

# Optimistic Reciprocities: The Literacy Narratives of First-Year Writing Students



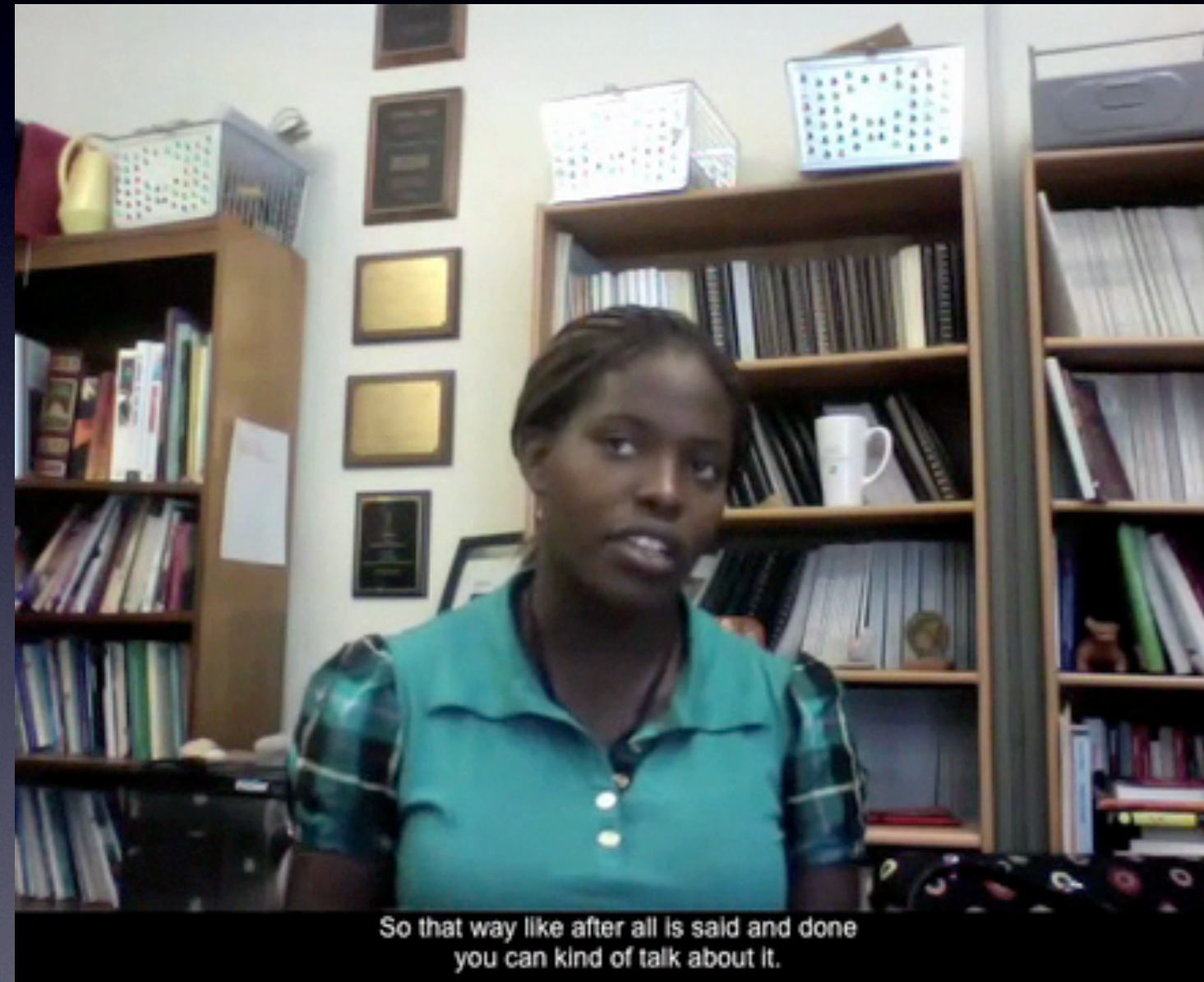
Kiosk 3: Optimism and Genuine Audiences



In our interviews with new students, I noticed a striking propensity toward optimism—their ability to imagine the future—when they spoke of writing and of their upcoming entry into college. Their inclination toward optimism transpired in two areas. The first occurred during interviews when they were prompted to send a message or give advice to new graduate teaching associates who would be teaching for the first time. In this area, the future event was built into the question and their responses to it. However, their willingness to participate in these interviews also exhibits that efficacy is a primary motivation for contributing to communities, including online communities (Kollock; Wang and Fesenmaier; Workman). Whereas the DALN does not include typical structures of online communities (synchronous and asynchronous discussion features), it's important to note that students were given the opportunity to visit the DALN so they could see how the archive operated, and they presumed their contributed video recorded message would be delivered to people working in the writing program and that sharing their stories could shape the teaching of writing at the university in the future, an anticipated reciprocity.

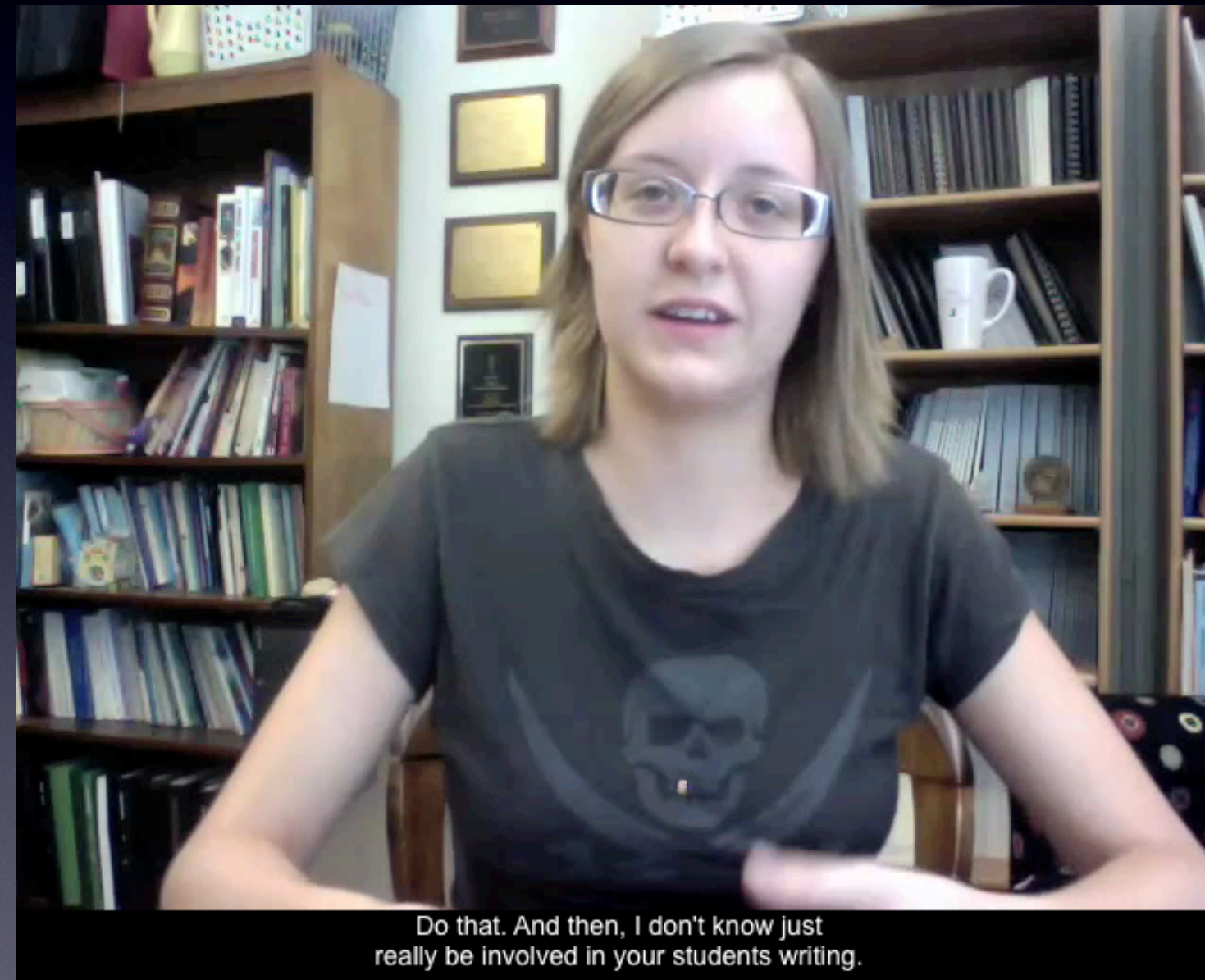


Blaique, Chahinaz, and Ryan offer responses that could be slotted in Hillocks' taxonomy: how instructors formatted their classes, how instructors emphasized particular kinds of knowledge, and how they asked students to participate in class.





Two students, however, in their message to new instructors, describe not only an engagement with their instructors, but also an imagination and expectation of the future in their writing. Sarah uses a former teacher as a model for new instructors:





For Sarah, the feedback she received from her teacher, a textual engagement with her writing, should not only lead to a new draft, but perhaps future writing, “the next essay.”



Johnny is the most conceptual and philosophical in his optimism. His response is similar to Sharot's subjects when they were asked to describe common events in their futures:





Similar in his optimism to Sarah, but even more passionate, Johnny believes in the momentum-building potential of constructive feedback and understands that real, human engagement with writing—a future event—can lead to “other things, other thoughts . . . [and] a great work might come out of that”—another future event. Both Sarah and Johnny operate in dual, parallel anticipated reciprocities couched in positivity and hope. Not only have they been prompted to imagine reciprocity connected to their interview, but they also speak of the importance of reciprocity *to* their writing, in this case, from their teachers.



Johnny especially begins to reveal the second area in which students' inclination toward optimism transpired. During their interviews, students shared stories that indicated their writing has in the past reached its intended audience—the readers for whom the text was directly written. These students strive for their writing to reach an audience with such attentiveness that it is, in fact, an expectation for them, what Rosenblatt, Britton, and Patraglia would call writing's transactionality. Although this second area is related to the first in the matter of optimism—they both exhibit future expectations—they are different in that in the first area, students were prompted toward offering a message to their future instructors. In this second area, students spoke in great detail about the future of their writing and their anticipated reciprocity to it without being prompted.



For some students, transactional writing for genuine audiences is connected to school writing. Sarah's optimistic view of writing, one for which she imagines an audience, is developed through a school experience—research—but is decidedly different from how research is often taught in English classes, a point she makes in her literacy narrative:





Sarah describes the fundamentals of the scientific method, a fluid process that requires researchers to embrace what Kathryn Shultz would call an optimistic view of being wrong: “Surprise, bafflement, fascination, excitement, hilarity, delight: all these and more are a part of the optimistic understanding of error. This model is harder to recognize around us, since it is forever being crowded out by the noisier notion that error is dangerous, demoralizing, and shameful.” It’s noteworthy that Sarah distinguishes between “looking at books and basically restating what other people have already researched” and what she calls doing *her own* research. Whereas one might argue that conducting primary research as Sarah has described it is a solitary act, she distinguishes it on four separate occasions as an act of making data and statistical analysis of those data as anticipated reciprocity: “put it into words that everybody can understand,” “translate it into words for other people to understand,” “to make it accessible to other people,” “you have to really be able to communicate in science and math.”



Johnny also connects transactional writing for genuine audiences to school writing. After being asked, “Can you tell us a story about another kind of writing you've done before? When you were in high school, did you do writing for your English classes?” Johnny speaks of his love of rap music and poetry:





Johnny describes his discovery of poetry, hip hop, and rap as a significant moment of growth in his life. Further, he does not describe writing poetry as a solitary act. His work with his English teacher/principal, a literacy sponsor (Brandt), on structure in poetry is “freeing,” regardless of its possible pseudotransactionality, and eventually leads to interaction with an genuine audience with anticipated reciprocity. Johnny’s contact with an audience is not through publication, but instead through a poetry reading—audience members listening and responding. More importantly, this reading takes place in a competition, a venue where there is not only an audience, but also a setting where an expectation for feedback exists.



Similarly, Ryan is accustomed to envisioning composition in relationship to anticipated reciprocity and transactionality. Entering college with a strong interest in film, Ryan imagines reaching an audience through media. While his experiences composing video begin in school, they fall outside of what is usually thought of as school writing, and they move outside of school walls:





Ryan is aware that doors opened for him to work on future projects when audiences view his videos. Not only are his highlight videos played for athletes for training purposes, but also they see extremely large-scale audiences in his church, a “congregation of 5000.” Because of this work, he was offered the opportunity to attend an awards show and produce video for *Christ Community Music Magazine*, an online Christian music magazine that showcases video interviews, behind-the-scenes highlights, and artist features. As he begins to recognize the need for more experience, he accepts an internship directing live television broadcast, which he notes is “watch[ing] all the cameras on the screen and pick[ing] which one goes up where,” a direct connection with viewers.



During his interview, Ryan draws comparison between composing videos and “writing,” a term he uses to describe alphabetic print: “They, film and writing, go hand in hand, really. Without writing there wouldn't be film. And film can really take what has been written, creative writing and stuff, and really creatively do it. Also, when going to creatively write anything, like you start coming up with images in your mind, and stuff, like those images come from somewhere.” However, when he imagines a future event and anticipated reciprocity for his work, he does so with his video compositions, the texts (and the live editing of hockey) that reach a genuine audience.



Finally, both Johnny and Chahinaz imagine their writing reaching an audience through journalism, often viewed as outside the purview of work in composition. Instruction in journalism is almost always transactional, with students' "lab" experiences being school newspapers or some kind of actual publication with built-in anticipated reciprocity.



Johnny's story about journalism comes early in his interview after being asked a general, narrative-generating question, "Can you tell us a story about when you were first learning to read, write, or compose?"





As was obvious in other segments of his narrative, Johnny exemplifies optimism, not only in his incredibly positive perspectives on writing, learning, and teaching, but more importantly, in how he imagines a future for his own writing. Johnny draws connections between his struggles with reading as a young boy, his recognition of the importance of details and how that helps him overcome his reading difficulties, and the role that details play in composing writing that addresses an audience. When describing an article he wrote for his school newspaper, he relates his extreme enthusiasm for anticipated reciprocity to finding a readership by physically handing the newspaper to friends, teammates, and classmates.



Chahinaz's practice in journalism also emerges early in her narrative after being asked a general question about reading and writing. While she does not aggressively seek a readership like Johnny, her goals for reaching readers are both deeply personal and humanitarian:





Chahinaz makes small gestures toward recognizing the presence of an audience in journalistic writing. For example, elsewhere in her interview, she relates the way Chris Matthews “grabs the attention” of his readers and notes that she plans to use similar techniques in her own writing. Also, Chahinaz’s use of journalism is goal oriented. Elsewhere in her interview, she relates a past event, the 9-11 attacks, to future goals--changing perspectives of Muslims to better a community to which she belongs. Her view of literacy is optimistic in that she sees it as a means of transforming what is “not Islamically correct.” Finally, she directly indicates that she has plans for her own future as a writer: “And I know that's what I want to do, you know in the future. Is to give a better image to Muslims.” In this way, Chahinaz exhibits Mathieu’s view of hope by “tak[ing] on risk and responsibility while maintaining a dogged optimism. . . . Hope is the tension between reality and vision that provides the energy and motivation to keep working” (17-19).

Next: An Optimistic Proposal