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## Editorial: Understanding Backwards, Looking Forwards

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## Understanding Backwards, Looking Forwards

If we trace the ongoing concern with reflective writing in first-year composition to its earliest roots, we find a decades-long trail back to John Dewey by way of Donald A. Schon. A consensus among composition teachers seems to have developed over time that our only reasonable expectation for receiving the kind of rich reflection we desire is to offer students a series of opportunities to reflect, rather than hoping they will know how to deliver what we seek in a one-time-only-end-of-semester final piece of writing. In this issue we feature two current compositionists' explorations of how teachers might more effectively assist students to live their lives as writers forwards by better understanding their writing experiences backwards, to echo Kierkegaard's famous observation.

In the first of the two pieces, Rachel Ihara reports on a study of students' reflections *after* composing a high-stakes reflection for her community college's institutionally required portfolio assessment. Through interviews with student writers, Ihara examines "the complicated power dynamics involved when self-reflective writing is assigned in a class, by a teacher, for a grade." She explains the impetus for the research by noting, that "Largely absent from this ongoing scholarly conversation about reflective writing and pedagogy are the views of the student writers themselves." Ihara concludes that "our reluctance to intervene or offer feedback on assignments like this may be a consequence of our failure to distinguish among different genres of reflection and a persisting misunderstanding of all self-reflection as private and personal, even when a given assignment demands a more rigorous and analytical approach."

In the second piece, "Writing beyond the Page: Reflective Essay as Box Composition," Lindsey Harding begins where many who have written about reflection begin—with a sense of dissonance between what teachers hope for in student reflection and what the students actually produce. She describes her dismay upon examining previously written responses required by her department's e-portfolio program: "In the sample essays I had read to familiarize myself with the assignment, I was struck by the mechanical, unimaginative quality of reflective writing students were producing." Harding's innovative approach to addressing this dissonance is to require her students to produce a multimodal reflection, entirely well-suited to a course in which they have been producing multimodal compositions throughout the term. She writes about her decision to move the reflection into a multimodal mode: "Changing the writing space for a reflective essay would not only enable

students to ‘stand apart’ and reflect, but it would also grant them greater access to writing as an object of analysis.” Her essay not only describes her assignment and grounds it in current theory, but it also offers some stunning examples of her students’ work (would that this journal could print in color . . .).

The discussion continues with a pair of Cross Talk pieces: I asked Rachel Ihara and Lindsey Harding to read one another’s work and write a response, reflecting on one another’s essays. I hope readers will read both the essays and Cross Talk responses and then engage in their own reflections by asking, “How can my first-year composition course ask students to reflect in more meaningful ways about their writing and their experiences as writers?” Answering that question might provide not only insights for instructors but also insights that the students themselves can carry forward with them into later writing situations.

—J.S.

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## TYCA OFFICERS TO BE ELECTED

The Two-Year College English Association (TYCA), the national organization of two-year college English faculty within NCTE, has named the following candidates for the position of **Secretary** in the spring elections (one to be elected; term to expire in 2017): **Cheryl Hogue Smith**, Kingsborough Community College, New York, New York; **Miles McCrimmon**, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, Richmond, Virginia.

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