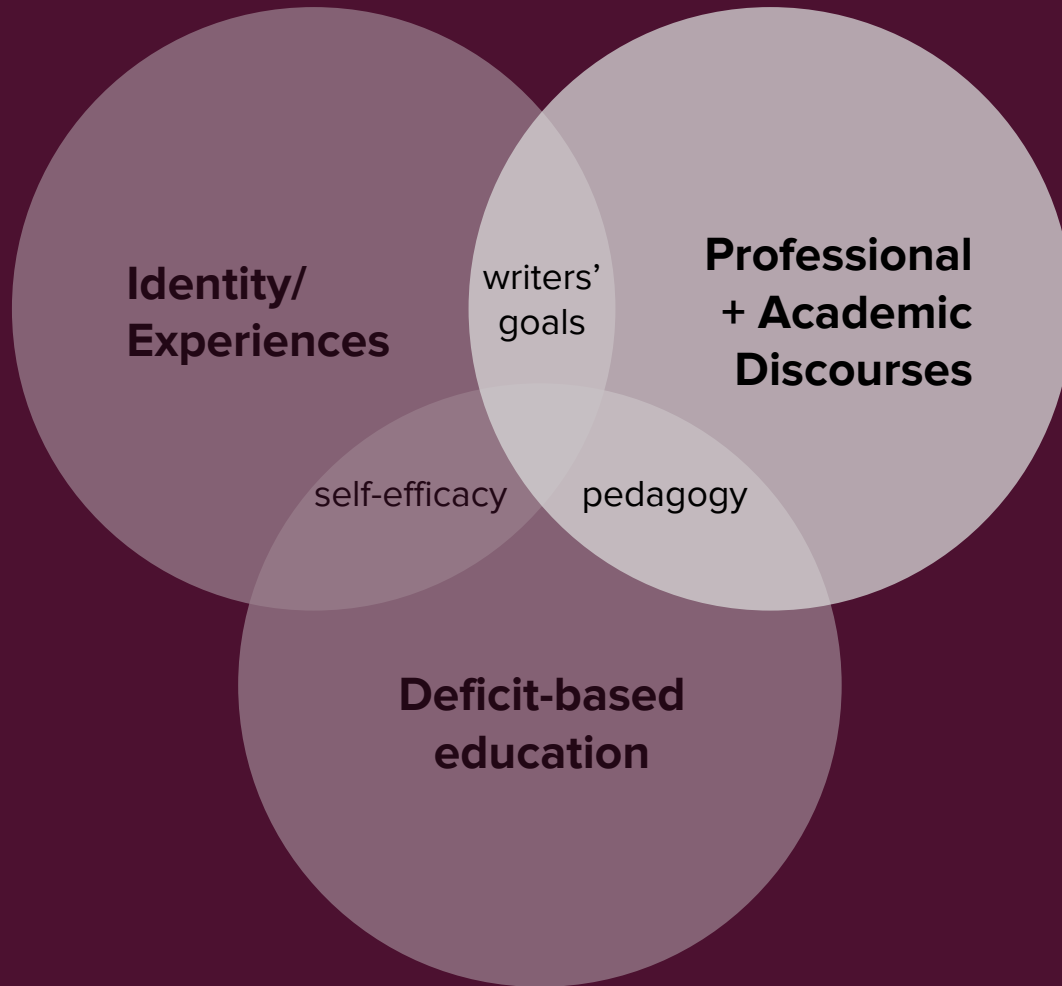
“ I think I do the bulk of my writing at work.” —Shawn

“There's no formal instruction that's part of the course material each week... [T]here's not a single lesson on how to write.”

—Nicole

“[When] I first applied for the MSW program, I didn't get into the program... I remember feeling frustrated because I felt like up to that point I was writing my progress notes and I thought the structure of my writing was okay.”

—Shawn



Participation in institutional practices, particularly regular discourse practices, draws the students into the collective reproduction of organizational ideology. . . . [T]he ideological space carved out by the textual practices of social work must contend with, and at times acquiesce to, the space created by other, more powerful discourses.

**The student newcomer seeking professional status must learn to negotiate the various and at times conflicting discourses and the ideologies they enact.**

(Paré, 2000)

When ***I first applied for the MSW program, I didn't get into the program.*** When I went to meet with the director of the program to find out why ***I remember her saying to me that my writing was a concern*** and she felt like I needed to work on the writing. ***She pinpointed the structure of my writing and writing errors.*** She suggested that I take some courses to help with that and then reapply for the program. ***I remember feeling frustrated because I felt like up to that point I was writing my progress notes and I thought the structure of my writing was okay.***

—Shawn

***“I think that social work writing in itself is a different type of writing.*** It took me a little while to grasp that.”

***“Social work writing is a lot more detailed. You are expected to be able to explain a situation in detail, you are expected to write in complete sentences and paragraphs succinctly.*** Whereas, I think in some other professions, you may not, the focus on writing may not be as much as it is in social work. Like I said, ***it took me a little while to make that adjustment,*** but I can definitely tell just in reading progress notes some of my coworkers write, some of them who have finished the program and have their licenses, I can tell ***its very succinct, it’s very clear, its structurally sound. I think that when you read anything from a social worker, the expectation is that you can follow it clearly”***

“I think there are some courses within the school of social work that mirror what a progress note will look like, in terms of assessing clients, behaviors during a session. You would do that in a progress note. There are some papers in grad school that we have to write about treatment plans and how you would design a treatment plan. I’ve done treatment plan writing at work and its very similar, the style, the structure, the wording. So ***there’s been instances where I can see where my academic writing has impacted or influenced the way I write professionally as well.***”

—Shawn

“I think that specifically *in social work, if there was an important specific detail, you should have the ability and the flexibility to include it. And I feel like in the academic setting, — we don't have that flexibility, you went off task if you include it.* Whereas in the clinical setting, you would maybe need to record something that's an important detail. . . . I guess the academic setting doesn't allow for that flexibility.  
[pause] But the structure is important for knowing what you're doing.

—Nicole

“Social work writing is a lot more detailed. You are expected to be able to explain a situation in detail, you are expected to write in complete sentences and paragraphs succinctly—it took me a little while to make that adjustment—its very succinct, it’s very clear, its structurally sound. I think that when you read anything from a social worker, the expectation is that you can follow it clearly.”

—Shawn

“I definitely think the writing I do in the academic setting greatly differs from the writing I do in the multiple practice settings that I've had field experience in... I feel like the academic writing is much more about making sure you have the right format... you're following the right guidelines that they've given you. And it doesn't really allow for you to incorporate anything outside of what the guidelines they've given you. So I guess, for lack of better words, creativity... in the academic setting, they place a lot more emphasis on making sure you have that format down, make sure you have the APA down, make sure you have what's... all these checkpoints that they've included on... that have to be in this assignment.”

—Nicole



***I definitely think the writing I do in the academic setting greatly differs from the writing I do in the multiple practice settings that I've had field experience in. So the family service agency, the two different schools I've worked in, and a community service agency. So I feel like the academic writing is much more about making sure you have the right format and the right — the right format, right — you're following the right guidelines that they've given you. And it doesn't really allow for you to incorporate anything outside of what the guidelines they've given you.***

—Nicole

“I have to relearn writing. It's—*I've had to completely learn how to write differently*, and even then, I haven't completely learned...”

—Eva

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