EXPLORING FIRST YEAR STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN READING ACADEMIC TEXTS IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Adele J. Doyle

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EXPLORING FIRST YEAR STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN READING ACADEMIC TEXTS IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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by

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______________________________  ________________________________
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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING FIRST YEAR STUDENTS’ INTEREST IN READING ACADEMIC TEXTS IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

Adele J. Doyle

This study explores how the construct of interest may influence first-year community college students’ willingness to engage with academic text assignments. Research on interest theory as presented by Renninger (2009) suggests that students, even those with low self-efficacy or regulation, are more likely to make gains in engagement and/or academic progress, dependent upon how interested those students are in the texts assigned by their teacher. Students from two 2020 spring semester first-year composition courses at a Northeast metropolitan community college were provided with 6 potential academic reading assignments on diverse topics. Students were asked to select one assignment, read it, and report back on their interest level. Through surveys, discussion posts, and class discussions, the concept of student interest in these texts was examined. Using constant comparative coding as asserted by Glaser (1965) and facilitated by NVivo 12 Software, underlying factors related to student interest in academic text assignments were explored. Through participant perspective, twelve observable factors relevant to student interest in academic text assignments were identified, culminating in the articulation of a newly proposed workflow model on Student Interest to Read Academic Texts. This model contributes to the field a visual understanding of the impact of student interest in academic text assignments specific to a young urban adult population. As such,
it serves as a valuable first step to consider innovation in educational instruction, to better harness student interest in academic texts for greater engagement and learning.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 37% of 12th grade students are viewed as proficient in reading (McFarland, et al., 2019). That statistic drops to 21% proficient for Hispanics and 15% for Black students (Hussar, et al., 2020). Coupled with these troubling statistics is the realization in the education community that older students are not only not reading well, but in effect, they are not reading print-based media as they once did (Twenge et al., 2019). These reading difficulties along with this a reticence to engage with progressively more difficult academic texts, culminates in a student population at the post-secondary level either unwilling to or unable to deeply connect with college-level texts (Hoeft, 2012; Lei, et al., 2010).

To understand this deficit in reading proficiency and a failed engagement in academic reading assignments, a growing faction of researchers has come to recognize that it is not enough to focus on cognitive processing strategies, most notably touted as the five pillars of literacy, as the be-all-end-all to advance student learning. They argue that alongside those more easily quantifiable and controlled traits are latent characteristics, seen as the driving psychological phenomena which cause a person to act – or not to act. These traits go by a variety of trending terminology such as habits of mind or emotional intelligence (Farrington et al., 2012; Garcia, 2016). Under the most prevalent term, non-cognitive research over the past thirty years has slowly made steps to link traits such as grit, determination, resilience, and curiosity to literacy acquisition.

Of potentially impacting latent characteristics, one of the most studied non-cognitive traits over the past twenty plus years has been motivation, which as it relates to students, has been called upon to answer the question, “Why don’t our students read
anymore?” *Motivation*, as a construct, is effectively (though debatably) defined as “the willingness to engage in an activity and a willingness to persist in that activity, even when it becomes difficult” (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006, p. 333). Researchers hypothesize that motivation, like other non-cognitive measurements (e.g., persistence, curiosity) is a driving mechanism for student achievement. And have spent decades attempting to quantify this latent trait and its effect on literacy achievement (e.g., DeNaeghel, 2012; Schiefele et al., 2012; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

Nevertheless, despite the attention that motivation to read has received from the educational and psychological research communities, yielding a wealth of affective measurement instruments directed at a wide range of student populations, little exclusive attention has been directed toward older adolescents, rather benefitting peripherally from the overflow of younger student research on motivation to read. Those motivation to read profiles have been adapted, either by researcher logic and theorizing, or ephemeral qualitative research, piggybacking off preconceived theories and formulations but without much significant input coming directly from older student populations. As such, affective measurements of older adolescent student motivation to read have resisted a close inspection of the very unique phenomena of the older adolescent reading experience, particularly a reading experience which arguably has evolved radically since the turn of this century (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011).

**Statement of the Problem**

Young adults across the country select community college, two-year post-secondary institutions with open admission policies, for a variety of reasons, whether because these schools offer a more direct route to two-year certifications in certain professional fields or provide a viable alternative to more expensive and/or more
academically demanding four-year colleges. With the rising cost of a college education, community college, with its much lower price tag, is considered by 40% of students enrolling in college as the most viable option to advance career objectives (Shapiro et al., 2014). In Fall 2017, 5.8 million U.S. students enrolled in 2-year public institutions. Significant portions of traditionally underserved populations across the nation chose community college over traditional four-year institutions including 55% of low-income students (with family income of less than $30,000), 35% African Americans, and 44% Hispanic. Also comprising community college enrollment are students with disabilities (20%), and first-generation attendees (29%) (McFarland et al., 2019; Hussar et al., 2020) NCES, 2019). A community college degree, for these underserved demographics, yields significant economic outcomes, where students who obtain an associate degree are shown to receive on average from $1,160 to $1,790 more income per quarter than non-completers (Belfield & Bailey, 2017).

However, despite the accessibility of community colleges, close to 40% of students will leave school before their second year, and only 17% are likely to graduate within three years (CUNY, 2020). An examination of the unique composition of our two-year colleges brings to light obstacles these students face and a need for urgent attention to a persistent problem at these institutions. Narrowing a focus to urban community college experience, 12.6% of first-time enrolled students at community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) community college system achieve an associate degree within 3 years, adding only an additional 6.6% in four years (CUNY, 2020).

Various studies have been offered in explanation for the low return rate on student investment in community college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Most of these studies over the
past two decades which seek an explanation for poor student persistence in community college focus most specifically on demographic indicators such as ethnic orientation (Barbatis, 2010), age and gender (Mertes & Hoover, 2008), and environmental indicators such as a sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Jacobs & Archie, 2008; Lundberg, 2014) and short and long term expectations (Hawley & Harris, 2005). However, as a growing body of theorists posit, such research focuses on predictors which are not easily changed or malleable and which discount the value of psychosocial or non-cognitive factors (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015; Fong et al., 2016; Richardson et al., 2012).

The case for studying non-cognitive motivational factors is made more apparent in that up to 80% of incoming freshmen across the nation (Public Policy Institute of California, 2016) including up to 74% at City University of New York community colleges (CUNY, 2016) were placed in some form of remediation before its phase out. In considering such an under-prepared population we, as their teachers, need ask, how, for a few short months, might we best support academic advancement in light of challenges our students face?

**Significance of this Study**

With these problematic data points in mind, one is forced to consider whether demographic uniqueness might explain failed retention and poor educational outcomes for urban community college students. Researchers theorize that a key to better retention is to build academic momentum and foster stronger first-year student engagement in their academic work (Belfield et al., 2019; McClenney et al., 2012). A predominant question asked is what makes students academically successful at the first-year level in community college? While the most logical answers remain academic preparedness and family support, such indicators are not tweaked in the classroom, but rather serve as predictors
of success (e.g. Fike & Fike, 2008). Research supports that students focused on their work, including reading the texts they are assigned, were more likely to achieve academically and ultimately graduate (Cooper, et al., 2006; McClenney et al., 2012; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Wood & Palmer, 2014).

**Research Purpose: Why Interest Matters**

The purpose of this research was to explore the construct of interest as it influences first-year community college student motivation to read assigned academic texts. Motivation to Read surveys have relegated interest theory to a truncated component often associated with Bandura’s self-efficacy theory wherein personal efficacy is yielded as an individual derives satisfaction from mastering a particular element and thereby builds interest in that element (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Schiefele and Schaffner (2016) acknowledge that Motivation to Read research peripheralizes potentially valuable factors in reading surveys. They drew attention to how Gambrell et al. (1996) in their seminal Motivation to Read Profile (MRP), upon which many other constructed surveys were modeled had actually isolated additional factors which they chose not to include in the final survey. Davis, et al. (2018), in a review of Motivation to Read research, identified sixteen survey instruments constructed since 1996, none of which specifically identified interest as a specific subconstruct.

Interest can be viewed as *situational* as related to a specific context and/or time, or *individual* relating to a predisposition to engage and reengage in varied subject matter over time (Harackiewicz et al., 2016). In either orientation, interest potentially acts as a facilitator of older student (either adolescent or young adult) identity formation. Interest, like educational motivation, suggests a complexity of engagement components poised to contribute meaningfully to young adult literacy progress, if researchers can clearly
quantify and harness that complexity for meaningful gains (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Jansen et al., 2016; Schiefele et al., 1992).

What makes interest particularly worthy of study is its consideration of the subjective orientation of the reader – in this case, young adult urban community college readers – which must be placed at the epicenter of inquiry. In such an iteration, the concept of *self* becomes of paramount importance, where the individual is explicitly situated as subject, or as the actor, and the environment is placed as the object of that action (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 1991). Interest then is articulated as the very particular relationship between a subject and object. The object is seen to have relevance only as it exists within the subject’s *life-space* (Krapp, 1999; Lewin, 1951). How the individual subject makes meaning of that object or the artifacts within that subject’s life-space relies upon a combined effect of disposition, emotional responsiveness and values. Interest, as an orientating disposition, implies intentionality where there exists “no gap between what a person has to do in a specific situation, and what the person wishes (or likes) to do” (Krapp, 1999, p. 26).

Unlike the most prevalent Motivation to Read research, Interest research significantly holds as its study population of choice, high school or college students and as such, accounts for social and cognitive development of the young adults we teach today (Davis, et al., 2018; Erickson, 1968). Such a dynamic concept of self is particularly related to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991) which argues that as the self develops, the individual either gains or abandons interests. While motivation research exhibits its value in addressing the generalized assimilation of younger students into an
academic setting, it does not focus on the subjective orientation and developmental trajectory in an interest-driven agenda of today’s older adolescents and young adults.

**Young Adult Identity Formation**

The advancement of this inquiry into student motivation to read academic texts, relied heavily upon accentuating the value of young adult identity formation. To consider young adulthood as a mere extension of adolescence exhibits a failure to conceptually understand the developmental milestones which mark high school and college student experience. In recognition of the delays to adulthood facilitated in a post-industrialized society, Arnett (2000) posited a delineation of the period from late teens to mid-20s as *emerging adulthood* accentuated by potential instability, self-focus, displacement and identity exploration, as well as the feeling of the possibility to affect change in one’s life. The term was adopted by subsequent theorists seeking to classify the time of life-bridging adolescence to mature adulthood (e.g. Ehrsensaft et al., 2003; Hagan & Foster, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2005). During this time, adults are bridging the dependencies of adolescence with the fully self-actuating individualization and decision making of adulthood. It is the space between where these young adults are finding and consciously deciding upon the adults they will become.

As noted by Schwartz et al. (2005), identity development during emergent adulthood is representative of what Erikson labeled as *psychosocial moratorium* (1968), such as afforded in college settings, where young adult ego development is encouraged to adopt various identity alternatives, without feeling pressured to be too adult. During this time, according to Schwartz and colleagues, students may take one of two paths, one that more firmly and decisively takes on the roles expected of mature adulthood, or alternatively, a path where decision-making and commitment to responsibility and
permanency is not clearly embraced. However, regardless of the chosen path, each is accentuated by clearly demarked individuation.

The work of Erikson (e.g. 1968) also clearly articulates the value of agency in emergent adult identity development. Côté and Bynner (2008), although they do not fully agree with Arnett’s model of emergent adulthood, nevertheless contend that traditional education in the college setting detracts from the emerging adult’s ability to self-actuate substantial choices and therefore stunts identity development and prolongs a young person’s suspension within the psychosocial moratorium of which Erikson speaks. This inquiry adopts the more prevalent term *young adult* in place of emergent adult, but recognizes the groundwork laid by Arnett and colleagues to clearly delineate a separate developmental phase between adolescence and adulthood as articulated first by Erikson (1968) who identified four phases of development, infancy, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Schwartz and colleagues offer a recognition of a dual path model to adulthood which accentuates the potential for a wide disparity of educational trajectories in a postsecondary setting, all dependent upon the developmental stage inhabited by the individual student. This inquiry explored how self-identification acts as a factor in a student’s interest to read academic texts in the community college setting.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this exploratory inquiry are:

RQ1. To what extent does personal interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read the academic texts they are assigned?

RQ2. To what extent does situational interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read academic texts they are assigned?
These questions recognize the duality of the construct of interest as both an enduring dispositional trait (personal) as well as a contextual factor (situational). Also, Interest has been conceptualized by theorists as a dual path process, wherein students may express interest, and/or students may have their interest stimulated by or acted upon by outside agencies, environment, or stimuli. Unbound by the pressure to produce generalizable results, this inquiry seeks, through exploratory inquiry, to arrive at a clearer understanding of the value of interest as a factor in student engagement to read academic texts, and thereby, pave the way for further research, including the potential development of an affective Motivation to Read instrument which accounts for the value of interest.

Definition of Key Terminology

**Young Adult.** The focus of this study is students which comprise the majority of those enrolled in community college – from age 18 to 26 as framed by Erikson (1968). Also, young adults, as characterized in this study and recognized by the National Research Council, exhibit traits that begin to move away from typically characterized impulsive adolescent behavior (See Cauffman et. al., 2010). For instance, young adults deliberate longer on difficult decisions before acting, are less motivated by extrinsic rewards as they might be associated with behavior, more readily recognize costs or outcomes caused by particular behavior, and potentially exhibit better impulse control.

**Interest.** Defined here as a motivational disposition to engage which may either be viewed as bound in the moment of an action, or more enduringly as a perpetual disposition and which bares the potential to change as the actor’s background affiliations change. Intrinsic interest is viewed as an integral component of Bandura’s self-efficacy
theory. Personal efficacy is yielded as an individual derives satisfaction from mastering a particular element and thereby builds interest in that element (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). However, here it is recognized that interest in its own right is at the center of this research, as it is deemed to have particular value to the young adult community and therefore falls more clearly under the auspices of Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 1991) Self-Determination Theory. Interest may be classified as either situational activated spontaneously within a particular environment (Krapp et al., 1992) or personal seen as intrinsically activated being of a more enduring trait beyond the parameters of any one particular environment (Schiefele, 1999).

Urban. Urban student demographics are likely to represent the diversity inherently identified in an urban community college setting, which may yield results distinctly separate from other college environments. The specific composition of the New York City community college demographic is Asian/Pacific Islander, 17%; Black, 29.2%; White, 15.3%; Hispanic, 38.1%; American Indian/Native Alaskan, .04% (CUNY, 2019).

Motivation. For the purpose of this study, motivation is separate and distinct from potentially overlapping constructs of engagement and interest, both of which are often considered associatively in motivation research. Motivation can be viewed as that which moves people to act (Eccles et al., 1998). Motivation may be constructed either intrinsically or extrinsically. The complication arises here in considering whether interest generates motivation or motivation generates interest, and similarly whether self-efficacy informs either motivation or interest. It will be a goal of this study to ascertain an answer to these queries through qualitative inquiry.
**Reading Motivation.** *Reading motivation,* or what moves someone to read, may be considered “as the individual’s goals and beliefs with regard to reading” (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999, p. 199). Like motivation and its relation to interest and self-efficacy, this concept is problematic if one considers what exactly one means by ‘reading,’ or more to the point, what either an young adult student means by ‘reading.’ What is further troublesome is that a teacher and student may have divergent beliefs about what it means to read (Niven, 2008). Again, for the purpose of this study, reading is related specifically to the context-specific evaluation of academic texts selected for class instruction.

**Limitations**

The limitations in this inquiry relate to sampling and student selection. For the purpose of initial inquiry, a convenience sampling was adopted, wherein first and second semester composition classes, in the Spring 2020 semester, were asked to participate based upon a perceived openness to the inquiry format of this study. Students had the opportunity to participate in all, some, or none of the study components. While these classes were expected to generally reflect the demographic composition of the student body, due to random assignment, nevertheless, student choice and circumstances related to the Covid-19 pandemic are acknowledged to have most likely led to an unbalanced demographic representative population.

Potential pitfalls of the self-report measures distributed to the students are also considered. These instruments relied upon the students’ clear understanding and deep consideration of the questions asked. Also hoped for are honest and thoughtful answers wherein students will not feel penalized for answering in a negative light. It is believed here that the structure of this study facilitated an authentic engagement which encouraged a deep consideration of the phenomenon in this inquiry.
Implications of this Research

The goal of this inquiry was to understand the construct of Interest to Read Academic Texts particularly isolated to the experience of young adults in an urban community college experience. Fifteen students in my own college composition courses were recruited as collaborator-participants. Through careful preferencing of student conceptualization of their lived experience captured through twenty-three qualitative data sources, 12 observable factors were isolated which are posited to effectively represent how student interest impacts the academic reading process and more importantly, how such impacts engagement and ultimately, learning.

Within a composite SDT and Interest Theory framework (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2019; Krapp, 1993, 2004, 2005; Scheifele, 1991; Schraw & Lehman, 2001), I developed an Interest-Based Workflow Model for Young Adult Motivation to Read Academic Texts which clearly accounts for the complexity of young adult agency and environmental influences (Figure 1).

Figure 1

*Interest-Based Workflow Model for Young Adult Motivation to Read Academic Texts*
As demonstrated in the following inquiry, these identified factors, clearly articulated by participants in this study, reveal the agentic interest-based pathway, guided by value and feeling laden valences, which determine the level of engagement certain young adults apply to their academic assignments. As this model presents, deep engagement and optimal learning are the optimal goals of reading academic texts – not compliance. Students in this inquiry divulged a clear articulation of how ‘reading’ as demanded by curriculum requirement could occur, and yet, learning (of any value in their eyes) might not, requiring that we as teachers must question, what is the purpose of the readings we assign in class?

Not only does this research provide a valuable first step toward compiling an Interest to Read Academic Texts affective instrument, but strategic classroom application also holds promise. Research holds that Situational Interest (SI) can be manipulated by instructors in the college classroom (Dohn et al., 2009; Linnenbrock-Garcia, et al., 2013). Students in this particular inquiry, admitted an inability to move through complex texts when interest was not present. However, no known research on the manipulation of SI at the urban community college level is known, especially related to reading academic assignments.

**Conclusion**

The impetus for this research hinged on my belief, built through fifteen years of informal classroom observation, that young adults appear in my classroom to be less academically equipped and more reticent to read anything more than two pages long. Further, diminished advanced literacy skills, including an ability to extrapolate deep meaning from texts, suggest a need to reconsider how best to prepare students for success in college and more importantly, in the world where deep critical thinking is a sorely
needed trait. If we, as teachers, merely demand that our young adult students comply with our requirements because such are the requirements of the class curriculum we will continue to miss valuable opportunities to catalyze meaningful literacy events. The 21st Century has demonstrated revolutionary change and innovation in the way young people learn. Perhaps it is time to innovate our classrooms to account for these changes.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Problem

A growing sentiment by community college teachers is that students are either not reading, or not effectively reading, the assigned content-area academic texts (Hoeft, 2012; Phillips, 2006; Schnee, 2018). Various studies consider specific environmental and cognitive factors which might be at the root of this issue, as well as on potential strategies to alleviate the issue of reading non-compliance (Brost & Bradley, 2006; Ihara & Del Principe, 2018). Researchers attempting to understand the problem, present the complexity and the relevance of a variety of factors which may answer the question, why community college students may not be reading the texts they are assigned. However, as this literature review will show, our field would benefit from a view of academic reading beyond mere compliance. If we identify reading academic texts foremost as a learning event and not as a compliance event, in this vein, the value of the community college student experience as developing young adults is accentuated, particularly in how the construct of interest may influence deeper engagement with academic texts.

Research on Young Adults

In this present study, young adults are delineated as students likely to be on the verge of or having just entered a college setting, whether as traditional freshmen, or as returning students who have taken one to several gap years. This brings the age of students in this inquiry to be approximately between 18 to 26-years-old. Research supports a developmental arc of young adults which begs isolated attention (Erikson, 1968). As students advance through school and stand on the cusp of adulthood, their intellectual and personal requirements for identity formation become more complicated. Renninger (2009) contends that instructors would benefit from
understanding the phase of development of these learners and how student interest may influence literacy acquisition in that phase wherein the individual’s phase of development will determine how that learner is motivated. The complexity of young adult reading is therefore evidenced in the inherent nature of content-area reading as more complex, requiring more intensive on-task attention and deeper analytic reasoning (Mickelson, 2018).

**The Devaluation of Affective Traits in Reading Research**

Reading research predominately focuses upon cognitive processes such as comprehension or decoding. Part of the reason for the prevalent attention to cognitive research is its seemingly more accessible, more generalizable outcomes produced in studies fueled by a “cognitive hypothesis” (Tough, 2012). These studies share methodologies which clearly and neatly isolates easily manipulated interventions and statistical outcomes. Cognitively oriented reading research has informed pedagogy based upon narrow field-centric parameters which can disregard important variables. Such research is arguably designed to entice funding by showing great gains and significant generalizability. As one critic espoused, “Having become obsessed with certainty in our research, we have eschewed broad research topics that require integrating various components of human intelligence in favor of being able to say with great certainty something of diminutive importance” (Bean, 2011, p. 167). Pressure to show quantifiable and significant results to warrant publication and boldly foster generalizability has severely hamstrung the field of valuable inquiry, particularly into the aspects of human behavior which defy scientific parameters, that of non-cognitive traits of human behavior.
Research in non-cognitive psychology holds merit not in its ability to be statistically quantified and yield ‘big’ answers, but in its ability to delve into a complex and slippery domain of motivation and attitude and consider how such uniquely informs learning for individual students and for student bodies across a variety of contexts (Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2016). By exploring the underpinnings of particular non-cognitive latent domains, and by seeking qualitative input from stakeholders, one can more effectively theorize as to what makes the 21st Century student come to the table of learning, and further consider the compilation of an affective instrument to measure that construct. In a world of educational pedagogy which demands clear transferrable practices, isolating less visible or quantifiable learning traits requires an intrepid spirit and a willingness to wade into the uncertainty of the human experience. As Bean (2011) asserts, “Researchers need to shed narrow definitions of research design and to embrace more flexible designs that support rather than constrain the study of promising ideas” (p. 166).

The lack of attention to non-cognitive factors which might enhance learning or classroom practices is evidenced in that *The Community College Survey of Student Engagement* only asks questions pertaining to engagement, such as how often one works on group projects, or attends extracurricular activities, referring to physical and not metacognitive curricular attachment. No questions are geared toward identifying student interest in subject matter or motivation for attending school related to non-cognitive traits, and yet the survey acknowledges that a great number of students are lost in the first semester of studies (CCCSE, 2015). This survey is an example of tools we use to assess student success which chooses not to consider an array of behaviors likely to expand our knowledge of the human experience.
Of the variety of non-cognitive constructs which might affect literacy acquisition, this study undertakes an evaluation of one potential variable which has been peripheralized in most dominant Motivation to Read Research, the construct of interest. And while some might argue that the significant cognitive deficits impacting some college students (as evidenced by the overwhelming need for remedial instruction) would require primary attention, it is suggested in this proposal that students cannot be taught comprehension or other critical thinking skills if they cannot be motivated to read assigned texts. Hidi and Renninger (2006) observed that the mental disposition to seek out new information, driven by interest, is a fundamental trait of all normally functioning animals in nature. Interest, in this view, has the capacity to compensate for the lack of other motivational traits such as self-efficacy or extrinsic motivation to succeed or even a lack of academic preparedness.

**Motivation to Read Research**

To understand the value of interest as a worthwhile subject of inquiry in educational research, a closer look at Motivation to Read research and its shortcomings is required. Motivation has long been theorized to predict reading comprehension and other achievement outcomes (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995; Guthrie, et al., 1999; Park, 2011; U Schiefele et al., 2012; Schwabe, 2015; Troyer, 2017, Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Wigfield et al., 2016). To understand students’ motivation to read, a majority of researchers on the issue have turned to affective instrumentation designed to measure motivation as a non-cognitive construct. Most pertinently, motivation is conceived as a multidimensional phenomenon which distinguishes a number of measurable components of reading motivation, building on work begun with the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP) for grade school students (Gambrell et al., 1996; Davis, et al., 2018) wherein researchers isolated...
factors determined as representative of the trait of motivation in two dimensions, self-concept and value of reading. For example and most largely, Wigfield and Guthrie’s (1997) Motivations for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) geared toward middle schoolers isolated 11 subconstructs.

- Reading Efficacy
- Reading Challenge
- Reading Curiosity
- Reading Involvement
- Importance of Reading
- Reading Work Avoidance
- Competition in Reading
- Recognition for Reading
- Reading for Grades
- Social Reasons for Reading
- Compliance (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

Subsequent surveys preference unique conceptual spins on earlier work; whether as an updated MRP specifically focused on middle school students considering out-of-school literacy practices (Pitcher, et al., 2007), as a comparison of struggling African American readers to Caucasian non-struggling readers (Guthrie et al., 2009), focused on struggling readers in Pitcher et al.’s (2007) Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP), or possibly most timely, as a revised MRP updated for the digital age (Malloy et al., 2013).
However, as Schiefele and Schaffner (2016) contest, despite the methodologies assumed and the models constructed, some two decades later researchers still do not fully agree upon the appropriate measurement of student Motivation to Read, particularly related to selected factors; whether it be 11 in the Motivations for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ: Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) or those with less (e.g., Greaney & Neuman, 1990; Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004; Schutte & Malouff, 2007) or even one dimensional models (e.g., McKenna et al., 1995). Also problematic is the failure of certain instruments to provide adequate methodological validation for composite scores derived related to secondary factors (e.g., Andreassen & Bråten, 2010; Guthrie et al., 1999; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) or, as well as rationale for the generalizability of survey results to different populations and contexts (Neugebauer, 2014).

However, perhaps most importantly, qualitative research presented by past researchers suggests additional factors which were purposefully excluded from consideration (e.g. Nolen, 2007). As Schiefele and Schaffner (2016) contend, Motivation studies often try to represent too much and do not, in the space of each respective study, utilize methodologies proven to effectively isolate the value of each factor. To do so would require a unique exploratory evaluation of each observed variable preferencing the participant perspective and how those variables might play out in a particular contextual setting. Arguably, each potentially valuable factor deserves a deep dive by researchers before any attempt can be made to identify the value of that observable trait to a particular context.
Motivation, Engagement, or Interest: Blurred Lines

What becomes problematic in Motivational Research, particularly of these last two decades, is the minimization of the construct of Interest to a subordinate factor in motivation. Most significantly, interest is generally reduced to one dwarfed component of larger theoretical models such as in the theory of task value, as a co-variable of intrinsic motivation, self-determination, flow, and goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This reduction of the value of interest suggests a failure to recognize inherent and driving subjective positioning of young adults and their reticence or outright refusal to engage in materials which fail to interest them. Interest loses footing perhaps because we still do not have conflicted theories of interest, relying instead on various other theoretical frameworks (Renninger & Hidi, 2011).

To compound the complexity of student motivation to read academic texts, student engagement is brought into consideration as researchers in the field grapple to reach consensus on a view of engagement in relation to interest and motivation. Debate continues on whether to view engagement and motivation alternately as stand-alone constructs or, like interest and motivation, as that which might be the dependent outcome or interplaying non-cognitive component catalyzing student learning (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Engagement may be defined as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes” (Quaye & Harper, 2015, p. 3). The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) also takes a broad stroke definition, calling engagement the “amount of time and energy that students invest in meaningful educational practices” (McClenney & Marti, 2006, p. 47 - 48). The first definition draws
into focus the need for “measurable outcomes” while the latter focuses on “meaningful educational practices.” Nevertheless, despite a tilt toward quantifying educational objectives when speaking of engagement, what seems agreed upon is that student engagement is at the crux of meaningful learning (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Engagement is valuable to this discussion of motivation to read academic texts because it is often articulated particularly as it relates to specific classroom contexts (Trowler, 2010). In turn, interest and motivation are read as part of interplaying dynamics, both informing and being informed by student’s positive or negative engagement with academic texts (Skinner et al., 2008; Unrau & Quirk, 2014).

**Figure 2**

*Interplay of Engagement, Motivation, and Interest*

How interest, motivation, or engagement, impact each other, leads to a consideration of the dynamics, or feedback loops, of three intersecting practices, traits and/or constructs. For instance, does student-specific interest in a particular subject motivate that student to engage deeply in the classroom context? Or does intrinsic motivation as a general trait cause a student to engage in classroom content and along the way stimulate interest? And in considering the role of teachers, is it possible to stimulate classroom engagement via
strategizing, thereby bypassing a possible deficit in interest? In all these scenarios, the key question is which of the three components are the *facilitators* and which are the *indicators* of non-cognitive components. And further, can researchers remove and study one component without upsetting or minimizing the balance of the three?

For the purpose of this study, motivation is viewed as a facilitator of engagement, or that which helps to make something happen, in reading academic texts (Unrau & Quirk, 2014). Interest is also viewed as a facilitator of engagement but also as a potential facilitator of motivation. If someone is interested in a context-specific assignment someone will be motivated by that interest and therefore be engaged. However, it is theoretically possible for a student to be motivated or demotivated whether there is interest in the content material. Conversely, it is argued that motivation can have a negative effect on interest (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Higgins, et al., 1995). For instance, a student may be motivated by achievement reward, or other external compensation, or demotivated by a lack of self-efficacy. As such, in this particular model, engagement is viewed as the outcome, and motivation and interest as potential facilitators (or ‘debilitators’) of that outcome.

**The Value of Interest for Young Adults**

Schiefele (1991) asserts that the non-cognitive construct of motivation, as established by researchers, fails to effectively account for pertinent and informing factors inherently linking to the construct of interest. The term *interest* is defined by Schiefele as “a context motivational characteristic composed of intrinsic feeling-related and value-related valances” (p. 299). Interest as *situational* is related to a specific context and/or time, or interest as *individual* relates to a predisposition to engage and reengage in varied subject matter over time (Harackiewicz et al., 2016).
Where motivation theory in education stumbles is in its inextricable link to achievement theory which tends to minimize the desire to learn content for any purpose other than measurable achievement (Davis et al., 2018). Interest most clearly articulates student orientation to texts in subject-specific contexts. What this suggests to research, and what should not be minimized, is that student motivation toward reading academic texts may not transfer uniformly across all academic disciplines, being inherently informed by situational interest, and as such, motivation to read may reveal a general orientation which must be further nuanced in an understanding of how individual interest in specific domains effects that motivation. In Schiefele’s view, interest must be considered hand-in-hand with motivation and with cognitive variables to reach an elaborated view of learning outcomes. The failure to effectively account for student interest in the academic reading process denies the subjective positioning of young adult students who are at an age where identity formation has been proven to matter more classroom settings (Verhoeven et al., 2018).

An Overview of Interest Theory

John Dewey (1913), in his seminal work *Interest and Effort in Education*, was one of the first theorists on record to identify the unique value which *interest*, as a psychological trait, had on learning. He delineated it from another trait he called *effort* specifying that while effort failed to promote deep learning, *high interest* acted as a mediator to facilitate personal engagement which in turn stimulated deep learning. In Dewey’s view, interest appealed to specific individual needs. However, because of the trends that followed over the next fifty years, which tended to reject unobservable traits, favoring paradigms espoused by more preferred schools of psychology such as American
Behaviorism, interest theory fell off, until some sixty years later and Kintsch (1980), theorizing how emotional interest differed from cognitive interest, speculated that higher cognitive interest might correlate to higher comprehension. And while Kintsch never tested this theory, it set a path for future research, and those who followed looked to articulate and expand upon cognitive interest (Wade, 1992; Schraw and Dennison, 1994).

Also contributing to the theory of interest as it relates to the reading process was Schank (1979) who considered a dual pathway model of interest as being both initiated in the reader and also as that which might be stimulated from outside influences, such as through prior knowledge. Schank coined the term interest-based parsing, where readers would distribute limited internal resources to information which they found engaging even if that information was not related to the main ideas of a text. But again, like Dewey and Kintsch, Schank did not empirically prove his theories. However, other researchers did take on the challenge and yielded thought-provoking results (e.g. Asher, 1980) specifically drawing the conclusion that interest gave incentive for students to attend, even when motivation was lacking. In this, we begin to see a delineation between motivation and interest as separate constructs which work individually or potentially in tandem, to engage students in reading (Schraw & Lehman, 2001).

VanDijk and Kintsch (1983), in their text processing theory, noted how interest could also interfere with text processing by diverting attention away from main themes in favor of inconsequential information which students found more engaging. However, how much situational interest influenced comprehension remained a source of debate as other researchers established alternate findings (Anderson et al., 1987; Shirey, 1992). Other researchers focused attention on personal interest and related it to prior knowledge,
which both together affected learning, but remained unrelated (Baldwin et al., 1985) or related to personal or gender specific preferences (Renninger & Wozniak, 1985).

Like motivation research, interest research sought to further deconstruct interest into more specific components. Most popular is the articulation of interest as either personal, or individual/topic interest (Deci, 1992; Renninger, 1992; Schiefele, 1991). Schiefele (1991) took the definitions further as latent and actualized personal interest. However perhaps the most important to this inquiry is the consideration of interest as either situational or personal. When considering young adult motivation to read academic texts, for instance, and in considering interest, the question to ask is, what is the driving type of trait which engages older students. In this iteration, personal interest might be feeling or value related, and situational interest which is argued to be spontaneous in nature might be text-based, task-based, or knowledge-based (Schraw & Lehman, 2001).

Throughout the 1990’s, researchers continued to target the deconstruction of interest. Motivation continued to wind its way in and out of this research, where interest was either identified as a state of motivation, or motivation was seen as a trait of the phenomenon of interest. Researchers continued to home in on particular traits of interest yielding suggestive findings. Schiefele (1999) identified how more interested readers measured deeper thinking than low interest readers, but low interest readers performed better at shallow processing. This suggested that interested readers distributed cognitive processing resources differently through specific engagement strategies. In considering the reading habits of college students, Tobias (1994) concluded that personal interest related to prior knowledge. Schiefele (1996) linked interest to quality of the reading experience in adult readers.
However, despite the yields of inquiries into personal interest, interest theory research has focused predominantly on situational interest, a context-specific in-the-moment engagement related to contextual text, task, and knowledge. The construct is further disassembled relating to the details of text, including seductiveness (distracting and inconsequential details), vividness related to passages that stand out particularly those which create an emotional response, and coherence (Campbell, 1995). Studies on the effect of seductive details on recall yielded conflicting positive and negative results (Harp & Mayer, 1998; Schraw, 1998). Research on vividness of text suggested that no negative effect on recall is related to the construct and that the construct was multifaceted, where some components of vividness of details affected interest and recall more than others (Schraw, 1997; Schraw et al., 1995). Studies of coherence, relating to text structure, organization, and ease of reading, reported results specifically related to college students. Wade et al. (1999) reported that novelty, imagery, and prior knowledge related positively to interest, while text difficulty and poor text coherence had a negative impact. Wade et al. also identified how students determined the importance of the text also impacted interest.

Also to be assessed as having applicable application to young adult motivation to read academic texts is the consideration of task-based interest which poses, as Dewey first theorized, that student interest could be manipulated in the classroom by structuring assignments to stimulate engagement (e.g. Schraw & Dennison, 1994) Again, unlike with traditional motivation to read research which selected younger school age students as the sample of choice, a significant portion of the studies reviewed in interest studies focuses specifically on college students. Work by Deci and colleagues (Deci and Ryan, 1987;
Deci et al., 1991) correlated interest to student academic and social control with greater control and autonomy yielding higher intrinsic interest. More control also linked to deeper learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). Mitchell (1993) focused on high school students’ augmented situational interest with the role of catching and holding requiring different stimulations to keep students focused on a particular task, concluding that active involvement is imperative to stimulating task completion and promote deeper learning.

Pertaining to the influence of text format on student desire to engage with an assigned text, the most significant research to the purpose of this inquiry lay in a consideration of whether text format and genre influence interest ratings. Wade et al. (1999), in a study of college students, identified that text, measured for a variety of components including interest, importance, imagery, humor, and coherence, when given to college students in either a narrative or technical/expository format, yielded similar higher interest and importance ratings. This relates significantly to a college population immersed in digitally creative text formats meant to stimulate interest when it has been theorized that students become disengaged by traditional formats, favoring instead the multimodal formats privileged in digital platforms. The “Time-Life” study conducted by Graves et al., (1988), revealed the impact of text manipulation conducted by experts and educators to improve enticement of the text. Initially, researchers reported that the Time-Life renditions were rated more interesting. However, a study conducted a year later with a comparable population of college students, reported that the highly coherent text (traditional to academic curricula) was recalled more clearly (Britton et al., 1989).

The final component of situational interest to be considered, especially as it relates to young adults, and particularly as it might relate to community college students,
is knowledge-based, referring to how prior knowledge and topic familiarity might affect interest. Of significance is a perceived directional relation of interest to prior knowledge. Where Tobias (1994) found a direct linear relationship between interest and prior knowledge, (the more prior knowledge, the more interest). Kintsch (1980) suggested, though never proved, that mid-level prior knowledge would yield greater comprehension gains. Yarlas and Gelman (1998) considered how well new knowledge, assimilated into an existing schema, affected interest. To date, conflicting theories regarding the linearity of a knowledge/interest relationship persist.

**Interest Studies**

Interest research has traveled a disjointed road throughout the decades with its most pronounced work occurring in the 1990s and seemingly supplanted by Motivation to Read research in the 2000s. Nevertheless, a relatively robust body of work related to interest unveiled some significant findings. U. Schiefele et al., (1992) conducted a meta-analysis of 121 studies identifying a high correlation between interest and academic achievement. Schraw and Lehman (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of studies related specifically to situational interest and texts, finding that all studies suggest a positive link between text interest and learning, with no study found with contrary indications.

Related specifically to the creation of affective measurement instruments, Interest is most predominantly considered a multifaceted phenomenon (Hidi, 1990, 1995; Krapp et al., 1992) and most research on the subject reflects that ideology. However, unlike Motivation Research with a sizable proliferation of Motivation to Read Affective Instruments, relatively few Interest Scales have been developed in the past two decades. Several focused on specific content-area subjects (e.g. Social Studies Interest Inventory—
Interest in Reading Materials, Ataya & Kulikowich, 2002; Situational Interest Scale for Physical Education, Chen, et al., 2001, 2014; Science Interest Survey, Lamb, et al., 2012). Those reviewed referred to specific contextual applications of interest, whether in social studies, science, or physical education, each independently identifying factors to represent interest as a multidimensional construct within the context of that learning environment.

Other survey compilations which looked more broadly at interest suffer, like Motivation to Read research, from a failure of the research field to come to consensus on the factors underlying interest as a construct. Some studies assert a single component construct of either emotion or value (Dotterer et al., 2009; Kalender and Berberoglu, 2009; Viljaranta et al., 2014) or two components (Study Interest Questionnaire; SIQ, Schiefele et al., 1988). Four component scales were rare, with only one undertaken in the United States (Winninger et al., 2014), and only several three subscale surveys including emotion, value and knowledge were found, most notably the General Individual Interest Scale (GIIS; Tang & Toyama, 2016). Other than using the four-dimension framework (Luo, Dang & Xu, 2019), one seven item scale considered academic interest from the subconstructs of positive emotion, value, and contextual disposition (Rotgans, 2015). The French 15-item SI Scale (Roure et al., 2016) explores five dimensions related to Situational Interest, including novelty, instant enjoyment, exploration intention, attention demand, and challenge. None consider the U.S. urban community college demographic, or specifically, college student interest to read academic texts.

Most recently, Luo et al., (2019) compiled an Academic Interest Scale for Adolescents (AISA) which evaluates interest across subjects in the Chinese junior high
school system, utilizing Renninger and Hidi’s (2011) Four-Phase Interest Model and isolating those four dimensions, emotion, value, knowledge, and engagement. This quasi-experimental study employed three separate surveys to assess the disposition of 1780 7th to 9th graders, related to academic interest. The survey items were researcher generated to theoretically isolate each of the four dimensions. Experts were employed to provide feedback on generated survey items, but student cross-validation was not sought.

Studies exploring reading motivation at the community college level tend to focus less on student interest but rather on considering potential factors related to student compliance to read textbooks. T.E. Ryan (2006) concluded that giving ‘global’ reading assignments yields poor outcomes, and students told simply to read a particular chapter were found less likely to engage with the text. Quizzes were offered as a potential incentive to stimulate compliance. In a case study by Brost and Bradley (2006), the researchers found that even when students read the text, student class comments post-reading tended to focus not on the actual text but on the general topic or on faculty-initiated comments. They also found that classes that assigned more readings were more likely to have less student reading compliance. In a survey given to students in this study, the most important reason for complying with reading was ‘personal desire to learn’ and the least was ‘sense of obligation.’

A study by Komiyama (2013) focused on language learner’s motivation to read texts and found five factors dictated that motivation; intrinsic motivation, drive to excel, academic compliance, test compliance, and social sharing. Bartolomeo-Maida (2017) focused specifically on an urban community college text reading experience and concluded that using journaling was an effective strategy to foster compliance but did not
specifically refer to depth of engagement. Ihara and Del Principe (2016) conducted a longitudinal evaluation of 10 urban community college students’ text reading experiences across disciplines for three years and found that while students believed that compliance was more likely if professors followed-up or referred to the readings after assignments were due. The researchers found that most professors did not follow up with students after readings were completed.

When considering the purpose of this proposed inquiry as an exploratory analysis of interest as it relates to student motivation to read academic texts in an urban community college setting, none of the studies reviewed directly covered similar ground. Some disregarded interest in favor of engagement, and under this cover considered a variety of motivational factors related to student engagement in the classroom, but not related specifically to reading assignments (e.g. Perrotta & Bohan, 2013). Schnee (2017) offers the most pointed consideration of community college students’ perspective on academic texts, wherein the researcher created and distributed surveys across disciplines to identify both student and teacher perceptions related to assigned reading in individual classrooms. In this last study, a discrepancy was found between teacher and student perception regarding the value of readings assigned and areas for further research were isolated, including targeting gender differences, reading compliance strategies and community college outcomes. But no identification of the value of interest in the reading compliance equation was advanced.

**Theoretical Background**

The work of this present inquiry draws heavily upon the conceptualization of reading as a meaning-construction process, as articulated by Ruddell and Unrau (2004), which lays out the complexity of reading as machinations which remain largely hidden
from view. Ruddell and Unrau’s modelling facilitates a consideration of older students’ subjective reading processes within the classroom context as meaning-making which is not specifically witnessed. As such, a theoretical consideration must be granted toward the evolving nature of young adult literacy events, and what it means to this study population ‘to read.’ Schachter and Galli-Schachter (2012) referred to the act of reading for a young adult population as **literacy identity**, which they defined as readers’ “proficiency and willingness to engage the meaning systems embedded within texts and to consider adopting them as part of their own personal meaning system- that system within which they define themselves and their relation to the world” (p. 4). In this light, multiple theoretical frameworks are drawn upon to create a rich tapestry which provides a relevant and adequate lens through which to view the expansive phenomenology of student interest to read academic texts.

**Self-Determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as posited by Deci and Ryan (1991) was advanced to explain the gradation of individual learning on a developmental spectrum from *controlled* to *optimal adjustment*. SDT holds that a developing student advances through four stages of knowledge generation, from what is termed by de Charms (1968) and Ryan and Connell (1989) as a “perceived locus of causality” (p. 749) to move from compliant external regulation toward a self-determined integration of cognitive processing. In all stages, intentional learning is occurring, however, the processes of regulation advance from extrinsic toward intrinsic or integrated. The four stages identified include External Regulation, Introjected Regulation, Identified Regulation, and Integrated Regulation. While the first and second are predominately motivated by
external incentives such as rewards or goals, in Deci and Ryan’s view it is only once one moves into the latter two stages that one’s regulatory processes, or reasons for acting, become fully integrated, and the individual, in the last stage, acts specifically and clearly in advancement of that individual’s conceptualization of a clear sense of self. For an individual to be fully self-actuated and to tap into deep learning, one must reach this last stage. All other stages signify that the individual has not become in tuned with one’s individuality and lacks the full ability of self-regulation for optimal learning.

From this theoretical framework, researchers advanced a theory of motivation correlated to energy, direction, persistence and equifinality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this formulation, motivation is portrayed as either extrinsic or intrinsic, where the latter label serves to identify the most developed individuals who have not only internalized various learning but have integrated the desire to integrate that information within their existing schema as a necessary part of identity formation, validation, and advancement. Those who are extrinsically motivated also are more apt to adopt integrated regulation, move autonomously and tap into deeper learning. In contrast, those students found to be externally regulated revealed less effort toward achievement and interest (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Miserandino, 1996). Other positive outcomes related to integrated motivation found through empirical testing included lower dropout rates (Vallerand and Bissonnette, 1992) and higher quality learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the autonomy which is generally a trait of more intrinsically motivated individuals in their learning scenarios facilitates exponential growth toward deeper synthesis of information, and further, such integration reaffirms a sense of a fully actualized self, which is an innate goal in any learning.
Deci and Ryan (2008) advance the theoretical framework of SDT further by defining the dichotomous positioning of Controlled versus Autonomous Motivation wherein the type of motivation matters more than how much you have of that particular motivation. For example, students who exhibit Controlled Motivation are dictated to by external regulation or pressure to think or feel a particular way. Whereas those students who exhibit Autonomous Motivation are likely to experience volition and recognize how their actions act as a self-endorsement. This theory recognizes the intentionality of learning, not with the learner as the object/receiver of his or her learning stimuli, but as the actuator of learning. It is expressed in terms which clearly integrate with the learner’s invested schema. In this framework theorists acknowledge the developmental tendencies of students moving from the youngest ages through adolescence as they tend to advance from a position of Controlled Motivation toward Autonomous Motivation and from External Regulation to Internalized and then Integrated Regulation as they become more in tune with their self-proclaimed sense of identity.

Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, researchers isolated Person-Object Approach to Interest (POI) to subjectively orient the learner within the learning process and in relation to personality development (Krapp, 1993, 2004). POI recognizes fundamentally the concept of dynamic self-identification at the core of human development, and that the developing self continually resituates itself in any environment to most optimally incorporate stimuli found to have value, discard that which is not found to value or even to incorporate that which does not quite fit when obligated to do so by externally regulating forces (Krapp, 2000). This orientation suggests an intentionality and
a subjective determination wherein the individual has a much greater influence on their own development.

As represented in POI, humans are constantly, from birth, driving toward integration or the fully autonomous functioning of motivational process where external stimuli from a variety of sources are recognized as valuable and supportive of the self. It is also recognized that an individual’s self-system may change continually as a person’s sense of self changes dynamically. Ultimately as an individual becomes more aware of a sense of self what one must do is difficult to dissimulate from what one likes to do. In this framework the concept of interest becomes relational as that which occurs between the actor and the object of interest which can be anything from an idea, a topic or specific subject matter.

Interest is also portrayed as having four formal criteria:

1. cognitive aspects which respond to cognitive schemata,

2. emotional or feeling related incorporating a tension which is empathic or related to feeling of competence and which also is that which helps derive feelings of stimulation or enjoyment,

3. a value component which supports to individual’s self-system, and

4. the intrinsic quality of interest wherein one no longer delineates between what one has to do and what one likes to do.

The emotional component corresponds directly to feelings of competence, self-determination, and freedom along with pleasure and positive social emotional stimulation. What is interesting then to someone with a defined self-system is that which is automatically identified as valuable and supportive toward the self. Significantly,
empirical studies have shown that interest levels tend to decline as students age, with the lowest levels of interest toward academic work found in students as they age (Helmke, 1993).

The Value of Action Research

Action research (AR), owing its origin to the work of Lewin (1946), is a form of teacher-as-researcher methodology, where the educator identifies a problem embedded within their own practice and seeks, through sound methodological inquiry, to explore that problem with the potential to adopt innovation to alleviate that problem (Mills, 2002). Through exploration and evaluation of feedback from that exploration, a context-specific solution is sought which effectively serves to innovate that teacher’s practice for the particular population under consideration (e.g. Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Kincheloe, 2003; Loughran, 2002; MacLean & Mohr, 1999). Suter (2006) recognized the value of action researchers in advancing pedagogical innovation. Teacher research was founded to help anchor education as evidenced-based practice (Fullan, 2007, 2013). Additionally, action research also serves as a valuable aspect of professional development when it is shared with colleagues undergoing similar circumstances, or identifiable issues (Atay, 2008).

Ethical Dilemmas in Action Research

Action research (AR) poses several ethical dilemmas, most pointedly in that it calls for an open and integrative consideration of one’s own practice and further calls on a researcher’s students to be participants in that consideration. Detractors of action research assert that a potential imbalance of power occurs when one in authority is in a position to exert pressure over subordinates to participate in a study. For instance, if the focus of study is classroom practice, and is therefore made part of the natural course of
instruction, it becomes problematic to delineate non-participants from participants, or at
least, to place non-participants at ease to believe that they are in some way not being
penalized for non-participation in the study (Nolan & Putten, 2007). And while
proponents of AR would argue that the National Commission for the Protection of
Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) lays out the duties for all
researchers, not just action researchers which must be adhered to pertaining to the respect
of participants, and Informed Consents articulate the rights of participants, including the
right not to participate, nevertheless, AR tends to suffer from a focused attention into the
blurred lines between practice and research. So ethical review boards tend to err in favor
of the human subjects those boards were formed to protect.

Action research as described here, is asserted as pedagogical research wherein a
researcher is not pressured to produce broad spectrum generalizability, but rather is
driven by curiosity and a desire to practically create a better practice by which to serve
their students (Norton, 2018). This viewpoint accentuates a democratization of inquiry
where the benefits of the results are to be shared by researcher and participants as co-
collaborators and co-generators of knowledge (Hilsen, 2006). As Hardy and Leiba-
O’Sullivan (1998) posit, how resources are allocated, who has control to those resources,
and how potential conflicts are predicted and avoided are at the heart of creating a
democratization of inquiry.

In considering the agency of young adults in post-secondary education, such
students are poised to understand the nature of an exploratory inquiry and contribute
purposefully to a consideration of their own rights and assertion of values (Erikson,
1968). This sense of agency provides students with a clear sense of their values and the
value of the research in which they are asked to participate. For this reason, action research, specifically focused on educational practices in young adult classrooms, is poised to create effective collaborative environments, where a teacher is able to offer assistance as facilitator and not as dictator of the inquiry.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

Young adults across the United States select community college, a two-year post-secondary-institution with open admission policies, for a variety of reasons, whether it be that these schools offer a more direct route to two-year certifications in certain professional fields or provide a viable alternative to more expensive and/or more academically demanding four-year colleges. However, despite the accessibility of community colleges, close to 40% of students will drop out before the second year, and only 17% are likely to graduate within three years (CUNY, 2019). Researchers theorize that a key to better retention is to foster stronger first-year student engagement in their academic work (McClenney et al., 2012). Also, research related to interest theory suggests that students, even those with low self-efficacy or regulation, are more likely to make gains in engagement or academic progress, dependent upon how interested those students are in the texts assigned by their teacher (Renninger, 2009).

The goal of this exploratory inquiry is to explore the construct of student interest as it relates to motivation to read academic texts. The research questions posed here are

RQ1: To what extent does personal interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read the academic texts they are assigned?

RQ2: To what extent does situational interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read academic texts they are assigned?

This study serves as a step to isolate potential factors (from participant perspective) related to the latent trait of student interest to read academic texts and may subsequently lead to additional research to pilot test a constructed Young Adult Student Interest to Read Academic Texts Survey.
Research Site

Participants in this inquiry were selected from first-year students in a major Northeastern metropolitan community college (given the pseudonym in this inquiry as Metropolitan Community College). In its Fall 2018 cohort, this college had enrolled 15,051 students seen as comparable to current enrollment (CUNY, 2019). The demographic composition of the college is ethnically diverse (Table 1).

Table 1
Demographic Breakdown of Research Site by Percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>39.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In this community college domain, lenient open admission policies allow academically disadvantaged students to experience college and seek a two-year associate degree; however, it has been shown that more than 40% of entering freshmen require some remediation, particularly in the area of reading and writing (CUNY, 2019). Even those not requiring remediation enter school underprepared to encounter the relative rigor of college level coursework (Martin et al., 2014). Class composition is comprised of diverse demographics including lower socioeconomic status, language learners, or those with diagnosed or undiagnosed learning disabilities, and found to fairly represent the diverse composition unique to community college populations in a large urban setting (Schnee, 2018).
Participant Pool

Participants were secured from the researcher’s own two first-year English composition classes at this institution. All students enrolled in Spring 2020 Semester classes (approximately 45 students split between two classes) were invited to participate. While random sampling was not possible, this non-probability convenience sampling was randomly assigned by the registrar to theses mandatory prerequisite English Composition classes, and as such the sample composition was originally expected to be representative of the overall population of this college. However, as this study was undertaken in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, institution-wide protocols were put in place which affected sampling. For safety, students were transferred to distance learning, and some students encountered difficulty successfully navigating that transfer. Therefore, it is not fair, or safe to assume that this sample population is representative of the broader student population at this college.

Research Design

This inquiry is framed under action research as an exploratory inquiry which recognizes the value of teacher-as-researcher research within the context of one’s own classroom. The task assigned to the teacher as researcher is to recognize a problem within one’s classroom, to acquire knowledge on that problem, with the potential to ultimately innovate practice through the process of inquiry (Mertler, 2013). While the design of this present study seeks to collect data from both qualitative and quantitative instruments, this study has been specifically articulated as exploratory because of its focus on knowledge construction rather than on expected measurement and innovation implementation. As such, the agency of student participants is fully recognized and respected, and students are called upon to be co-researchers, to form a collaborative co-construction of meaning-
making which is democratic and does not exert undue power imbalance within the
classroom context. This research does not seek to link any outcomes to grades or other
achievement measures. The purpose of this study is to consider student interest to read
academic texts, to better understand that construct from the participant perspective.
Generalizability is not a goal of this study, but rather an articulation of the contextual
understanding of student interest to read academic texts and how such an understanding
might allow teachers of this local population to reflect on pedagogical practice.

The Spring 2020 semester classes, from which participants were invited, began
the semester meeting in person for one-hour time slots, four mornings each week, from
early March until early June 2020 (Appendix B). However, due to circumstances related
to the COVID-19 pandemic, all class instruction was moved online. This disruption was
less taxing for me as an educator, as I already use Blackboard extensively, and students
had demonstrated an aptitude for the platform as it was in regular use at the beginning of
the semester to transmit work product and participate in group class work. Original study
parameters were altered slightly to reflect the transition to online forums.

The class curriculum was divided into four thematic modules, each with
applicable assigned reading tasks. Writing tasks were part of the curriculum, assigned in
the latter portion of the module but not reflected in this table (Table 2). To ensure that no
students felt pressure to participate in this study, data collection was undertaken in the
last two weeks of the semester in a two-week module, after students had submitted most
course-required gradable materials. Assignments given during this last module (Module
5) were deemed as extra credit course work.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Description/Theme</th>
<th>Reading Assignments</th>
<th>Learning Objectives related to reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Module 1</td>
<td>“Wired for Distraction” An introduction to reading comprehension, advanced literacy skills and college composition</td>
<td>Readings in different genres are used to assess reading level and difficulties. Readings are provided with increasing difficulty to build appropriate strategies and develop student resilience</td>
<td>Annotation, Summarization, Pre-read/Read/Re-Read, Vocabulary in Context, Question/Surprise/Confused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 2 - March 30 - April 19</td>
<td>“Designer Babies and Other Adventures in Science” Uses a debate format to deepen students reading and advanced literacy skills to create enriched arguments</td>
<td>Topic related readings are provided. Students are divided into two groups to debate two sides of one issue. Students identify appropriate college level readings as evidence to support arguments in class-wide debate.</td>
<td>Generating Questions, Activating Prior Knowledge, Deepening Understanding, Assessing Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 3 - April 18 – May 1 (dates/topic tentative)</td>
<td>“Technology Overload” Reinforcing reading skills learned in Module 1.</td>
<td>Readings are provided with increasing difficulty related to thematic content</td>
<td>Annotation, Summarization, Pre-read/Read/Re-Read, Vocabulary in Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module 4</td>
<td>Capstone Essay Workshop, student selected final thesis.</td>
<td>Self-selected college level readings are used to construct final capstone research paper</td>
<td>Putting it all together. Identifying appropriate college level resources to support student thesis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exact dates of modules were altered to accommodate student adjustment to a technology-based platform. The final module was begun the day after Memorial Day (May 26) and progressed through June 3.

I conducted this study during the course of curriculum instruction in the fifth and final module of the semester, students were offered six different readings, were asked to select one, read that selection, and report back to the class on their interest or lack of interest in that reading. I collected student responses and class discussion over the course of six classes, via surveys, recorded class discussions, Group text chats, Discussion Post assignments, (standard to Blackboard virtual classroom), and other classroom tools available on Blackboard.

**Reducing Bias and Coercion**

Although this exploratory inquiry is framed as action research, with its primary purpose defined as the acquisition of knowledge and the articulation of participant perspective related to a specific phenomenon. I do not seek to generalize findings to a broader population. The goal of this research was to understand, with the help of students
as co-collaborators, the construct of interest to read academic texts. Nevertheless, to avoid any semblance of pressure, this study was conducted at the end of the semester after most student grades had been tallied. The assignments given during this short module were framed as extra credit, and students were given the opportunity to participate or not participate for extra credit. Students who chose not to participate were given the opportunity for an alternate extra credit assignment.

All surveys and data instruments were distributed online via Blackboard within the classroom context in the course of reading and writing instruction. All students, as detailed in the Informed Consent (Appendix B), were given the option to participate in all, some, or none of the study components. Class discussions were conducted online using Blackboard Collaborate digital platform where students have the control to mute audio or video on their end. Students who chose not to participate in the study were provided with an alternate assignment for the same credit as students participating in the study. All students, whether participating or not, were asked to join in group discussions and complete discussion posts, but non-participating students did not have data collected. Data that was collected and uploaded to NVivo software was not linked to student names. No student grade was adversely affected by participation or non-participation. Extra credit was equally offered to participants or non-participants. Non-participating students were offered an extra credit opportunity of the same points as study participants. All other grades for work submitted in the class to date were clearly calculated and visible on Blackboard prior to the study inception.

Data Collection Process

After an introduction of the study and recruitment of participants following IRB guidelines, I distributed the Initial Survey on Student Interest to participating students
prior to the start of Module 5 (Appendix C). The survey collected basic demographic data to isolate particular traits of the study population as well as to account for potential covariables. The survey consisted of both multiple choice and open-ended questions to orient study participants as to the nature of the study and the construct under consideration as well as to seek initial student conceptualization of the concept of interest. These answers were used to help steer qualitative inquiry throughout the study.

The Informed Consent was completed online, and students were asked to grant consent or dissent electronically. The purpose of the survey as well as directions were read aloud via video to the class. I administered the survey to those individuals who signed an Informed Consent Agreement to participate in the study. Students who requested an alternate extra credit option were given the parameters of the assignment (a 3-to-5-page critical analysis of the reading selection of their choice). Those students were given until the conclusion of the module to complete that extra credit assignment. The alternate assignment or participation in this study offered the same extra credit value.

Survey data were exported to NVivo 12 Pro Software. Initial themes were coded (See analysis section) and demographic data were identified to isolate potential co-variables. Results were used to fuel subsequent class discussions related to student conceptualization of interest, and potential lines of inquiry related to student compliance with reading assignments.

After the initial survey completion, students were given a selection of six readings from which to choose (Appendix D). The titles of the essays along with a short blurb referring to the content of the essay were read aloud, and either hyperlinks for the readings or links to the pdfs were attached in the online content folder. Students were
asked to select one reading which interested them, and which would be used as the basis for assignments for the week. Readings were selected from a variety of genres recognized by news journals for their literary and were selected to represent a diversity of potentially interesting topics.

Additionally, two Discussion Post assignments were given to the students on Blackboard. The first Post asked about student past academic reading experience and current experience in college. The second asked what students specifically found interesting about the reading they selected. Students were also asked to respond to two peers’ posts. Student responses were uploaded to NVivo software to facilitate coding and analysis.

Student feedback was also sought during class discussions over the course of six class periods from May 26 through June 3. Class discussions took place on Blackboard in a virtual classroom. Students also had the opportunity to respond to questions or class tasks via a standard group chat feature which was recorded as part of standard classroom procedure with course content. All students, both participating in this study or not, understood (through specific verbal directives at the start of online learning) that all class sessions were recorded. This is part of standard class procedure so students who are unable to attend live sessions can review the class lectures as able. Consent forms also clearly indicated recordings were taking place, and all participating students agreed to recording. However, while, students in Cohort A (first semester English) chose as their primary form of communication to speak on active audio feeds, the majority chose not to activate video feed. Students in Cohort B chose not to participate through video or audio, instead preferring to communicate primarily through group chat.
All relevant forms of communication related to this inquiry were collected for later analysis. Students had the option to fully participate in these discussions, or to listen to these discussions without providing input. Blackboard Collaborate offers students the control to mute their audio and video feed as they chose. As is the common rule to ensure equity, particularly during the pandemic where student access to technology could be sporadic, no student was penalized for non-participation.

Data collected are represented in the following table.

**Table 3**

*Data Collection Instruments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Instrument</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IS12</td>
<td>Initial Survey on Interest</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS24</td>
<td>Initial Survey on Interest</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP112</td>
<td>Discussion Post 1</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP124</td>
<td>Discussion Post 1</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP212</td>
<td>Discussion Post 2</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP224</td>
<td>Discussion Post 2</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD26</td>
<td>Class Discussion Transcript 5/26</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD27</td>
<td>Class Discussion Transcript 5/27</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD28</td>
<td>Class Discussion Transcript 5/28</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD61</td>
<td>Class Discussion Transcript 6/1</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD62</td>
<td>Class Discussion Transcript 6/2</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD63</td>
<td>Class Discussion Transcript 6/3</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC526</td>
<td>Class Chat Transcript 5/26</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC527</td>
<td>Class Chat Transcript 5/27</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC528</td>
<td>Class Chat Transcript 5/28</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC61</td>
<td>Class Chat Transcript 6/1</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An explanation of data instruments used in this inquiry follows.

Data Instruments

**Initial Survey on Interest.** The researcher-developed Initial Survey on Interest (Appendix E) consists of 32 questions in total, formulated to collect demographic data, orient study participants to the nature of the study and the phenomenon under consideration, and to seek initial student conceptualization of the concept of interest. Questions were developed as both multiple choice and open-ended. As this is an exploratory study serving as the initial step to understand a phenomenon, the researcher-constructed survey is a valid approach to pretest questions to ensure participant understanding, question clarity, and to preliminarily identify if the questions isolate the phenomenon under consideration (Collins, 2001). Determination of construct validity was made by pretesting the interest survey with non-study participant students to determine readability and to ensure that questions are duly focused on the phenomenon of interest. Cognitive testing, wherein participants may be questioned as to their understanding of the survey questions, was included (Bolton, 1991). Suggestions made by pretesting students regarding readability were incorporated into the survey (i.e. pertaining to potentially difficult vocabulary).

I assessed content validity by asking several students from prior classes to read the survey questions and to specify whether the meaning of those questions is clear to them. Students identified that the survey was mostly understandable. However, a student during this inquiry identified that he did not understand what the word ‘seldom’ meant.
The word was altered for readability. More careful consideration of vocabulary for language learners will be made for future inquiries. Readability of the survey was determined by the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Index, which automatically calculates readability in MS Word documents, and is found to fairly assess reading ease of documents (Kincaid et al., 1975). The readability index of this survey is a 7.8 rated as “fairly easy.”

Also, an error in the administration of this survey is acknowledged, in that Question 26 was input twice to the online format. Most students did not respond to the duplicated question. If students answered twice, those answers were consolidated. Also pertaining to this question, it is recognized that students had differing interpretation of the intent of the question. The question asked, “When are you most likely to complete a reading assignment?” Some students identified that to mean, what time, not for what reason. A clearer articulation of the question will be considered for subsequent survey distribution.

**Readings.** Students were given a choice of 6 readings and asked to select 1 reading which interested them. They were asked to read that selection completely, answer discussion questions, and report back to the class on their findings. The readings were chosen from content which might normally be found in college composition anthologies or noteworthy news journals and represent a diversity of topics all contemplative of social issues (Appendix F). All essay selections were assessed for readability using the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Index.

2. “Why I Gave My Kidney to a Stranger – and Why You Should Consider Doing It Too” by Dylan Matthews reprinted from *Vox*, April 11, 2017


5. “Black Men in Public Places” by Brent Staples


Students received readily accessible and free links to all six articles via their online Blackboard module folder. Each link was accompanied by a short blurb, provided by the publisher, explaining in brief, the essay’s main consideration.

**Class Discussions.** Additionally, student feedback was sought during class discussions, online using Blackboard Collaborate conferencing. Discussions were recorded (with student permission, and student-controlled ability to turn off their video feed). Most students participated in class discussions using audio only. I transcribed recordings and had them verified for accuracy by a neutral third party. Class discussions also took place via running group chat threads imbedded in Blackboard Collaborate. Students participated freely in these forums, and I responded to comments made there. Transcripts of group chats were downloaded from Blackboard and comments and indicators not relevant to this inquiry (i.e. questions regarding grading, end of term instructions, statements made by non-participants, or student personal information not within the parameters of this inquiry) were redacted. All transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12 software management system for coding and analysis.
**Discussion Posts.** A final instrument used in this study is the Discussion Post assignment component provided on Blackboard. Both assignments were given to study participating and non-participating students. Two Discussion Post assignments were used. The first asked students to briefly relay their prior academic reading experience, as well as their current college academic reading experience. The second Discussion Post assignment asked students to elaborate on what they may or may not have found interesting about the assigned reading, asking them to elaborate. Students were also asked to respond to two peers’ posts. The specific wording of Discussion Post 2 follows, modelling discussion questions given in prior classes.

“Consider this reading you have selected and read.

1. What specifically, if anything, did you find interesting about this reading? Why? (Remember to be specific.)

2. What specifically, if anything, about this reading was not interesting to you? Why? (Be specific.)

3. Do you think your level of interest affected how engaged you were with the material?

4. Respond thoughtfully to least two peers’ posts.

Please specifically state the reading you selected and refer to parts of the text to support your answer. There is no assigned length to this response, but consider your answer carefully, and be as clear as possible.”

Peer responses were sought to facilitate student to student dialogue related to the concept of interest, particularly related to alternate choices other students may have exhibited.

**Data Analysis**

In this study, I collected both quantitative and qualitative data. However, as this research is framed as an exploratory inquiry, data analysis was not intent on measurement of the degrees of an observed phenomenon but was pursued within the context of
knowledge acquisition to better understand that phenomenon. Quantitative data from surveys assumed a supportive role and was used to isolate potential variables as well as to cross-check qualitative data responses. I adopted a hybridized constant comparative Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) deemed as a flexible yet rigorous endeavor best suited to describe the lived experience of participants and to generate theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1965). Analysis here is framed in a constructivist perspective of meaning-making, wherein the researcher, over the course of repeated interactions with participants articulates a deeper understanding of the situation or issue under consideration (Charmaz, 2000, 2006). To preference participant perspective, codes were not determined *a priori*.

A constant comparative hierarchical coding process was utilized using three steps: open, axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first review of data in open coding allowed patterns to emerge through an identification of specific repetition of words and phrases. Repeated review of the data allowed for reduction to more narrowed concepts. Initial verbatim themes evolved into preliminary emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All three steps inductively foster “a cyclical and evolving data loop which allows the systematic and rigorous development and reduction of categories and ultimate theme generation” (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 47). Refinement of themes continued in second level axial coding utilizing inductive and deductive reasoning through constant comparative and line-by-line coding. This method called for a close reading of all data for potential coding variations and overlap (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Williams & Moser, 2019). Using these three steps through reading and rereading data, I was able to more effectively understand student conceptualization of interest to read
academic texts and how alternate perspectives on that issue converged into thematic patterns. The third step, selective coding, was undertaken to further consolidate and refine themes consider sub-themes and to align those themes, to the research questions of this inquiry moving the researcher closer to theory construction (Flick, 2009).

Axial coding was undertaken by coding emergent themes through NVivo software, isolated through open coding and conducting line by line and constant comparative coding of all other obtained qualitative data sources. Rigor was facilitated through the systematic cyclical consideration of data sources and how patterns and themes evolved from simultaneous coding and analysis of responses. As themes were refined, data sources were reread and additional word frequency searches conducted as additional terms related to evolved themes were determined. Themes (identified as Parent Nodes in NVivo Software), and subcategories, (Child Nodes) were delineated. The research questions in this inquiry were referenced to identify alignment of themes to the questions under consideration. Particular repeated phrases were also run to determine frequency of unique representations of student expressions. At this stage, also facilitated by NVivo software, code sentiment labels (positive, negative, or neutral) were refined to further isolate the positive or negative impact of the theme as such related to the construct under consideration.

Quantitative data were also analyzed to produce descriptive statistics. Isolated themes were used to develop initial categories and fuel in-class discussion related to student conceptualization of interest, and potential lines of inquiry student compliance with reading assignments. This quantitative data either isolated demographic data which
might be pertinent for further study or using a Likert scale measurement isolated student likelihood to act one way or another related to the issue under consideration.

Throughout this inquiry, coding and analysis were not taken as synonymous, but coding was part of analysis (Basit, 2003). While coding and analysis were facilitated by NVivo Pro 12 Software throughout this inquiry, I recognized that over-reliance on data management tools could lead to missed thematic content (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). While GTM often refers to themes as “emerging” as if they are passively unveiled, my analysis was conducted in the understanding of analysis as an interpretive endeavor. As Braun and Clarke (2006) wrote, “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question” (p. 13). The goal of this inquiry was not to foster a positivist or objectivist epistemology but a constructivist one. In this frame, analysis was guided by the research questions posed, and thematic categories were generated accordingly (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Staller, 2015).

**Final Analysis**

Ultimately, through constant comparative thematic coding and analysis, in conjunction with continual collaborative dialogic inquiry with students through class discussion, a clearer conceptualization of student interest to read academic texts was achieved. This research was undertaken in my own classrooms which afforded multiple opportunities to obtain feedback and clarification of student input. Further through this opportunity, I was offered valuable co-collaboration with the student participants, who had the opportunity through the module, to provide feedback beyond what might be scripted. What followed was an open and forthcoming articulation of student concerns and beliefs. The data collected and analyzed in this inquiry, represent an authentic
evaluation in real-time, and ideally a democratized inquiry which fairly recognizes the value of participants to articulate their own experience.

The purpose of Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) and constant comparison is to allow a researcher to fully consider a question or issue and through that consideration to move toward theory formation (Glaser, 1965, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Action research utilizing GTM affords an optimal environment and analytic tool to conduct such an inquiry because deep interactions fostered in the teacher’s own classroom over time afford the unique opportunity to engender deep and authentic communication, to reveal the “why” of students’ lived experiences. This study was structured to grant student participants ample opportunity over time to fully explicate their experience and preferences (Charmaz, 2000; Mann, 1993). Within this exploratory inquiry, students acted as co-researchers and I as their teacher, instead of driving discussion, served as facilitator so that student voices could be affectively accounted for.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview

This exploratory inquiry was undertaken as action research which recognizes the inherent value of the teacher as researcher. In this frame, the teacher identifies a problem or question related to their specific classroom practice and takes concrete steps to understand that problem and subsequently to apply an innovative solution to address that problem (Mills, 2002). Action research is known to be population-specific, more concerned to address possible benefits to a localized demographic, as opposed to a focus on generalizable results. (e.g. Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Kincheloe, 2003; Loughran, 2002;). This form of inquiry is recognized for its value in advancing pedagogical innovation, for anchoring education as evidence-based practice, and as an important component of professional development (Atay, 2008; Fullan, 2013; Suter, 2006).

The purpose of this exploratory inquiry was to isolate, from a participant perspective, factors which indicate the phenomenon of student interest to read academic texts in an urban community college sampling. Student interest in reading assignments is an important yet not clearly studied component of academic engagement at the post-secondary level. The most prevalent research on student engagement in college reading focuses predominantly on reading compliance which isolates specific extrinsic motivation, such as reward expectation, time management, dismissal of value, or attention deficit (e.g. Bartolomeo-Maida, 2017; Ihara & Del Principe, 2016; Kerr & Frese, 2017). While such studies hold value in recognizing the possible implementation of teacher-initiated strategies to encourage task completion, they do not consider fully the
impact of student interest in those tasks as a catalyst for optimal learning (Harackiewicz, et al., 2016).

To accomplish the goal of action research, this inquiry was undertaken within my own two Spring 2020 Semester College Composition Courses. (For the purpose of this inquiry, these courses and study samples are labeled as English 1, Cohort A, and English 2, Cohort B.) All students at this metropolitan community college (pseudonym as Metropolitan College) are required to sequentially take and pass English 1 and 2 as prerequisites for graduation. The courses focus on developing basic critical literacy and written argument construction. English 2 focuses more specifically on developing effective research strategies. Students are either assigned randomly or through individual selection and generally represent a diversity indicative of an urban community college, both culturally and also related to the degree of academic preparedness.

Through classroom interaction and discussion over the course of two weeks, I invited students to present their view of interest as it pertained to a module assignment given to the class. In this assignment, students were asked to choose 1 of 6 readings, read that assignment, and then report back specifically on their interest in that assignment. Fifteen students across my two separate English composition classes volunteered to participate. Due to COVID – 19 pandemic protocols, these classes, which originally met in person beginning in March 2020, were moved online, and all classes were conducted synchronously (live instruction), with recordings of classes made available for all students unable to attend at scheduled meeting times. To most broadly and clearly isolate student understanding of interest in their academic text assignments, I collected student feedback through 23 separate data sources (13 for Cohort A and 12 for Cohort B).
Analysis

I cleaned and transcribed all data sources and uploaded to NVivo Pro 12 software to aid in the identification of word frequencies, codes, and patterns across responses to isolate student conceptualization of factors related to student interest to read academic texts. The research questions stated for this inquiry were used to guide data coding and analysis.

RQ1. To what extent does personal interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read the academic texts they are assigned?

RQ2. To what extent does situational interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read academic texts they are assigned?

By using these questions as guides within constant comparative data analysis methodology (Glaser, 1965) student conceptualization of interest to read academic text was more clearly identified. Constant comparative methodology combines coding and analysis to most effectively conceptualize new theory related to a particular phenomenon. Unlike analytic induction, this form of data inspection does not attempt to generalize findings or test theory. Nor does it require a collection from all or particular forms of data sources to form a theoretical assertion. Rather, the primary purpose of constant comparative coding and analysis is conducted recognizing that the parameters of a particular concept or phenomenon are not clearly known or understood. This inquiry delineated coding and analysis in the frame of grounded theory where the researcher seeks “patterns of action and interaction among various types of social units (i.e. actors)” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 278). Through identification of these patterns, themes were generated to account for the theoretical implications which the data reveals.
After first round open and axial coding of the twenty-three data sources obtained in this inquiry, I identified 12 themes (Table 4).

Table 4

*Theme Generation Matrix*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Code (Negative and positive associations)</th>
<th>Number of files/References</th>
<th>Axial/Code and Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catch my eye, make you day dream, what stood out</td>
<td>13/44</td>
<td>Attention/Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer; I would choose</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Choice/Preference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to understand, uses complex terms</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Complicated/Complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed, maintained, or lost interest, technology</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment, like, amazing, I enjoyed</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>Positive Sentiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bias, I feel like, initial impression, politics</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Judgement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made me think, complete, different beliefs, grow, maturity, something new, left an impression</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades, I put in effort, push through, power through, strategy, my kids</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Other Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like a movie, like a story, font, too long, overwhelming, complicated, repetitive, facts</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Presentation of Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can relate, applicable; cultural application</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>Related/Relevance/Application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The right way, don’t care</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Teacher/Class Dynamic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s the point; valuable, benefit me; help me succeed; help me grow</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This chapter contains a recount of the deep analysis of student participant responses and how those responses were categorized to create themes related to the research questions posed for this inquiry. Using an open coding technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) themes were revealed through the text and not through \textit{a priori} code templating. The only guide to coding outside of participant responses was the generated research questions posed for this inquiry. This method was chosen to fairly give the participant perspective an opportunity to reveal itself without undue bias or anticipation of theoretically supportive conclusions (Glaser & Holton, 2004). The inquiry maintained its focus by utilizing the research questions as a guide. In the following account, I illustrate how themes evolved, and I present how those themes relate to theory and prior research. Finally, a researcher-developed workflow model for Student Interest to Read Academic Texts is presented which accounts for the 12 generated themes and supporting theory as related to the posed research questions.

\textit{Emergent Themes}

Through a constant comparative method without \textit{a priori} categorization, I first analyzed the Initial Surveys on Interest, submitted by all fifteen participants, in which students elaborated upon their understanding of the concept of interest and how such might affect their engagement with academic text assignments. This initial survey, previously piloted with former students, covered a broad spectrum of inquiry to allow students a full opportunity to evaluate their understanding of the topic in their own academic experience. The purpose of the survey to serve as a springboard framing discussion related to the research questions posed and to facilitate the identification of potential patterns in speech and conceptualization.
The research questions posed for this study were used as a guide to identify information specifically related to this inquiry.

RQ1. To what extent does personal interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read the academic texts they are assigned?

RQ2. To what extent does situational interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read academic texts they are assigned?

To ensure a fair representation of the participant perspective of this phenomenon, I used a combination coding technique utilizing both word frequency searches and an In vivo (verbatim) coding method which places emphasis on the actual spoken words of participants (Manning, 2017) otherwise referred to alternately as verbatim coding, literal coding, and natural coding (Saldaña, 2016). Also, using NVivo software, I assessed participant responses to isolate the perception of generated themes as either more positive or negative and counted the number of occurrences. Examples of positive and negative expressed sentiments are illustrated in Table 5. Word frequency values for terms found relatable to the research questions were also generated from In vivo coding (verbatim) of Initial Surveys. Those words are placed in bold.

Table 5

*Sample of Positive and Negative Sentiments Isolated by In Vivo Coding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Emergent Coding</th>
<th>Examples of Positive Verbatim Statements from In Vivo Code Matrix</th>
<th>Examples of Negative statements from In Vivo Code Matrix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher/Class</strong></td>
<td>• a class <em>discussion</em> usually takes place about the readings</td>
<td>• She just goes to the next chapter and <em>expects</em> us to get it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Orientation</strong></td>
<td>• engage the <em>class</em> in the readings and <em>encourage</em> deeper thinking</td>
<td>• I only have professors <em>assign</em> readings and readings that <em>don't interest</em> us at all and we</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **professor explained** the assignments I would understand it more that my other classes
• I **could tell** who **loves teaching**, they're very **excited** and explain well and want everyone to understand When they including the readings they **really want us to enjoy** them as well.

| New Information/Learning | I felt as if I **learned new** and **valuable** information
• I've definitely learned some **life-changing** things
• When I read the article I found myself **seeing** things **differently**

| Presentation of Reading | the author **managed** to interest me
• If it's **not too long**, I find it **easier** to get through the work

| Relatable | I **usually relate** to something in the readings relate to it in my **personal experiences**;
• |

• just **have to do it** for our **grades**
• the **lack of communication** from the professor was the reason I **lost interest**

| | When I **don't feel like I won't learn anything**
• and learning **without** interest means there is **no point** in learning and growing.

| | Events developed **too predictably**
• For long readings like Peer-reviewed journals, I **don't actually read** the whole thing; just seems to **ramble on facts** in a **boring** manner

| | not something that **pertains to my life**
• **old-fashioned**

As an additional cross-check for validity, a word frequency chart was generated from the verbatim coding matrix. Relevant student participant rhetoric from verbatim statements was isolated and matched against the NVivo Pro 12 Software word frequency chart. To facilitate a constant comparative method, I ran an independent word frequency search of all qualitative data sources isolating most commonly found terms related to the inquiry and exclusive of stop words. The word frequency search identified the following
relevant terms as most frequent including stemmed variations. Highlighting indicates word searches conducted.

**Table 6**

*Top Sample of Word Frequency Search for Cross-Checking Coding Validity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Similar Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>readings</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1386</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>read, reading, readings, reads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interests</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>interest, interested, interesting, interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>Not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>think</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>think, thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>want</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>want, wanted, wanting, wants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>really</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>Really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>experience, experiences, experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeah</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>Yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>get</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>get, gets, getting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>story</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>stories, story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>Going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>author</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>school, schooling, schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>learn, learned, learned’, learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>feel, feeling, feelings, feels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>teacher, teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>Our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>article</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>article, articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>topic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>topic, topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>Has</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>make, makes, making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>life</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>related</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>relatability, relatable, relate, related, relates, relating, relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ways</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>way, ways</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A comparison of word frequency searches based upon the verbatim coding matrix to the word frequency search of the whole data set confirmed that initial open codes generated were grounded in the most prevalent word searches. Word frequency searches added to the rigor of qualitative analysis by confirming that the target of inquiry is evident within the text (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Also, word frequency counts reveal what Pennebaker et al. (2003) identified as “linguistic fingerprints” (p. 568) based upon the belief that participants in a phenomenon adopt a common vernacular. Additional word searches were conducted as constant comparison coding evolved themes. Word frequency searches across the entire data set isolated that the most prevalent terms (excluding stop words) were ‘readings’ (or an iteration of) with 1386 mentions and 4.36% weighted coverage, and ‘interest’ (or an iteration of ) with 565 mentions and 1.78% weighted coverage. Word frequency throughout the inquiry also cross-validated that the most prevalent words also aligned to established codes.

Utilizing initial emergent codes and added codes generated through word frequency based upon an analysis of the Initial Surveys on Interest, I analyzed all other qualitative data sources (Table 6) using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Table 7

Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>INSTRUMENT</th>
<th>GROUP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IS12</td>
<td>Initial Survey on Interest</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS24</td>
<td>Initial Survey on Interest</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP112</td>
<td>Discussion Post 1</td>
<td>Cohort A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP124</td>
<td>Discussion Post 1</td>
<td>Cohort B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From this analysis, I generated axial coding using a parent/child node coding scheme specific to NVivo software. “Nodes” are the descriptive term given to specific themes isolated during the coding and analysis process. These nodes can either be “free” or independent, or “tree nodes” which recognize a hierarchical connection to other first or second level themes. Parent nodes are considered first-order umbrella themes, and child nodes are identified as branching off and related to umbrella/parent nodes. Parent nodes represent general or broader categorizations, while child nodes recognize a specificity of context within the general theme (Bazeley & Richards, 2000; Siccama & Pena, 2008).

Utilizing this hierarchical structure of parent and child nodes assists in the organization of coding and analysis to reveal the complexity of a conceptual framework (Gibbs, 2002). In this inquiry, child nodes (or subcategories) were specifically referenced because they
begged individual consideration for the unique expression of beliefs shared by participants. Initially generated codes with the least references were made child nodes (subcategories) under more generally articulated parent nodes.

Utilizing initial word searches as guides, emergent themes were recognized, and word frequency searches related to those themes were expanded. The following code matrix was established (Table 8). Parent nodes refer to major codes with most reference points. Child nodes refer to the subcategories which fall under the umbrella of the Parent nodes. The expanded word frequency search based upon captured patterns is also included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Node (Files/Occurrences)</th>
<th>Child Node (Files/Occurrences)</th>
<th>Expanded Word Frequency Search</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATTENTION FOCUS (13/36)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Catch caught eye what stood out attention focus drift sleep tired daydream wander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENGAGEMENT (8/37)</td>
<td>DELAYED MAINTAINED LOST (8/19)</td>
<td>hooked wanting more become interested initial impression happens first paragraph stood out want anymore turned off isn't great seems grip mind completely focused difficult keep track lose interest allow forced feel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRESENTATION OF TEXT (8/31)</td>
<td>like a movie ¾</td>
<td>movie font ramble text facts author genre long short complicated confusing predictable story plot thick complex too deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENJOYMENT (11/36)</td>
<td></td>
<td>enjoy want topic like actually more interested forced look forward hate avoid bother thick bored energy laid back good relax easy too</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEARNING/DIFFERENT BELIEFS/NEW PERSPECTIVE</td>
<td>LEARNING/DIFFERENT BELIEFS/NEW PERSPECTIVE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shocking reaction made think learned something new valuable information felt definitely life-changing gained different perspective left impression help progress makes think facts actually learn something subject knowledge different viewpoint catch on know about topic to learn more found myself seeing things differently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPLEX COMPLICATED 4/10</th>
<th>COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTY 6/21</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>understand well trouble comprehending text words know harder point explained complicated complex terms ideas feels foreign usually topic difficult understand mental capacity absorb information early possible get easy hard point get deep fast lost lose track idea.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VALUE 11/41</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valuable meaning meaningful life want applies value benefit important involves use useful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELATED APPLICATION CULTURAL 3/9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>relate relatable apply application life personal experience old fashioned value context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEACHER CLASS DYNAMIC 10/72</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>class discussion a lot conversations relax easy topics touch upon fuel and flow course engaging open-minded class engagement encourage deeper thinking great keep me engaged stories engaged involved involves dialogue discourse subject not too heavy smile topic teacher said discussions what we love hate create relationships sounds cool I would understand in touch teacher described work flow excited loves teaching wants everyone to understand want us to enjoy them work flow described explained expected story told us I believed her recommended thought-provoking questions encourage opinions leaves an impression care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
discourse personal experience right way bonding interaction between classmates made me involved connection want to be there energetic connection energy excitement deep conversations expects monotonous limited quiet tired slow make me constantly listing facts learn memorizing assign grades verbal hands-on sleepy bored want students teach miserable don't want to be her lack communication lost not asking us talking hours clear learn much interact

| TECHNOLOGY | 8/15 | movie PowerPoint television tv video games |
| CHOICE PREFERENCE | 12/40 | gives option genre own opinions formulate my mine choose chose different more likely choice select prefer express want enjoy |

**Refined Axial Coding**

Following first cluster axial coding, I returned to the isolated references to confirm coding accuracy, to subcategorize references as noted, and to conclude on final axial coding as represented below. Codes generated represent the themes as viewed from participant perspective, indicated by verbatim (in vivo) coding. Verbatim coding was absorbed in theme generation unless particular phrases were found repeatedly referenced.

**Table 9**

**Final Refined Axial Coding Hierarchy Chart with Subcategories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Number of coding references</th>
<th>Aggregate number of coding references</th>
<th>Number of items coded</th>
<th>Aggregate number of items coded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes\Attention Focus</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes\Attention Focus\Catch my eye\caught my eye</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Count1</td>
<td>Count2</td>
<td>Count3</td>
<td>Count4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention Focus: what stood out to me</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice Preference</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicated Complex</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complicated Complex: Comprehension Difficulty</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement: Delayed Maintained or Lessen Interest</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement: Technology Mixed Media</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment: Amazing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment: Bored</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment: Like</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment: Bias</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment: I feel like</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment: Initial Impression</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment: Politics</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning: And that made me think</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning: Complete</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning: Grow Mature</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning: New Perspective</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Grades</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation: Strategy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation: like a movie in my head.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related/Relevant Application</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Application: Cultural Application</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher or Class Dynamic</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A detailed explanation follows of each theme as isolated in this inquiry.

**Explanation of Generated Themes**

After open and axial coding, 12 major themes relevant to this inquiry were identified. Theme-overlap or relationships between themes was also identified. However, the purpose of this inquiry was to identify the uniqueness and value of each theme related to the research questions posed.

RQ1. To what extent does personal interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read the academic texts they are assigned?

RQ2. To what extent does situational interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read academic texts they are assigned?

Additional refinement of themes may be warranted dependent upon subsequent inquiry and theory building. Following is an explication of each identified theme as articulated by student participants.

**Attention/Focus**

Attention and Focus were isolated thematically as a lower order cognitive function and held separate from Engagement wherein students were able to attend to the task at hand. On the contrary, Engagement was specified as a “spark” by which students consciously made the decision to actively consider the text and topics about the text. Where Engagement generally was referenced positively, student participants were likely to speak of Focus as something that was difficult to accomplish. Interest was positively associated with the ability to focus. When I asked students when they were most likely to complete a reading assignment, one respondent stated, “When I am interested in the material because it is easier for me to stay focused on the reading and retain what I learn.” In turn, inability to comprehend the text negatively impacted focus or maintaining
concentration. “Yes, it does [lack of comprehension]. I believe that if the text is too
difficult I will just give up and end up searching up the text instead.”

Lack of interest was recognized in the inability to “keep on track” because the text
was seen as “boring.” Attention was seen as something to be “grabbed” and was not
necessarily maintained. Two students (of immigrant cultural orientations) also identified
that interest was not necessary to stay focused in that alternate external motivators
helped. One student stated,

I feel that we at [Metropolitan College] don’t really need interest to stay focused
and do well. A lot of us at [Metropolitan College] are good at getting things done
when they have to be no matter how boring it can be.

Only two of fifteen student respondents specifically recognized alternate priorities which
also took away from their ability to concentration on the text. A young mother (21) of
two cited her two young children as a reason for her inability to focus. Another student
referenced a list of alternate obligations, saying, “Sometimes I have things to take care of
and do, whether it's work, family issues or my personal issues and that's why I may drift
off from school work sometimes because I forget about it.”

When focus or attention diminished, students admitted to “skim” through the text
or that they would take “shortcuts.” One student admitted to becoming distracted by his
phone when he could not focus or if he lost attention. Students also recognized that they
were less likely to stay focused on longer readings such as peer-reviewed journals. One
student admitted, “I don't actually read the whole thing.” Students described
diminishment of energy when they lost focus on longer readings, where they were likely
to “drift off” or get “sleepy.” As one student complained, “[Long readings]…can make
you daydream or the pages may be too long but if you're not a reader, just looking at a
thick book can make you bored and drain your energy to read it.”

Student focus was affected by an inability to comprehend the text, where that inability influenced whether a student could stay “in the moment.”

Um it depends on my focus. If I'm in the moment and like I can really focus for a long period of time, then I'll just dive in. If it's a little too hard for me, [I] just experience like some severe ADHD moment and I just can't sit still. Then I'll take it in chunks and I'll just select like paragraph or one page at a time.

However, one student recognized a text-based strategy to deal with a lack of focus due to text complexity.

I'll usually just dissect a paragraph or two but what I like to do is understand and treat that paragraph like a story or a point that the author is trying to make and try and break it down to get what they need mean and one time and continue reading so I try to understand the reading until I have the whole text.

Student respondents identified strategies for reading texts to help them to focus, particularly when interest was lacking.

I gave my full attention to the reading. Went to my parent’s bedroom where it's quiet (minus the noisy cars outside). The quietness and my full attention is what affected my interest in reading it more. The more focused I became in reading the story, the more I enjoyed it.

One related their particular strategy used to engage “discipline.” Citing an absence of interest required an alternate mindset to keep focused. Multiple student respondents recognized that an inability to focus required “powering through” or “pushing through” and such was not conducive to deeper learning. No student identified an inability to focus when interest was present. Students referred to interest fading which in turn might lead to an inability to maintain focus. Another student recognized that “finding” something interesting in the text and seeing the text through a specific “lens” as a valid strategy.

What separated Attention/Focus as a theme from Engagement as a theme (which is detailed below) was student consideration of attention and focus as a skillset or characteristic. Where Engagement was often seen as something which the author either
failed or succeeded to do, as in “the author failed to engage me,” alternately
Attention/Focus (concentration) as a theme was most dominantly considered as something the student either did or could not accomplish. Further, while both Engagement and Attention/Focus were isolated as potential factors in the Interest construct, Engagement was positively linked to Enjoyment. No student positively associated Attention/Focus to any other observable factor, as it was often identified as a negative sentiment, as something the student could not do, or struggled to do, particularly in the absence of interest.

**Choice/Preference**

Responses coded to this theme referred to a self-identified predisposition to prefer particular aspects of texts, topics, or other items relevant to this inquiry. In the Initial Survey on Interest students were asked, “Would you have been more likely to complete assigned readings in your classes this year at Metropolitan College if your teacher asked for your input on topics for readings, or gave you a selection of readings to choose from? Why or why not?” Of the 11 respondents, all six in Cohort B responded affirmatively. However, in Cohort A, a first semester English course, responses were more mixed, where three responded negatively, one with a maybe, and the last affirmatively. This suggests that students’ desire for more choice in reading assignments may be linked to other factors. Reasons for these answers are explored below.

Of students who responded that they would prefer more choice in reading selections used in class, choice was linked to interest, as in, “Yes, because I would be more interested in reading something I like instead of reading something I'm forced to read”, or to self-determination and relatedness.
Yes, I would be more likely to complete it because it's my choice, and I never had a say in what I can read and, it would also give an idea to teachers of how their students are and what their students like and it can create many relationships because students may interested in the same readings you chose.

Lack of choice was linked to a more difficult path to completion of assignments, a path which would have to draw on alternate forms of motivation outside of interest.

You have more choices to pick from, and you can look over the brief information the reading has to offer. If it were just one reading, not everyone would be interested in that topic, and people would have to suck it up and power through it.

Choice was linked to more optimal performance in class. One student stated, “I do think I would do better in class if I chose from a selected set of selected readings because I have more chances to pick readings that I'm interested in.” Multiple respondents linked choice to a more enriched class dynamic which preferences a diversity of perspectives, an example being,

With regards to having the option of choosing my own reading or being assigned one - I think having the option allows for more diversity in class discussions, where people are not coming to the same (or at least similar) conclusions. It allows for the same amount of deep thinking and consideration, but with more of a variety of options.

Students spoke of a willingness (want) or openness to engage with texts they choose as opposed to being forced to deal with an assigned reading. The sentiment was evoked as a voluntary decision to engage. Multiple students suggested that when choice was given they were more “willing to read more,” “willing to learn,” or “wanted to talk about [the readings] more.” Students also suggest that they wanted “to look more into the aspects [of the reading]” or “read more content by the creator of the reading(s).”

Choice was seen by one respondent as an integral part of their mental process while reading. “I like being able to choose what I read, so I can keep my thoughts in sync with reading.” Having the option to select one’s own reading was viewed with
excitement, and a gateway to greater learning outcomes. “When I know about the topic and want to learn more.” Multiple respondents linked choice to individuality and the unique experience of each reader and how teachers might not be in sync with that, such as, “Everyone has their own genre that they like so for a teacher to say this book is amazing, another student could completely disagree.”

Choice was linked to other isolated themes in this inquiry including Relatedness, “Yes, because I would be more interested in the topic that I chose because I can relate”, Enjoyment, “I enjoyed reading books but not the ones assigned to me in school, I read books that were interesting to me like romance novels and mysteries”, and Engagement, “My level of interest was higher compared to the other readings because it was the closest to something I would read about on my spare time, the engagement was higher than what the other ones would have been.”

Students also spoke of the process of selecting what interested them, recognizing a preference or distaste for a particular topic.

I think it does help for me to give it a choice because not everybody has the same tastes or who wants to be on the same page of something. So I think there's more, I guess preference and more of what you are leading towards and picking what you want to read. It’s like choosing from a library. If you will.

However, alternate to a preference for choice, some student respondents indicate a negative perception of choice related to reading assignments suggesting most prevalently that students might not know what to choose. “You have a choice of so many books and so many topics people don't know where to start, but I feel for some people not everyone it's but better to go with one thing that we're all doing.” Students also recognized the experience of their teachers as valuable in providing readings of value, whether or not students recognized that value. “However, assigned readings can encourage a student to
think outside the box, beyond the obvious thoughts that would be expected. Which is a pretty cool exercise.”

Multiple student respondents identified how their choice to read or not to read an article as part of this inquiry was influenced by either my or another student’s description of that reading. For instance, one reader who had initially dismissed a reading as insignificant, consciously rethought his decision after I elaborated on what the text was about.

I would have picked the turtle one. I didn’t know beforehand that it was so deeply philosophical and I kind of just read the blurb and I was like “Oh, ok it’s about a turtle.” So now that you mention it, I probably would have picked the turtle one just to see where that would go and um...Yeah, I don’t know, just out of curiosity I would have picked the turtle one. I might even read it after this.

Overall, choice was positively linked to self-expression, identity, preference, and self-determination. A student’s ability to choose a reading was directly related to increased interest and engagement. However, students in Cohort A, which was comprised of new freshmen, were more likely to relinquish the ability of choice in favor of teacher experience, while students in Cohort B, comprised predominately of second semester freshmen were more likely to desire having the ability to choose their own readings.

Complicated/Complex

Students referred less often to text complexity as a reason for their lack of interest then to other factors identified in this inquiry (such as Presentation of Text). However, most responses coded to this theme did evoke a sense that students felt that text that was “too complicated” or “uses complex terms or ideas” was often an obstacle to deeper engagement. For example, as one student admitted, “If a text seems overwhelming or uses complex terms or ideas, it feels like reading a foreign language.” Students also
recognized an inability to maintain focus if the ideas in the text were complex even if teachers attempted to facilitate comprehension, “If the readings point is explained to me beforehand, sure, I get the idea, but I lose track of it when things get too deep.”

Interpretation of complexity was not often expressed as something beyond the ability responding students. Still multiple students presented an aversion to expending large amounts of effort to understand a text, preferring not to “bother looking up” meaning that was beyond their immediate grasp, or they might “just give up and end up searching up the text instead.” However, language learner respondents differed, tending to express a sense of perseverance, despite vocabulary difficulty, necessarily undertaken to comprehend texts, such as, “Sometimes it hard to understand the reading, but when you twice a time it gets easy to understand.” Two students identified text complexity as a positive motivator to stimulate deeper knowledge. For example, “…Text difficulty makes you think more of the text and using your own knowledge.” One student preferred to have knowledge clearly encapsulated in the single reading and not to require additional research or instruction.

Overall, text complexity was not always identified negatively. Language learners at times, identified complicated text as a given hurdle that needed to be overcome. One student identified complex text as a potential path to greater learning. However, other students referred to complex terminology as a detractor from interest or impacting persistence to attend to task. It is noted here that potential overlap may exist between the themes Complicated/Complex and Presentation of Text, in that Presentation of Text (reviewed below) as a theme, isolates overly-complicated arguments as a detractor from interest. These two potentially overlapped themes are delineated here where
Complicated/Complex refers to difficult vocabulary or domain knowledge, whereas Presentation of Text refers more to the structure of an author’s argument as being convoluted or poorly organized.

**Comprehension Difficulty as a Subcategory of Complicated/Complex**

During the course of analysis, I identified how students associated texts that were complicated or complex with a lack of interest, but not because they didn’t understand the texts. These students suggested that such complex texts either offered too much information or the texts required too much brain power to warrant interest suggesting a predominant desire not to exert excess effort which in turn influenced a refusal to engage. On the other hand, some students definitely identified how complexity equated to comprehension difficulty which in turn led to a lack of interest. With these differences in mind, Comprehension Difficulty was made a subcategory (child node) of Complicated/Complex.

While only 3 out of 15 students self-disclosed that they had been mandated to undergo developmental (remedial) reading instruction, other students also suggested that comprehension difficulties led to a lack of interest. Most often, respondents identified that those difficulties affected ability to attend or “maintain concentration” or caused a student to have trouble “paying attention to [the reading].” One student responded that the primary cause of a decline of interest was “when the topic, reading, or a sentence is too difficult to understand.”

Students who identified comprehension difficulty, also recognized teacher influence in alleviating comprehension issues. “The way the professor explained the assignments I would understand it more than my other classes.” Or conversely, one
respondent placed onus on the teacher for not identifying student understanding of the text, “The professor is not asking us if we understand the topic.” Respondents acknowledged a belief that interest in a subject could help students put in the work to understand the text. “Oftentimes I have to re-read a sentence or paragraph to grasp the concept, but if the subject matter as whole is interesting to me, I will put in the effort.” Multiple students responded that an inability to grasp a text’s content led to disinterest in the reading which in turn would affect completion of the reading, as in, “I try reading all of it but I don't know what I read.”

The interrelation of interest, comprehension, enjoyment, and learning was also noted.

When I don't feel like I won't learn anything or I have trouble comprehending it, I lose interest because it won't allow me to grow my knowledge. Yes, when the text is too difficult, then it is hard to maintain concentration and read with enjoyment.

Multiple respondents expressed frustration in the reading process brought by a lack of comprehension. “If I don't understand the text, it’s very difficult for me to concentrate [on] what it’s requesting.”Another complained that “[t]he readings are so confusing.” Yet another stated, “But I give up because I don't understand a word.” Language-learners and students with difficult academic experiences related to a deficit in vocabulary acquisition, expressed a unique frustration which they did not feel was readily identified by teachers. One respondent acknowledged a tendency to feel isolated due to a teacher inability to identify student lack of understanding of the text.

Um, it's like a 50/50 because half of them [vocabulary words] I do understand them and half of them I don't, but that's kind of my struggle right there that I don't understand them and I'm…it goes from there because I try to read on my own and then um I try to do the work on my own but I understand but I don't know.

Another stated, “Yeah then processing everything on my own. I'm doing everything on
my own.”

Overall, the theme Complicated/Complex was not often expressed as a negative sentiment affecting interest. Difficult texts were at times seen as beneficial or capable of providing valuable information, or neutrally as something that needed to be overcome. On the contrary, related to the subcategory Comprehension Difficulty, all respondent answers were viewed as having a negative impact on student interest to read academic texts wherein students expressed feelings of being lost or ill-equipped to maneuver through the texts, particularly where teacher support was lacking.

**Engagement**

Student engagement with reading assignments was identified as a factor distinct from Attention/Focus in that it correlated with a conscious choice to participate in the reading assignment due to some benefit gained from reading that text. Attention/Focus was represented in student comments more akin to an unconscious process which had conscious effects on other aspects of the reading process. For instance, one might unconsciously attempt to focus on a text, or might conversely automatically, or without apparent conscious decision, apply one’s will to, as multiple students stated, “push through” a text. Where Attention/Focus was most often correlated to completion of a text, Engagement was more often correlated to enjoyment, interest, value, and learning.

Students referred to an activation of Engagement as a “spark” or as something that “caught my eye.” Or students spoke of becoming “hooked” on reading content. Students also recognized engagement as a conscious choice where one reads because one wants to, not because one has to. Multiple student responses reinforced this perception. One respondent relayed, “[The reading] hooked the reader to wanting to read more rather
than having to be forced to read it.” Where interest was lacking, engagement was also, and students had to work hard to move through the text. “I have to force myself to want to read it more.” Or one student stated a definitive desire not to go on. “I don't want to read it anymore.”

A significant number of student responses referred to non-static levels or degrees of engagement (often offered convergently as interest), where student engagement was either sparked early on in the reading, as in “…and I read the first paragraph and it sounds interesting with the refrigerator story” or which faded along the way. “My interest levels faded as I went along, to be quite honest.” Desire to engage was also delayed or activated later in the text reading. “My interest level was very uninterested at first, however, as I got more into the text, I indulged in the reading and maintained interest.”

Engagement was positively correlated to texts that made a student think and want to know more about the topic at hand, as in “…that made me feel to read more and more get better knowledge.” Students also recognized a decrease in engagement due to unmet expectations. For example, “I feel as something interesting is going to happen, I get turned off and it isn't as great as it seems.”

Inability to focus was also a factor in engagement levels. As one student stated,

   No, my level of interest wasn’t affected because I started reading at night but then I started to fall asleep, but as soon as the next morning came about, I started reading it even more, so I was fully engaged.

Students also expressed how teacher failure to effectively engage students affected student willingness to participate, because teachers did not give “a chance for students to be engaged and express their own opinions.” One student spoke of his attempt to consciously engage as a means for stimulating interest stating, “I’m trying to engage my
Multiple respondents asserted in qualitative responses that it was the title that initially engaged them to interact with their chosen readings. Speaking of the selection process for the reading assignment given, one student stated, “I found the title extreme which caught my interest. I thought, “Selling my soul to internet giants? No way,” and began reading to see what the writer meant.” However, contrary to this finding, in the Initial Survey on Interest where students were asked how they were initially most likely to determine if a reading is boring, no student specified title as a factor.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q17. How do you determine if a reading is boring initially?</th>
<th>Cohort A</th>
<th>Cohort B</th>
<th>Total A + B</th>
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<td>By what teacher said about topic</td>
<td>83.33%</td>
<td>44.44%</td>
<td>63.89%</td>
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<tr>
<td>By reading title</td>
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<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading first paragraph</td>
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<td>(Pictures)</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative responses suggest that students actually weigh the value of titles more significantly than initially specified, but this may be on an unconscious level. These disparate views on how much the title influenced student interest were also represented in other responses related to other thematic content. Survey results also indicated that students more likely than not assessed their desire to engage with reading content early on in the reading process, with multiple students responding that they were directly influenced most predominately by what a teacher said about a text, or by reading the first paragraph.
Ultimately, items coded to Engagement shared similarities and cross-over coding with other factors, most particularly related to Enjoyment. Students also tended to express engagement alternately as interest or enjoyment. Engagement was not necessarily viewed as the initial catalyzing event, but rather something that could be stimulated at any point in the reading process. Students could read or attend to the text, without actively being engaged. Also, as respondents showed, engagement could wane, and with it, interest. Interest and engagement were often taken as synonymous. No differentiation, or divergence between the two constructs, was made by any single respondent. Students also expressed that effective engagement created a desire to know more and learn more about the subject in the reading.

**Technology as a Subcategory of Engagement**

References to technology and multimedia, as they might relate to student interest to read academic texts, were made less frequently than other factors identified here. Most significant is the number of respondents who referred to themselves as “visual” learners. As such, this theme is represented within this inquiry as a subcategory of Engagement in that the presence of technology either in a personal out-of-school context or as part of the class dynamic was seen to impact student engagement and interest, either positively or negatively. Students revealed a multimodal perspective in their repeated references to visual learning cues. One student stated, “When it becomes interesting for me is the explanation the professor gives us and an example because I’m mostly a visual learner.” Another stated, “I'm a visual learner and I like how professors use power points or slide shows to make us more engaged in the class.”
Students also referenced several times a preference for seeing visual images as part of class and text structure. A negative sentiment was expressed for lecture-centric curricula, negatively referencing “…when the professor keeps on talking for hours and doesn't have any visual images.” Two respondents suggested that the presence of a visual image in the text could influence their interest in that text. One stated, “Yes, I think images are powerful and grabs readers attention.” Multiple students who had discounted the turtle story” as “just” being about a turtle, became interested in the text when I showed them the actual formatted text they could have but hadn’t chosen. However, other students responded that pictures were not needed to derive interest, where one student stated, “It'll help but [it’s] not needed” and another said, “Nah the images didn't make me [want to read it].”

Only two specific references were made across data sets to technology as a distraction or a preference for technology to reading academic texts. For example, one student relayed he needed to detach completely from technology to concentrate.

Now, when I'm reading, I need complete silence and no distractions. I normally either turn my phone completely off or leave it in another room and listen to the audio of a book with headphones in on full blast while reading along with the audio version of the book.

Another student identified that when students were disengaged, they were likely to take out their phones in class to distract themselves.

Multiple students referred to how movies inspired them to engage with texts. Or students expressed a preference for a movie option for the texts they read. For example, one student identified how a movie of a book (The Fault in Our Stars) came out it inspired them to read the book first. Another student expressed how even a documentary integrated to relate to the reading material was enough to spark engagement. Multiple
students expressed visual perception as they referred to the ‘movie’ like qualities of stories or being able to visualize a text as ‘a movie in my head.’ In this sense, students tended to equate movies and multimodal images with positive affect.

During the course of this inquiry, when students were presented with specific images from the reading selections, they responded positively with active engagement, suggesting the value of student technological existences impacted interest levels. However, while visual images or imaging seemed to activate interest, no student relayed in any sense how such perception of introduction of technology might deepen learning. In fact, several students suggested how mixed media in print-base format was not necessary to stimulate interest.

**Enjoyment**

Student enjoyment of texts was positively associated with interest. Student respondents expressed enjoyment as ‘enjoy’ (or stemmed words) ninety-five times in data sources. They also expressed enjoyment as either ‘amazing,’ or as something you like (as in “I like to read” and not as an inserted place holder as in ‘I don’t know how to like understand the text’), or love, or antithetically as ‘annoying’ or boring (or synonyms). Converse representation of Enjoyment as a code recognized word searches for ‘hate,’ and ‘dislike’ as an expression of negative sentiment. However, a majority of coded references were expressed as positive sentiments.

Related to the direct expression of enjoyment, student respondents used this term or a stemmed variant to express pleasure in reading assignments or reading in general. Enjoyment was alternate or concurrently expressed in terms of what was “fun,” “interesting” or which otherwise had a positive sentiment attached. Multiple student
respondents directly related enjoyment of a topic to interest in that topic. One student stated, “I enjoyed it [the reading]. I really didn’t find anything not interesting about it.” Another stated, “From my reading experiences, I enjoy reading certain topics that are interesting.” Yet another said, “Plus in college you pick courses that are in your interests most of the time, so I’ve enjoyed the readings for the most part.”

Reading with enjoyment expressed as “fun” was referenced seventeen times across data sets. Students also identified specific aspects, genres, activities or topics which sparked enjoyment, such as “I love history, love learning about the past” or “I actually enjoyed this reading because it had a little bit of humor.”

Enjoyment, as a factor of Interest, was also linked to the theme Choice/Preference, as well as Attention/Focus. One student elaborated,

All I tend to read now are assigned articles for class or books for class I have to read, (and even with those books I'm just skimming through). I feel that since I was forced to read certain books for class I didn’t enjoy them. I always wished we could select a certain book we choose for class instead of some boring book our teachers assign.

This idea of being “forced” to read academic assignments was seen directly contrary to what was considered to be fun.

To sum up, from elementary, I used to pick any books that I want to read and it was fun for me, but when the books were assigned to me by the teachers I felt like I am forced to do something that I don't want to do.

Student respondents also linked Enjoyment to the theme Value. As one student stated, “Currently I do enjoy reading because I think it is really beneficial.” One language learner remarkably responded that readings had value even when they were not interesting, and because they had value one could derive enjoyment from reading.

And yes, I always read my assignments, even if sometimes it is not so interesting because I think it will bring you some useful knowledge anyway. Here at
[Metropolitan College] reading is more professional and academic. I really like it because it helps me to become more professional too. I really enjoy learning here and try to get the best out of every reading and every assignment.

I observed throughout this inquiry, that this student expressed a strong academic work ethic wherein she often recognized that academic work was important, and therefore worth a strong application of effort, regardless of preference.

Enjoyment was also associated with the theme of Relatability/Application. As one student stated, “Music class, although it is not bad, I don't enjoy it too much. The class consists of talking about old fashioned music, and music terminology that is [not] used today/isn't used anymore.”

Teacher ability to influence student enjoyment or conversely to detract from enjoyment was also recognized. One student negatively noted, “Most teachers I've had just handed out readings because it's part of the curriculum regardless if we will enjoy the reading.” But student respondents also recognized how teacher disposition or class dynamic could positively impact enjoyment. One student stated,

However, some teachers do consider readings for their students because of the amount students who enjoyed in their other classes and they feel like it would be in our best interest and sometimes us students enjoy the teacher's taste and style in reading.

Another student linked how much a teacher cares about students enjoying assignments as a potential factor in interest.

I feel like my interest sort of has to do if the teacher cares. A teacher who doesn’t care if we learn or enjoy the class gives worksheets and just pages of notes a day. This is when I’ll just go home and use google for 99% of my stuff.

Enjoyment was also linked to the subcategory Comprehension Difficulty. One student specified, “Yes, when the text is too difficult, then it is hard to maintain concentration and read with enjoyment.” Multiple respondents also recognized a moment in their
development (around middle and high school) where academic reading became less enjoyable. One student stated,

Then I stopped reading during high school because other things became more interesting and fun to me. I still enjoy reading, just not as much as I used to. Other things like sports, work and people became a bigger distraction in my life so I was not able to put reading first.

Enjoyment could also be linked positively to text complexity and/or deeper learning, such as was evidenced in the respondent who explained how even the difficulty of a subject like Microeconomics could stimulate interest, “But I enjoy that kind of stimulation where I feel myself understanding subjects outside of fiction/English related readings.

Class discussion interspersed with readings also seemed to activate enjoyment, and enjoyment/interest was also shown to have a direct impact on willingness to engage in complex text material.

I think it would be different if I didn’t enjoy the class or found the subject we’re learning uninteresting. From what I remember, I’ve only ever found Living Environment science readings boring to the point where I almost refused to read the texts assigned.

Also, seeking enjoyment in the text was expressed as a key strategy to completing a reading assignment.

If it's truly boring to me like history at times I would have an issue with…if it's boring to me I usually just have to power myself through it and say you know what just find something and just read it instead of moping about it and eventually you're going to have to read it to get an assignment done but at the same time you might as well find something you enjoy about it.

In both of the above responses, enjoyment is marked as the antithesis of boredom. The first was presented as positive activator of engagement, even in the face of complexity, while the latter detracted from engagement and attention to task. Students who expressed that a text was boring chose one of two courses of action, either in finding some alternate
strategy to aid completion of the assignment, or as likely to disengage, skip parts, or to stop reading completely.

Only students exhibiting more refined alternative motivation (e.g. driven by extrinsic factors such as grades or parental pressure, or intrinsic drive) were likely to “power” through a text. In the last example above, the idea of ‘finding’ something in the text to enjoy correlated to responses where students with alternate motivational tendencies were able to find something of interest in a text to spark engagement. Student respondents who expressed these motivational strategies were less common than students who were more likely to disregard a “boring” text.

**Judgment**

Judgment, as a theme and as isolated here, refers to student metacognitive practices, which occurred throughout this inquiry, wherein students, when called upon, cast definitive expressions of dispositional tendencies, articulated in the form of judgments of what, in their minds, should or should not be. These statements usually began with “I feel” or “I think” representing broad or narrowed considerations of what the student participant felt was either right or acceptable. There exists in this theme an overlap with Choice/Preference; however, where Choice/Preference seems to dwell on the formation of a definitive this or that, as in ‘I prefer a fantasy genre to non-fiction,’ Judgment refers more to a, not conscious, or at least not clearly acknowledged, bias or emotional response. For example, judgments were made when students express a withdrawal from an activity for some reason, or a hate or intense dislike for something, to the point of aversion from the object of disdain. In this vein, judgments appear to be value statements, which, while not always consciously articulated, are strong drivers for
courses of action – or inaction. As value statements, the obvious potential overlap with the theme Value should be considered. The most discernable difference between these two themes, at least as revealed in this inquiry, is the emotive potential of judgments when considering reading academic texts. Judgments as expressed seemed to have a higher degree of emotional attachment and appear to be more decisively articulated. Whereas value statements appeared to be more deeply engrained as schema, and often less clearly articulated.

Word query searches revealed a tendency of student participants to form judgments qualified by “I feel” or “it’s like” as prefaces to the description of disposition. Students expressed these statements as decision points of whether they would or would not engage further with the text. Fifty-eight “I feel like” statements were made across sixteen data sources. While this might be deemed merely as an inherent characteristic of a youthful vernacular, statements linked to this phrase search all expressed clear judgments as in “I don’t feel like I was gonna grow much” or “I feel like I never read anything like this before” or “I feel like they're something we need to know.”

Through judgment statements, students also recognized the value or lack in proceeding in the activity. Judgments related to a variety of specific factors, whether it be due to teacher interaction (But I feel like it mostly depends on the professors”), text presentation (“I feel the author kept rambling on.”), lack of choice (I feel that since I was forced to read certain books for class. I didn’t enjoy them.”), or how a grade would be affected (“I also had a point in my life where I only read because it would determine my grade, I just felt like it was very pointless”). These responses show how students consciously asserted judgments about texts which evoked an openness (or refusal) to
engage. As one student definitively stated, “I completely agree with you, I feel that I could easily read this article with interest.”

Students also directly expressed emotional responses as ‘love’ (twenty-one references) or ‘hate’ (7) statements, as in “I picked this story because I love animals” or “I hate lectures.” Or strong emotion was expressed as a sense of amazement as in “I feel like it was amazing.” All of such expressions appeared to act as strong gatekeepers affecting further engagement.

Students sometimes expressed judgements made in the reading process as inner monologues, such as one student identified, “[It was] three hundred pages. You know and I was like ‘What?’ So I read the thing. I read it. I read it and I was like ‘Ok, I hope he talks about it in class.’ And nowhere at all did he mention it in class and I was furious.”

**Politics as a Subcategory of Judgment**

Students, in this inquiry, expressed solidly formed judgements, based upon prior experience, or a belief in a particular way of the world. However, throughout this inquiry, students repeatedly shut down any attempts to discuss politics. Of the fifteen participants, only one selected the reading on Political Correctness. (That student was a 31-year-old self-identifying Caucasian woman, outside our target demographic.) When I asked students why they did not select that reading, multiple participants said the title having the word “political” in it was enough to turn them off. In their responses they revealed an intense aversion to political content as the following statements reveal:

- I feel like um this country’s corrupt, like with money you could get whatever you want you can become president with money and I told him I feel that’s how it is everywhere.
- the nation is like....
• I would not have gone near the "On Political Correctness" reading because I feel like there is a lot of topics that touch on politics and it just seems a little boring to me.

• I was a bit judgmental when they got touchy on the politics part when it came to play with what the Trump administration did I was like “well that’s not really fair…”

• You know in the beginning of the semester I had a strong interest in politics but as I kept on reading, I was like “I don’t think I’m…”

• Because we had this argument with my partner and we always end up arguing about it because he's into politics for some reason and I’m not so… and like I tell him you could get mad with whatever the president does whatever the senator does the governor everybody does But you can't change anything because you don't vote.

• Yes and I went over that [The Political Correctness essay]. I didn’t want to even go over that.

• They all look interesting for me but the politics essay.

  More generally, students expressed an aversion to content which revealed distinct bias, as in an extreme left or right agenda or other perceived bias or skew which did not ‘fairly’ present both sides.

  • Um because I feel like that particular topic [Internet Giants] is so charged with like conspiracy theories and big brother and all of those things, I just don’t have the head for it.

  • If I feel [it] has a specific skew I’d like to read the other side as well just so I feel more well-rounded in the whole thing so I have both sides and so issues like race and gender I feel I can have a certain leaning to it and can see - ah its only presenting half of the picture and there’s a whole if that makes sense–

  • What I see today like what I…I feel like people can just read like one piece of an article and…or write one article or I fe – or just they have a small bit of information and feel like they know it all.

  Students avoided polarizing topics, especially when they felt they could not devote enough time to come to an encapsulated understanding of the issues at hand. One
student stated, “I felt with the two issues with the gender and the race I felt that those are very um I guess contentious could be the word.” One student recognized a tendency toward “confirmation bias” and suggested a preference for readings that didn’t easily fill that need but rather presented “both sides.” However, another student with a particular theological mindset, admitted to a type of confirmation bias in their refusal to read the reading on gender because as they stated, “I feel like me reading that article wasn’t going to give me all the information on gender or race so I these are I don’t know I felt like those are issues I have to spend more time thinking about looking at.”

In considering Judgment as a theme along with the subcategory of Politics, there exist clear overlaps or interrelations with other themes, it is included here because I recognized throughout data collection and analysis that student participants were actively engaging in decision-making based upon a protocol of values or beliefs when it came to reading assigned texts. While that decision-making process was not always consciously articulated, it clearly was a distinct catalyst or inhibitor for student willingness to engage. Conversely, the theme Value (as will be explained below), which also arguably represents judgments, was not always articulated as emotionally connected, but rationally, or logically, as practical consideration of how reading could impact students’ lives.

**Learning**

Within this inquiry, Learning evolved as a clear theme where students specified that interest in a reading catalyzed deeper critical understanding. When students spoke of interest and its relationship to learning, they spoke of seeking newly acquired knowledge
or as discovering information which offers a “new perspective.” One student suggested different types of learning dependent on level of familiarity.

It depends what the subject is. If it is something that I already knew something...like a minimal aspect of it that was just common knowledge and I'm just expanding my world...with that reading that’s one option. The other thing is learning something completely new that I never even considered before but the new deeper way of thinking about life or a whole new perspective that’s something else I look for.

Sometimes that learning had shock value or acted as a “wake-up call” and was treated by the participant with a sense of wonderment. As one student put it, “This is because of the new information that was stated to me. It was like a wake-up call. The new information and ideas shared, and even the experiences the people had, amazed me.” Students were also quick to denounce readings where they felt they already knew information provided and labeled such readings as “boring” (or the opposite of what they would consider to be interesting.) One student stated, “[I found] facts I had known already like how there are more than 1 gender or informative info about non-binary to be boring or bland.”

Students articulated a difference between learning and getting good grades. In a class group chat for Cohort B (a class which preferred the online group chat as the primary method of communication), I recognized how students in this inquiry were making this distinction. I asked in a group if seeking good grades and learning were necessarily related.

<AD>grades and learning don't necessarily go together?

<[Student name redacted]>i don't believe it does

<[Student name redacted]>No

<[Student name redacted]> [Crying laughing emoji]
no because you can [get] a good grade from cheating, putting any answer or from knowing the answer with your own knowledge but when your taking the time to learn it, your investing in your education instead of taking advantage of it

Interest levels and concurrent degrees of engagement were likely to wane or increase based upon the value of the learning felt by the student. One respondent acknowledged, “And I did not maintain the same level of interest throughout the reading. I thought the beginning of the reading was boring since I already knew much of the information he provided.” Another student identified how learning something new at the end of the reading inspired deeper interest. “[I] felt at the end of the reading that I was more interested since I thought he offered a new valuable perspective that I never considered before.”

Students spoke of learning as a quest for, or an openness to, new knowledge and experiences. As one student speculated, “I think honestly it's just wanting to experience something new, seeking out what knowledge I can take in.” Another student stated, “The discussions led me to open my mind even more to new things and ideas.” Different students specified that it was not enough to learn new information, but that that learning must also have value. (“I find a reading interesting to me if I feel like I learn something new that is valuable.”) Interest was also seen as a facilitator of learning and as being integral to memory recall. Interest was also seen as necessary to activate attention if learning is to occur. One respondent stated, “No, I don’t believe I am able to learn without interest because you need to be intrigued to learn because if you don't seem interested then you won’t take it seriously.” But one student, an immigrant to this country, also acknowledged that you could learn without interest, but that it would require “more discipline” and it would be a lesser degree of learning. She stated, “[Lack of interest]
does takes away from retaining information and performing. It's not impossible but it takes more discipline.”

A relationship was identified between Learning and Enjoyment (liking), both of which were found to be defining factors of what is interesting. As one student relayed, “I like doing things in order for me to learn.” Students also linked novelty of learning new information to Enjoyment. Speaking of the student’s self-selected reading assignment, “I enjoyed it. I really didn’t find anything not interesting about it. Even the mentioning of the four other guys who set up a chain of donating kidneys was interesting because I never read anything like that before.”

Interest in learning was also shown to influence Engagement. (“I think my level of interest affects how engaged I was because I'm always interested in learning about people's experiences.”) Interest was also linked to retention of knowledge one is learning. (“But if I’m not interested in the material even though I’m reading and reading, it doesn’t grip in my mind.) Students also suggests that teachers are partially responsible for the lack of learning. As one student stated, “Not every professor would care if the assigned readings are interesting. They would just want you to read it and possibly put it in your essays and some readings I don't necessarily learn anything from it.”

Students also linked learning and their interest in what they were learning to growth, even growth into adulthood.

I believe that interest matters a lot in [college name redacted] and I don’t think I can learn without interest because, without that interest, I would lose motivation for myself, and learning without interest means there is no point in learning and growing.

Relationships between learning, engagement, enjoyment all of which can stimulate growth were observed in student responses.
Learning, isolated as a theme related to interest, revealed that students specifically differentiated between completing texts and learning from those texts. While students might be driven to complete texts, they acknowledged they did not always learn from those texts. In most, if not all, references, student acknowledged how interest and learning were integrated, and how in the absence of interest, learning (or deeper learning) were generally greatly diminished. Students also recognized how learning must have value or serve some purpose. Most student responses suggested that the greater or more sustained student interest was, the deeper the learning that took place. Such learning sparked by interest was also likely to be retained for greater lengths of time.

**Presentation of Text**

In the Initial Surveys on Student Interest, when asked what was most likely to affect their interest to read academic texts, 41.67% of students (of fifteen students surveyed) stated if the text was “too long” they were most likely not to be interested in reading the assignment. This was the primary indicator of interest related to the actual text (followed by “can’t relate” and then by “too complicated.”). While all of these indicators are seen to refer to aspects of the text, the theme Presentation of Text as specified here relates to the physical formation of the text (e.g. font, visual images,) and presentation of the argument by the author (e.g. length, evidence given, choice of rhetoric, organization of argument, etc.).

While students spoke most prevalently about the length of the text as affecting sustained or waning interest, they also referred repeatedly to the organization of the author’s argument, expressing a distaste for predictability, repetition and also for what they saw as rambling, as one student wrote, “The only thing I didn’t find interesting was

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towards the end the story seemed a little repetitive and boring. I feel the author kept rambling on.”

Students also spoke of the author’s failure or ability to engage/interest the reader. (“I mean that the author failed to interest me.”) Often, judgment of the author’s ability was made early on in the reading. As one student wrote, “I mean that the author managed to interest me, in most cases it happens from the first paragraph.” Also pertaining to argument organization, students expressed that they were turned off by arguments which they felt was too biased, preferring instead readings which presented “both sides.”

Specific to the actual text formatting, students identified font as an issue in retaining interest, and two responders mentioned peer-reviewed texts with smaller condensed font as particularly problematic. One student relayed, “You know when you read long texts and the font is extremely small, but my eyes would drift off because it's too close.”

Students also relayed that text presentation which was too “complicated” also affected interest levels. What was seen as complicated was linked to complex vocabulary used and the “thickness” of the text where such texts were referred to as “content heavy.” As one student revealed that a combination of factors related to text presentation affected interest:

I think it's the vocabulary. It's how fluently it reads [inaudible] and also if it's a really long reading and it if it keeps repeating the same thing over and over again with different words and it gets boring. Just like different ways of making it hard to read but um content heavy I feel is also the concept.

Students also expressed a preference or distaste for different genres and talked positively in terms of stories with ‘twists’ or ‘good plots.’ Multiple students referred positively to the text as playing out “like a movie” in their heads which created greater
engagement. But while some students recognized how images embedded in a text increased interest, other students did not see such as needed to engage interest.

Nevertheless, when, during the course of this inquiry, I presented visual images via our remote learning sessions, students verbally expressed engagement. Text components, particularly those most represented in academic texts such as complex terminology, small font and complex arguments negatively impact student interest. However, must notably, students expressed that length of text was more often likely to impact their desire to complete the reading assignment. Multiple students admitted that they were likely to skip sections, “skim,” or go directly to the questions which needed to be answered if they determined texts to be “too long.”

**Related/Relevance/Application**

When asked to define their conceptualization of interest in the Initial Survey on Student Interest, students most prevalently used the words ‘relate’ and ‘life’ in their definitions or elaboration of their responses. NVivo coding showed the term ‘life’ referenced thirty times and ‘relate’ (or an iteration of) referenced twenty-nine times. References coded to this theme throughout data sets revealed a belief by students that interest in reading academic assignments was correlated to how that material related to students’ personal experience. Conversely, boredom was often associated with reading material to which student respondents could not relate. When asked when they were least likely to be interested in a reading assignment 30.56% of student respondent selected “Can’t relate” as their second top choice (Initial Survey Q.25). This selection was only second to the response “Too Long” which 41.67% put as their first choice.

Students identified interest when they could connect or relate the reading material to their
personal experience, alternating between specifying what related to that experience and what applied to that experience. As one student stated,

What led me to choose “How We Sold Our Souls” was because I thought I can relate to the text more since I use the internet so frequently. I did not think that the other text applied to me personally so I didn’t think I would get much useful information out of them.

Also, students articulated relating to the experience of others as a sense of empathy evoked by the reading. “I felt I was in their shoes and felt I was able to empathize with them, because of how I was able to visualize their situations like a movie in my head.” ‘Relating to something’ also equated to finding relevance, or something relevant, and relating that to a particular interest, as in “I can find some relevance in the readings to something else I take interest in.”

Students recognized the need to make personal connections to the text, not just academic connections. One student identified, “[Class discussion about readings] adds to the fuel and flow of the course, allowing us to speak about the content on not just an academic level, but a personal level.” However, students could not relate to topics that they felt were “old fashioned” or “not used today/anymore.”

Students not only related the text to their interests or personal experience but to the experiences they witnessed in the world. One student who selected “Black Men and Public Space” by Brent Staples, in the immediate wake of George Floyd’s murder wrote:

I believe the level of interest did affect how engaged I was with the material. I was interested to see what the article was about, especially with what is going on right now with George Floyd and the riots in Minneapolis.

Most students of color (self-identified) specified they had selected this reading on racism specifically because of what was occurring in the world in May 2020.

‘Relating’ to the material was used interchangeably with ‘application’ and
‘applying’ what was learned in the reading to their life. Sometimes students sought to provide inspiration for how they might want to live their lives. One student acknowledged, “If you learn something and it’s not applicable to anything, like I’m not going to do anything [with it] I don’t think there is really a point.”

One student identified relatability as “an umbrella term,” writing:

The way I figured it was that the relatability factor is really just like an umbrella term. It could be anything from something that I already knew, something that I wanted to know about, something that I experienced? Um something that you know. It’s just something that relates to me.

Other references connected how a reading being applicable to a student’s life had value, and in turn how a student related to a text and found value in that text was connected to the student’s ability to comprehend the text,

And when I don't understand it's hard for me to get value to read stuff that I can apply to my life now or something that um will help me understand the world deeper and some --it's like sometimes it’s not that useful information um uh other than to pass the test uh like it's not I don't know I just feel like I can understand it well enough in order to be able to see how it affects my life now. Ah… if that makes sense.

However, despite how students appeared in part, to determine interest through relatability, relatability was not always enough to create interest, particularly if the reader already knew a lot about the topic in the reading. While familiarity with the topic often appeared key (although novelty was also engaging) over-familiarity could potentially derail interest. One student stated, “I felt like it was something that was within my experience that I didn't know a lot about.” In this way, a relationship was identified between learning and relatability.

Student overwhelming preference to use the term “relate” or stemming words to describe what interest means to them, suggests that interest in texts is deeply entwined
with personal connections to academic content. If students could not find such a connection, they were less likely to actively engage with the text. Similarly, if students failed to identify the relevance or applicability of the material, they similarly were less likely to show interest in the material. In this sense, students engaging in academic text assignments appeared less focused on the completion of text, but rather in identifying some value, specific to their own experience. In this way, Relatability/Relevance/Applicability seems to associate with Value, as in only that which can be related to the reader’s life is found to have Value. This consideration is further explained pertaining to the theme of Value within this inquiry.

**Teacher/Class Dynamic**

While it may be argued that an inquiry focused on an individual perspective on reading academic texts would not see teacher or class dynamic as a direct correlate, but rather as a potential covariable, data in the Initial Survey on Student Interest suggest this theme has direct bearing on this inquiry. Almost ninety percent of respondents stated that they had, in their experience, become interested in a reading assignment based upon something the teacher said. Almost two-thirds of student respondents determined boredom by what the teacher said about the topic. 69.46% of students admitted that they were more likely to find readings interesting if they also found the class interesting.

Qualitative responses coded to this theme reinforced ordinal data results. Students expressed a reliance on teacher actions to initially gauge the value of the texts they were assigned in that class. Teacher explanation of the content of the text affected the decision to give a reading attention. As one student stated, “She told us it would it is interesting and believed that we could relate, so I read it.” Also students expressed satisfaction in
being told by teachers what was expected of them specific to the “work flow” of the class, as one student relayed, “The teacher explained what the contents contained and what we were expected to do.” Students expressed dissatisfaction when teachers failed in this regard; for example, “[I] feel the lack of communication from the professor was the reason I lost interest in that class.” Because a lack of clear communication students “didn’t learn much.”

Students placed value on the teacher explanations which evoked a visualization of the topic and in turn inspired interest. One respondent recognized, “When it becomes interesting for me is the explanation the professor gives us and an example because I’m mostly a visual learner.” Participants also recognized teacher effort to engage the class in the reading, to help them think about the topic as valuable and to “encourage deeper thinking.” In this regard, class discussions about the reading beforehand were found to be helpful. Such class engagement was found to be a key component of sustaining interest in the course. Students also critically identified teachers who failed to engage the class. One respondent referenced how “The professors do not know how to teach the kids and some don't know how to work with their students.” Professor attitudes were noted as having a negative impact on student interest. “Some of my previous professors that I had were miserable in a ‘I don't want to be here’ kind of way.” One student complained about “teachers that simply relay the syllabus and test the class on their knowledge of it are those that give the feeling that they are simply doing their jobs.”

The effect of visual manipulation by a teacher was evidenced in this inquiry, related to the insertion of graphics. A majority of students surveyed, when asked if pictures would alter their perception of a text, responded negatively. However, in one
class chat with Cohort B, when speaking of student selection of one of the six offered
texts, only 1 student selected the article on a turtle’s longevity. I expressed my shock that
more students had selected this reading. I pulled up the text in class on screen, digitally
accessed through the available hyperlink, and the picture of a turtle (Fred) appeared on
the screen on the first page of the text. Students, when shown the image of Fred the
Turtle, responded with positive engagement.

<student name redacted>aw! i changed my mind this seems like a wholesome read

<student name redacted>yea

<student name redacted>yea

<student name redacted>yes

<student name redacted>Of course my guy Fred would get all the love

<student name redacted>prob

<student name redacted>yes i think images are powerful and grabs readers attention

Teaching method was viewed as having positive impact on deeper learning, when
teachers explained assignments. Teachers or class structure seen as unresponsive and as
having a negative impact on student learning, were referenced as “constantly listing
facts,” “talking for hours,” or with “not a lot of hands on activities” which all negatively
impacted how much students learned. One respondent wrote:

[[I] feel like my interest sort of has to do if the teacher cares . A teacher who
doesn’t care if we learn or enjoy the class gives worksheets and just pages of
notes a day. This is when I’ll just go home and use Google for 99% of my stuff.
When a teacher engages and lets us voice opinions and then grows off a topic in a
way where your caught really thinking and reflecting is when I learn.
Students presented disparate views on the value of lectures, which were seen as either worthwhile or making one “want to sleep.” Several students mentioned that they preferred lectures that included visual aids or PowerPoints.

Students recognized positive teacher attitudes. As one study participant identified, “I could tell who loves teaching, they’re very excited and explain well and want everyone to understand.” Multiple respondents referred to the “energy” in a class, negatively represented as being “monotonous” or “quiet and tired” or represented positively to influence how they as students felt about the class. As one student put it, “The energy. Every day I had that class, I always [was] excited to go to it and learn. A[n] energetic classroom is much better than a class full of sleepy students.” Twice, students referred to energy as “fuel” and its effect on the “flow” of the class either positively, or if lacking, negatively. If the flow of the course was found to be slow it was not seen as exciting, which students looked for in their interactions.

Two respondents recognized that there was a ‘right way’ to teach where students “learned new and valuable information.” As one student explained, “The teachers that provide thought-provoking questions or encourage opinions or discourse on personal experience with the topic being discussed are the ones that leave an impression that they care about their students' interest in that subject.” A number of respondents referred positively to classes as more “laid back” as “a place to relax and take things easy” where “the teacher doesn’t make things seem too bad.” Students also referenced that teachers who appeared to care about students had a greater impact. Those teachers were more likely to get to know students’ personal likes and needs.

Ah I don't know if they care or maybe they think like it's um Not - I don't know. It's like my friend says. All the teachers may not understand you and not all the
teachers are going to care so you have to do it on your own but uhm if it was possible I feel like I feel the teachers should at least consider that that not everybody has it that easy right in college.

One aspect of class dynamics mentioned most prevalently by students related to teacher interaction which allowed for personal opinion and discussion of text which moved beyond the academic to the personally relatable. In this way, teacher and class dynamic was viewed positively, especially where class conversations branched from readings toward “deep conversations.” Conversation and discourse which allowed for different views figured prominently when students positively viewed class dynamics. One student described an optimal learning environment where, “[t]he class isn't just about reading and writing, it's also about topics we can touch upon that link to the content we are discussing.” Teachers who allowed student individuality were referred to as “open minded” for engaging in dialogue. Teachers were positively referenced who were “in touch” with students. Another student expressed a preference to a class that was “interactive…instead of just making it about reading.”

One respondent suggested that student interest should figure into class curriculum stating, “I think that professors should really find interesting articles and more interesting books that people our age can relate to and be interested in.” Students recognized degrees of learning linked to individuality, as one student noted:

If a teacher is not engaging or if a teacher does not invite um individuality with like the students, it makes the class a snoozefest essentially. I mean it’s just you know it’s basically just recall and memorization at that point. Holistically, student respondents appeared to prefer classes where student interests and personal opinions were accounted for and recognized as valuable. Teachers who appeared connected with their students and encouraged dynamic class engagement which was focused on personal connection, experience, and opinion were found to be
more appealing than teachers who favored one-sided lectures focused on facts. Teacher attitude or energy figured prominently in how students responded to text assignments, as did teacher preamble about texts students were assigned.

**Value**

Student participants made sixty-nine references to readings or information which had value or were seen as valuable. They defined that value related to what was “beneficial” to their future (either for themselves or for their children). Students expressed recognition of the value of learning as something that was not just academic in nature, but which also applied to their growth as individuals, providing a “roadmap” for how they might live their lives. One student stated, “Some of these readings have principles in them and they can sometimes help depict the way you want to live your life.” Another admitted, “I honestly felt that the reading had value in my life because it allows me to be a more well-rounded person.” And a young mother of two responded, I feel that it [a reading] has its values because I can pass it down to my kids and help the succeed in life.”

Students also articulated a belief that there was definitive knowledge they required, and they looked to academic texts to provide that knowledge. One student relayed, “Your articles are interesting because I feel like they're something we need to know.” Conversely, a belief existed that some information was not necessary, or at least not necessary for every individual. One student shared, “I agree with [student name redacted] but not every reading has value for every person.” However, another student also recognized that some individuals lack the maturity to recognize what they need in
life and what has value suggesting “Most books have life principles in them that we need to mature from and some people take them seriously and some don't.”

Students also expressed a clear judgment of readings that did not progress their learning as not having value in their lives. One respondent identified, “The books were important to me, but the handout readings weren't that important to me.” Multiple students recognized that what has value is unique to individuals. “A few readings I've had in some classes had value to it but most were boring and didn't have any value to it.”

While some students were able to “find” value in their readings, others rejected reading assignments seeing their lack of significance in their lives, denouncing assignment value because “No readings made me feel different about my life.” Or readings were never “life-changing.”

One student expressed regret for not having recognized earlier in their academic lives what readings had value, as the student confessed, “My laziness didn't get better in high school if anything it was worse, If I could go back in time to read more books I will because I will have more knowledge, and as we all know knowledge is…” Multiple students recognized how maturity, growth or developed perspective helps reveal value. For example, “No, I don’t still employ the same method in some of the classes because now I understand why it's important to read and I think the Professors did it for a reason.”

Students also expressed a desire to share reading content with others, particularly that reading content which identifies key social value.

I completely agree with you, I feel that I could easily read this article with interest because it's time for everyone to help make a change. It's so sad that he was just minding his business and he felt that way. Although there’s so much of this topic on the media, it’s always interesting to educate yourself about because everyone has a story they have encountered racism, it shows how many people are racist in this country. There’s so much change that still needs to happen it’s sad.
Another student who expressed a social consciousness, also expressed a desire to share the information learned with friends and family.

Students also expressed Value in terms of collected knowledge which might not provide useful now but might apply in the future, to be stored away in case it might come in “handy”. Student responses coded to this theme also revealed overlap with other themes. Students linked finding value to interest which in turn linked to an ability to focus on the material presented. As one student identified, “I find that spark to help me grow more and concentrate more.” Also, what students saw as valuable was also linked to what is applicable. What is not applicable is not seen as having value, such as one student explained, “It’s harder to apply so it was less interesting and so the information’s still there. I just don’t know what to do with it.”

Value was also linked to relatability and discounted information that they could not apply personally. “I didn't feel like it would really give me any new valuable information that I that I could relate to personally um yeah.” Relating to the text and the value of that relation was seen as a connection, as in “I really can't connect to so I don't feel like it's going to add much value anything.”

While the vast majority of sentiments in this inquiry were expressed as what students were looking for academic reading assignments to provide for them for their personal lives, a few notable responses expressed an intense belief that reading assignments had no value in their lives. Also, significantly, the value of the reading assignments was not always linked to the learning acquired, but to whether the text provided enjoyment.
Other Motivation

Data analysis in this inquiry revealed that other forms of motivation, distinct from interest, figured in varying degrees of prominence in relation to student completion of academic reading assignments. The most significantly stated motivational factor identified was extrinsic and most often related to grades a student might receive for completing or not completing a reading assignment or assignments attached to that reading (e.g. test, essay).

Students shared their perception of completing assignments versus learning from assignments. During a class discussion with Cohort A, a poll was distributed to students asking them when they are most likely to complete their reading assignments. Two thirds of the six responders cited grades over interest as the most important factor to complete a reading assignment. However, one student who was having difficulty formulating a response, asked for clarification (the student happened to be a 31-year-old first-time freshman.) In my explanation, I inadvertently altered the terms of the question in my clarifying description, asking instead when a student might be more likely to learn material better. The student responded that those were two completely different questions, at which point she had no difficulty answering that question, since “hands down” interest was the greater motivator to learn.

For the sake of further exploration, I reworded the poll to “What is it that motivates you more in your school reading?” Two thirds of the six respondents chose interest over grades as their answer. I again reworded the question, this time to read “Do you think you learn better when you…” The possible answers were “When I am interested in the material” and “you think your grade may depend on that material.” Five
of 6 respondents chose interest over grade. Related to the same line of inquiry, in Cohort B, 7 of 9 respondents selected grades as the primary reason to complete reading assignments. However, 8 of 9 respondents said they learn material better when they are interested in material.

Student responses across both cohorts continued to reveal a clear delineation between completing reading assignments and learning from reading assignments. For instance, students referred to completion of assignments and the effect on grades. As one student described “[I’m] most likely to complete an assigned reading is when it really affects my grade or the reading is needed to input for future essays.” Another student completed readings if an assignment or test required that knowledge. Even when comprehension was an issue one student would “struggle to understand but devoted time and energy to comprehend for my grade.” In this way they would become “invested.”

However, even when students used grades as motivation, they recognized the interrelatedness of motivation for grades and interest as a co-motivator. They would speak as using interest or finding interest as a tool to help them become engaged in completing the reading assignment. One student expressed academic determination as “I’m going to complete a school reading, and I’m going to use interest as a tool to do well because my grade is my motivation. The interest level is the tool I use to get a good grade.” One student identified different motivations and different outcomes, “My motivation to participate at all is for the grade. my motivation to get involved and excited and knowledgeable about the reading depends on how interesting the reading is. So it's really both...”
Finding interest in a text was seen as a significant, and for some, imperative strategy to perform well, despite other motivational factors, such as work ethic.

I'll find something. I'll find whatever I need to do to make it interesting for myself just for recall, just be able to do well, just for my work ethic to be able to give it my all and find some sort of interest in that. So I'll find something.

Alternately, several students, two in particular being language learners of Eastern European decent, believed that a key motivator was internal regulation isolated as discipline. As one student explained, “I believe interest and discipline go hand in hand when it comes to academic success, and certainly when it comes to achieving excellence.” Another relayed that if one had discipline then interest would develop, as she stated, “I believe discipline is taught either by positive reinforcement during upbringing or by trial and error during adolescence into adulthood.” Multiple students recognized parental influence as a motivator.

Other internal non-cognitive factors serving as internal regulators, such as grit and perseverance were referenced represented as a student’s ability to “power” or “push” through, to “put in elbow grease.” One student spoke of the mental pep talk required when interest was missing. “Me, I usually just have to power myself through it and just find something and just read it instead of moping about it and eventually you're going to have to read it to get an assignment done.” One student suggested that if were to “suck it up and power through it” he might find interest, but not always. Another spoke of motivation related to due dates suggesting that “what really inspires me to write is the deadline.”

However, students clearly delineated between levels of engagement depending on how interested they were in the assignment showing that how interested they were was
the greater motivator to learning. Multiple respondents did not feel they could effectively learn without interest present, and no other motivation helps. One student wrote:

I believe that interest matters a lot in [Metropolitan College] and I don’t think I can learn without interest because, without that interest, I would lose motivation for myself, and learning without interest means there is no point in learning and growing.

One student identified that they were more likely to put in greater effort in writing assignments (related to assigned readings) if they were not interested in the topic, stating, “If I'm interested, I will put deep thoughts into the essays but if I'm not I'll just write anything that don’t relate to the story and still wind up getting a bad grade.” Another student suggested that if they were interested in the assignment they would be less inclined to put it off and would purposefully go home to read it.

Students repeatedly differentiated between reading the whole essay and just skimming if interest was missing, no matter what other motivation might be at their disposal. One student admitted, “Uh, I would say what motivates me in that reading? Specifically, well if we’re talking again about the content, if I’m interested, I’ll read it…like whole.” Multiple students identified an inability to be motivated outside the presence of interest citing a “need to find interest as a motivator” or run the risk of just shutting down and turning away. Students acknowledged that while they will attempt to use other motivational strategies, they will consistently attempt to seek out interest as a primary motivator. One student confessed, “Because if it doesn't interest me, again I'll do what I did before. When I wasn't interested, I'll just like put my head down or just not pay attention.” Another student said,

Yeah, if I’m not interested I’ll do my best to motivate myself and I won’t say ‘Oh I’ll just suck through it’ because if I just simply go into the reading I’ll lose interest quickly. I’ll just close the book and say ‘ok I don’t want to read this so I’ll
read it bit by bit’ and I’ll write down like what I’ve learned and see how it connects to my class and see if my interest still goes on.

Data coded to the theme Other Motivation revealed that while some students utilized extrinsic incentives like grades, tests, or deadline, levels of engagement with the actual text were deeply affected by the interest they had in the topic or ‘found’ during the reading process. Students of immigrant decent revealed the most developed deployment of alternate affective traits, such as grit and perseverance, which manifested as a discipline built into the belief that it didn’t matter if text was interesting. It was in essence part of the job of going to school that required academic attention. Conversely, other students, felt that no other motivator was enough to engage them in text content if interest in that text could not be established.

Summary

Through constant comparative methodology facilitated by NVivo Pro 12 Software, student perspective on interest to read academic text was more clearly elucidated. Twelve major themes were identified specifically related to student conceptualization of both personal and situational interest particularly as both affect first year community college motivation to read academic texts. Each factor was found to uniquely contribute in some way to student interest or lack of interest in the academic texts which they were assigned. Language learners were most often found to activate alternate motivational techniques independent or in conjunction with interest (Theme/Other Motivation). Students also clearly identified a difference between completing texts and learning from texts, where the first was generally done with reward/penalty incentives in mind, and the latter was most often if almost always accomplished only if interest was present.
Both personal and situational interest were found to affect reading engagement. However, overlap among themes was also identified. Interest and subsequently learning (Theme: Learning) were generally interrelated with the value which students found in the text they were assigned (Theme: Value). That value was generally associated with how well students could relate to a text or apply the knowledge of that text to their lives (Theme: Related/Relevance/Application). Presentation of Text (theme) most often affected student ability to engage (Theme/Engagement) with the reading assigned where longer texts, smaller font, and complicated arguments were cited as the most prevalent text elements which affected a student’s ability not only to engage, but to attend to the task presented (Theme: Attention/Focus). Although the actual value of text images was not conclusively resolved.

Students recognized the importance of individual identity as evoked through their expressed preferences and desire for input in class curricula (Theme: Choice/Preference). They asserted strongly developed sensibilities of what they liked or did not like, and those preferences tended to influence engagement, especially if they could not find enjoyment in what they were asked to do (Theme: Enjoyment). These dispositional tendencies were either consciously or unconsciously asserted as judgments both before the reading process and during the reading process, and either helped to develop, sustain, or devolve interest throughout the reading process.

Students also recognized their own growth trajectories and how underdeveloped maturity could inhibit the recognition of text value. Students with a more developed sense of their own maturity or growth in progress were more likely to use interest as a tool, which could be purposefully employed to “find” interest, even when interest in a text
assignment was not immediately recognized. They were also more likely to co-employ other extrinsic or intrinsic motivational factors to achieve educational objectives. Although students expressed conflicted educational objectives, those with the most honed academic drives would use grades or career objectives as incentives in absence of interest. On the contrary, others without these expressed drives relied on interest as a primary motivational factor, which needed to be more overtly or effortlessly present early in the reading process for engagement to be sufficiently activated. They also expressed that real learning could not occur absent of interest.

Specifically related to text presentation, students expressed particular preference for seductive text details such as shock value, suspense, or dynamic minor (although relatively insignificant) details. These preferences were generally grounded in personal interest, well in place before the actual text was presented. Such details induced interest and were remembered most clearly as demonstrated in student responses. Repetition and predictability, conversely, were found not to aid in interest activation. Multiple students recognized a visual sensibility where they were more likely to find interest by being able to visualize content “like a movie.” However, sentiment was mixed related to the value of multimodal content in texts. The value of technology in class, although mentioned, was found to be less significantly represented then other factors related to interest. Students also rather notably held a distinct aversion to any content of a political bent, particularly when that content was deemed one-sided, extreme, or did not align with a student’s strongly established belief system.

Finally, students recognized the value of teacher influence and class dynamics in activating interest in reading assignments. Students overwhelming recognized how
teacher presentation of a text could influence their engagement and subsequent interest in that text. Additionally students cast ready judgment on what was the “right” way to teach, and noted teachers who did not teach well, or seemed not to care about students, or more pointedly, appeared not to care about teaching. These perceptions affected student willingness to engage not only in the class but in the assignments presented. Students recognized teacher strategies that helped to spark interest even when students originally had discounted the value of class content. Students positively recognized teachers who seemed “open-minded” and encouraged individual opinions without casting dispersion on those opinions. Teachers who lectured or just presented “facts” were most likely to be associated with boredom, where students were not only less likely to engage, but more likely to turn off completely to classroom content. Students expressed a value for relationship building both with their teacher and with their peers as a valuable component of optimal learning environments. Students also predominantly specified that the more enthusiastic they were to come to class, the more likely they were to find reading assignments to be interesting.

Analysis, as presented in this exploratory inquiry, revealed that both student personal interest (established prior to text engagement) as well as situational interest (environmentally and text dependent), held great importance in students’ conscious decisions to engage in academic text assignments. While students realized an ability to complete reading assignments in the absence of interest, recall and optimal learning were believed to be directly relate to how interested students were in their assignments.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Overview

Through this exploratory inquiry framed under action research, I examined the concept of young adult interest in reading academic texts from the perspective of fifteen students in an urban community college. Participants volunteered from my own two Spring 2020 Composition classes (via remote learning, implemented as Covid-19 pandemic protocol). They completed initial surveys wherein they identified definitions for interest and answered questions related to interest and their academic reading experience. Students were then asked to pick and complete one reading assignment from six choices from various sources and genres. Then, over the course of the last semester module, I invited students to share with their classmates and myself the perceived value or lack of value of those selections. Students provided candid insight on what it meant for them to be interested in reading assignments, both in my classes, and in their other classes, and as importantly, why they were often not interested in the assignments they were given.

Using constant comparative coding and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I guided my inquiry through the two research questions posed in this inquiry.

RQ1: To what extent does personal interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read the academic texts they are assigned?

RQ2: To what extent does situational interest influence urban community college students’ motivation to read academic texts they are assigned?

In this chapter, I align findings relevant to posed research, linking observed themes to prior research specifically related to student interest to read academic texts. I first identify agreement in the field related to specific factors of interest, and then
delineate specific attributes of personal and situational interest pertinent to this exploration. Next, I articulate aspects of the German psychological model of Person-Object Theory related to feeling and value valences, and finally represent how a Self Determination Theory framework effectively accounts for student interest to read academic texts. From this careful consideration, a Work-Flow Model of Student Interest to Read Academic Texts is evolved, which accounts for both inquiry and theory. Finally, I offer next steps in research which will build on the work of this inquiry to further isolate young adult student interest to read academic texts and how such affects learning.

**Summary of Findings**

I undertook this study to elicit young adults’ perspective on interest to read academic texts. To preference participant perspective, I purposefully rejected *a priori* coding and prior modeling to ensure that data were collected without conceptualization of the phenomenon under consideration (Glaser & Holton, 2004). As such, themes as coded, are evoked from the data at hand and not theory or bias. Using this inquiry’s research questions as guidance, through constant comparative analysis, 12 themes were isolated as they relate specifically to student interest to read academic texts. Student respondents revealed distinctly individualized responses to text assignments while sharing commonalities of belief.

A major finding in this inquiry relates to how students understood ‘completing’ a reading assignment, as something potentially different and/or lessor than ‘learning’ from a reading assignment. Where completing reading assignments was identified as a task that was undertaken to satisfy a class requirement (e.g., grade or test), learning was clearly linked to something potentially more meaningful, sparked by student interest in a text and measured by how relatable and valuable students found information in those text
assignments to be. Where some students admitted that they could complete assignments for one purpose but never actually learn anything of value from those assignments, others stated that they could not complete assignments in the absence of interest. Student goals in college tended to dictate how well students completed and/or learned from the readings they were assigned.

This inquiry also revealed the distinct influence which teacher and class dynamic had on student willingness to find interest and engage in the readings they were assigned. Students presented decisive judgment pertaining to effective or ineffective teachers and how such colored their perception of classwork. Positive sentiments were expressed about teachers who cared, encouraged student opinion and individuality, provided choice, had dynamic interactive non-lecture-oriented classes, and who used multimodal curricula material. Students negatively identified teachers who they felt did not care about their students, failed to understand student inability to comprehend material, or did not effectively introduce or explain value of reading material. Students demonstrated that teachers were the predominant determiner of whether they would engage in text materials. Students were more likely to find texts to be interesting if they found classes to be interesting. Often that interest was intwined in how positive the ‘energy’ of a class was deemed to be.

Students also expressed aversion to particular topics and indicated clearly defined personal interests integrated with developed belief systems. For instance, of participants who responded, no single young adult chose the essay on political correctness. Students concretely articulated that anything associated with the word ‘politics’ was a turn off. This had to do with whether they predetermined that an article on that topic would most
likely be biased, one-sided, or ‘extreme.’ Students tended to discount any article which appeared, in their minds, not to present both sides of an issue. However, one student honestly revealed that he would not read a topic that did not align with his personal belief system (the article on gender), as he did not see “the point” because he had already established views of the topic.

In their responses, students revealed distinct value systems at work throughout the reading process demonstrating that they made judgments (i.e., either consciously or subconsciously) about the value of text assignments both before and while reading. Those judgments were made by tapping into both personal and situational interest. Drawing on already established personal interests (i.e., what they liked or did not like), students made judgments early on, either based upon the topic or title of a work, or something the teacher said, which sparked personal interest. However, situational interest could also be engaged or derailed throughout the reading process based upon text components (i.e., length and organization of argument), entertainment value (enjoyment), complexity, and teacher orientation or acts. All of these components influenced how well students were able to attend to task and ultimately to engage meaningfully with the text material. Students also recognized that interest could be activated anywhere during the reading. But the longer the reading, the less likely students were to attempt to find interest if it was not initially present.

What students perceived as the value of text assignments most often referred to how relatable, applicable, or relevant students felt texts to be in their personal (or professional) lives. Students identified that teachers could reveal such value that students themselves did not immediately see. Judgments on the value of texts were made
throughout the reading process and influenced how students extracted meaning from texts. Positive judgements and learning generally associated with deeper relatability, applicability, or relevance. Deeper learning was clearly correlated to how much interest students could find in the text assignments; however, multiple students were quick to assert dual agendas related to conflicted beliefs about the value of academic readings (whether solely for grade advancement, or rather to add personal value to their lives). In this way students recognized quests for grades as being potentially independent and disconnected from learning.

While students of American-born cultural orientation were more likely to identify a need for interest as a primary motivator to become engaged in reading content, Language Learners tended to rely more on other motivators independent of interest, in particular more developed self-regulation, which they utilized in their reading process. While they recognized the value and desire to find interest in the texts they were assigned, they were less likely to rely on such to complete reading assignments. One student of Eastern European decent was seen as an outlier to the language learner model, wherein that student, although congenial and engaged in class discussion on a general level, repeatedly expressed a distaste for completing class assignments for any reason, stating at one point, his tendency not to be particularly motivated. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this inquiry was initially undertaken in recognition of low retention rates of first year students at the community college level. High dropout rates in the first year in particular suggested failed student curricula engagement (Bonet & Walters, 2016). The student who showed particular reticence in completing his work, accentuated a spectrum of student engagement at the community college level, highlighting how ethnic
orientation cannot necessarily be used to effectively delineate a demographic’s motivation to engage in academic work.

However, while this student was prone toward lax work habits, throughout remote learning, he came to almost every class, and actively conversed online (albeit sometimes off topic). He attended our early morning class even though, as he acknowledged, he had not gone to bed the night before (an admitted teen habit expressed by several students) and was waiting until our class was over to do so. Also notable is that this student potentially influenced members of Cohort B (second semester English) to select a particular reading, by announcing before students had a chance to select readings of their choice, that he intended to read “The Kidney” essay. Five students in Cohort B selected that reading, as opposed to none in Cohort A (first semester English), who stated they did not find the material particularly relevant.

Through this inquiry, 12 major themes related to the construct of young adult student interest to read academic texts. Distinct overlaps among themes was noted; however, clear differences related specifically to each theme warranted separate categorization.

- Attention/Focus
- Choice/Preference
- Complicated/Complex
- Engagement
- Enjoyment
- Judgment
- Learning
• Other Motivation
• Presentation of Text
• Related/Relevant/Application
• Teacher/Class Dynamic
• Value

Each theme was identified as an observable factor related to and/or influencing the level of student interest to read academic texts. The importance of each theme appeared to differ from student to student, dependent specifically upon varying development (academic and personal) and goals (professional and personal). Student feedback in this inquiry illustrated the gamut of developmental levels and value goals asserted by individual respondents. Some students more clearly demonstrated self-regulatory strategies and were more likely to assert a clearer articulation of the value of academic reading assignments. Students with less self-regulatory strategies, or less recognized interests were likely to dismiss texts much more quickly if interest was not promptly engaged. What this inquiry revealed is that where students exhibited less self-regulatory tools or academic incentive, interest played a key role in how they engaged with assigned class readings.

**Moving Beyond Reading Compliance**

Professors have long complained about college students’ failure to complete academic reading assignments (Hoeft, 2012; Phillips, 2006; Schnee, 2018), and research from the field supports these complaints (Brost & Bradley, 2006; Ihara & Del Principe, 2018, Starcher & Proffitt, 2011). Studies have focused on a variety of factors relating to and influencing student reading compliance such as, grade achievement (e.g.,
Bartolomeo-Maida, 2017), to address student non-compliance, A variety of strategies have been offered such as journals, quizzes, and more creative assignments (e.g., Bartolomeo-Maida, 2017; Carney et al., 2008; Lei et al., 2010; Marchant, 2002; Sappington et al., 2002).

However, studies at the college level, focused on reading compliance are more likely to ask the question “Why don’t students read. or complete, their reading assignments?” rather than “What do students learn from their reading assignments. Ihara and Del Principe (2018), in their consideration of the complexity of reading academic texts at the postsecondary level, suggest that we need to “rethink” why we as teachers assign readings in college. As they write, “To treat reading as a single act, something people either do or don’t do, is to vastly oversimplify” (p.1). Ihara and Del Principe sought to understand the value of academic readings, by addressing this question from the teacher’s perspective. However, as posited here, as equally valid is a consideration of student value systems and how such should also clearly be accounted for in the classroom.

**Empirical Research Linked to Inquiry Themes**

What follows here is a consideration of how empirical research moves beyond reading compliance to address the topic of first year college students academic reading engagement as such relates to the themes identified in this study. Nevertheless, it is first necessary to recognize how reading compliance studies have contributed to understanding college student motivation to read. While student responses in this study support that interest may be harnessed to spark greater young adult engagement, reading, compliance research is valuable in its recognition of the conscious choice which college-age students make to attend to their assignments. Further these studies isolate the myriad
of reasons for student lack of compliance. Three studies are presented below which isolated multiple factors for non-compliance. They are highlighted here because they touch upon, but do not deeply investigate, how student interest is also a factor in non-compliance. Also, themes from my inquiry which are represented in non-compliance studies are also highlighted.

**Compliance Studies and the Value of Interest**

Hoeft (2012) assessed first-year college student reading compliance through a self-report survey. Only half of students surveyed stated they completed readings, and only half of those could demonstrate basic comprehension of those readings (Theme: Comprehension Difficulty). Students most often cited a conflict of work schedules as the main reason for an inability to complete work. However, findings in this present inquiry do not support that presupposition, as only two comments across twenty-three data sources demonstrated lack of time, or alternate obligations, as reasons not to complete reading assignments. In Hoeft’s inquiry, students also identified lack of interest in classwork as a factor in non-compliance but that assertion was not explored. Students in Hoeft’s study did show a significant preference for smaller class sizes which they stated was likely to increase their engagement (Theme: Teacher/Class Dynamic). A follow-up study by the same author, “How to Get University Students to Read”, focuses on strategies to entice compliance. Assigning quizzes, journals and reminders were all found to have some impact on reading compliance (Theme: Other Motivation). Manipulating student interest in content was not assessed as a viable strategy.

Brost and Bradley (2006) touched more pointedly on the teacher’s role in engaging students in academic readings, a role that moves beyond an extrinsic
reward/punishment mentality. Students in this study identified “personal value to learn” as the most important reason to read a text (p. 104; Themes: Attention/Focus, Choice/Preference, Engagement, Judgment, Learning, Value.). Length (amount) of reading was also seen as negatively impacting. (Theme: Presentation of Text.) Students were asked open-ended questions wherein they made negative judgments about reading (seen as boring), or they articulated strategic decisions pertaining to whether readings would or would not be useful will (Theme: Value). Student interest in the text or the content of the class curriculum was not considered.

Sharma et al. (2013) also focused on student lack of compliance with reading assignments, concluding that failure to comply with reading assignments is related to a multitude of potential factors. Important to this inquiry is the assertion made by students that interest in the topic and a consideration of the relevance of the topic to students’ lives had significant impact on their decision to complete reading assignments. Sharma et al. concluded that if students are shown the relevance of the assignments to their own lives, then students will comply. Suggestions to increase reading compliance related to availability of resources, timing, and other external regulating factors. Students acknowledged how particular external regulators, such as pop quizzes, acted as disincentives. Students matched responses to this present inquiry in that they cited a teacher’s lack of enthusiasm as a disincentive to read (Themes: Related/Application, Teacher/Class Dynamic, Other Motivation).

As explained in Chapter 2, reading compliance studies add value to our understanding of student motivation to read, in that they seek to identify, and subsequently, to manipulate environment and student extrinsic motivation to encourage
college-age students to complete reading assignments. However, the focus of such studies is generally not on depth of engagement or learning, but on task completion. What is not adequately accounted for in a focus on compliance is the very unique growth trajectory of urban young adult community college students where student completion of text assignments does not necessarily equate to optimal learning. Interest theory, when applied to young adult educational objectives asserts the value of the college students as autonomous learners.

**Interest and Self Determination Theory Related Young Adults**

Like other fields related to affective domains, interest theory research has been hindered by the disparity of conceptualizations of interest in academic domains, and the subsequent inability to generalize findings across populations (Appleton et al., 2008; Conradi, et al, 2013; Grossnickle, 2016; Hattie et al., 2020). Although there exists agreement in certain aspects of theoretical modeling. Most specifically, researchers agree on, and as qualitative exploration suggests here, five characteristics of interest as a motivational variable (Renninger & Hidi, 2011).

**Table 11**

**Commonalities in Various Interest Research and Relation to Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commonalities in Interest Research</th>
<th>Relevant Research</th>
<th>Related Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest is object or content specific wherein focused attention and/or engagement is a specific factor</td>
<td>(e.g. Silvia, 2006)</td>
<td>Attention/Focus; Relatedness/Application; Presentation of Text; Engagement; Teacher/Class Dynamic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The actor’s environment affects sustained interaction</td>
<td>(e.g. Sansone &amp; Thoman, 2005)</td>
<td>Teacher/Class Dynamic; Other Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interest has both affective and cognitive components which interact</td>
<td>(e.g. Ainley et al., 2002)</td>
<td>: Enjoyment; Teacher/Class Dynamic; Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interest during engagement may not be consciously acknowledged by the actor</td>
<td>(Renninger &amp; Hidi, 2002)</td>
<td>Engagement, Attention/Focus;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interest has a biological or neurological foundation</td>
<td>(Panksepp, 1998).</td>
<td>Enjoyment, Attention/Focus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The physiological component of interest-seeking behavior in mammals is notable, in that studies have proven that mammals have hardwired into evolutionary DNA, what is called ‘seeking’ behavior. Brain activity has been mapped revealing unique neural pathway activation when individuals are engaged with interest (Kang, et al., 2009; Palmer, 2009; Panksepp, 1998). While degrees of seeking behavior may vary among individuals, the commonality is a hardwiring of interest utilization as a motivational variable to seek out relevant and self-sustaining cognitive input.

Interest theory, as posited by Renninger et al. (1992) built upon a platform of Self Determination Theory (SDT) (Krapp, 2005), accounts for the developmental growth of young adults and the innate drive for all mammals to seek out interesting information. This framework also helps to bridge the gap in advanced literacy skills faced by young adults in this community college setting, who have, either by virtue of limited educational experiences or unaddressed obstacles, are unable to attend to the academic tasks demanded of them in a college setting (Huff, 2009; Schuetz, 2008).

I argue here that young adults require a unique lens which clearly accounts for the developmental milestones faced by this student population, who on the verge of adulthood, are actively exploring versions of their identity upon which they will ultimately settle into as adults, sometime in their late twenties. This lens must also
account for the unique diversity of experience in an urban population and the academic development still underway, but which is not always acknowledged.

An SDT framework has been applied in empirical research to isolate student persistence and achievement of academic goals. De Lourdes-Villerreal and Garcia (2016) identified how male community college students of color were more likely to persist if they felt a sense of relatedness or belonging within their English class. A multiple case study by Brower et al. (2020) supported how underprepared students in community college settings benefitted from choice, autonomy and relatedness supports. Jones (2016) asserted how SDT supported classroom modeling improved cross-cultural relatedness and interaction.

Self Determination Theory, applied at the community-college level, effectively accounts for the unique developmental milestones observed in young adults (Lekes, et al., 2016). Arnett (2000) categorized the period of growth from 18 to 25 as “emerging adulthood” (p. 469) noted as a time of deep identity exploration (Arnett, 2007; Dezutter, et al., 2014; Waterman, et al., 2013), experimentation (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006) and shifting role orientation (Padilla-Walker et al., 2008). Arnett (2000) also recognized this period of development as “culturally constructed, not universal and immutable” (p. 470), acknowledging the demographic diversity and uniqueness associated with this phase of life, in that students can be situated (temporally and in identity) anywhere from living with their parents, single and living alone, married, with children or in any number of potential configurations and states of flux. This is the developmental uniqueness which characterizes young urban community college students. SDT is uniquely positioned to
account for this growth trajectory in its consideration of a young adult’s quest for autonomy, relatedness and competence, as key factors in development into adulthood.

**Characteristics and Value of Personal Interest**

Personal interest, as defined by Schraw and Lehman (2001) is viewed as “intrinsic desire to understand a particular topic that persists over time” (p. 24). It is something that is taken with the individual as a personality trait. Like situational interest, personal interest can be activated, but while situational interest is always linked to specific, in the moment, environmental stimuli, Personal interest is grounded in the experience and preferences of the actor and includes a consistency of valence beliefs (Schiefele, 1996, 2001). These beliefs isolate aspects of the actor’s developing identity and include beliefs, expectancies, attributions, and self-concepts (Schiefele, 2009).

Personal interest has also been called *individual or topic interest* and is shaped by prior knowledge, experiences and the emotions evoked. A further delineation of personal interest identifies *latent* (referring to a dispositional state) and *actualized* (topic-activated) personal interest (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). Previous studies found personal interest in adults is related specifically to prior knowledge and metacognitive processing (Tobias, 1994) and deeper reader experience quality and knowledge acquisition (Schiefele, 1996). A number of studies have concluded that student personal (alternately labeled as individual) interest impacts learning for various populations and across disciplines (e.g. Ainley, 2006; Ainley et al., 2002, Linnenbrink-Garcias et al., 2013). However, the full impact of student personal interest, and how it might be activated in specific learning environments has not clearly been accounted for. (Palmer, 2019).

This inquiry adopts a view of personal interest as either latent or actualized and
relative to the valence theory of interest as either value or feeling laden (Krapp, 1993; Schiefele, 1991, 1999, 2001). Students in this inquiry repeatedly offered value statements which often began “I think” and feeling statements which often began with “I feel”. Personal interest was often expressed as actualized when students consciously identified why they were interested in the texts they chose to read. Students were found to have strongly developed interests and were quick to offer judgments related to those interests.

**Person-Object Theory**

Personal interest is isolated here as a component in young adult learning and identity formation and is accounted for in Person-Object Theory (POI) theory (Krapp, 1993), which evaluates ontogenetic development, recognizing that young adults are in the process of establishing stable personality structures. Personal interest cannot be viewed as applying to single events but must be accounted for as part of a developing self-system as part of a lifelong course of human development (Boekaerts, 1997; 1999).

Personal-Object Theory (POI) refers to work advanced by German educational psychologists and which is often related to Self Determination Theory as advanced by Deci and Ryan (cf. Krapp, 2004; Krapp & Lewalter, 2001). Most specific to this inquiry, POI, as theorized by Krapp refers to a specific person-object relationship which is associated with both value-related and feeling-related valences (2002). This conceptualization is often held in contrast to the Four Phase Model of Interest presented by Hidi and Renninger (2006) which suggested how value is influenced by affect and knowledge. In terms of my findings, I theorize that value and emotion (isolated most prominently in the Themes: Enjoyment, Judgment, and Value) influence activation and
sustainability of interest, and which ultimately drive the actor to deeper knowledge acquisition. Accordingly, value and feeling valences help characterize interest.

Value and Feeling Represented in Interest Theory

Schiefele (1991, 1999) referred to a dual-component system of value and feeling, and isolated interest as an intrinsic trait which influences cognitive engagement and assigns either a feeling-related component or a value-related component. Both components serve to activate or increase engagement (Kintsch, 1980). Research indicates that a feeling component most often presents as a sense of enjoyment, involvement or stimulation (Schiefele, 1992; Schiefele & Krapp, 1996) and those feelings can occur either prior to, during, or following an interest-triggered activity (Schiefele, 1992, 1999; Schiefele & Rheinberg, 1997). Related to theme construction in this study, the feeling valence is represented as Enjoyment because that was the predominant emotive observed.

Two separate themes in this inquiry specifically represent value as related to the reading experience and to the positive feeling component linked to interest-based tasks (and conversely, negative feeling component which is linked to boredom or disengagement). Value and positive sentiments are interlaced with judgements students metacognitively make throughout the reading process. Schiefele (1991, 1992) asserted that both feeling and value components were interrelated. However, a study by Sansone, et al., (1992) on college undergraduates demonstrated that where the feeling-related component was low and value-related interest was high, students exhibited more self-regulatory strategies. Subsequently, the depth of learning or level of interest was not conclusively established. As I theorize here, the levels of value and feeling valences in the interest-triggered event of reading academic texts are not conclusively quantified.
Rather, I assert only that both feeling and value valences are present and both actively influence a student engagement as that process relates to reading academic texts.

**Young Adult Interest Development**

Young adult interest development can be related to ontogenetic orientation where different developing populations incorporate interests into their life-spaces in different ways to feed emerging identities (Krapp, 2004). In a model of ontogenetic development, as individuals develop, they take in information, identify interests, and hold, retain, or discard portions of interests. By the young adult stage, this constant process of differentiation and reorganization of interests serves to complexly inform one’s sense of self. Although not often articulated, these interests are nevertheless a driving mechanism of knowledge acquisition which will be assimilated long term into new and sustaining interests through a process of internalization (Krapp, 2004).

In recognition of the unique ontogenetic disposition of young adults, this current exploratory inquiry isolates the underpinnings of student processing of interests as they themselves seek to incorporate or discard information they deem valuable or worthless to their identity formation. As one student wrote, “I think I can’t learn without interest because, without that interest, I would lose motivation for myself, and learning without interest means there is no point in learning and growing.” This statement demonstrates the recognition of a distinct self-system where personal growth is central to knowledge acquisition even in academic settings.

However, students in this study run the gamut on interest identification, motivational drive, and personal growth reinforcing the individuation of interest development and its role in academic endeavors. This disparity in growth was evidenced
in that during one online session, a student, who may have not realized he was sharing the remote whiteboard with the entire class, drew a sperm for all to see, mid-class discussion, which in turn provoked a young mother to respond in shock that there were babies present, as she attended class with her two young children. On the opposite end of the spectrum were students exhibiting strong motivational drive and clearly defined likes and dislikes. Perhaps no student represented this trait so clearly as the 31-year-old first-time freshman, on a self-expressed plotted course to Harvard Law School. She articulated preferences with hatchet precision, “I felt impatient after the fourth page of the author’s tirade. I found myself wishing for him to get to his point.”

Between this dichotomy of extremes in experience lay the myriad of developing identities of other student participants who articulated in varying degrees, how interest in some way influenced their educational experiences, even if other motivational factors were also at work. All these students share a common sense of quest, all just on this side of adulthood, where academic endeavors are recognized in a dual capacity, first as a task imposed upon them and yielding some extrinsic reward, or, arguably more importantly, as an endeavor potentially affecting personal growth and identity formation. Personal interest, deeply engrained and ever evolving even as identities evolve, is the catalyst for a determination of that value.

**Characteristics and Value of Situational Interest**

While personal interest may be viewed as the catalyst of young adult engagement in academic coursework, sustained engagement is arguably determined by a student’s interest in the actual task. U. Schiefele (2017) defined situational interest as “a temporary state aroused by specific features of a task or object” (p. 198). Situational interest is
expressed as adopting a tone which is positive (Krapp et al., 1992) and may act as a facilitator of other motivations. It has also been characterized as spontaneous and environmentally activated by the topic or situation at hand. Factors related to situational interest pertaining to reading texts, have been presented by a number of researchers (Schraw, 1997; Schraw & Lehman, 2001; Silvia, 2006). Hidi and Baird (1986) and Mitchell (1993) articulated two separate levels of situational interest: triggered and maintained. According to U. Schiefele (2009) “Triggering (or ‘catching’, in Mitchell’s terms) interest describes the induction of attention and arousal for only a short term” (p. 200.) Hidi (2000) conceptualized situational interest as two phased, wherein one triggered interest, and then maintained interest. In Hidi’s view, only maintained, situational interest is conducive to the development of long-term interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Krapp, 1999; Renninger, 2000). The two phases are separated only by duration. Activation of situational interest depends upon prior knowledge, surprising content, text structure and the goals of the reader (Baldwin et al., 1985; Renninger & Wozniak, 1985; Tobias, 1994).

As demonstrated in this inquiry, this potential fluctuation of interest is isolated most clearly under the theme Engagement, represented as student willingness to deeply consider a text, which may be activated or derailed at any point during the reading event. Unlike during the act of simply “completing” assignments, the more deeply involved act of student engagement reveals students consciously or unconsciously making judgment assessments throughout the reading process related to value and relevance of the text material. These judgments, and the subsequent interest levels sparked, in turn inform interest, engagement, and ultimately learning.
Sustaining interest or the failure to do so was a common theme throughout this inquiry, related in its simplest cognitive application as Attention/Focus. Unlike the theme Engagement, Attention/Focus refers more so to either rote or conscious focus on the text. Students clearly recognized, at least after the fact, when they failed to attend to the text or task at hand, as in “[I am more likely to complete a reading assignment] when I am interested in the material because it is easier for me to stay focused on the reading and retain what I learn.” The ‘why’ of this failure to attend to text is represented in the theme Engagement, where students identified successful engagement as either activated, delayed, sustained, or lost interest. As one student relayed, “My interest level was very uninterested at first, however, as I got more into the text, I indulged in the reading and maintained interest.” Sustained engagement was linked to the value which students identified in the text (Hecht, et al., 2020). Student comments revealed the complexity of situational interest and the components required to keep students interested in reading a text assignment.

This distinction between Attention/Focus and Engagement in interest activation refers back to Schiefele (1991) which recognized not only the feeling and value related components, but a third component of interest which he called “its intrinsic character” (p. 304) wherein, if interest is effectively activated, a reader undertakes the task for its intrinsic value and not related to any external reward or threatened penalty. Students in this inquiry expressed the theme Attention/Focus in terms of failure and negative sentiment. They admitted to requiring external incentives or threats to persist in such tasks where Attention/Focus devoid of interest, was viewed as the driving mechanism for task completion. On the contrary, where students were actively engaged (generally
catalyzed through interest), they expressed a desire to intrinsically embrace the reading task for its own sake because of the value and feelings evoked by the topic.

**Text-based, Task-based, and Knowledge-based Interest**

This inquiry adopts a view of situational interest as alternately text-based, task-based, or knowledge-based (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). Knowledge-based situational interest also relates back to personal interest so may be viewed in both categories. These three sub-categories of situational interest are particularly relevant to this inquiry in that they clearly refer to factors isolated by student participants. As such, these subcategories help to show how each factor may be uniquely categorized to specifically contribute to student interest to read academic texts.

**Text-based Situational Interest**

Text-based situational interest refers to specific aspects of the text assignment which may incite or discourage student interest (Schraw et al., 2001). The studies reviewed here suggest that at least one of the factors isolated in this inquiry relates to student interest. For instance, in this inquiry, under the theme Presentation of Text, students identified particular elements of the actual reading, including font, length to argument organization, as having a direct impact on interest to read the text assignment. Schank (1979) identified three components affecting text-based interest wherein students’ expectations about what the text would accomplish were somehow disrupted. Usually this was made apparent in a lack of coherent argument organization where important information was found to be conflicting or missing. Students in this inquiry repeatedly asserted how author presentation of argument was a deciding factor in sustaining interest. Students demonstrated an expectancy that exposition follow a particular path of reasoning which appeared balanced and well-considered (in the mind of the reader).
When this did not occur, or the author became repetitive, students disengaged.

Related to the theme Complex/Complicated and the subcategory of Comprehension Difficulty, Schraw (1997) identified how text details affected comprehension. Information complexity held separately from ease of comprehension was evaluated by van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) wherein the researchers recognized levels of text organization requiring both linguistic and situational analysis, each contributing uniquely to text understanding. In this inquiry, these factors are isolated as Complicated/Complex and as a subconstruct of Comprehension Difficulty. Students here delineated between texts that were complex which could be expressed positively as enticing, despite the challenge, or, related to Comprehension Difficulty, which was often perceived as a hinderance to interest.

Most research on text-based situational interest relates to three subcategories, seductiveness, vividness, and coherence (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). While studies in the field have focused independently on each subcategory of text detail and its effect on interest, seductiveness and its effect on interest has received particular attention in interest research. Seductive details are elaborated upon in Wade and Adams (1990) who isolated four components of text-based situational interest. Each component is represented as follows along with an example of student participant response in this inquiry.

1. Main ideas (viewed as important and highly interesting): Students in this inquiry demonstrated an aptitude in their responses for recognizing important main ideas of texts and viewing those ideas with interest. For example, as one student stated,
I especially liked the idea of the author where he said that the Internet is already an integral part of our everyday life and so it is important to understand that we probably have to accept the fact that our data is collected and try to trust companies that collect our data for their own purposes.

2. **Factual details** (important and highly uninteresting): Students in this inquiry often equated “facts” with boredom or a desire not to continue the learning process, as in “[I] felt the teachers were just constantly listing facts and that doesn’t make me want to learn.”

3. **Seductive details** (highly interesting and unimportant): Students in this inquiry did refer to enticing details, recognizing impact of particular statement, but they did not often give specifics of those. Students expressed a penchant for “stories” and “movies,” genres prone toward seductive details. However, one student identified how an anecdote provided at the beginning of one reading hooked her, even though that detail would not be considered an important detail.

4. **Boring trivia** (neither important or interesting): Again, facts were considered boring, and students did not demonstrate an ability (or inability) to determine what facts qualified as trivia, and which qualified as important. But trivia might be considered as information students already knew.

I identified that students with other developed motivational strategies and established personal interest in the topic under consideration were less likely to focus on seductive details, shown in prior research to potentially detract from valuable knowledge acquisition (Harp & Mayer, 1998). Those students were more likely to identify prior topic knowledge, but still were able to articulate interest in new knowledge they acquired. As
long as the author could provide new information which engaged students’ thought processes, they remained engaged. When texts became redundant or failed to provide new information, students were likely to disengage. However, qualitative results in this inquiry reveal students referring less to distracting details as a source of interest, and more to the vividness and/or coherence of text details as more influencing of interest levels.

_Vividness_, the second subcategory of text-based situational interest research, pertains to information which particularly stood out to students as either shocking or surprising (Schraw et al., 2001), as in this reference.

It was very interesting when the article had mentioned that “You can literally measure the years of life his kidney donation chain gave in centuries.” I was surprised when I read this sentence and made me want to know more about the story and totally grab my attention.

Multiple students referred to this one detail as standing out to them. Vividness was represented often in responses, as students refer repeatedly to such information as that which ‘stood out’ (five references), was ‘shocking’ (six references), ‘caught’ their eye (fourteen references), ‘hooked’ them (five references), or grab/grabbed (seven references) their attention. Fewer empirical studies exist pertaining to vividness of text details. Jose and Brewer (1984) assessed surprise in narrative fiction and its effect on interest. Alternately Iran-Nejad (1987) linked higher surprise to higher interest, but problematically disassociated interest from ‘liking’ a story. In my analysis, liking is seen as a potential component and positive indicator of interest. Iran-Nejad recognized, how particular research differentiates interest from liking such as in the example of how one can find a snake interesting, but not like snakes. However, for the sake of this current
study, in that it is specifically related to reading, and as revealed in student responses, ‘liking’ is viewed as a potential observable factor of interest.

*Coherence* relates to the organization of the author’s ideas (Campbell, 1995). Schraw (1997) identified how students found higher interest in texts they saw as informationally well-organized or complete. Multiple students in this inquiry referred specifically to author aptitude in argument organization and were ready to dismiss texts based upon poor argument presentation. One student wrote, “The only thing I didn’t find interesting was towards the end the story seemed a little repetitive and boring. I feel the author kept rambling on.” Students, during the reading process made continual judgments regarding coherence, and when text coherence unraveled, in their view, student engagement would be diminished. Schraw et al. (1995) found text coherence to be highly corelated with interest ratings ($r = 0.61$ and $r = 0.45$).

Of the three subcategories represented here, related to text-based interest, student respondents appeared most critical of texts where authors (in the mind of student respondents) failed to present a text coherently. The concept of text coherence was often imbedded in negative sentiment related to text length (fifteen references). Students who devalued longer essays tended to express a desire for the author to get to the point more quickly. Research on college students by Soemer and Schiefele (2019) related to mind wandering and text comprehension, recognized text cohesion as a valuable indicator of student inability to comprehend text and subsequently to remain engaged with a text. Perceived lack of cohesion was found to have the potential to negatively impact student Attention and Focus as confirmed in this study. Students conceptualized their minds akin to physical entities which needed to be caught hold of or sparked. The act of placing
something or gripping something in one’s mind was a repeated depiction. Students seemed prone most to recognize when this ability to hold onto information failed to occur.

As represented in this current inquiry, the theme Presentation of Text isolates how students identify the value of specific text details, not just on a comprehension level, but related to cohesion. Text-based interest recognizes the complex judgment process which students undertake during the reading event related not only to the actual event but with preconceived ideas of what a text should accomplish.

**Task-based Situational Interest**

Task-based situational interest relates to reading instructions or direction which might impact student goals (Schraw & Dennison, 1994). How a text is presented or the environment in which it is presented is shown to impact student interest. Hidi and Anderson (1992) concluded that student focus could be enhanced by highlighting specific aspects of the text to increase attention in those aspects of the text. For example, a student in this inquiry referred to such manipulation as he mentioned that his music textbook came ready highlighted by the publisher, where ‘important’ information was accented, and ‘less important’ information remained muted in the digital text. This formatting was not positively received and impacted how this student perceived the value of the assigned reading.

As relayed in Chapter 4, the effect of teacher manipulation of presentation of text was observed in this inquiry when students were shown a picture of ‘Fred the Turtle’ from one of their essay options. Students had not been presented with hard copies of texts, but only links to the texts. Upon seeing the picture of Fred in class, students who
had not previously considered the text showed excitement upon viewing the engaging picture. This incident highlighted two important considerations; firstly, that these students who expressed interest (6 in total), had not previously looked past the title of the article before dismissing the reading (as evidenced by their surprise at the picture on the first page), and secondly, that as a teacher, I was directly able to impact student interest (in at least considering the text) through manipulating text presentation. Reflexively speaking, had I previously, when assigning the texts, presented the text in full, with images openly displayed, and not as I had, by merely presenting title, truncated blurb, and digital hyperlink, I might have enticed additional readers to consider the text’s content more deeply.

Mitchell (1993) referred to external controls which might incite catching and holding student interest, based upon presentation of certain salient details. The promotion of active involvement in class materials was deemed key to promoting student interest. Student responses in this inquiry revealed how specific environmental inducements, such as interactive conversations which stimulate prior knowledge, debates or multimedia integration were often enough to stimulate (or catch) interest in a reading task. That interest is ‘held’ by helping students to see the personal value of the texts they are being asked to read (Schraw & Lehman, 2001).

Seventy-two references are made to Teacher or Class Dynamic as it positively or negatively influenced student interest in the reading assignments, or more broadly, in the topic or the class. Students in this inquiry referred repeatedly to the value of teacher presentation of the text as relevant or otherwise valuable in their judgment process, to a preference for clear instructions pertaining to general class instructions and task-related
activities which allowed for self-expression, showed comprehension support, and allowed for autonomy. Research supports the value of teacher manipulation of task orientation as having a positive impact on student engagement. Schraw and Dennison (1994) suggested that assigning students particular perspectives when reading a text augmented engagement. However, conversely, too much control of task parameters by teachers was also found to have negative impact (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Deci et al., 1991). Interest was found to be specifically related to autonomy and control (Flink et al., 1990.)

Additionally, college students themselves have been shown to manipulate task assignments, where those students when presented with texts they found to be ‘boring’, would engage self-created strategies to incite interest (Sansone et al., 1992). A student in this current inquiry presented how they would look to “find” something interesting about text to help them complete and “retain” a reading assignment. However, Sansone et al., (1999) concluded, students with such motivational tendencies tended to have more developed affective traits such as persistence or grit. Grit or lack of grit was represented in this inquiry, by students defined either by a willingness to “power through” a reading, or those who were more likely to “just give up.”

What this inquiry reveals and research supports is how much stock students place in teachers to engage them in course content. Schraw and Lehman (2001) assert in their evaluation of studies pertaining to task-based interest, “Changing the way participants engage in a task, providing specific cognitive goals, or giving individuals reasons to persist in a task may increase situational interest via selective attention or a greater desire to find the task interesting” (p. 38). Reading is not a static event which begins when
students set eyes on their texts. It is a process which can be influenced long before any 
reading is ever distributed.

Knowledge-Based Situational Interest

Knowledge-based situational interest refers to the impact of prior knowledge on 
interest (Schraw & Lehman, 2001). Research in this area refers both to personal interest, 
in which prior knowledge is generally catalyzed, but also to the specific situation in 
which interest can be evoked by that knowledge (Cordova et al., 2014; Rotgans & 
knowledge could lead to less interest in a topic. Students in this inquiry support this 
finding by articulating lessened engagement if they already knew too much about a topic 
to find it valuable.

The concept of prior knowledge has been explicated as domain knowledge, with 
purposefully delineated subcategories of topic knowledge and prior knowledge (Zhang, 
Liu, & Cole, 2013) and each was found to contribute uniquely to task performance. Prior 
knowledge has been found to positively affect learning through stronger attention (Yu et 
al., 2012), better processing and/or information recall (Gobet et al., 2001). Negative 
impact of prior knowledge has also been established where information already in stores 
is either incomplete or inaccurate, and therefore leads to misconceptions (Hecht & 
Proffitt, 1995; Lewandowsky & Kirsner, 2000). Nevertheless, despite the issues related to 
potential misconception, engagement and interest have been shown to be positively 
induced when a reader has sufficient domain knowledge. Students in this inquiry offered 
support for these theoretical findings, most often preferring to have some familiarity to 
the reading topic, as it might relate their experience or what they see in the world.
Self-Determination Theory and the Value of Choice

This inquiry draws heavily on Deci and Ryan’s (1991, 2001, 2008) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which holds as its driving tenet that humans, along with all mammals, are driven by an intrinsic desire to learn and grow. Toward that end, human motivation is attached to three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In an educational context where teachers are called upon to establish effective structure so students can move toward mastery, learning, and connectivity (Ryan & Deci, 2020), the benefits of fostering autonomy through choice to facilitate such growth has been well documented (e.g. Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Patall et al., 2008). Autonomy supports enhance motivation when “conditions allow people to feel that their actions are freely emanating from the self” (Patall, 2013, p. 523). Most recently, Baker and Goodboy (2018) conducted an experimental study on two college classes, where one class was given control over their choice of learning material and the other was not. Results indicated that the class which received this autonomy support exhibited greater intrinsic motivation, deeper engagement, and more positive sentiment.

However, although research supports that classrooms which provide autonomy supports yield a variety of positive outcomes, choice does not always act as a positive motivator. As demonstrated in this inquiry and supported by research, student value of choice as an autonomous support remains conflicted (Katz & Assor, 2007). Although the value of choice in the classroom has been well considered in Self-Determination Theory, studies have yielded disparate conclusions. Where some research identified choice in the classroom as a positive motivator (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Patall et al., 2010), other studies
suggest that choice has no impact or negative impact on objectives (Parker & Lepper, 1992; Reeve et al., 2003).

For instance, although, students in this study more often expressed the theme of Choice as a positive sentiment, first semester students (Cohort A) were more likely than second semester students (Cohort B), to reject a preference for choice in their class assignments, generally acquiescing to the expertise of teachers. One might speculate that the reason for the disparate views among students regarding the value of choice has to do with the familiarity or sense of competence more established students might feel in their educational environment. As students in Cohort B had had a semester to engage in college inquiry and were able to consider their likes and dislikes more fully in the college classroom, then subsequently they might seek to harness those environments to meet their perceived needs. Or, as another student asserted in Cohort B that choice was good but not necessary to achieve objectives, perhaps students who have combined motivational drives or are more mature in an understanding of the value of learning can find interest in a diversity of reading material they might not otherwise consider.

The degrees of interest development are correlated to how students perceive the necessity of choice as an intrinsic autonomy control (Patall, 2013) or competency building endeavor. That perception can be informed by a number of dispositional and environmental factors including the particular parameters of choice, the development of the learner, cultural orientation, or teacher characteristics (e.g. Iyengar & Lepper, 1999, 2000; Moller et al., 2006; Patall et al., 2008; Reeve et al., 2003).

As asserted by Katz and Assor (2007), choice must be offered in a way which meets the needs or value system of the student. In Flowerday et al. (2004), undergraduate students
were given the option of selecting from two undisclosed packets of readings. Study findings revealed that students were more impacted by situational interest in the task than by choice. The choice option was deemed irrelevant or less important to their value system.

Students here clearly identified that the value of choice lay in its facilitation of interest and of learning. However, certain students were more apt to recognize a deficient growth trajectory which might make them ill-equipped to actuate choice as an autonomy component in the quest of learning and effective self-development. Those students were more likely to relinquish choice options, or at least to consider teacher selections more deeply. Iyengar and Lepper (2000), in marketing research referred to what cognitive psychologist call the “too-much-choice effect,” which can be anxiety inducing, particularly related to complex materials or environments. Choice, in these situations can lead to “choice overload” (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Greifeneder, et al., 2010) and subsequently to a reduction of a sense of competence (one of the three primary psychological needs in SDT). Responses in this inquiry support what research validates, that choice in educational environments can lead to increased interest (Pintrich, 2003). However, to what degree and under what circumstances in a general classroom setting of diverse learners this is so remain unclear. Although, the vast majority of student participants articulated distinct preference and choice in line with their interests, as well as a desire for teachers to somehow account for such in the classroom, how choice in reading assignment can be used most effectively to inspire optimal learning objectives requires further consideration.
Learning versus Completing

Results of this inquiry support the theoretical underpinning of SDT in recognizing how student respondents sought growth in their educational experiences. Learning as a theme had fifty-four relevant references across fifteen files and was often linked to something to be valued (forty-one references) and/or as being applicable or relatable to one’s life (eighty-one references). Eight relevant references were made by student respondents to growing or maturing as individuals as an innate driving mechanism for seeking out knowledge. Student respondents also linked this SDT tenet of seeking out learning that is applicable and helps them to grow, to interest, which suggests that interest (an intrinsic motivator) may be a driving mechanism to help students find relevant knowledge which fosters growth goals.

However, although all students in this inquiry acknowledged that they drew on interest as a valuable motivator if their intention was to learn and apply readings to their lives, how able students were to harness interest to both learn and to achieve school objectives varied dependent upon the developmental arc of the individual student. Problematically, students repeatedly disassociated completing reading assignments from learning from those assignments. These indicators support what cognitive psychologists label as mastery goals and achievement goals (Ames & Archer, 1988; Harackiewicz et al., 1997). Mastery goals associate with a student’s desire to learn whereas achievement goals associate with student’s desire to perform (Harackiewicz et al., 1997). A third categorization was added by researchers called work avoidance goals wherein students are possessed to complete work with the least amount of effort possible (Brophy 1983; Dudda & Nicholls, 1992).

Students in this present research expressed different motivations in combination,
or lack of motivations, which led to variations in engagement. How or if students reconciled incongruent goals generally determined success or failure in the classroom. For instance, students in an achievement goal orientation expressed stronger external motivations and also expressed an ability to adapt internal motivators such as interest (or grit or persistence) to optimize both learning and achievement in an academic setting. More productive students tended to understand their balance of motivation and how to employ those motivations for better outcomes as in “I believe interest and discipline go hand in hand when it comes to academic success, and certainly when it comes to achieving excellence.” However levels of learning, even in these high performers, were called into question as students recognized how lack of interest impacted engagement. “[M]y motivation to participate at all is for the grade. My motivation to get involved and excited and knowledgeable about the reading depends on how interesting the reading is. So it's really both.”

On the other end of the spectrum, students with significantly diminished achievement and/or mastery goals, or more problematically, were oriented toward work avoidance goals expressed how even in the presence of interest, their motivation for completing task assignments was precarious. One student stated how they would only complete work if it was related to a specific writing assignment. Another explained how deadlines were not enough. Sometimes these students could engage interest (mastery goal orientation) but if that interest could not be sustained, students would not finish reading assignments.

In between these two extremes lay the majority of students who, although mostly driven by mastery goals, also recognized certain achievement goals. However, their
ability to tap into the needed combination of both was what determined successful educational outcomes. Current research recognizes the combined effect of various motivations to either facilitate or hinder academic achievement and supports how intrinsically motivated students are more likely to have higher outcomes even when also driven by external rewards (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2014) suggesting that a particular, although individualized, combination of motivations is optimal.

Related to the theme Learning in this inquiry, SDT recognizes the role in growth of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. On the one hand, Deci & Ryan (2000) identified intrinsic motivation as activities one does for their own interest or enjoyment. In this view, interest enforcing behaviors represent a move toward an apex of learning engagement. Intrinsically motivated college students are found to do better in coursework (Schunk et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2014). As stated in Deci and Ryan (2020), such motivation is “likely responsible for the preponderance of human learning across the life span, as opposed to externally mandated learning and instruction” (Ryan and Deci, 2017, n.p.).

Deci et al. (1991) identified graduated self-determined behavior as the difference (or degrees) between compliance and choice. As students develop value systems that recognize the relevance of the task they are assigned, the more likely they are to move toward optimal learning. Multiple student responses in this inquiry draw attention to the various motivations for attending college. In that students delineated between reading to learn (intrinsic motivation) versus reading to complete a required assignment and/or get a good grade (extrinsic reward/motivation) reveals conflicting motivators and potentially incongruous value systems which run the risk of derailing both learning and extrinsic
goals. Some students never fully come to terms with their reason for attending school, whether to learn and grow as an adult, or to get a degree, get out and get a job. It is argued here, to facilitate academic and personal growth, teachers need to recognize student motivational factors (both intrinsic and extrinsic) and harness them effectively.

While the value of interest as an intrinsic motivator is at the heart of this inquiry, extrinsic motivation was expressed which must be evaluated for its impact on learning and growth in young adults. According to SDT, four subtypes of extrinsic motivation pertain to the gradation of motivational drive of developing students (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2019). Students situated on this spectrum, depending upon developmental arc, can exhibit varying and interrelating degrees of any of the four. The four types of extrinsic motivation recognized in SDT are explicated as follows. The first two categories represent motivational drives of less psychologically developed individuals, (arguably most applicable to students of younger ages in more controlled classroom environments).

A. External Regulation: students in this category least recognized that learning is an intrinsic drive to learn and grow. Such students are motivated primarily to act by external commands/threats/rewards.

B. Introjected Regulation: motivation is partially internalized, but still driven by fears (shame-avoidance) or desires for recognition.

Students represented in this inquiry are young adults already with strongly entrenched views and developing autonomy. As recognized in this inquiry, no students particularly expressed a fear of punishment, or an overwhelming desire for reward or recognition, which would appear developmentally appropriate as they move innately toward a sense
of autonomy characterized by adulthood. External regulation is shown to undermine autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2013; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). As, such these first two forms of regulation (on the lower end of a continuum toward complete autonomy) are not explicated further related to this inquiry.

The last two categories of extrinsic regulation represented are considered autonomously activated, and as such fall within the developmental arc of young adults who value autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2005). When considering this population of young adults and their interest to read academic texts, almost all responses fell into one of the last two categories of external motivation.

C. Identified Regulation: A conscious recognition of the value of an activity is asserted, which in turn influences a higher level of willingness to act. This level of motivation was clearly represented in a number of student responses in this inquiry in value statements and a subsequent willingness to engage with text materials. A majority of student respondents fell primarily into this third category of regulation wherein they identified task value (or lack of value) and how that impacted willingness to engage, but they could not clearly articulate how the task was in sync with their core belief system. This might be so because young adults are continuing to develop that core identity and have yet to fully articulate who they are as individuals and what they hold as their driving belief system.

The final category of motivation as identified by SDT, and the most advanced was also less identifiable as a primary driving trait in student respondents.
D. Integrated Regulation: This categorization clearly recognizes the congruency between the value of the activity presented (reading an academic assignment) with core values and interests.

Only one student in this inquiry consistently represented Integrated Regulation. As stated previously, all students in this inquiry fell within the target young adult age range of 18 to 26, except one. That was a 31-year-old first time freshman woman, who presented with a strong motivational drive to excel. She also presented with a strong internalized belief system pertaining to what she chose or rejected as being of value in her academic studies. What this student presents is most likely moving beyond Integrated Regulation to intrinsic motivation, or “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore and to learn” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70) which is the goal for optimal learning.

SDT is valuable to this inquiry because it recognizes that learning as a behavior for young adults is most often intentional and also motivated by multiple objectives and dispositions (Litalien et al., 2017). A student may use a form of intrinsic motivation such as personal interest to spark engagement in text material, but the desire to persist in that endeavor may be facilitated by external incentives such as grades. Or on the contrary, students may undertake an assignment because they need to write an essay, but interest if engaged will inspire deeper learning. Ryan and Deci (2000) acknowledge that extrinsic motivation is not to be discounted as it continues to serve a purpose, particularly for learners growing into adulthood. While children have the abandon to be guided by their intrinsic motivation, as adults with competing responsibilities, we adapt varying forms of
external motivation to achieve goals, when intrinsic motivation (for inherent satisfaction derived from the task) is missing or not a sufficient guide.

Extrinsic motivation as it pertains to in Self Determination Theory influences and drives levels of persistence and commitment throughout one’s life. In this light, extrinsic motivators in the young adult classroom setting can act as incentives as students continue to develop their value systems. As students develop and integrate extrinsic motivations and reconcile them effectively with intrinsic motivators (such as interest) they move closer toward autonomous motivation which has been shown in studies to contribute to optimal learning and growth (Benware & Deci, 1984; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Guay et al., 2020; Vansteenkist, et al., 2005).

This juggling of motivations reveals the complexity of the young adult drive to learn in an academic setting. An imbalance between external and internalized regulators means the difference between ‘completing’ a reading assignment or actually ‘learning’ from an assignment. It recognizes that development entails what Ryan (1993) called \textit{organismic integration}, or the constant intake and sorting of information found to have value to the developing self. As one gets older, that process becomes more complex, where parts of interests are kept and discarded and layered until they become deeply engrained in one’s self-system. On the path to such identity formation, young adults might be simultaneously intrinsically motivated by interest and the factors related to interest, or externally regulated by deadlines and grades. However, as recognized by Saxton et al., (2017), as a learner internalizes motivation, identity formation is aided. That ultimately is the recognition of this inquiry, as young adults form their identities,
interests are more often articulated as a driving mechanism integrated with external demands to facilitate optimal learning.

**Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness**

SDT is relevant to this inquiry in its articulation of three basic psychological needs which must be met for a student to move toward self-actualization and psychological growth; competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991). If each of these basic psychological needs are not given support, student growth cannot occur. The following sections will demonstrate how each component is assessed, attached to research findings, and shown to be represented in student responses in this inquiry.

**Competence**

A number of motivational models identify competence as a key component (e.g. Becker et al., 2010; Connell & Welborn, 1991; Deci et al., 1991; Froiland & Oros, 2012). However, Self-Determination Theory identifies that competence support alone does not effectively allow for personal growth and a move toward intrinsic motivation as the locus of causality in an academic endeavor. One that is extremely competent, may yet be severely regulated, whether through reward enticement or a need to please, or a fear of being shamed. Persons who exhibit high competence have also been shown to demonstrate high levels of anxiety (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Competence, as it relates to this inquiry, refers to a feeling of mastery where one feels they can learn and grow.

Specific to this study, student participants clearly articulate issues related to competence support, unmasked as frustration when teachers failed to effectively assist with comprehension difficulties. Students who acknowledged comprehension difficulties
also appeared reluctant to ask for support but expressed frustration or dissatisfaction with teachers who failed to recognize that need. Only two direct references were made to teachers providing competency support, and this was from a student who was more assertive. Students had clear ideas what such support should entail, where teachers explained difficult concepts or made themselves available. They suggested that teachers should know “the right way” to teach and what support to provide, and failure to do so signaled a lack of care or ability to relate to students. However students were more likely to “push through” difficult texts then to ask for teacher support. Other students identified that they were likely to give up on the text or skim the contents.

In a study of 214 college freshman, Feller et al., (2020) identified that proficiency in foundation skills in vocabulary and comprehension to be significant indicators of success. Fike and Fike (2008) recognized the greater likelihood of community colleges to enroll underprepared students and how such impacted first year success. In a sampling of 9200 students, the strongest indicator of first year success was passing a developmental reading course, highlighting the need for strong comprehension skills for first year students. However, it is noted here that current research remains contradicted about to the value of remedial education (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Armstrong et al., (2016) asserted that it was a failure to delineate college level text material for underprepared students which created insurmountable obstacles for students never exposed to increasingly difficult material. Teachers circumvented these issues, not by providing comprehension support but by implementing “workarounds” such as summaries, lecture notes and PowerPoints (p. 903).

Studies focusing on teacher perspective isolated how although college professors
recognized academic reading as essential, few teachers actively implemented reading pedagogies to develop college level literacy skills (e.g. Desa et al., 2020; Ihara & Del Principe, 2018). Findings suggest a cognitive dissonance which exists when teachers expect students to understand texts, and students do not, or teachers did not believe it is their job to teach comprehension (Sherfield et al., 2005). Students and teachers alike may fail to recognize that even at the college level, reading skills are still developing (Gorzycki et al., 2020; Isakson & Isakson, 2017). Responses in this inquiry reinforce how student perception of their own ability to understand academic texts and perception of teacher support of competence development impacted willingness to engage in academic readings. Findings also suggest that student affective traits if sufficiently developed (i.e. persistence, grit) as well as cultural orientation, may be key indicators of student ability to engage with complex texts. However, in absence of such factors, interest could effectively be employed to attend to complex readings.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy, as represented in the Self Determination Theory, was found to be particularly relevant in this exploration. As the parameters of this study dictated, students were asked to self-direct their learning engagement by selecting one reading from six potential assignments. According to SDT, autonomy is a need which must be fulfilled to imbue a learner with a sense of initiative and ownership in an activity (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Classrooms which do not allow for this sense of ownership, (controlling environments) foster a reliance on reward and punishment as incentive for task completion, neither of which is most conducive to a meaningful learning experience. (Guay et al., 2010; Howard et al., 2017, Katz et al., 2014). This need, as noted by Ryan
and Deci (2020) is “supported by experience of interest and value and undermined by experiences of being externally controlled, whether by rewards or punishments” (n.p.). Relying on grades and deadlines can often undermine learning objectives. Grades or sanctions are also shown to lead to less developed motivational strategies and performance. As one student admitted, “If I'm interested, I will put deep thoughts into the essays but if I'm not I'll just write anything that don’t relate to the story and still wind up getting a bad grade.”

Ryan and Deci relate how autonomy-supporting classroom environments generally produce more intrinsically motivated students with greater learning outcomes, such as perceived competence or self-esteem (Deci et al., 1981), better grades (Guay & Vallerand, 1997), greater ownership of learning objectives, and lower dropout rates (Hardre & Reeves, 2003; Vallerand et al., 1997). In an SDT educational framework, as students develop, they also move toward a deeper internalization of external motivation. One student in this inquiry specified,

Sometimes all it takes is maturity to enjoy the expansion of our minds a bit more, but however your path led you to enjoying reading, what you gain out of it is all that matters.

As students progress developmentally, they also gravitate toward engagement in behaviors which preference interest and enjoyment, not only because those behaviors appear on the surface to be engaging or fun, but also because those activities align to student values reflective of developing identities. When these components align, optimal learning occurs (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

**The Value of Choice as a Component of Autonomy.** According to an SDT framework and as indicated by this inquiry, choice, if effectively offered, supports
autonomy, and autonomy supports engagement (Moller et al., 2006). As these researchers postulate, choice may be delineated as controlled choice which is ego depleting (where actors lack real agency in the defined task), or, in contrast, as increasing energy, persistence or willingness to engage (autonomous regulation). In this conceptualization and in supportive empirical research, the type of choice which provided students with real ownership and agency in tasks were determined to have greater impact on learning (Katz & Assor, 2007; Patall et al., 2008).

Additional research suggests that intrinsic motivation is enhanced when students feel more autonomy and ownership of activities (Reeve et al., 2003). Students in this inquiry acknowledged how autonomy support was intertwined in choice where students were afforded opportunity to direct class discussion. As one student admitted, “Now, that I could speak my mind and discuss it, I wanted to talk about them more, read more, and understand.” Choice is also tied to stronger performance (Murayama, et al., 2015). One student participant in this inquiry claimed, “I do think I would do better in class if I choose from a selected set of selected readings because I have more chances to pick readings that I'm interested in.”

However, Patall (2013) reveals conflicting results related to the impact of choice, on interest. where students were provided with choice in reading materials on subjects they considered to be boring, they were more likely to find choice increased interest in the subject. Conversely, where students tended to agree that a topic was interesting, choice in readings tended to lessen interest. Students in this presentation were not asked to read ‘boring’ texts, and in fact expressed a tendency to avoid or ‘skim’ boring texts. As such, not enough data were compiled to address the efficacy of Patall’s findings.
A study by Schutte and Malouff (2019) identified how choice fosters greater curiosity in learning endeavors. Students in this inquiry repeatedly referenced greater desire to learn more about a subject based upon their ability to choose their own reading material. One student stated, “I mean that the subject or the content that is shown makes me think and want to look more into the aspects of it, or I want to read more content by the creator of the reading(s).” Another student cited increased curiosity because of prior domain knowledge which induced her to expand her knowledge on the subject by choosing a particular reading. “I personally selected the kidney story because I have just written an essay on 3D printing organs [a topic the student chose] and curious to learn more about organ donation.” According to Hidi and Renninger (2019), curiosity acts as a temporal trigger to activate situational interest which in turn increases engagement and fosters learning. In this iteration, curiosity is driven by choice, not by regulation. But choice needs to be offered by teachers without any subtle pressure to perform in a particular way, or to adhere to a particular pressure (Deci & Ryan, 2006). Choice must be meaningful or deemed to meet the needs of students, or such choice runs the risk of appearing disingenuous (Katz & Assor, 2007).

However, according to SDT, where a student has more deeply integrated motivations, they can still find autonomy when choice is not available as long as students can find value in that work related to their interests.

I was willing [to] read more on the assignment about "Wired for Distraction" - The teacher explained what the contents contained and what we were expected to do. After reading the contents and materials, I became interested in what the subject and idea had to offer.

Class structure is also linked to autonomy, even when choice is not available, wherein student ownership is encouraged and lesson objectives are seen to have value.
My last English teacher had us sit around the class and ask people what they thought about the chapter. And we would work off of each other’s opinions which was fun. It was mandatory but also fun, so I did learn.

Patall et al. (2013) identified that not only is choice valuable to support student autonomy but taking student interests into account also yields greater benefits. The representation of choice, by students in this inquiry, as an identify affirming action supports the value of subjective identity affiliation of young adults, reinforcing the tenets of Self-Determination Theory as directly applicable to this student population.

Cultural Differences Related to Autonomy. One controversial aspect of SDT as it relates to autonomy support through choice is the suggested value of this component to all cultures (Chirkov, 2009; Miller, et al., 2011). It is argued that more collectivist cultures would be more likely to acquiesce to external regulations (Markus et al., 1996; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). It is further assumed that autonomy support is to be equated with individualism, which does not consider a greater goal beyond one’s own narrow perception. However, as Ryan and Deci (2020) assert, autonomy as a need component is integrated in collectivism because it is interrelated with the need component relatedness. Chirkov et al. (2003) found in their study on cultural perception of autonomy, that the term is compatible in cultures where the values of those cultures have been internalized. Diverse inhabitants still valued autonomy to assert collectivist goals to be a valuable part of their identity. More recent research delineates degrees of autonomy support required by students of more diverse cultures (Craven et al., 2016; Reeve et al., 2020). Cheng et al., (2016) recognize differing cultural perspectives on what is deemed to be controlling,
where American students might find certain aspects of a learning environment to be controlling, while other cultures would not.

This current study demonstrated the differing cultural perspectives related to autonomy controls and the role of choice. Students of Caribbean, Asian, and Eastern European heritages articulated a combination of motivational drives, focusing more on discipline and upbringing and completing assignments as a necessary requirement. Expressed sentiments downplayed the role of choice and autonomy, preferencing cultural orientations ingrained in upbringing. As one student wrote, “Interest can be developed if discipline is present. I believe discipline is taught either by positive reinforcement during upbringing or by trial and error during adolescence into adulthood.” Another student suggested that her cultural upbringing made her “well trained” suggesting that motivational drives can be indoctrinated into a collectivist cultural orientation.

Students in this inquiry exhibited clear footholds in immigrant cultures, and as such expressed extrinsic motivational drives not specifically predicated on an overwhelming need to find interest in reading assignments. However, to perform academically, these students also recognized how interest deepened engagement and learning. One student wrote, “I think the word better is the difference in this. I'll always try in school because otherwise why go, so the main reason I always do try is grades...BUTTT I usually do better on topics I actually like.” As Ryan and Deci (2000) assert, autonomy as presented in SDT refers to 'the feeling of volition that can accompany any act, whether dependent or independent, collectivist or individualist” (p. 74). Therein, autonomy and collectivistic attitudes are linked positively (Kim et al.,1998).
**Relatedness**

Ryan and Deci (2000) describe relatedness as “the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others” (pp. 68-69). Relatedness has been linked to positive outcomes, including engagement, self-efficacy, interest in school, higher grades, and retention (Furrer & Skinner 2003; Inkelas & Weisman 2003). According to Ryan and Deci, the internalization of learning objectives cannot fully be achieved if students do not feel connected (or related) to their social environment. Most recently, Scogin, et al. (2020) determined how creating, an inclusive environment from the first day of college, for diverse underserved students, fostered positive sentiments and learning engagement through connectivity with peers and teachers, and increased feelings of belonging.

Data from this inquiry support the value of relatedness in the classroom setting as positively affecting educational experience. The positive effect of relatedness is demonstrated in considering the composition of Cohort A, which is classified as a Learning Community. As part of a Learning Community Cohort, students in this group participate in a program which places a group of freshman students together in all classes, and with structured academic support advisor who meets with them a class. Learning Communities, immersed in connectivity, have been proven in prior research to effect greater academic and social-emotional outcomes for freshman students (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Zhou & Kuh, 2004). This cohort of study participants exhibited a stronger academic orientation than Cohort B, as exemplified in qualitative data responses expressing goal motivation, academic focus, and demonstrated completion of assignments. Cohort A also completed the semester with a higher collective GPA than
Cohort B participants. Research supports the effectiveness of Learning Communities, specifically in a Self Determination Theory framework (Beachboard et al., 2011).

Qualitative responses across Cohort A and B represent a recognition of how teacher and class relatedness are connected to choice (autonomy) and affect learning. Multiple students suggested that creating relationships through class experiences was key to stronger engagement. Harackiewicz, et al., (2016) recognizes how teacher strategies can effectively activate situational interest even when students might not recognize the value of course curriculum. For instance, Teachers can enhance relatedness and the internalization of extrinsic motivation by providing students with choice (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In this model, even if students are not intrinsically motivated, they will tend to absorb the values of those to whom they relate, and in this way learning is optimized. Baker and Goodboy (2019) specified how teacher classroom behaviors can foster student connectivity and internalized motivation for optimal engagement with curriculum material, even material students did not immediately identify as valuable. As one student in this current inquiry wrote,

The bonding between my classmates and the interactions of the teachers made me more interested and involved in the course and that connection between us made me want to be there. Sometimes it wasn't the reading assignments and homework assignment that were given. It was just the connection we had with one another.

Students in this inquiry repeatedly asserted a positive orientation to teachers whom they believe cared about them or respected their opinion.

Urdan and Schoenfelder (2006) suggest the importance of teachers shifting away from autonomy-controlling practices toward autonomy-supportive practices which foster relatedness and a sense of teacher care for student values. A fundamental pathway to illustrate teacher care, according to these researchers, is through classroom discourse.
One methodology offered to construct supportive discourse is “scaffolded instruction” in a mastery (Turner & Meyer, 1999) which “concentrates on constructive approaches to accepting mistakes that encourage risk-taking and the pursuit of challenges and avoids methodical teaching techniques that require compliance” (p. 341).

In SDT as illustrated by Urdan and Schoenfelder, classroom practices which fosters relatedness (through discourse and structure allow for meaningful autonomy, which in turn develops competence. The combined outcome of meeting these needs leads toward an empowered and potentially intrinsically motivated student, and ultimately to optimal learning. However, while intrinsic motivation is ultimately the goal to achieve optimal learning, it is recognized here that students, particularly those in a first-year community college classroom, may exhibit particular challenges which must be met, such as language acquisition or comprehension deficits. The mere act of relating to a teacher or class environment may not be enough to overcome those challenges. It is asserted here that a classroom which enhances relatedness demonstrates a valuable first step toward overcoming an academically challenged student’s deeply engrained reticence to engage with difficult texts.

**Summary of Supports for Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness**

In considering the unique diversity of urban community college students, a surge of empirical research in recent years has reinforced the impact of classroom strategies which support competence, autonomy, and relatedness in an SDT framework. Rogers and Tannock (2018) examined how students with ADHD more profoundly felt negative pressure when perceptions of relatedness, competence and autonomy were not met. A qualitative inquiry by Ingram et al. (2016) illustrated black male perspective in an urban
community college which values authentic teacher supportive and peer building environments as key components to foster academic persistence. De Lourdes et al. (2016) concluded how male community college students of color benefited from an SDT needs supportive faculty framework which was demonstrated to increase persistence toward academic goals. A phenomenological inquiry by Simon (2020) illustrated the value of a current SDT framed learning environment for young mothers who predominantly select community college as postsecondary opportunities for advancement. Jones (2016) demonstrated how SDT responsive environments foster interactional diversity (the communal interaction between diverse subgroups to foster greater communal experiences and stronger outcomes). Other SDT framed studies consider first generation motivation to attend and to persist in college (e.g. Barbatis, 2010; Mitchell & Jaeger, 2018).

Ultimately, what SDT recognizes, and what this inquiry reinforces, is how relevant support for competence, autonomy and relatedness is at the community college level. According to this model, teacher support in the classroom for student basic psychological needs is imperative. Such support acknowledges and values student perspective and provides opportunities for ownership and initiative in schoolwork. When possible, choice is offered which is meaningful and allows for an exploration of interests. If choice is not available, then a meaningful rationale is provided which helps students to identify the value of the assignment. Teachers who support students' autonomy (and student perspective) are acknowledged as good teachers who care. Particularly related to the developmental arc of young adults, pressure should be exerted on students to think, feel, or behave in ways which exhibits a lack of unresponsiveness to student well-being or identity values (Patall, et al., 2019).
A Theoretical Workflow Model of Student Interest to Read Academic Texts

Based upon exploratory findings, I developed a theoretical workflow model of Student Interest to Read Academic Texts, accounting for all 12 isolated themes evolved from participant perspective. The model moves toward answering the posed research questions regarding how personal and situational interest may motivate students to read academic texts. What follows below is a presentation of the model in two parts to account both for the 12 themes evolved from this inquiry, directly from a participant perspective, as well as for theoretical positioning of Self Determination Theory which effectively accounts for the young adult knowledge seeking process and identify formation.

**Engagement**

The level of Engagement as shown in this model will be a direct product of how well a student assimilates personal and situational interest. That assimilation of interest (or potential detraction from interest) occurs when a variety of factors are either satisfied or not satisfied. Those factors are represented in the themes encountered in this inquiry and are shown in the following figure.

**Figure 3**

*Proposed Presentation of Effect of Interest on Engagement*
Engagement, as accounted for here, refers back to Schiefele (1992) who identified a workflow model of personal interest wherein latent interest and actualized interest are activated when the reader encounters the text. In my proposed model, a student encounters a text, bringing to the encounter already established personal interest. In that interest they identify material which they prefer, too which they relate or feel they can apply to their lives. They also bring other motivations which drive them forward. Upon encountering a text, an initial judgment will be made based upon the preceding factors, whether or how much to engage further with the text.

The student then proceeds to the realm of situational interest, identified as a construct activated during a particular activity, relational to individual predeveloped interests and stimuli presented during and by the particular task (Knogler, 2017). In this situational endeavor, attention to interest can be categorized as either Task, Text, or Knowledge-Based. As a student is attending to the text, factors related to situational interest are considered, related to the themes Teacher/Class Dynamic, Presentation of Text, Attention/Focus, and Complicated/Complex. I have purposefully not categorized these themes specifically to Task, Text, or Knowledge Based, recognizing overlap in categorizations which require fuller inquiry to unravel the complexity of these relationships.

Based upon the workflow presented here, as a student assesses all relevant factors, a decision whether to engage or not engage is made. The degree to which each component is activated accounts for the student’s level of engagement with the text. So while engagement can be considered a catalyzing component of personal interest, it is placed in this workflow model as the culmination of all other themes based upon
judgement (conscious or unconscious) to ultimately engage. This judgement, based upon the cumulative effects of factors related to personal and situational interest, in turn activates learning.

**Accounting for the Value/Feeling Valence**

According to the workflow model presented here, Feeling, (represented in this inquiry as Enjoyment) and Value (both identified themes in this inquiry), are ever present in the students’ cognitive and affective processing, informing and being informed by personal interest and environmental stimuli related to situational interest. Feeling and Value are accounted for in my proposed model, by drawing upon the theoretical proposal advanced by Schiefele (1991, 1999) where latent interest entailed both a feeling-related and a value-related component, interrelated yet each providing differentiated contribution to the activation of interest.

**Figure 4**

*Presentation of a Value/Feeling Valence in this Proposed Workflow Model*

As represented in this feeling/value double valence model of interest and informed by Schiefele, what young adult students value is informed by, and informs, what they feel to
be relevant or related to their lives. Their selection of information input is made specifically to either evolve or foster growth, identity or identity experiences (Arnett, 2000). Value and Positive feeling are represented throughout the process. As findings in this inquiry revealed, even in the face of complicated or difficult texts, positive feeling can still be present if personal interest has been sufficiently activated.

In my presented model, value is not an end component of situational interest. Value and Feeling (Enjoyment) also inform degrees of Learning. Learning, a product of Engagement, if recognized as valuable, will eventually return to become ingrained into a person’s schema, as personal interest, and as it is returned to that schema, it will add to the repository of value and feeling. In this iteration, topic interest, if sustained, arises from situational processing, as newly evolved individual interest, or what Hidi and Renninger (2006) referred to as Emerging Individual Interest, the beginning of “an enduring predisposition to seek repeated reengagement with particular classes of content over time” (p. 114). In this manner, the cyclical reconstituting and evolving of interest is accounted for. The 12 themes which were revealed in this inquiry illustrate the complexity of interest development. Student personal interest (dark green) serves as the foundation or initial catalyst for student interaction with the academic text. Young adults, in particular, bring to the reading experience what they value in their identity predispositions based upon experience, prior knowledge, temperament, and other characteristics known to form and inform individual identit(ies) (Arnett, 2000).

In the light of this inquiry, this Interest Based Work-Flow Model for Young Adult Motivation to Read Academic Texts (Figure 6) carefully considers the factors which bring young adult students to the act of reading academic texts, and also accounts for
their active willingness to engage.

**Figure 5**

*Interest-based Workflow Model for Young Adult Motivation to Read Academic Texts*

According to this proposed model, learning, not completing assignments, is the ultimate goal in the academic reading endeavor (Hidi, 2001; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Herein, “valuing” is represented as an innate human drive which acts as a primary function of the self to recognize the potential merit of stimuli to enhance growth and subjective wellbeing (Kasser, 2002). If an environment supports this valuing system, then actors move toward intrinsic motivation (i.e. to learn for the sake of learning and growing.) However, when this valuing system is subverted, whether, for example, by excessive teacher controls, a rejection of SDT needs, or refusal to recognize student values, then the learning process is derailed, and students become handicapped by an unbalanced over-dependence on external motivators (incentives) to meet externally imposed demands (Krapp, 2004; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006).
Summary

This inquiry sought to consider the needs of diverse young adults in an urban community college setting. As illustrated by low first year retention rates at this institution where its Fall 2016 cohort saw a decline from 70.4% enrolled after one year to 32.5% after two years, with only 17.7% degrees conferred after 2 years, and 34.3% conferral after 3 years (CUNY, 2020) one may surmise that a distinct portion of freshman are either not meeting educational objectives, or some other obstacles are hindering their academic journeys. In the theorization of this inquiry, fostering student interest in academic reading assignments, and subsequently in class engagement, may hold a key to greater engagement, and ultimately to greater learning.

Critics of interest theory might argue that students in higher education ought to find value in curricula, regardless of interest levels. Even while advocating for interest theory, Deci et al. (1991) asserted that for students to engage actively in an academic endeavor “they must value learning, achievement, and accomplishment even with respect to topics and activities they do not find interesting” (p. 338). More academically motivated students in this inquiry echo that sentiment. Even with an expressed preference for interest-based curricula, student focus can be enhanced by grades, discipline, and life goals. However, as this inquiry supports, student interest can be harnessed to maximize classroom learning objectives, by recognizing and fostering student intrinsic needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy (Matheson, 2019).

Students in this inquiry asserted that grades and learning do not equate to the same outcome values. In particular, what is the goal of teachers who are responsible for students, over eighty percent of whom are not likely to obtain an associate’s degree within three years (CUNY, 2020)? What is the goal of teachers whose students lack
external motivation or academic preparation, not because they chose not to acquire those tools, but because their prior educational experiences failed to prepare those students with those tools? Again, as illustrated in this inquiry, students with motivational drive beyond interest appear to fare well, but even those who are driven by grades and academic success recognize the value of “finding” interest to catalyze deeper engagement.

The supposition of this inquiry is that activating student interest has the capacity to deepen engagement, which in turn will lead to deeper learning and growth. Students in this inquiry repeatedly referenced a search for information that had value, that was relatable, that helped them grow. Self Determination Theory, with its focus on support for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, helps teachers focus on the growth of the student and not on the grade. Interest theory, as presented in this inquiry, seeks to act as a bridge for underprepared students to self-actualize and recognize the value of their education as they mature and grow. If our goal as educators is to foster lifelong learning and not merely reading ‘compliance’, then this workflow model serves as a map, by recognizing the complexity of a student’s valuing system, and the teacher’s place to fostering the value of learning objectives, considerate of young adult agentic identities.

**Next Steps for Research**

This research served as a valuable first step in isolating young adult student interest to read academic texts. The 12 factors as isolated indicate the complexity of student activation of personal and situational interest. Further research is required to identify the specific impact and overlap of each factor. In this regard, it is proposed that an instrument be constructed which accounts for these 12 factors to measure young adult student interest to read academic texts. Based upon the findings of that pilot study further refinement of theory and action can be more effectively evaluated.
Additionally, the diversity of gender and cultural orientation necessitates further inquiry. Multiple delineating demographic factors separated student respondents and their levels of engagement suggesting the unique response of each student to presented curricular material. In Cohort B, most participants in this study were female and tended to exhibit strong academic motivation wherein they used interest as a tool to complement other motivational factors. Students who were likely to give up on texts they did not find interesting tended to be male. As stated previously, I lost a significant percentage of students during the transition to online platforms. Most were persons of color and male. This student population requires more focused attention to determine how interest in academic curriculum might be catalyzed to influence stronger outcomes.

Pertaining to cultural orientation, working in online instructional platforms, I could not assume, rightly or wrongly, a student’s ethnicity, as most students chose not to use the video reveal on their end. As students conversed congenially with their peers through group chat, or expressed their viewpoints, they revealed aspects of a cultural orientation beyond a demographic check box. Also, a significant number of students self-identified as multiple ethnicities, demonstrating the complexity of personal identity and cultural affiliation. An urban community college classroom is a microcosm of global diversity. As such, a deeper consideration of the impact of diverse ethnic identification on engagement is a worthwhile endeavor. If one might theorize that students respond to curriculum to which they can relate, then the implementation of culturally relevant curricula material would be deemed as impacting. However, when one is faced with the ethnic diversity of an urban community college classroom, then the question is how one might address such criteria. Or is it equally worthwhile to pursue curriculum structures
which engage interest by offering insight into a diversity of ethnic orientations and achieve relatability through that endeavor?

As previously noted, students who identified as Black were more likely to select the text on racism. Their selection was, admittedly, specifically predicated on knowledge of what was happening in the world around them. Most students who self-identified as Black expressed distinct frustration about the death of George Floyd and readily and passionately shared what they identified as a unique perspective on racism faced by African Americans in this country. I noted, however, that few other students of alternate cultural orientations offered views when these discussions took place. The 31 year-old self-identified Jewish woman in my class who admitted to rejecting the article on racism, unequivocally denounced racism and the murder of George Floyd, but stated she felt she did not qualify to have an opinion on the subject as she was not black, so who was she to offer commentary. Students of Eastern European decent were also less likely to offer input on the topic. Even when I asked students to attempt to relate to the material by considering instances of racism they underwent as immigrants to this country no student offered a perspective. An inquiry related to student interest in racially discursive curricula material would help isolate how students feel about discussing racism which impacts specific cultures, and having other students, as well as their teacher, of differing cultural perspectives, offer commentary on matters which impact them personally.

In a similar vein, inquiry pertaining to students’ apparent distaste for political content is also worth further consideration. Perhaps in response to the fervor of this 2020 election year, or maybe due to a more entrenched bias, students across diverse cultural orientations revealed a reticence to discuss politics. Similar to discussions of race, few
students offered a specific political perspective related to current events. Those students who spoke, discussed politics in generalities, referring vaguely to what was going on, but rarely clearly defining their political bent. Most students when they spoke of their reluctance to consider political material expressed a fear of bias or polarized view in curricula content. But they also suggested that their view didn’t really matter, or they articulated a feeling that they couldn’t legitimately impact events, or that politics in other ways did not relate to their day-to-day experience. As this election cycle winds down, I would like to revisit student perspective on interest in politics in academic curricula to consider if student statements expressed previously were an anomaly or indicative of a trending perspective in this student population.

Another avenue to pursue relates to the impact of COVID 19 protocols on student willingness to engage in academic readings. The long-term implications of this pandemic have required that teachers rethink the concept of teaching especially applied to digital formats where connectivity and community are jeopardized due to the lack of synchronous forums and student and/or teacher familiarity with technology. Student engagement with text materials in digital formats should be carefully reviewed by seeking student feedback and implementing innovative work-arounds to mimic the community of in person class structures, as well as capitalize on the perks of digital communication and group exercises.

Additionally, while student engagement in academic curricula is one goal of catalyzed interest, another is achievement, or more particular to this inquiry, learning. Therefore, measurement of comprehension or other indicators of learning (e.g. accurate application of themes to current events), is also an important endeavor. One of the
theorized applications of Interest theory is to utilize student preferences to bridge potential gaps in previous educational experiences, as those gaps impact ability to engage in college level coursework. Also, as identified, theory suggests that interest in the ‘wrong’ details (i.e. seductive details) does not necessarily equate to deeper learning. Students in this inquiry identified deeper interest in ‘stories’ and ‘shock value’ suggesting a mirroring of preference for entertainment over domain knowledge. Comprehension measurements will help determine correlation between interest and learning.

Finally, as this inquiry was modeled as action research and meant to inform teacher practice for a local population, further action research related to teacher stimulation of interest in academic reading is a valuable real-time application. As engagement with my students during this inquiry revealed, teacher interaction, which is genuine and caring, is highly valued by students. Assignments which value student choice and perspective are also valued. Manipulation of class dynamics specifically to incite deeper interest in class content offers the potential to foster exponential gains. As expressed by students in this study, teacher and class dynamics, more so than text details, most likely influenced students to engage. I spoke previously about the potential disconnect between teacher and student perception of responsibility and preparedness. While I as a teacher would like to rest on the inherent belief that students come to school to learn and to do well, the truth, as my students inform me, is much more complicated. Perhaps, we need to consider texts not as the end, but as the means to an end.

I have taken, in recent years to creating folders of essay readings on specific topics and assigning a problem-based inquiry for students to solve. It requires that students isolate a topic based upon discussions in the Module, create a thesis, and seek
out the information relevant within the texts assigned which helps them to solve the problem they themselves define within the parameters of the Module. So for example, currently in our Module on the First Amendment (covering political correctness, free speech on campus, cancel culture, and hate speech), an African American student chose a comparative essay on divergent perspectives of hate speech as it might not be protected under the First Amendment. She has structured her inquiry by identifying texts on both sides of the argument (as housed in our Module), including a close look at other countries and The U.S. Constitution, and is now reading to gain knowledge from multiple sources with intent to solve a problem. This is relevant to her and applicable to her life, and now the sources are not the end but the means to important discovery.

Maryanne Wolf (2018) in Reader, Come Home, passionately details the impact of digital technology on “the reading brain” arguing how such is jeopardizing deep reading invoked by complex texts which can invoke “a cerebrally pregnant pause” (p. 37). She writes like a reader in love with the act of deep reading, of engaging the brain in the complex process of knowledge harvesting, of recognizing the value of interpretation and critical application. She also clearly hears the potential death knell of such reading, due to the rise of technology and the preference for quick and easy over complex and far reaching. As she writes “It takes years for deep-reading processes to be formed, and as a society we need to be sure that we are vigilant about their development in our young from a very early age. It takes daily vigilance by us, the expert readers of our society, to choose to expend the extra milliseconds needed to maintain deep reading over time” (p. 38). So I end as I began and ask, what is the purpose of the texts we assign? Are we looking for students to comply or to learn?
Appendix A

Kingsborough Community College
Exploratory Inquiry into Student Interest to Read Academic Texts
Spring 2020

Throughout this semester, we have read a variety of texts, and I have asked you to consider your interest in those texts. Your comments help me to better understand how I assign readings and helps you to consider how your interest in those readings might affect your engagement in those readings. Over the next two weeks I would like to look deeper into how your interests matter when you consider reading the texts I assign. For this purpose, I will be conducting a study and would like you to participate. Your comments and involvement in this study will help me to better understand my teaching practice, your learning style, and how your interests affect how you read and understand texts assigned. The study will include a short survey asking about who you are, your past reading practice and what you think about the idea of student interest related to reading. I will provide you with a selection of readings in the next module. I will ask you to select at least one and read that selection. I will ask what you think of the selection you chose and that you provide feedback, and I will collect your responses to better understand the concept of “student interest to read assigned texts.” I will record class discussions to document what you think about the readings, so I do not misstate any responses. I will also ask that you conduct reader responses an additional interest survey related to the reading you select. All responses will be collected virtually through Blackboard.

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your participation or refusal to participate will in no way affect your grade. You will be completing assigned readings and discussion posts whether or not you participate. Participating or not participating will not exempt you from completing class requirements, including readings and discussion posts. All information collected for this study will have your names and any identifying information removed.

You will receive fifteen (15) extra credit classwork points for your participation. If you choose not to participate you will have the option of completing an additional written three-page MLA formatted text analysis for fifteen (15) extra credit classwork points.

This study will benefit me as it is part of the Dissertation process and the final step of my PhD. It will also help me to better my instructional practice and will help you as you consider how your own interests affect the way you learn. If you would like to participate, I will ask that you sign this consent form as I am required to give you to inform you of your rights and the guidelines for this study. You must be 18 or older to participate.

Do you have any questions I can answer?
Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant:

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about how interest may play a part in student engagement to read academic texts in this class. This study will be conducted by Adele Doyle, your teacher, a lecturer at Kingsborough Community College and a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Education Specialties at St. John’s University, as part of her doctoral dissertation work. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Molly Ness, Department of Education Specialties. This study will be conducted during the final two weeks of this semester in our class. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following: Take part in a survey to help the researcher understand who you are as a student at Kingsborough and also to understand more about your academic reading experience and your understanding of what it means when something is interesting. You will also be asked to select at least one reading from a selection of six and to provide specific feedback related to your interest in that selection. That feedback will be collected virtually, through Blackboard, through some or all of the following: Discussion posts, a short interest survey, and virtual class discussion. You may also be asked to participate in an individual interview as I may seek to clarify some feedback provided, but you can say no to that request. No information will be collected in person, but through Blackboard. Class discussions and interviews will be recorded and transcribed to protect accuracy, but all identifying information will be removed from collected responses and no names or identifying information will be published. Federal regulations require that all subjects be informed of the availability of medical treatment or financial compensation in the event of physical injury resulting from participation in the research. St. John’s University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-9901440).
Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand how student interest influences engagement in reading assignments and will likely help me shape future curriculum. It may also help you understand how your interests might influence engagement. Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by removing your name from collected information, and any identifiers will be replaced with an alias. Consent forms will be stored in a separate location from the interview documentation and will be stored in a locked file. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself or to others. Your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, questionnaires or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. Nonparticipation or withdrawal will not affect your grades or academic standing. If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Adele Doyle, adele.doyle17@my.stjohns.edu, or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Molly Ness, at nessm@stjohns.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University’s Institutional Review Board, St. John’s University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.

Sincerely,

Adele J. Doyle, MA, Doctoral Candidate
School of Education, St. John’s University, New York

_____Yes, I will participate.  _____Yes, I give permission for interviews to be audiotaped, for my verbatim responses to be used in the written narrative, and for the investigator to access instructional materials.

_____No, I will not participate.  _____No, I do not give permission for interviews to be audiotaped, for my verbatim responses to be used in the written narrative, or for the investigator to access instructional materials.

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

Statement of Consent
I have read this consent form. The research study has been explained to me. I agree to be in the research study described above. A copy of this consent form will be provided to me after I sign it. By signing this consent form, I have not given up any of the legal rights that I would have if I were not a participant in the study.

Agreement to Participate
Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

__________________________________________  ______________________________
Subject's Signature                               Date
Appendix C

Survey on Student Interest to Read Assigned Texts

This is a survey to explore student interest to read assigned academic texts. Completing this survey is strictly voluntary. You may answer all, some or none of the questions asked. There is no penalty for not answering. Your answers will help in a study which focuses on student interest here at Kingsborough. Please be thoughtful in responding and provide honest answers.

Background:

1. How many semesters did you complete at Kingsborough prior to this semester.
   A. One  B. Two  C. Three or more  D. This is my first semester

2. What is your preferred gender expression?
   A. Male  B. Female  C. Non-Binary  D. Other

3. What is your preferred ethnic identification? (Insert Answer) __________________________

4. How old are you?
   A. 16 -17  B. 18 – 20  D. 21 -24  E. Over 24 -26  F. Over 26

5. Are you married?
   A. Yes  B. No  C. I prefer not to say

6. Do you have children?
   A. Yes  B. No  C. I prefer not to say

7. Do you intend/want to advance to a four-year college?
   A. Yes  B. No  C. I’m not sure

8. Is English your first language?
   A. Yes  B. No

9. Did one or both of your parents attend college either here or in another country?
   A. Yes  B. No

10. If you are an immigrant, how long ago did you come to this country?
    A. In the past year  B. 2 to 5 years ago  C. 5 to 10 years ago  D. More than 10 years

11. Did you attend a NYC Public High School?

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A. Yes  B. No

12. In the last semester, (September, 2019, or this Spring semester if this is your first semester), how much of the reading assigned for homework in all your classes (not including this class) did you complete prior to coming to class?
   a. None  b. about 25%  c. about 50%  d. about 75%  e. All

13. Referring to all classes, not including your current English class, which you have taken at Kingsborough in the last year, do you feel that the reading was important to complete in order to do well in that class?

14. Were you required to take English 92 or 93 Developmental Reading or Writing at Kingsborough or another college?
   a. Yes.  b. No.

The following questions relate specifically to ideas about interest and academic reading in courses taken this year at Kingsborough. Please take your time so you can think about what these ideas might mean to you. All answers related to coursework should draw on your experiences in classes taken at Kingsborough.

1. When you say something you read for academic purposes was “interesting,” what do you mean?

2. When you say something you read for academic purposes was “boring” what do you mean?

3. When you were assigned a reading in your last English Class (or this English class if it is the only English class you have taken at Kingsborough) how did you initially determine that the reading was most likely to be “interesting” or “boring?”
   a. By what the teacher said about it or the topic involved
   b. By reading the title of the reading
   c. By reading the first paragraph
   d. If it has pictures/graphics or large or small font
   e. Other __________________________________________

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4. What makes you *most likely* to complete an assigned reading in any class you have taken at Kingsborough?

a. If I know or believe it affects my grade

b. Because I am asked by the teacher to complete it

c. Because it is what I am expected to do.

d. Because I find the topic interesting

e. Other_______________________________________________________

5. Considering the classes you took here at Kingsborough this year, did you ever become interested to read an academic assignment in any class based upon something your teacher did or said?

a. Yes

b. No

5b. Explain (Be specific.)

________________________________________________________________________

6. Of all the classes in which you enrolled in this past year at Kingsborough, including this semester, how many of those classes would you say were interesting (excluding this class)?

a. All

b. None

c. Most

d. Less than half

e. Half

7. What made those courses interesting? (Be specific.)
7b. What made courses less interesting? (Be specific.)

8. Referring to question 6 and 7, in those classes you found “interesting” did you also find the readings assigned interesting?
   a. Yes, always. b. Often c. Sometimes d. Never e. There was no assigned reading

9. When are you least likely to be interested in the assigned reading for a class?
   Rank your answers from most important answer to least important answer to you, 1 being most important answer, and 5 being least important answer.
   a. When it is too long ___
   b. When it is too complicated ___
   c. When I don’t have enough time ___
   d. When I think it’s a waste of time ___
   e. When I can’t relate to the material ___

10. When are you least likely to complete an assigned reading?

_____________________________________________________________________

11. Does text difficulty influence how interesting you find an academic reading?
   a. Yes b. No

11b. Please explain your answer to 11.

12. Thinking of the teachers who assigned reading to you this year in your classes at Kingsborough (other than this class), do you think those teachers cared if you were interested in the assigned readings?
   a. Yes b. No c. Sometimes d. I couldn’t tell

12b. Please explain your answer to #12
13. Would you have been more likely to complete assigned readings in your classes this year at Kingsborough if your teacher asked for your input on topics for readings, or gave you selection of readings to choose from? Why or why not?

14. Did you believe the readings in your classes this year at Kingsborough (other than in this class) had real value in your life?
   a. Yes, definitely all
   b. Most do
   c. Some do
   d. None

14b. Explain.

15. Without going back to your prior answers, in your mind, what makes a reading you are assigned in any class interesting to you?

Is there anything you would like to add related to topics mentioned in this survey?
_______________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Appendix D

Reading Selections

Reading 1: “How We Sold Our Souls—and More—to the Internet Giants”

By Bruce Schneier

From TVs that listen in on us to a doll that records your child’s questions, data collection has become both dangerously intrusive and highly profitable. Is it time for governments to act to curb online surveillance?

_The Guardian_

May 17, 2015

Last year, when my refrigerator broke, the repair man replaced the computer that controls it. I realised that I had been thinking about the refrigerator backwards: it's not a refrigerator with a computer, it's a computer that keeps food cold. Just like that, everything is turning into a computer. Your phone is a computer that makes calls. Your car is a computer with wheels and an engine. Your oven is a computer that cooks lasagne. Your camera is a computer that takes pictures. Even our pets and livestock are now regularly chipped; my cat could be considered a computer that sleeps in the sun all day.

Computers are being embedded into all sort of products that connect to the internet. Nest, which Google purchased last year for more than $3bn, makes an internet-enabled thermostat. You can buy a smart air conditioner that learns your preferences and maximises energy efficiency. Fitness tracking devices, such as Fitbit or Jawbone, collect information about your movements, awake and asleep, and use that to analyse both your exercise and sleep habits. Many medical devices are starting to be internet-enabled, collecting and reporting a variety of biometric data. There are—or will be soon—devices that continually measure our vital signs, moods and brain activity.

This year, we have had two surprising stories of technology monitoring our activity: Samsung televisions that listen to conversations in the room and send them elsewhere for transcription—just in case someone is telling the TV to change the channel—and a Barbie that records your child's questions and sells them to third parties.

All these computers produce data about what they're doing and a lot of it is surveillance data. It's the location of your phone, who you're talking to and what you're saying, what you're searching and writing. It's your heart rate. Corporations gather, store and analyse this data, often without our knowledge, and typically without our consent. Based on this data, they draw conclusions about us that we might disagree with or object to and that can affect our lives in profound ways. We may not like to admit it, but we are under mass surveillance.

Internet surveillance has evolved into a shockingly extensive, robust and profitable surveillance architecture. You are being tracked pretty much everywhere you go, by many companies and data brokers: 10 different companies on one website, a dozen on another. Facebook tracks you on every site with a Facebook Like button (whether you're
logged in to Facebook or not), while Google tracks you on every site that has a Google Plus g+ button or that uses Google Analytics to monitor its own web traffic.

Most of the companies tracking you have names you've never heard of: Rubicon Project, AdSonar, Quantcast, Undertone, Traffic Marketplace. If you want to see who's tracking you, install one of the browser plug-ins that let you monitor cookies. I guarantee you will be startled. One reporter discovered that 105 different companies tracked his internet use during one 36-hour period. In 2010, the seemingly innocuous site Dictionary.com installed more than 200 tracking cookies on your browser when you visited.

It's no different on your smartphone. The apps there track you as well. They track your location and sometimes download your address book, calendar, bookmarks and search history. In 2013, the rapper Jay Z and Samsung teamed up to offer people who downloaded an app the ability to hear the new Jay Z album before release. The app required that users give Samsung consent to view all accounts on the phone, track its location and who the user was talking to. The Angry Birds game even collects location data when you're not playing. It's less Big Brother and more hundreds of tittletattle little brothers.

Most internet surveillance data is inherently anonymous, but companies are increasingly able to correlate the information gathered with other information that positively identifies us. You identify yourself willingly to lots of internet services. Often you do this with only a username, but increasingly usernames can be tied to your real name. Google tried to enforce this with its "real name policy", which required users register for Google Plus with their legal names, until it rescinded that policy in 2014. Facebook pretty much demands real names. Whenever you use your credit card number to buy something, your real identity is tied to any cookies set by companies involved in that transaction. And any browsing you do on your smartphone is tied to you as the phone's owner, although the website might not know it. Surveillance is the business model of the internet for two primary reasons: people like free and people like convenient. The truth is, though, that people aren't given much of a choice. It's either surveillance or nothing and the surveillance is conveniently invisible so you don't have to think about it. And it's all possible because laws have failed to keep up with changes in business practices.

In general, privacy is something people tend to undervalue until they don't have it anymore. Arguments such as "I have nothing to hide" are common, but aren't really true. People living under constant surveillance quickly realise that privacy isn't about having something to hide. It's about individuality and personal autonomy. It's about being able to decide who to reveal yourself to and under what terms. It's about being free to be an individual and not having to constantly justify yourself to some overseer.

This tendency to undervalue privacy is exacerbated by companies deliberately making sure that privacy is not salient to users. When you log on to Facebook, you don't think about how much personal information you're revealing to the company; you chat with your friends. When you wake up in the morning, you don't think about how you're going to allow a bunch of companies to track you throughout the day; you just put your cell phone in your pocket.
But by accepting surveillance-based business models, we hand over even more power to the powerful. Google controls two-thirds of the US search market. Almost three-quarters of all internet users have Facebook accounts. Amazon controls about 30% of the US book market, and 70% of the ebook market. Comcast owns about 25% of the US broadband market. These companies have enormous power and control over us simply because of their economic position.

Our relationship with many of the internet companies we rely on is not a traditional company-customer relationship. That's primarily because we're not customers—we're products those companies sell to their real customers. The companies are analogous to feudal lords and we are their vassals, peasants and—on a bad day—serfs. We are tenant farmers for these companies, working on their land by producing data that they in turn sell for profit.

Yes, it's a metaphor, but it often really feels like that. Some people have pledged allegiance to Google. They have Gmail accounts, use Google Calendar and Google Docs and have Android phones. Others have pledged similar allegiance to Apple. They have iMacs, iPhones and iPads and let iCloud automatically synchronise and back up everything. Still others let Microsoft do it all. Some of us have pretty much abandoned email altogether for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We might prefer one feudal lord to the others. We might distribute our allegiance among several of these companies or studiously avoid a particular one we don't like. Regardless, it's becoming increasingly difficult to avoid pledging allegiance to at least one of them.

After all, customers get a lot of value out of having feudal lords. It's simply easier and safer for someone else to hold our data and manage our devices. We like having someone else take care of our device configurations, software management, and data storage. We like it when we can access our email anywhere, from any computer, and we like it that Facebook just works, from any device, anywhere. We want our calendar entries to appear automatically on all our devices. Cloud storage sites do a better job of backing up our photos and files than we can manage by ourselves; Apple has done a great job of keeping malware out of its iPhone app store. We like automatic security updates and automatic backups; the companies do a better job of protecting our devices than we ever did. And we're really happy when, after we lose a smartphone and buy a new one, all of our data reappears on it at the push of a button.

In this new world of computing, we're no longer expected to manage our computing environment. We trust the feudal lords to treat us well and protect us from harm. It's all a result of two technological trends.

The first is the rise of cloud computing. Basically, our data is no longer stored and processed on our computers. That all happens on servers owned by many different companies. The result is that we no longer control our data. These companies access our data—both content and metadata—for whatever profitable purpose they want. They have carefully crafted terms of service that dictate what sorts of data we can store on their systems, and can delete our entire accounts if they believe we violate them. And they turn our data over to law enforcement without our knowledge or consent. Potentially even
worse, our data might be stored on computers in a country whose data protection laws are less than rigorous.

The second trend is the rise of user devices that are managed closely by their vendors: iPhones, iPads, Android phones, Kindles, ChromeBooks, and the like. The result is that we no longer control our computing environment. We have ceded control over what we can see, what we can do, and what we can use. Apple has rules about what software can be installed on iOS devices. You can load your own documents onto your Kindle, but Amazon is able to delete books it has already sold you. In 2009, Amazon automatically deleted some editions of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four from users' Kindles because of a copyright issue. I know, you just couldn't write this stuff any more ironically.

It's not just hardware. It's getting hard to just buy a piece of software and use it on your computer in any way you like. Increasingly, vendors are moving to a subscription model—Adobe did that with Creative Cloud in 2013—that gives the vendor much more control. Microsoft hasn't yet given up on a purchase model, but is making its MS Office subscription very attractive. And Office 365's option of storing your documents in the Microsoft cloud is hard to turn off. Companies are pushing us in this direction because it makes us more profitable as customers or users.

Given current laws, trust is our only option. There are no consistent or predictable rules. We have no control over the actions of these companies. I can't negotiate the rules regarding when Yahoo will access my photos on Flickr. I can't demand greater security for my presentations on Prezi or my task list on Trello. I don't even know the cloud providers to whom those companies have outsourced their infrastructures. If any of those companies delete my data, I don't have the right to demand it back. If any of those companies give the government access to my data, I have no recourse. And if I decide to abandon those services, chances are I can't easily take my data with me.

Political scientist Henry Farrell observed: "Much of our life is conducted online, which is another way of saying that much of our life is conducted under rules set by large private businesses, which are subject neither to much regulation nor much real market competition."

The common defence is something like "business is business". No one is forced to join Facebook or use Google search or buy an iPhone. Potential customers are choosing to enter into these quasi-feudal user relationships because of the enormous value they receive from them. If they don't like it, goes the argument, they shouldn't do it.

This advice is not practical. It's not reasonable to tell people that if they don't like their data being collected, they shouldn't email, shop online, use Facebook or have a mobile phone. I can't imagine students getting through school anymore without an internet search or Wikipedia, much less finding a job afterwards. These are the tools of modern life. They're necessary to a career and a social life. Opting out just isn't a viable choice for most of us, most of the time; it violates what have become very real norms of contemporary life.
Right now, choosing among providers is not a choice between surveillance or no surveillance, but only a choice of which feudal lords get to spy on you. This won't change until we have laws to protect both us and our data from these sorts of relationships. Data is power and those that have our data have power over us. It's time for government to step in and balance things out.

Adapted from Data and Goliath by Bruce Schneier, published by Norton Books.

https://www.schneier.com/essays/archives/2015/05/how_we_sold_our_soul.html

Reading 2: “Black Men and Public Spaces” by Brent Staples

BRENT STAPLES Black Men and Public Space Brent Staples (b. 1951) earned his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Chicago and went on to become a journalist. The following essay originally appeared in Ms. Magazine in 1986, under the title "Just Walk On By." Staples revised it slightly for publication in Harper's a year later under the present title. The particular occasion for Staples's reflections is an incident that occurred for the first time in the mid-1970s, when he discovered that his mere presence on the street late at night was enough to frighten a young white woman. Recalling this incident leads him to reflect on issues of race, gender, and class in the United States. As you read, think about why Staples chose the new title, "Black Men and Public Space."

My first victim was a woman-white, well dressed, probably in her early twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, uninflammatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket—seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses, she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds she disappeared into a cross street.

That was more than a decade ago, I was twenty-two years old, a graduate student newly arrived at the University of Chicago. It was in the echo of that terrified woman's footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. It was clear that she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse. Suffering a bout of insomnia, however, I was stalking sleep, not defenseless wayfarers. As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken—let alone hold one to a person's throat—I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once. Her flight made me feel like an accomplice in tyranny. It also made it clear that I was indistinguishable from the muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto. That first encounter, and those that followed, signified that a vast, unnerving gulf lay between nighttime pedestrians—particularly women—and me. And I soon gathered that being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself. I only needed to turn a corner into a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer somewhere, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where fear
and weapons meet--and they often do in urban America--there is always the possibility of death.

In that first year, my first away from my hometown, I was to become thoroughly familiar with the language of fear. At dark, shadowy intersections, I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the thunk, thunk, thunk of the driver--black, white, male, or female-- hammering down the door locks. On less traveled streets after dark, I grew accustomed to but never comfortable with people crossing to the other side of the street rather than pass me. Then there were the standard unpleasantries with policemen, doormen, bouncers, cabdrivers, and others whose business it is to screen out troublesome individuals before there is any nastiness.

I moved to New York nearly two years ago and I have remained an avid night walker. In central Manhattan, the near-constant crowd cover minimizes tense one-on-one street encounters.

Elsewhere--in SoHo, for example, where sidewalks are narrow and tightly spaced buildings shut out the sky--things can get very taut indeed.

After dark, on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live, I often see women who fear the worst from me. They seem to have set their faces on neutral, and with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier-style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled. I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence. Yet these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of twenty-two without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me. Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial town where I came of age in the 1960s, I was scarcely noticeable against a backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders. I grew up one of the good boys, had perhaps a halfdozen fistfights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat has clear sources.

As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried several, too. They were babies, really--a teenage cousin, a brother of twenty-two, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties-- all gone down in episodes of bravado played out in the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps unconsciously, to remain a shadow-timid, but a survivor.

The fearsomeness mistakenly attributed to me in public places often has a perilous flavor. The most frightening of these confusions occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when I worked as a journalist in Chicago. One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken for a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an ad hoc posse, pursued me through the labyrinthine
halls, nearly to my editor's door. I had no way of proving who I was. I could only move briskly toward the company of someone who knew me.

Another time I was on assignment for a local paper and killing time before an interview. I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. She stood, the dog extended toward me, silent to my questions, her eyes bulging nearly out of her head. I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her good night.

Relatively speaking, however, I never fared as badly as another black male journalist. He went to nearby Waukegan, Illinois, a couple of summers ago to work on a story about a murderer who was born there. Mistaking the reporter for the killer, police officers hauled him from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials would probably have tried to book him. Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time.

Over the years, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness. I now take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours, particularly when I have exchanged business clothes for jeans. If I happen to be entering a building behind some people who appear skittish, I may walk by, letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them. I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police.

And on late-evening constitutionals I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure: I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn’t be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's Four Seasons. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country.

Reading 3: “A Pet Tortoise Who Will Outlive Us All”

by Hanya Yanagihara
May 17, 2017

It’s humbling to care for an animal that reminds you, each day, of your own imminent death.

Every morning, Fred takes a walk around my parents’ yard in suburban Honolulu. The yard, though small, around 600 square feet, is beautiful, green and cool and jungly, densely planted with lacy native ferns and heavy-headed crimson heliconia and fragrant with white flowers: gardenia, plumeria, ginger, night-blooming jasmine. Fred is 15 years old and 80 pounds, and since my parents adopted him two years ago, he has never left
this yard. When he is dozing in the shade, the old shower trees outside the picket fence that surrounds the yard rain their pink and yellow petals down on him.

People get up early in Hawaii — by 6:30, kids are being dropped off at school and adults are driving to work — and yet Fred doesn’t start moving until 8 or, sometimes, 9. By the time he does, the neighborhood is silent. Everyone else has already begun the day. But exceptions are made for Fred, because Fred has nowhere to go and nothing to do, and my parents expect nothing from him. This is because Fred is not a human, but a sulcata tortoise, an impulse purchase ($250, from a man living a few minutes drive away, near Waikiki) whose consequences — as with all impulse purchases — were not quite fully imagined. Every morning, Fred must be fed: a mixture of timothy hay, romaine and protein-rich kibble, which is spread across a baking tray so he can see it easily. As Fred is eating, his turds — wet, cold, fat as hand-rolled cigars and strafed with undigested hay and grass — must be collected and the lawn around them doused with water. Some five hours later, lunch must be provided. Then, at around 6 in the evening, someone has to check that Fred has put himself to bed in his wooden house, where he spends at least 20 minutes bumping and scraping against the walls and the floor: the sulcata, which is native to sub-Saharan Africa, is like most tortoises a burrower by nature; in those arid climates, tortoises will dig deep tunnels in order to access damper, cooler earth. My parents’ neighborhood is humid — it rains every morning and every evening, a light, brief mist that makes the air smell loamy and slightly feral — but Fred is conditioned to dig regardless, his stumpy back legs chafing against the flagstones beneath his house. By 8 p.m., he is silent, sluggish; like all reptiles, Fred is coldblooded, and he will remain in his house until the morning and the return of the sun and its heat.

Fred is not rare: not as a species (the sulcata is one of the largest species of tortoise in the world) and not even as a pet, not in Hawaii, at least, where there is a largely Asian population, which associates them with good fortune, wisdom and long life. And yet when the occasional passer-by looks over the fence and sees Fred marching across the yard, his legs churning with the same steady, hardy energy of a toddler delighting in his newfound ability to walk, they are always startled. The surprise is attributable to his size, as well as his shape and color; at first glance, you might mistake him for a large rock, only to then realize that the rock is moving.

But I think the other surprise of Fred has less to do with his unexpected presence and more to do with what he represents. To be in the company of a tortoise is to be reminded — instantly, inarticulably — of the oldness of the world and the newness of us (humans, specifically, but also mammals in general). Nature has created thousands of creatures, but most of us have been redrawn over the millennia: Our heads have grown larger, our teeth smaller, our legs longer, our jaws weaker. But tortoises, some varieties of which are 300 million years old, older than the dinosaurs, are a rough draft that was never refined, because they never needed to be. They are proof of nature’s genius and of our own imperfection, our fragility and brevity in a world that existed long before us and will exist long after we’re gone. They are older than we are in all ways, as a tribe and as individuals — they can live 150 years (and can grow to be 200 pounds). As such, you cannot help feeling a sort of humility around them: They may be slow and ungainly and lumpily fashioned, but they are, in their durability and unchangeability, perfect in a way we
aren’t. It is all this that makes them unique and unsettling animals to live with, for to be around them is to be reminded, incessantly, of our own vulnerability — and our own imminent deaths.

**Last July, I went** to Honolulu to meet Fred and to spend the summer with my parents. My parents and I have a warm relationship, even though, or perhaps because, I don’t speak to or visit them frequently; until my most recent trip there, the previous July, I hadn’t seen them in six years. I live in New York, and they live in Hawaii, and while it’s true that traveling to the islands requires a certain commitment of time, the real reason I stayed away is that there were other places I wanted to go and other things I wanted to see. Of all the gifts and advantages my parents have given me, one of the greatest is their understanding of this desire, their conviction that it is the duty of children to leave and do what they want, and the duty of parents to not just accept this but to encourage it. When I was 14 and first leaving my parents — then living in East Texas — to attend high school in Honolulu, my father told me that any parent who expected anything from his child (he was speaking of money and accomplishment, but he also meant love, devotion and caretaking) was bound to be disappointed, because it was foolish and selfish to raise children in the hope that they might someday repay the debt of their existence; he has maintained this ever since. It is, in a culture that cherishes familial proximity, a radical way of thinking by people who otherwise pride themselves on their conventionality (though, lovably, their idea of the conventional tends to not actually be so at all).

This philosophy explains and contradicts their attachment to a pet that, in many ways, defies what we believe a pet should be. Those of us with animals in our lives don’t like to think of ourselves as having expectations for them, but we do: We want their loyalty and dedication, and we want these things to be expressed in a way that we can understand; we want the bird chirping when we walk in the door, the dog trotting toward us, drooling and hopeful, the cat rumbling with pleasure as she butts her head against our fist, the horse nickering and shuffling in his stall as he hears our footfall.

Fred, however, provides none of these things. Other than a series of grunts when he’s defecating, he can’t make noises. Although he’ll let you stroke the top of his cool, leathery head, he’s literally unhuggable. Although he is, in his way, friendly or, less generously, un-shy — every deliveryman or neighbor who enters the yard is approached and inspected — he is not a creature who, you feel, has any particular fondness for you.

Owning a pet is often an act of assumed, albeit unacknowledged, reciprocity; when people speak of their pet’s unconditional love, they are in fact revealing the unspoken, highly one-sided exchange of pet ownership: I, the human, will provide you with food and shelter, and you, the pet, will give me endless affection and acceptance, no matter how crummy a person I may be. Children, being humans and therefore manipulable only to a certain extent, may disappoint; a pet is not allowed to disappoint, or else it won’t remain a pet for long.
Much as the role of a child has changed in the past century — from undersize workers to creatures to spoil and cherish — so, too, have the animals in our lives come to fulfill a certain need. Many of us in the developed world have easier lives than our forebears had: There is less arduous labor; there is less labor in general. But it can often feel that the luxury of time has been accompanied by a heightened, commensurate craving for love: Part of the modern condition is wondering who might love us and how that love might be more perfectly expressed, and animals’ new duty is to answer both of those problems, to make this loneliest of ages feel a little less lonely.

Being with Fred, therefore, makes me re-evaluate why we keep pets at all. Along with his inability to behave as a modern pet ought, his appeal as an animate being is of a specific and subtle kind: He is stolid and implacable, neither of which are traits we typically value in any species we hope to employ as companions. Then there is the fact of the amount of care he demands, which is accompanied by the contradictory suspicion that he might be perfectly content on his own, without us: As much as he may enjoy them, Fred doesn’t actually need company, or water, or even food; were he at home in Sudan, he would be eating (dry grasses; shrubbery) only every few days. To own a turtle, then, means accepting that you will be seen as the neighborhood eccentrics, people who have chosen a secondary position in their own households. If people who love cats are self-assured (but self-absorbed), and people who love dogs are self-satisfied (but insecure), then it might be said that people who love turtles are, to some degree, fatalistic: Loving a turtle means pouring endless amounts of affection into a bucket that will never fill because it has a hole cut in its bottom.

And yet Fred’s presence in my parents’ life seemed to be an expression of something beyond mere eccentricity: As the days passed, I couldn’t help seeing him as a late-in-life yank of the parental tether. My parents are 71 and 69; I am 42. Fred, therefore, will most likely outlive not only my father and mother but me as well. In the midafternoon, when Fred was at his most alert, I would sit and watch him: his asplike face, his determined, plucky trudge, which made his head bounce a little with every step, his piggy nostrils, each the size and shape of a watermelon seed, the faint, coin-size indentations on the side of his head where his ears lay. As I watched him, I wondered: Why would my parents assume such a responsibility? Why would they bring into their — my; our — lives something so disruptive?

The easy explanation was that they had simply chosen not to consider it: My parents are young enough and unsentimental enough that death (how, when, where) was still sufficiently distant to be an abstraction, a dinner-table conversation. But though they claimed to be ready to die at any moment — they had reached an age in which they viewed life as a contractor’s punch list, a series of tasks that had been satisfactorily, or at least competently, completed — Fred’s arrival belied those claims. Their adoption of him suggested that they might actually have expected something from my brother and me after all. My parents weren’t upset when we left home (they were in fact pretty gleefful), and yet here, in Fred, was a collective problem, a challenge that would force a reunion of our small family. For what, after all, makes adult children remain in contact with their parents? Fondness, of course; love. But in the absence of or in addition to those, there is
inheritance, the stuff (and quarrels and resentments) that will be left behind when the parents die.

In a post-industrialized country and era, there are fewer and fewer practical reasons for a family to stay together once its children are grown. We do so out of tradition, but tradition isn’t an imperative. Fred, however, was his own imperative, a difficulty that demanded a response, a legacy that, unlike a car or a house, needed a caretaker, an animal who was both a repository of a surplus of parental love and an announcement of parental need: Come home. See what we’ve taken on. When you see him, will you remember us? Fred was a way of requesting devotion without having to literally ask.

I wish I could say that we had decided what to do with Fred by the time I left Hawaii, but we hadn’t. Instead, we watched Fred circle the yard, speaking of him with the same affectionate bewilderment we would a precocious child. I had already told my parents that I wouldn’t take Fred when they died; my brother said he wouldn’t, either. Our refusal seemed to provide them with a curious, even paradoxical contentment — my brother and I might not need them to stay alive (we would like them to, but like is not the same as need), but Fred did, or so they could believe. And so, for him, they would. If one of pets’ great gifts is their ability to make us feel loved, their greater gift is how they make us feel necessary.

In the months after my return home, my parents sent me messages: Fred was getting bigger. He had broken through one of the metal gates and tried to escape. He was having diarrhea. He liked only red hibiscus, not pink. He had rejected the Swiss chard they tried to feed him. He was a whim that was becoming a burden. And yet they couldn’t imagine letting him go. He was their pet, and they were going to take care of him, even if they didn’t truly understand what that might entail. But what person who’s responsible for another living creature ever really understands what care entails? You may think you know, or have some sense. But you never truly know until you are doing the actual work of caring, in particular for something that may not care for you in return but to whom you have sworn your allegiance.

Sometimes, after reading these messages, I found myself slipping into a daydream, imagining Fred’s life — and, by extension, my own — years into the future. I imagined a day in which my parents were dead and still no one had determined what to do with Fred: where he would live, who would talk to him. I imagined Fred edging out of his wooden house to find something to eat, a young specimen of an old species on a young island in an old world. I imagined him sitting, and waiting, for someone to come feed him. And when no one did? Maybe he would start eating the grass. And then when the grass was gone, he might eat the petals from the shower trees. And then the ferns. And then the ti leaves. And then the gardenia bushes. He would eat and eat, and when the yard had been denuded of anything green, he would wait until the lawn turned green once more. A tortoise knows how to wait. It is another piece of wisdom that comes from being a member of a species that is so very old.

He was, I always thought, an unattractive animal: his eyes might kindly be called beady, his mouth a puckered seam — the writer Jane Gardam once described a tortoise as having
“an old man’s mean little mouth” — but over my summer with my parents, I also realized that I was mesmerized by him — even that I respected him. How could I not? An animal that demands so little and craves even less? An animal so unlike the animal I am, one with such a developed sense of self-possession? What secret did Fred know that I did not?

In those daydreams, I would think of how, when the light was winy and golden, I liked to sit on the porch steps and watch Fred trundle across the lawn. A few weeks into my stay, we’d grown familiar enough that he would toddle right up to me and stretch out his neck, its skin sagging into crepey pleats, and let me pat his head, closing his little black eyes as I did. In those moments, I found myself talking to him, usually about banal things: asking if he’d enjoyed the hibiscus flowers I’d snapped off a neighbor’s bush; if he could feel the myna birds that occasionally perched on his back. This time, though, I asked him something else, something more intimate, something about what it was like to be the creature he was, what it was like to live without a sense of obligation or pity or guilt — all the things that make being a human so sad and so mysterious and so wondrously rich.

He didn’t answer, of course. But for a moment, he held his position, his head motionless beneath my hand, a short pause in his very long life. And then he moved on — and I stood and watched him go.

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Reading 4: “On Political Correctness”

By William Deresiewicz | March 6, 2017

Power, class, and the new campus religion

Let us eschew the familiar examples: the disinvited speakers, the Title IX tribunals, the safe zones stocked with Play-Doh, the crusades against banh mi. The flesh-eating bacterium of political correctness, which feeds preferentially on brain tissue, and which has become endemic on elite college campuses, reveals its true virulence not in the sorts of high-profile outbreaks that reach the national consciousness, but in the myriad of ordinary cases—the everyday business-as-usual at institutions around the country—that are rarely even talked about.

A clarification, before I continue (since deliberate misconstrual is itself a tactic of the phenomenon in question). By political correctness, I do not mean the term as it has come to be employed on the right—that is, the expectation of adherence to the norms of basic
decency, like refraining from derogatory epithets. I mean its older, intramural denotation: the persistent attempt to suppress the expression of unwelcome beliefs and ideas.

I recently spent a semester at Scripps, a selective women’s college in Southern California. I had one student, from a Chinese-American family, who informed me that the first thing she learned when she got to college was to keep quiet about her Christian faith and her non-feminist views about marriage. I had another student, a self-described “strong feminist,” who told me that she tends to keep quiet about everything, because she never knows when she might say something that you’re not supposed to. I had a third student, a junior, who wrote about a friend whom she had known since the beginning of college and who, she’d just discovered, went to church every Sunday. My student hadn’t even been aware that her friend was religious. When she asked her why she had concealed this essential fact about herself, her friend replied, “Because I don’t feel comfortable being out as a religious person here.”

I also heard that the director of the writing center, a specialist in disability studies, was informing people that they couldn’t use expressions like “that’s a crazy idea” because they stigmatize the mentally ill. I heard a young woman tell me that she had been criticized by a fellow student for wearing moccasins—an act, she was informed, of cultural appropriation. I heard an adjunct instructor describe how a routine pedagogical conflict over something he had said in class had turned, when the student in question claimed to have felt “triggered,” into, in his words, a bureaucratic “dumpster fire.” He was careful now, he added, to avoid saying anything, or teaching anything, that might conceivably lead to trouble.

I listened to students—young women, again, who considered themselves strong feminists—talk about how they were afraid to speak freely among their peers, and how despite its notoriety as a platform for cyberbullying, they were grateful for YikYak, the social media app, because it allowed them to say anonymously what they couldn’t say in their own name. Above all, I heard my students tell me that while they generally identified with the sentiments and norms that travel under the name of political correctness, they thought that it had simply gone too far—way too far. Everybody felt
oppressed, as they put it, by the “PC police”—everybody, that is, except for those whom everybody else regarded as members of the PC police.

I heard all this, and a good bit more, while teaching one class, for 12 students, during one semester, at one college. And I have no reason to believe that circumstances are substantially different at other elite private institutions, and plenty of reasons not to believe it: from conversations with individuals at many schools, from my broader experience in higher education, from what I’ve read not only in the mainstream media but also in the higher education press. The situation is undoubtedly better at some places than others, undoubtedly worse at the liberal arts colleges as a whole than at the universities as a whole, but broadly similar across the board.

So this is how I’ve come to understand the situation. Selective private colleges have become religious schools. The religion in question is not Methodism or Catholicism but an extreme version of the belief system of the liberal elite: the liberal professional, managerial, and creative classes, which provide a large majority of students enrolled at such places and an even larger majority of faculty and administrators who work at them. To attend those institutions is to be socialized, and not infrequently, indoctrinated into that religion.

I should mention that when I was speaking about these issues last fall with a group of students at Whitman College, a selective school in Washington State, that idea, that elite private colleges are religious institutions, is the one that resonated with them most. I should also mention that I received an email recently from a student who had transferred from Oral Roberts, the evangelical Christian university in Tulsa, to Columbia, my alma mater. The latter, he found to his surprise, is also a religious school, only there, he said, the faith is the religion of success. The religion of success is not the same as political correctness, but as I will presently explain, the two go hand in hand.

What does it mean to say that these institutions are religious schools? First, that they possess a dogma, unwritten but understood by all: a set of “correct” opinions and beliefs, or at best, a narrow range within which disagreement is permitted. There is a right way to
think and a right way to talk, and also a right set of things to think and talk about. Secularism is taken for granted. Environmentalism is a sacred cause. Issues of identity— principally the holy trinity of race, gender, and sexuality—occupy the center of concern. The presiding presence is Michel Foucault, with his theories of power, discourse, and the social construction of the self, who plays the same role on the left as Marx once did. The fundamental questions that a college education ought to raise—questions of individual and collective virtue, of what it means to be a good person and a good community—are understood to have been settled. The assumption, on elite college campuses, is that we are already in full possession of the moral truth. This is a religious attitude. It is certainly not a scholarly or intellectual attitude.

Dogma, and the enforcement of dogma, makes for ideological consensus. Students seldom disagree with one another anymore in class, I’ve been told about school after school. The reason, at least at Whitman, said one of the students I talked to there, is mainly that they really don’t have any disagreements. Another added that when they take up an issue in class, it isn’t, let’s talk about issue X, but rather, let’s talk about why such-and-such position is the correct one to have on issue X. When my student wrote about her churchgoing friend, she said that she couldn’t understand why anyone would feel uncomfortable being out as a religious person at a place as diverse as Scripps. But of course, Scripps and its ilk are only diverse in terms of identity. In terms of ideology, they are all but homogeneous. You don’t have “different voices” on campus, as these institutions like to boast; you have different bodies, speaking with the same voice.

That, by the way, is why liberal students (and liberals in general) are so bad at defending their own positions. They never have to, so they never learn to. That is also why it tends to be so easy for conservatives to goad them into incoherent anger. Nothing makes you more enraged than an argument you cannot answer. But the reason to listen to people who disagree with you is not so you can learn to refute them. The reason is that you may be wrong. In fact, you are wrong: about some things and probably about a lot of things. There is zero percent chance that any one of us is 100 percent correct. That, in turn, is why freedom of expression includes the right to hear as well as speak, and why
disinviting campus speakers abridges the speech rights of students as well as of the speakers themselves.

Elite private colleges are ideologically homogenous because they are socially homogeneous, or close to it. Their student populations largely come from the liberal upper and upper-middle classes, multiracial but predominantly white, with an admixture of students from poor communities of color—two demographics with broadly similar political beliefs, as evidenced by the fact that they together constitute a large proportion of the Democratic Party base. As for faculty and managerial staff, they are even more homogenous than their students, both in their social origins and in their present milieu, which tends to be composed exclusively of other liberal professionals—if not, indeed, of other liberal academics. Unlike the campus protesters of the 1960s, today’s student activists are not expressing countercultural views. They are expressing the exact views of the culture in which they find themselves (a reason that administrators prove so ready to accede to their demands). If you want to find the counterculture on today’s elite college campuses, you need to look for the conservative students.

Which brings us to another thing that comes with dogma: heresy. Heresy means those beliefs that undermine the orthodox consensus, so it must be eradicated: by education, by reeducation—if necessary, by censorship. It makes a perfect, dreary sense that there are speech codes, or the desire for speech codes, at selective private colleges. The irony is that conservatives don’t actually care if progressives disapprove of them, with the result that political correctness generally amounts to internecine warfare on the left: radical feminists excoriating other radical feminists for saying “vagina” instead of “front hole,” students denouncing the director of Boys Don’t Cry as a transphobic “cis white bitch” (as recently happened at Reed College), and so forth.

But the most effective form of censorship, of course, is self-censorship—which, in the intimate environment of a residential college, young adults are very quick to learn. One of the students at Whitman mentioned that he’s careful, when questioning consensus beliefs, to phrase his opinion in terms of “Explain to me why I’m wrong.” Other students— at Bard College, at the Claremont Colleges—have explained that any
challenge to the hegemony of identity politics will get you branded as a racist (as in, “Don’t talk to that guy, he’s a racist”). Campus protesters, their frequent rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, are not the ones being silenced: they are, after all, not being silent. They are in the middle of the quad, speaking their minds. The ones being silenced are the ones like my students at Scripps, like the students at Whitman, like many students, no doubt, at many places, who are keeping their mouths shut. “The religion of humanity,” as David Bromwich recently wrote, “may turn out to be as dangerous as all the other religions.”

The assumption on selective campuses is not only that we are in full possession of the truth, but that we are in full possession of virtue. We don’t just know the good with perfect wisdom, we embody it with perfect innocence. But regimes of virtue tend to eat their children. Think of Salem. They tend to turn upon themselves, since everybody wants to be the holiest. Think of the French Revolution. The ante is forever being upped. The PC commissariat reminds me of the NRA. Everyone is terrified of challenging the NRA (everyone in a position to stop it, at least), so it gets whatever it demands. But then, because it can, it thinks up new demands. Guns in playgrounds, guns in bars.

So it is with political correctness. There is always something new, as my students understood, that you aren’t supposed to say. And worst of all, you often don’t find out about it until after you have said it. The term political correctness, which originated in the 1970s as a form of self-mockery among progressive college students, was a deliberately ironic invocation of Stalinism. By now we’ve lost the irony but kept the Stalinism—and it was a feature of Stalinism that you could be convicted for an act that was not a crime at the time you committed it. So you were always already guilty, or could be made to be guilty, and therefore were always controllable.

You were also always under surveillance by a cadre of what Jane Austen called, in a very different context, “voluntary spies,” and what my students called the PC police. Regimes of virtue produce informants (which really does wonders for social cohesion). They also produce authorities, often self-appointed authorities, like the writing director at Scripps who decreed that you aren’t supposed to use the word crazy. Whenever I hear that you
aren’t supposed to say something, I want to know, where did this supposed descend from? Who decided, and who gave them the right to decide? And whenever I hear that a given group of students demands this or says that, I want to ask, whom exactly are we talking about: all of them, or just a few of them? Did the group choose its leaders, or did the leaders choose themselves?

Let me be clear. I recognize that both the culture of political correctness and the recent forms of campus agitation are responding to enormous, intractable national problems. There is systemic racism and individual bigotry in the United States, and colleges are not immune from either. There is systemic sexism and sexual assault in society at large, and campuses are no exception. The call for safe spaces and trigger warnings, the desire to eliminate micro-aggressions, the demand for the removal of offensive symbols and the suppression of offensive language: however foolish some of these might be as policy prescriptions (especially the first two), however absurd as they work themselves out on the ground, all originate in deeply legitimate concerns.

But so much of political correctness is not about justice or creating a safe environment; it is about power. And so much of what is taking place at colleges today reflects the way that relations of power have been reconfigured in contemporary higher education. Campus activists are taking advantage of the fact (and I suspect that a lot of them understand this intuitively, if not explicitly) that students have a lot more power than they used to. The change is the result not only of the rise of the customer-service mentality in academia, but also of the proletarianization of the faculty. Students have risen; instructors have fallen. Where once administrations worked in alliance with the faculty, were indeed largely composed of faculty, now they work against the faculty in alliance with students, a separate managerial stratum more interested in the satisfaction of its customers than the well-being of its employees.

In the inevitable power struggle between students and teachers, the former have gained the whip hand. The large majority of instructors today are adjuncts working term to term for a few thousand dollars a course, or contract employees with no long-term job security, or untenured professors whose careers can still be derailed. With the expansion of Title
IX in 2011—the law is now being used, among other things, to police classroom content—even tenured faculty are sitting with a sword above their heads. Thanks not only to the shift to contingent employment but also to the chronic oversupply of PhDs (the academic reserve army, to adapt a phrase from Marx), academic labor is cheap and academic workers are vulnerable and frightened. In a conflict between a student and a faculty member, almost nothing is at stake for the student beyond the possibility of receiving a low grade (which, in the current environment, means something like a B+). But the teacher could be fired. That is why so many faculty members, like that adjunct instructor at Scripps, are teaching with their tails between their legs. They, too, are being silenced. Whether they know it or not, student activists (and students in general) are exploiting the insecurity of an increasingly immiserated workforce. So much for social justice.

The power of political correctness is wielded not only against the faculty, however, but also against other groups within the student body, ones who don’t belong to the ideologically privileged demographics or espouse the approved points of view: conservative students; religious students, particularly Christians; students who identify as Zionists, a category that includes a lot of Jewish students; “athletes,” meaning white male athletes; white students from red states; heterosexual cisgendered white men from anywhere at all, who represent, depending on the school, between a fifth and a third of all students. (I say this, by the way, as an atheist, a democratic socialist, a native northeasterner, a person who believes that colleges should not have sports teams in the first place—and in case it isn’t obvious by now, a card-carrying member of the liberal elite.) I haven’t heard too many people talk about creating safe spaces for Christians, or preventing micro-aggressions against conservatives, or banning hate speech against athletes, or disinving socialists.

What I have heard, frequently, for as long as I have been involved in academia, are open expressions of contempt or prejudice or hostility against those suspect groups or members of those groups. If you are a white man, you are routinely regarded as guilty until proven innocent, the worst possible construction is put upon your words, and anything you say
on a sensitive issue is received with suspicion at best. I attended a workshop on micro-
aggressions at the University of Missouri last year. The problem with micro-aggressions,
the leader said, is that they “create a space of hostility,” that they say, “you don’t belong;
you are different in a way that’s not okay.” Those formulations precisely describe the
environment that the groups I just enumerated often encounter at elite private colleges,
except that unlike the typical micro-aggression, the offense is not inadvertent. It is quite
deliberate. Racism may indeed be a system, but bigotry and prejudice are personal
attitudes, and they are freely distributed (“cis white bitch”) across the political spectrum.

I am perfectly aware that men, whites, heterosexuals, and cisgendered people remain the
dominant groups in society as a whole. But equality is not revenge. Racism, sexism,
homophobia, and transphobia are incomparably more powerful, and more entrenched,
than their “reverse” counterparts, but that doesn’t make the latter anything less than
reprehensible, especially when practiced against college students: individuals, in other
words, who are scarcely more than adolescents, and who deserve the benefit of the doubt.

I was talking about trigger warnings with the writing director at Scripps. I told her that
the only student I’d taught who was so uncomfortable with course material that he had to
leave the room was a young Christian man (another Asian American, as it turns out), who
excused himself before a class discussion of the sexually explicit lesbian novelist Jeanette
Winterson. I was naïve enough to think that the director would be sympathetic to the
student’s situation. Instead, she snorted with contempt. (For the record, I myself was
none too happy with his move. But then, I don’t believe in trigger warnings in the first
place.) Progressive faculty and students at selective private colleges will often say that
they want to dismantle the hierarchies of power that persist in society at large. Their
actions often suggest that in fact they would like to invert them. All groups are equal, but
some are more equal than others.

Political correctness creates a mindset of us versus them. “Them” is white men, or
straight cisgendered white men—a.k.a. “the patriarchy.” (The phrase “dead white men,”
so beloved on the left, would have little force if its last two words were not already felt to
constitute a pejorative.) “Us” is everybody else, the coalition of virtue (virtuous, of
course, by virtue of an accident of birth). Which means that political correctness not only treats “them” as a monolith—erasing the differences among white people, like those between Jews and Mormons or English and Irish, thus effacing the specificity of their historical and sometimes also their present experiences—it effaces the specificity of everyone’s experience.

Political correctness expects us to plot our experience on the grid of identity, to interpret it in terms of our location at the intersection of a limited number of recognized categories. You are a lesbian Latina, therefore you must feel X. You are a white trans man, therefore you must think Y. But identity should not precede experience; it should proceed from it. And experience is much more granular, and composed of a vastly larger number of variables, than is dreamt of in the PC philosophy. I myself am a youngest child; I was raised in the suburbs; I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family—but more to the point, my consciousness and way of being in the world have been shaped by an infinite series of experiential particulars, a large proportion of which are not reducible to any category.

That, by the way, is one of the reasons to read literature, and to place it at the center of a college education: because it captures the complexity of lived experience, and of enacted identity, in a way that the categories of a politicized social science can never hope to match.

There is one category that the religion of the liberal elite does not recognize—that its purpose, one might almost conclude, is to conceal: class. Class at fancy colleges, as throughout American society, has been the unspeakable word, the great forbidden truth. And the exclusion of class on selective college campuses enables the exclusion of a class. It has long struck me in leftist or PC rhetoric how often “white” is conflated with “wealthy,” as if all white people were wealthy and all wealthy people were white. In fact, more than 40 percent of poor Americans are white. Roughly 60 percent of working-class Americans are white. Almost two-thirds of white Americans are poor or working-class. Altogether, lower-income whites make up about 40 percent of the country, yet they are almost entirely absent on elite college campuses, where they amount, at most, to a few percent and constitute, by a wide margin, the single most underrepresented group.
We don’t acknowledge class, so there are few affirmative-action programs based on class. Not coincidentally, lower-income whites belong disproportionately to precisely those groups whom it is acceptable and even desirable, in the religion of the colleges, to demonize: conservatives, Christians, people from red states. Selective private colleges are produced by the liberal elite and reproduce it in turn. If it took an electoral catastrophe to remind this elite of the existence (and ultimately, one hopes, the humanity) of the white working class, the fact should come as no surprise. They’ve never met them, so they neither know nor care about them. In the psychic economy of the liberal elite, the white working class plays the role of the repressed. The recent presidential campaign may be understood as the return of that repressed—and the repressed, when it returns, is always monstrous.

The exclusion of class also enables the concealment of the role that elite colleges play in perpetuating class, which they do through a system that pretends to accomplish the opposite, our so-called meritocracy. Students have as much merit, in general, as their parents can purchase (which, for example, is the reason SAT scores correlate closely with family income). The college admissions process is, as Mitchell L. Stevens writes in *Creating a Class*, a way of “laundering privilege.”

But it isn’t simply the admissions process. The culture of political correctness, the religion of the fancy private colleges, provides the affluent white and Asian students who make up the preponderant majority of their student bodies, and the affluent white and Asian professionals who make up the preponderant majority of their tenured faculty and managerial staffs, with the ideological resources to alibi or erase their privilege. It enables them to tell themselves that they are children of the light—part of the solution to our social ills, not an integral component of the problem. It may speak about dismantling the elite, but its real purpose is to flatter it.
And here we come to the connection between the religion of success and the religion of political correctness. Political correctness is a fig leaf for the competitive individualism of meritocratic neoliberalism, with its worship of success above all. It provides a moral cover beneath which undergraduates can prosecute their careerist projects undisturbed. Student existence may be understood as largely separated into two non-communicating realms: campus social life (including the classroom understood as a collective space), where the enforcement of political correctness is designed to create an emotionally unthreatening environment; and the individual pursuit of personal advancement, the real business going forward. The moral commitments of the first (which are often transient in any case) are safely isolated from the second.

What falls between the two is nothing less than the core purpose of a liberal education: inquiry into the fundamental human questions, undertaken through rational discourse. Rational discourse, meaning rational argument: not the us-talk of PC consensus, which isn’t argument, or the them-talk of vituperation (as practiced ubiquitously on social media), which isn’t rational. But inquiry into the fundamental human questions—in the words of Tolstoy, “What shall we do and how shall we live?”—threatens both of the current campus creeds: political correctness, by calling its certainties into question; the religion of success, by calling its values into question. Such inquiry raises the possibility that there are different ways to think and different things to live for.

Political correctness and rational discourse are incompatible ideals. Forget “civility,” the quality that college deans and presidents inevitably put forth as that which needs to “balance” free expression. The call for civility is nothing more than a management tool for nervous bureaucrats, a way of splitting every difference and puréeing them into a pablum of deanly mush. Free expression is an absolute; to balance it is to destroy it.

Fortunately, we already have a tried-and-tested rule for free expression, one specifically designed to foster rational discourse. It’s called the First Amendment, and First Amendment jurisprudence doesn’t recognize “offensive” speech or even hate speech as categories subject to legitimate restriction. For one thing, hate is not illegal, and neither is giving offense. For another, what’s hate to me may not be hate to you; what’s offensive
to you may be my deeply held belief. The concepts are relative and subjective. When I gave a version of this essay as a talk at Bard, the first comment from the panel of student respondents came from a young Palestinian woman who argued that “conservative narratives” like Zionism should be censored, because “they require the otherization, if not the dehumanization, of another group of people.” It didn’t seem to have occurred to her that many Zionists would say the same about what they regard as the Palestinian position. Once you start to ban offensive speech, there is no logical place to stop—or rather, where you stop will be determined by the relative positions of competing groups within the community.

In other words, again, by power. To take the most conspicuous issue around which questions of free expression are being disputed on campus, the disinvitation of outside speakers always reflects the power of one group over another. When a speaker is invited to campus, it means that some set of people within the institution—some department, center, committee, or student organization—wants to hear what they have to say. When they are disinvited, shouted down, or otherwise prevented from speaking, it means another set has proved to be more powerful.

When the latter are accused of opposing free speech, they invariably respond, “How can we be opposed to free speech? We are exercising it right now!” But everyone is in favor of their own free speech (including, for instance, Vladimir Putin). The test of your commitment to free speech as a general principle is whether you are willing to tolerate the speech of others, especially those with whom you most disagree. If you are using your speech to try to silence speech, you are not in favor of free speech. You are only in favor of yourself.

I see no reason that the First Amendment shouldn’t be the guiding principle at private colleges and universities (at least the ones that profess to be secular), just as it is, perforce, at public institutions. But public schools are very different places from private ones. Their student bodies, for the most part, are far more diverse, economically and in every other way, which means these institutions do not have to deal with a large bolus of affluent, sheltered white and Asian kids who don’t know how to talk to black and brown
people and need to be “educated” into “awareness” by the presence of African-American and Latino students (who are, in turn, expected to “represent” their communities). When different kinds of people grow up together, rather than being introduced to one another under artificial conditions in young adulthood, they learn to talk and play and study together honestly and unselfconsciously—which means, for adolescents, often frankly and roughly—without feeling that they have to tiptoe around sensitivities that are frequently created by the situation itself. (In today’s idiom, they can be real with one another. The one thing students at elite private colleges very rarely are is “real.”) It’s true that neighborhoods and public schools are much more segregated than they were a generation ago, but students at public colleges and universities are still considerably less likely to come from affluent white/Asian bubbles than are those at wealthy private ones.

True diversity means true disagreement. Political correctness exists at public institutions, but it doesn’t dominate them. A friend of mine who went to Columbia and Yale now teaches at Hunter College, part of the City University of New York. “When you meet someone at Hunter,” she told me, “you can’t assume they see the world the same way you do.” That’s about as pithy an expression of the problem at selective private colleges as I can imagine. When you meet someone at Columbia or Yale or Scripps or Whitman or any of scores of other institutions, you absolutely can assume they see the world the same way you do. And anyone who threatens to disrupt that cozy situation must be disinvited, reeducated, or silenced. It’s no surprise that the large majority of high-profile PC absurdities take place at elite private schools like Emory or Oberlin or Northwestern.

That same safe assumption, about the points of view of everyone around you, does not pervade selective private campuses alone, of course. It is equally the case among the liberal elite: at the Manhattan dinner party, the Silicon Valley startup, the Seattle coffee shop, the Brookline PTA. (That it is also the case in other realms of society, non-liberal and/or non-elite, is true. It is also no excuse, especially not for people who consider themselves so enlightened.) This is not an accident. Selective private colleges are the training grounds of the liberal elite, and the training in question involves not only formal education for professional success, but also initiation into the folkways of the tribe.
Which means that fancy private colleges have a mission public institutions don’t. People arrive at public schools from a wide range of social locations, and they return to a range that is nearly as wide. The institutional mission is to get them through and into the job market, not to turn them into any particular kind of person. But selective private colleges (which also tend to be a lot smaller than public schools) are in the business of creating a community and, beyond that, a class. “However much diversity Yale’s freshman classes may have,” as one of my students once put it, “its senior classes have far less.”

And this, I believe, is one of the sources of the new revolt among students of color at elite private colleges and universities. The expectation at those institutions has always been that the newcomers whom they deign to admit to the ranks of the blessed, be they Jews in the 1950s or African Americans today, will assimilate to the ways of the blessed. That they will become, as people say, “more white.” That bargain, as uncomfortable as it has always been, was more readily accepted in the past. For various reasons, it seems that it no longer is. Students of color are telling the whites who surround them, No, we aren’t like you, and what’s more, we don’t want to be like you. As very different as their outlook is from that of the white working class, their rejection of the liberal elite is not entirely dissimilar.

Selective private colleges need to decide what kind of places they want to be. Do they want to be socialization machines for the upper-middle class, ideological enforcers of progressive dogma? Or do they want to be educational institutions in the only sense that really matters: places of free, frank, and fearless inquiry? When we talk about political correctness and its many florid manifestations, so much in the news of late, we are talking not only about racial injustice and other forms of systemic oppression, or about the coddling of privileged youth, though both are certainly at play. We are also talking, or rather not talking, about the pathologies of the American class system. And those are also what we need to deal with.

Reading 5: Why I gave my kidney to a stranger — and why you should consider doing it too

By Dylan Matthews@dylanmattdylan@vox.com Apr 11, 2017
On Monday, August 22, 2016, a surgical team at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore removed my left kidney. It was then drained of blood, flushed with a preservative solution, placed on ice, and flown to Cincinnati.

Surgeons in Cincinnati then transplanted the kidney into a recipient I’d never met and whose name I didn’t know; we didn’t correspond until this past month. The only thing I knew about him at the time was that he needed my kidney more than I did. It would let him avoid the physically draining experience of dialysis and possibly live an extra nine to 10 years, maybe more.

It’s not just him, though. We were part of a chain of donations that led to four people getting kidneys, all told. My recipient (let’s call him Craig) had a relative who was willing to donate a kidney to him. Unfortunately, the two didn’t match. So Craig and his relative agreed to a trade: If Craig got a kidney from somebody, his relative would still go forward and donate to someone else who needed a kidney.

So the very same day that I donated, Craig’s relative had their kidney taken out as well and flown to the West Coast. This second recipient also had a friend or relative agreeing to an exchange; so did the third recipient, who got the second recipient’s friend’s kidney. Our chain will let people enjoy 36 to 40 years of life they would’ve otherwise been denied.

Our four kidneys were pretty good, but some chains can go even longer. A chain started by a 44-year-old man in California named Rick Ruzzamenti wound up getting 30 people kidneys. Ruzzamenti’s chain let people live 270 to 300 years longer. You can literally measure the years of life his kidney donation chain gave in centuries.

And here’s the thing: This is not that hard to do. Not really. Anyone with an understanding employer with paid medical leave, and friends and family willing to support them in the recovery, can do the same thing I did. There’s a simple form that takes, like, five minutes to fill out, if you want to get started.

I’d wanted to give a kidney for years — at least since I first heard it was possible after reading Larissa MacFarquhar’s New Yorker piece on “good Samaritan” kidney donors when I was in college. It just seemed like such a simple and clear way to help someone else, through a procedure that’s very low-risk to me. I studied moral philosophy as an undergrad, and there’s a famous thought experiment about a man who walks by a shallow pond where a child is drowning and does nothing, because leaping in to save the child might muddy his clothes.

If I kept walking around with two kidneys, when there were more than 100,000 people on the kidney waitlist who would most likely die in the next five years if they didn’t get one, was I doing anything different from that man, really? Wasn’t I, like him, letting another person die to avoid a small cost to myself?
I grew up in a Christian church that put a huge emphasis on social justice, on Christ’s message being one of radical empathy and selflessness. One passage that always stuck with me was Luke 3:11: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none.” Well, I had two working kidneys. There were people with none. What to do next felt pretty clear.

I had it in my head as a kind of abstract goal for years, but I kept putting off the donation. I couldn’t do it in college, since I couldn’t take the time off from exams and papers. I didn’t want to do it in my summers, when I was interning in Washington, DC. It just came to seem like such an extravagant step to take, one that I couldn’t find time for. This was just excuse-making, in retrospect. But it was effective excuse-making.

Then I became friends with people who’d donated kidneys; first with Alexander Berger, who donated his kidney to a stranger when he was 21. Seeing that he was able to give a kidney and barely interrupt his career to do so was striking. I knew intellectually, before, that the costs of donating were small. Hanging out with Alexander, whose life post-donation was totally normal with no lingering side effects of the procedure at all, made the costs look and feel small, minuscule even.

But Alexander works for a charity. Maybe his employer was unusually game for him to take time off for something wacky-sounding but altruistic?

Then I made my second kidney donor friend: Ben Strahs, a bar trivia buddy of mine in DC whom I first met right after he donated. Ben is a programmer at Facebook; he’s a pretty normal guy with a job at a company like anyone else. If he could manage to take time off to do this, what was my excuse?

The facts: it’s awful to need a kidney, and it’s really not that hard to give one. And then there were just the raw facts — of how awful it is to need a kidney, how much good it does to receive one, and how little risk donation poses to donors.

To be on the kidney waitlist, you have to have end-stage renal disease: Your existing kidneys have to be failing. Once you have end-stage renal disease, you have two options: dialysis or transplant. And since transplants are scarce, that usually means dialysis.

Dialysis uses a machine to partially replace your kidneys' waste-filtering functions, and it’s terrible. It reduces your quality of life in a profound way, and having to rely on it rather than a real kidney shortens your life span dramatically.

Dialysis is usually offered three times a week, for four hours at a time. That means no traveling of any real length, since you have to be close to the machine. You can’t hold down a regular work schedule at an office or workplace — you have to be home (if you’re lucky enough to have a home dialysis machine) or at the hospital too often. Even part-time work is difficult because dialysis is physically extremely draining, and the vast majority of people on it report being fatigued. The rate of depression is more than double that in the general population.
And it doesn’t work nearly as well as a human kidney. Dialysis can only replace about 10 percent of normal kidney function. One in four people on dialysis don’t survive a year. Sixty-seven percent die within the first five. That’s a five-year survival rate comparable to that of brain cancer.

This is why getting a kidney is such a big deal: The recipient gains about a decade of life, on average. They get to see their children and grandchildren grow, to spend more time with their partner and their friends, and to escape a painful, exhausting procedure that would otherwise consume half their days.

And the toll on the donor is tiny in comparison. The risk of death in surgery is 3.1 in 10,000, or 1.3 in 10,000 if (like me) you don't suffer from hypertension. For comparison, that’s a little higher and a little lower, respectively, than the risk of pregnancy-related death in the US. The risk isn’t zero (this is still major surgery), but death is extraordinarily rare. Indeed, there’s no good evidence that donating reduces your life expectancy at all.

There are occasionally complications in the hospital post-surgery, but the vast majority of complications that do happen are relatively minor, like a urinary tract infection or a fever. The most significant risk is the increased rate of preeclampsia (pregnancy-related high blood pressure and organ damage, often requiring premature delivery) in people who become pregnant after donating; giving increases the incidence from 5 percent to 11 percent.

The procedure does increase your risk of kidney failure — but the average donor still has only a 1 to 2 percent chance of that happening. The vast majority of donors, 98 to 99 percent, don’t have kidney failure later on. And those who do get bumped up to the top of the waiting list due to their donation.

The monetary costs are small or nonexistent. In the US, the Medicare program guarantees coverage for just about everyone with end-stage renal disease regardless of their age. Medicare is more than happy to pay for transplant surgery, which saves the program tens of thousands of dollars in dialysis expenses. I paid nothing for my surgery or follow-up treatment. The closest thing to an expense was the cost of my dad flying down and staying in a hotel to be by me for the surgery. For families with more financial need than my own, the National Living Donor Assistance Center can pay for travel and other donation-related expenses.

All those risks and costs, stacked up next to the benefits to the recipients, felt so small, particularly for someone like me who won’t ever get pregnant and doesn’t have hypertension.

The donation process is long, but it’s worth it. I registered as a donor through the National Kidney Registry; you can also go through Waitlist Zero or the Alliance for Paired Kidney Donation. I researched transplant centers in my area, to see which ones did the most living donor
surgeries and which had the best reputations in the field. I opted for Johns Hopkins, which is a bit far from where I live in DC but is a leader in research on kidney transplants and performs dozens of living donor transplants a year; high surgical volume is a good predictor of low complication rates.

After filling out some paperwork and completing a psychological screening by phone to show I was of sound mind, I started going in for tests. Giving a kidney means getting a lot of blood taken out of you, often a few vials at a time. I wasn’t counting, but I wouldn’t be shocked if I had more than 100 vials drawn over the course of the whole process (over the course of months, this really isn’t a big deal). Luckily, I did the initial tests at a LabCorp in DC, so I didn’t have to schlep all the way up to Baltimore.

The most invasive initial test is the 24-hour urine collection. That is exactly what it sounds like: You get a big jug, and you have to piss into it for a day. And it has to have all your urine: No cheating and going to a toilet. Suffice it to say I worked from home that day — and the day I had to do it again, because LabCorp couldn’t get a clear enough reading from my first try.

But even the second day of me pissing into a jug, and capturing the overflow in water bottles, and then carrying them and the jug in the middle of a public street to a testing office like Howard Hughes wasn’t enough to get a clear reading.

The test is meant to capture my glomerular filtration rate, the rate at which my kidneys filtered out waste products, specifically the product creatinine. Another way to do that is to have yourself injected with a radioactive tracer and then get regular blood draws to see how much of the tracer is left after a few hours. This is a totally safe procedure, but did entail a day spent working in a hospital waiting room.

That, finally, was enough to show my kidneys were working properly. The next step was going up to Johns Hopkins for a day and holding court in an exam room, talking to a bevy of people on the transplant team. Throughout the day, a transplant surgeon, a psychologist, a nephrologist, and several nurses and social workers filtered in and out — walking me through what the procedure would entail, checking if I had any medications that would be affected, triple-checking I was mentally fit to consent to this and wasn’t being pressured or coerced in any way.

It turned out I had to slightly change my antidepressant mixture (too much Wellbutrin is tough on the kidneys), and everyone who donates a kidney has to switch to acetaminophen (Tylenol) rather than aspirin or ibuprofen for over-the-counter pain relief for the rest of their lives. Neither of those seemed like a particularly big deal; my brand loyalty to Advil shouldn’t keep someone from getting a kidney.

After the day of meetings, the transplant team got together to review my case file, and officially approved me as a donor. At that point, it was just a matter of matching with someone (not just on blood type but on a wide variety of antibodies they test for), constructing a chain, and scheduling. We settled on late August 2016; it was after the
political conventions, so I wouldn’t be missing as much at work, and it worked for my girlfriend’s and dad’s schedules so they could be with me at the hospital.

The process with the transplant center took about five months from start to finish. I started working with Hopkins in March, finished my evaluations in mid-May, and was approved in June, before waiting another two months for a preoperative appointment and then the ultimate surgery. But all told it wasn’t that intrusive. I only had to go up to Baltimore three times before the surgery, I could get the blood tests done at a lab close to my office, and even the urine collection was more funny than anything else.

Recovery hurts — but it gets better really, really fast
After fasting for a day, I got up in my Baltimore hotel at 4:30 am on Monday, August 22, and took a cab over with my extremely supportive dad and girlfriend to Johns Hopkins Hospital, where I was due in at 5:15 am.

The surgery itself is minimally invasive, or “laparoscopic.” The surgeon made three incisions: two small ones on the left side of my abdomen for a camera and surgical instruments respectively, and a few-inches-long “hand port” cut around my belly button that he could use to pull the kidney out once all the veins and arteries had been snipped. This is what it looked like four days after the surgery:

Today those scars are fully healed and barely even noticeable.

The hardest parts of recovering, I found, had nothing to do with the actual cuts. The first thing you notice upon waking up is that you’re really hungry and thirsty; you spent the previous day fasting and haven’t had anything to drink in many hours. And you can’t eat or drink again right away; it can take a while for the digestive system to start up again after abdominal surgery. So initially I was limited to dabbing a Q-tip on ice and using that to wet my lips. That got better as I was eased back into eating, but it’s still the most desperately thirsty I’ve ever felt.

I had plenty of painkillers available; I was initially hooked up to a drip of fentanyl, and then switched to Dilaudid when fentanyl made me nauseated. But painkillers don’t help with the worst pain after laparoscopic surgery, namely gas pain. So the surgeon can see what’s going on, laparoscopic procedures generally involve pumping you full of carbon dioxide to lift up the abdominal wall and give a clear view. That carbon dioxide is then slowly absorbed into your body, but not before applying pressure to various nerves and causing serious pain.

The worst for me was my phrenic nerve, which extends from the neck down to the diaphragm. The CO2 hit it at the lower point, and the result was sharp stabbing pain in my shoulders. This was all fine at night, as I figured out how to sleep more or less upside down on my hospital bed, so my legs were elevated and the gas would flow away from my diaphragm. But the best way to get your body to absorb the gas faster is to get up and walk around a lot, and with gas pain that’s pretty rough. I distinctly remember trying to
walk around my hospital ward and getting repeatedly lapped by an older man who was clearly ecstatic to be owning a 26-year-old.

Also embarrassing was discovering that many men, apparently including me, don’t have a really firm division between their abdominal cavity and their scrotum, so when the former is pumped full of the gas, the latter gets blown up like a carnival balloon. This is an extremely fun thing to explain to nurses, especially with your girlfriend and father both present.

But the pain went away quickly. It was half as bad the second day as the first day, half as bad the third day as the second, and on the fourth day I was feeling well enough to go home. In fact, I could’ve gone home the day before if I hadn’t failed a bladder ultrasound (the nurses would periodically ultrasound my bladder to make sure all my pee was getting out; being hospitalized is a very dignified experience, all told).

I vomited in the cab on the way home from Baltimore, and experienced some constipation my first week home. But other than that, I felt back to normal. I got home from the hospital on Thursday, three days after the surgery. That Friday, I went out to happy hour with my Vox co-workers and had a beer. On Saturday, I went out to see a movie with my dad (Anthropoid, which is quite good if you’re into watching Cillian Murphy kill some Nazis).

And while I didn’t work the next week, it felt less like recovery than like vacation. According to Steam, I logged 100 hours playing Stardew Valley, which I highly recommend. The following weekend, my girlfriend’s college friends were in town, and we all hung out and hopped from restaurant to coffee shop to bar like we would at any other time. The surgery didn’t slow me down.

Before the surgery, one of the nurses told me that most patients get to a point, usually three to four weeks after the surgery, where they stop and realize that they feel completely normal again. I hit that point in my second week back at work. It was less that I felt something specific, and more that I didn’t feel anything weird or different anymore. My life was back to where it was pre-surgery. And it had happened really, really fast.

Giving a kidney was the most rewarding experience of my life

Being able to do all this, to afford the time off work and the travel bills and hotel for my dad, is a reflection of privilege. Not everyone has an employer with benefits that generous, or good enough health to be able to donate to begin with. I know I’m profoundly lucky to be able to donate at all.

And “lucky” is really the right word. As I’m no doubt the first person to notice, being an adult is hard. You are consistently faced with choices — about your career, about your friendships, about your romantic life, about your family — that have deep moral consequences, and even when you try the best you can, you’re going to get a lot of those choices wrong. And you more often than not won’t know if you got them wrong or right.
Maybe you should’ve picked another job, where you could do more good. Maybe you should’ve gone to grad school. Maybe you shouldn’t have moved to a new city.

So I was selfishly, deeply gratified to have made at least one choice in my life that I know beyond a shadow of a doubt was the right one. I went through a week of serious pain and a mild recovery thereafter, and as a result, someone got off dialysis and gets to enjoy another nine, 10, maybe more years of life. My recipient and I recently opened up an email dialogue, and it just means the world to me — to both of us.

It’s a strange bond, the one between donor and donee. And not just between us, but among all eight people who participated in the chain on August 22, four donors and four recipients altogether. We barely know each other, but we’re literally linked by blood, by an operation that profoundly changed each of our lives. I have not regretted being part of that for a second.

Reading 6: “The Struggles of Rejecting the Gender Binary”
by Daniel Bergner reprinted from The New York Times, June 4, 2019

Why didn’t you wear makeup today?”

Jan Tate asked her client during a therapy session in May of last year. “I didn’t feel the need to.”

“Would today be the day to begin using Salem instead of Hannah?”

There was a long pause and a hushed reply: “Yeah. But it would hurt a lot worse to start asking people to call me Salem and have them not do it than not to ask them.”

Tate is a psychotherapist at the Carolina Partners clinic in Durham, N.C. She specializes in clients who are pushing against the bounds of gender. Salem is 20 and was, in the phrase Salem prefers, assigned male at birth, with a more clearly masculine name — that it is a “deadname” is all Salem will say about it. Salem uses gender-neutral they/them pronouns. They’d failed, so far, to get their parents, their sister or their two remaining friends to understand and accept that they were neither a man nor a woman, that they were nonbinary, gender fluid, gender expansive. They’d chosen the name Salem to fit with their identity, but they’d almost never asked anyone to call them by it. It was easier — definitely not easy, but easier — to let themself be considered conventionally transgender, male to female, and go by the name Hannah.

Tate, who is 31, suggested that Salem practice the request now, in the safety of her office. Sitting across from the therapist, they could hardly manage it — “Can you call me Salem?” — and as soon as they did, they turned their face away. Their brown hair fell with a loose curl just past their slim shoulders. Unlike two days before, when Salem arrived for therapy with their full lips in dark red lipstick and a dash of blush across each cheekbone, and with their long fingernails painted a bright lavender, this afternoon there was only the nail polish.
They wore a gray V-neck T-shirt and jeans. With an ankle crossed over the other knee, they picked at the rubber rim of one of their sneakers, picking, picking. The pain of being nonbinary was “excruciating,” they told me later, a torment mixing disconnection from themself and isolation from everyone else. Tate said to me that “I often find myself gut-knotted after sessions with Salem, because of the things they don’t say” — because of the feelings Salem kept locked away, even from her, for fear that their experience was inexpressible, incomprehensible. She imagined Salem in an “abyss,” undergoing a torture that was the emotional equivalent of “taking a saw blade and cutting into the skin of an arm.”

Tate was raised Southern Baptist on a small tobacco-and-cattle farm in a town not far from Salem’s. She is cisgender — the gender she was assigned at birth and her sense of identity match up. But she’s gay, and as a teenager, when she was struggling with her sexuality, she found solace in talks with the father of a close friend, a former deacon at her church, a middle-aged doctor who was making a full transition from male to female and was barred from the congregation and kicked out of her medical practice. Ever since, Tate has felt keenly for anyone pitted against gender conformity. She’s especially invested in the battles of people like Salem, who yearn not to go from one category to the other but to escape altogether. And philosophically, she’s electrified by the profound challenge that people like Salem put up against dominant preconceptions. What if our most fundamental means of perceiving and classifying one another is illusory and can be swept away?

As Tate worked with Salem, she had, at home, a pet tortoise; whenever she mentioned it in conversation, she used “they” and “them.” With a freckled, impish face, she relishes small acts of defiance. The windowsills in her office were lined with flowers she’d pilfered from various spots around the city. In her first session with Salem, months earlier, when Salem clung to silence, she coaxed them into speech by asking which was their favorite of the flowers and plants on the sills and floor. They chose a dwarfish plant with twisted stems.

Except for therapy, Salem rarely left the house where they live with their family, in a town that’s a half-hour’s drive outside Durham, amid farmland and forest. The town center consists of a little gun shop, a squat brick Post Office and an old stone church. Tate, who wore a floral dress and brown wingtips, asked whether Salem could “imagine a world where the binary does not exist.” She went on: “We all police one another. Women police women, men police men. If the policing didn’t exist, what would things be like for you?”

But Salem couldn’t envision such a fantasy. They looked increasingly distressed, face rigid and eyes glazed.

Tate switched the subject to the hormones Salem had been taking for two months: a low dose of spironolactone, a testosterone blocker, and estradiol, a type of estrogen. Salem felt driven to feminize their body, to lessen their constant alienation from their own anatomy — and their self-revulsion — but wasn’t at all sure what the right combination
of feminine and masculine would be. Different days brought different answers. From the hormones, their breasts were buds. “I could foresee breasts bothering me,” Salem told Tate, though they believed they wanted them. “I just have to hope the hormones don’t make too big of a problem.”

Even so, Tate commented tentatively that Salem seemed more confident since starting the hormones, that Salem seemed to be making progress in accepting themself.

“While I’m presenting myself as more comfortable,” Salem mumbled, head bowed, “the feeling I have is that I hate myself.” They sometimes called themself a monster. Tate has another nonbinary client who cut themself relentlessly across their shoulders, leaving “scars on scars on scars” that the client asked Tate to touch. Weeks before this session, Salem stripped naked in their bedroom and, with a marker, scrawled “tranny” and “faggot” all over their body, slurs that were inaccurate but screamed their self-disgust.

For the next minutes, Salem tried to criticize Tate, to lash out at her, for failing to help them enough, and Tate encouraged the effort. But quickly Salem fell mute. Body utterly still, they withdrew further and further, the glaze of their eyes clouding, until Tate felt that her client was in a state of dissociation, totally detached from their own surroundings, absent from the room, from themself, gone.

Tate grabbed a bunch of blossoms and put them in Salem’s hands: purple irises, blue bachelor buttons. The colors and smells — the immediacy of sensation — were a way to rescue them, to bring them back. She took a blank index card from her desk and asked Salem to dictate to her some personal facts, another method of making her client rehabit themself.

“I play video games,” they said tonelessly. Then a retreat: “My name is Hannah.”

Tate wrote these things out and gave Salem the card. Hunched over, shoulders curled inward, Salem clutched the card and the flowers.

Just in the last few years, nonbinary identity has been slowly seeping into societal consciousness. A nonbinary actor, Asia Kate Dillon, has starred since 2017 as a nonbinary character on the Showtime series “Billions.” A raft of new nonbinary models are featured in fashion spreads, and a Coke ad, aired during the 2018 Super Bowl, paired an androgynous face with a pointed gender-neutral pronoun. “There’s a Coke,” the voice-over said, “for he and she and her and me and them.” Nonbinary as a category has even slipped into state laws. In 2016, an Oregon court granted a plaintiff the right to label themself nonbinary on their driver’s license, and by now, though the Trump administration proclaims that gender is a simple matter of biology, some dozen states, from New York to Utah, offer some form of Oregon’s flexibility. Yet the nation’s glimmers of tolerance don’t necessarily mean much — even in New York, let alone in rural North Carolina — when you’re living in opposition to our most basic way of seeing and sorting and comprehending one another.
It’s impossible to say how many Salems, how many nonbinary people, there are across the United States. Surveys have yet to deal with this reliably. And any researcher who takes on the question will run into a problem with terminology. An abundance of labels, with subtle distinctions, are in play. Neutrois and gender nonconforming and demiboy and demigirl and pangender and genderqueer are among the array of closely related identities that could confound any demographer. Another complication is that many nonbinary people also call themselves transgender or trans — not, as Salem has, to avoid explaining themselves, but as an umbrella term, encompassing all kinds of self-definition, all sorts of physical transformation and transgression of the norms of F and M.

“Data are scarce, and the research gaps are vast,” Jody Herman, a public-policy scholar at the U.C.L.A. School of Law’s Williams Institute, a think tank devoted to issues of gender and sexual orientation, told me, cautioning against any estimate of the country’s nonbinary population. That said, she pointed to an analysis of two federal public-health surveys, conducted by phone in 2014 and 2015, on which 19 states included a brief optional section about gender identity. The results suggest — tenuously — that the total of all transgender-identified adults in the United States is in the neighborhood of 1.4 million. The optional section had a lone follow-up question seeking more specificity: “Do you consider yourself to be male-to-female, female-to-male or gender nonconforming?” Around one-fifth of those who identified as trans chose nonconforming. Yet at the very outset of the section, any interview subject asking for clarification about the meaning of transgender was given a traditional binary definition along with an example of someone born male but living as female. So anyone who rejected both male and female classifications was potentially excluded. All told, the results didn’t provide much insight into nonbinary numbers; instead, the surveys were a reminder of the confusion and ignorance surrounding the topic.

For anyone interested in nonbinary demographics, the surveys had another shortcoming. They excluded anyone under age 18, and according to clinicians who specialize in gender, it’s among the young that nonbinary identity is taking hold most rapidly. “It’s growing exponentially,” Linda Hawkins, co-director of the Gender and Sexuality Development Clinic at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, told me about the number of kids and youth in her practice — from ages 6 to 21 — who identify as nonbinary. Hawkins, who was a clinical professor of Tate’s, has been working in the field for two decades. She talked about the importance, for young children, of recent picture books about fluidity, and of education programs for pediatricians, who are taught to respond with calm understanding when parents report that their children say they are “in the middle.” At least, she added with a rueful laugh, pediatricians are taught this in places like Philadelphia. For older kids, the internet has delivered “a surge of nonbinary information, of nuances in gender expression, in the last five years,” she said. “It has connected kids to supportive communities. Looking back, there were always nonbinary kids, but it’s only in the last few years that there has been the language — language to not feel alone, to have a flag.”
Laura A. Jacobs, a therapist in New York who focuses on L.G.B.T. clients, has seen some of the same nonbinary momentum. Jacobs is 49 and nonbinary (they prefer “genderqueer”), but Jacobs is a rarity; the identity, they said, is the province mainly of people under 30. Its underground beginnings, they explained, can be traced well back in time, but one iteration emerged in the 1990s, with theorists like Judith Butler, who wrote about gender as a culturally scripted performance, based in social norms rather than biology, imposed much more than innate; and with activists like Kate Bornstein, who fully surgically transitioned from male to female in the mid-1980s, only to write in her 1994 manifesto, “Gender Outlaw”: “I know I’m not a man ... and I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m probably not a woman. ... The trouble is, we’re living in a world that insists we be one or the other. ... All my life, my nontraditional gender identity had been my biggest secret, my deepest shame.”

With their long hair in a ponytail, and wearing thick leather boots and a button-down shirt and tie, Jacobs said that over the last several years, some psychiatric and medical providers have started to let go of binary assumptions and the idea that hormones and surgery should be offered only to those who suffer an agonizing need to remake the body as completely as possible from female to male or male to female. It may not be easy, but nowadays people who wish to exist somewhere other than these two endpoints, and who feel they can’t get far enough by nonmedical means — clothing choices; a name change; chest binding; penis tucking and taping — can find endocrinologists and surgeons to treat them. Still, the goal of treatment is often unclear to the patient themself; the prevailing binary paradigm doesn’t apply. The need is to get beyond, but how?

“Think of getting out of the shower and standing in front of a mirror,” Jacobs said. “For most people, cis people, it’s easy to see those body parts as belonging to us, even if we might rather they be smaller or bigger or more muscular or whatnot. Now imagine that the mirror is a little blurry, streaky with steam. And let’s say you’re a binary trans person who hasn’t yet transitioned. Around the edges of the blurriness, between the streaks, you can at least imagine the reflection you want; you know what it is. But the nonbinary person may not have an image; even with the help of the foggy mirror, they may not be able to find themself.”

Jacobs heard themself straining to communicate the dilemma they hoped to describe. Trying to evoke nonbinary experience for binary people, in a world where nearly everyone is raised with an either-or concept of gender, can feel liberating, but also futile: wearying, dispiriting, sometimes devastating. Whether in culturally conservative or liberal America, the subjective divide can feel too wide to bridge. This was something I heard again and again during countless conversations spanning eight states. And being nonbinary can feel inexplicable to yourself; the longings for physical alteration can feel both indefinite and indefensible. The harshest doubt can come from within.

“I am reconstructing sea level during Marine Isotope Stage 5a,” Kai Morsink, a Columbia University senior, told a roomful of earth-and-environmental-sciences students as the class gave presentations last November. Kai is 21, was assigned female at birth, uses masculine pronouns and is nonbinary. In a dress shirt, a black-and-white vest and
black chinos, with his dark hair clipped short and parted boyishly on the side, he stood at
the lectern, speaking at high speed and clicking through graphs and images of fossilized
coral. He sounded nothing less than thrilled as he described his study site on Barbados,
detailed its tectonic history, discussed the density of information his reef contained,
elaborated on its relevance to climate change and announced, as his 10 minutes came to a
close, “My future holds a lot of data collection!”

A classmate, responding to Kai’s exuberance, raised a hand and asked how he’d found
such a perfect project. And indeed, to spend time with Kai is to be entranced by his
expressiveness on topics ranging from paleoceanography to gender theory, from classical
singing to his own sense of inescapable difference. “It’s like standing right beside a
hanging punching bag,” he said, as we talked one afternoon at a cafe near the Columbia
campus. “You push it away, and it swings back to hit you. You push it away farther, and
it hits you harder. You push it again — farther — and it clobbers you.”

Kai talked about having long identified with “effeminate, foppish” males in literature,
from Romeo to recurrent types in romance novels, and about adoring Julie Andrews as a
gender-pretzeling nightclub performer in “Victor/Victoria.” He wore, that day, another
dress shirt and vest — blue and red, floral-patterned, flashy. Underneath, as always, he
wore a binder. He said he’d decided on top surgery, the removal of his breasts, as a next
step, to be taken soon after graduation.

But he was still debating hormones, whose effects are unpredictable — frighteningly so
for Kai. There would be facial hair, sparse or thick. His voice would drop to an unknown
degree. His wish was to be perceived as more masculine yet not male, feminine yet not
female. What precisely he desired, physically, was a puzzle he was forever trying to
solve. And he treasured singing as a mezzo-soprano; he dreaded that loss. But when I
asked about the first time he felt the heavy punching bag swinging back to strike him, or
any hint that he couldn’t fit into conventional notions of gender, Kai replied with
resolution. “There are ways I could speak retrospectively,” he said. “The way I was
terrified of getting my ears pierced and fled the mall when I was 11. The way I freaked
out over my period. There’s a temptation to shape a narrative about how it’s inherent in
me to be nonbinary. But I want to go the other way and say, we’re all born nonbinary.
We learn gender. And at some point, some of us can’t stand it anymore.”

Kai grew up in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington; both his parents are
economists. He came out to them as genderqueer a year and a half ago, and they, as he
put it, were willing “to step through the door” he held wide for them, the door into his
way of seeing himself. They read a piece of creative writing he gave them, a meditation
using Dadaism to explicate the nonsense of either-or. His mother asked if she could buy
him new clothes. “Shopping for clothes was something we’d always done,” he said. “It
was her way of saying, ‘I want to keep being part of your life.’ That was really stepping
through the door. And then, all the nerve-rackingness of shopping in the men’s section of
a department store and trying on pants and worrying about how people are looking at you
and reading your gender, it would have been really hard to do on my own. But my mother
was there. Just like when we’d shopped together before. And that made it normal.”
Not everyone in Kai’s world, though, has been so willing. Coming out requires preparation, putting on emotional armor. On a road trip through Pennsylvania, he confided recently in one of his closest childhood friends, hoping for the intimacy of the sleepovers they’d once had. The woman listened. She wasn’t critical. But as they drove, and as Kai invited her repeatedly to ask questions, she remained disengaged. Recounting his friend’s resistance, pain caught at Kai’s quick words, making him pause. The pain came both from without, from the friend’s refusal, and from within. “One of the hardest things for me,” he said, “is to say to myself, Yes, I’m real.” His voice trembled. “I don’t make sense. I have this theoretical framework which I think is better for the world, a framework where we have different bodies but where gender is almost entirely socially constructed, where people can articulate whatever they want about their gender. But if the theory is right, then I wouldn’t care at all about transitioning” to some undetermined physiological midpoint.

Logically and philosophically, for Kai, bodies signified nothing; physiology was without meaning. “But I do — I care, very much,” he said. Logic and longing were irreconcilable. And for someone as smart and scientific as Kai, this was barely endurable. The contradiction between anatomical irrelevance and anatomical yearning was an existential challenge. “What I’m feeling is that there’s this internal, eternal thing that is always going to be saying, ‘You as you exist are not real.’ ”

He was on the brink of tears. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to get all dramatic on you.”

When Salem was 8, their family moved from Plaistow, N.H., to Indian Land, S.C. Sometime before then, they recalled, their sister was learning to paint her fingernails and asked to do Salem’s. They let their sister use only clear polish, for fear that they would like the colors too well. In South Carolina, they endured almost a decade of bullying — for being “borderline obese from big stress eating,” Salem told me (since then Salem has slimmed down by running late at night, when the roads around their town are empty), for their good grades (until, in high school, anxiety kept them home so often that their grades bottomed out and they barely graduated) and maybe, they can’t be sure, because other kids detected a difference that Salem wasn’t yet admitting to themself. Salem was called porky and brown-noser and faggot and punched in the chest and hit in the groin with footballs and dodge balls and a makeshift ball and chain wielded at high velocity by a boy they considered a friend.

Salem withdrew to a mostly online existence, in which friendships — with three classmates, counting the bully with the ball and chain — consisted of playing video games, each kid in a separate, solo space at home but communing over shared screens, gunning and grenading enemy fighters. Salem invested so much time in the warfare of one game that they eventually rose past two million other players, they said, murmuring with enough modesty to be believed, and were fleetingly ranked first on the game’s leader board.

“I was very angry at that time, really miserable,” they said. Online, they and their friends lured solitary, hapless players into the front seat of their armored vehicle with promises
of safety. Salem, sitting behind, shot them in the back of the head. In the mirror, Salem despised their new facial hair; they tried to overcome the repulsion by growing mutton chops and a scraggily beard. They spent uncountable hours on YouTube channels that espoused white nationalism and denounced, as one alt-right ranter declared, the “feminization” and “mass, uncontrolled third-world immigration” that was destroying Western civilization. They steered their three friends to these channels: “I was spreading my awful views.” With these friends, Salem mocked binary trans people and cracked jokes about nonbinary gender and gender fluidity, saying there was no such thing. But they didn’t let themself think too much about the terms they scorned, “because,” they told me, “I guess my self was trying to protect itself. If I had thought about gender for any length of time, I might have come to some uncomfortable conclusions.”

For Salem, as for so many, the internet wound up being an inadvertent route to self-recognition. In the late summer of 2016 — soon after Salem finished high school and their family moved to North Carolina, where their father had a new job managing an auto-repair shop in Raleigh — they first stared at manga featuring feminine men having sex with women. Salem was attracted to the women, while finding themself wishing they looked like those men. Before that, something else had happened online. Despite their alt-right allegiance, they were drawn to the economic ideas of Bernie Sanders’s presidential campaign. After the November election, Salem’s new politics took them to anarchist sites and from there to videos posted by people announcing themselves as nonbinary. They were taken with the caustic style of a video called “I Am Genderqueer and Wtf That Means” by a YouTuber named ContraPoints.

Yet self-recognition, for Salem, wasn’t liberating; it was the opposite. It required secrecy. It deepened Salem’s hiding, their isolation. The pain of self-concealment accumulated for months, until, Salem said, “I would rather have gotten kicked out of the house and become homeless and died than go on the way I was living.”

They decided to tell their sister, who is two years older, before telling their parents. The talk, in the summer of 2017, did not go well. Their sister, in Salem’s memory, was bewildered and dismissive: “I explained to her that I planned to present myself as more feminine and change my name to something more feminine, and she was like, Well, if you don’t feel like you’re a woman, why would you want to do any of that?” Salem had no coherent answer. Language eluded them. She later told them it must be a phase, that Salem would get over it, all of which, for Salem, felt like a drubbing of their reality.

Their sister remembered this conversation somewhat differently, when I spoke with her by phone, with Salem on the line. “I was confused about what they were telling me,” she said. “I think I reacted fairly positively.”

Later in the summer, Salem steeled themself to come out to two of their three South Carolina friends. (Salem chose to wait on saying anything to the bully.) It was 3 in the morning. Playing a Vietnam War game online, Salem and one of the friends were North Vietnamese soldiers defending a hilltop, with a napalmed landscape separating them from the American infantry lower down on the hill. The second friend was just listening; all three had an audio link. Sporadically the Americans gave up their jungle cover and tried to rush near enough to take out the North Vietnamese, but Salem, in the role of an N.V.A.
squad commander, gunned them down with a light, low-recoil assault rifle that was ideal for the situation. During a lull, Salem figured it was time. But given their failure with their sister, they elided the truth and took a more comprehensible tack. Via audio, they said they were a trans woman.

“You’re [expletive] with me,” Salem recounted their friends saying over and over. Convincing the two took some doing, because of Salem’s alt-right history. With scattered Americans lurching forward to take potshots across a field of charred trees and bomb craters, Salem aimed swiftly and killed enemy grunts and told their two friends they were serious, adding, with all the hope they could muster, “I’m still the same person, so not much has changed.”

**JP Hyzy has** a discreet tattoo of the pronoun “them” on one arm. They’re in their mid-20s, are in training to become a massage therapist and recalled going to the bathroom at a concert in Carrboro, a town outside Chapel Hill, after the passage of North Carolina’s House Bill 2. The state’s so-called “bathroom bill” won overwhelming approval in the legislature in 2016, mandating that in publicly-owned buildings people had to use the restroom corresponding to their biological sex as signified on their birth certificate. Hyzy, who takes hormones and has breasts, said they were followed into the men’s room by someone who then pounded on Hyzy’s stall door. Nothing more happened, but the moment was terrifying. After threats of boycotts by national companies and the N.C.A.A., the law has since been repealed, but it’s the source of continuing legislative and legal battles; for Hyzy, neither the fear nor the feeling of denigration has dissipated. “I am this thing,” they said, “that isn’t allowed.”

Like Salem, Hyzy first encountered the word “nonbinary” online. Shortly before that, three years ago, they thought they might be a trans woman. They took the step of going to a voice clinic with the paradoxical hope of learning to pitch their voice higher but not of having a more feminine voice, not exactly. The intake questions of the clinic staff, who assumed Hyzy was embarking on a binary transition — “When are you getting the surgery?” — helped Hyzy to realize that wasn’t the goal.

Yet what set of alterations would bring peace, a feeling that the physical is in sync with the psychological, is uncertain. Maybe, Hyzy said, it will be elusive forever. One thing, though, is achingly plain: “It’s hard to get people to understand that nonbinary isn’t made up.” Three practitioners Hyzy has turned to in Chapel Hill — a therapist, a psychiatrist and another therapist with a professed specialty in gender — have responded with bafflement.

H.B. 2 turned out to be a harbinger of a broader political strategy on the American right. The effort has featured the **Trump administration’s decrees** that gender should be legally defined, immutably, by biology at birth, and the arguments made by Roger Severino, Trump’s director of the Office for Civil Rights at the Department of Health and Human Services, that positions taken by the Obama administration — including letting openly trans people serve in the military — amounted to a “radical new gender ideology” and must be rolled back. For the nonbinary, though, negation can even come from within the L.G.B.T. community. David Baker-Hargrove is a therapist and the founding president
and co-chief executive of Two Spirit Health, which provides medical and mental health care to L.G.B.T. clients throughout Central Florida. He’s gay and has been working with binary trans people for more than two decades, yet he remembered that with his initial nonbinary cases three or four years ago, he had to “really explore the oppressive in my own thinking about gender norms” and felt, at first, “I can’t get there.” He added: “It took me a while. Our brains fight fluidity. We like this or that. Nonbinary presents a lot of challenges.” And not only cis people resist the concept. “Transgender people can react with ‘Pick a side’ or ‘Nonbinary is an insult to my experience — it’s crap.’” Baker-Hargrove has recently begun identifying as nonbinary.

To make the doubt and dismissal faced by nonbinary people worse, some physicians and surgeons who are committed to treating binary trans patients with hormones and surgery are wary of doing the same for the nonbinary, questioning whether the interventions are psychiatrically, and therefore medically, necessary. The bible of psychiatric diagnosis, the D.S.M., gives meager help; its criteria for the condition of “gender dysphoria” are essentially binary. And insurers sometimes refuse to pay for care that isn’t couched in a binary narrative. So the nonbinary can be forced to dissemble, to erase their own truths and fabricate a familiar transmale or transfemale tale, in order to get the treatment — the hormones and breast removals, the Adam’s-apple reductions and facial recontourings — they seek.

In their sun-filled apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, D’hana Perry worked one morning last winter on an installation for an exhibit at the New Museum. Perry, a nonbinary video artist and D.J. and a program manager at an L.G.B.T. health center, sat before laptops and a MIDI controller as they contemplated a piece that would pay homage to the role of three trans activists in the Stonewall riots of 1969, an event widely recognized as pivotal in gay history but scarcely known as being partly driven by — and being crucial for — trans people. Perry was designing video projections of the three leaders, Marsha P. Johnson, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and Sylvia Rivera, and talked about how their work contributed to the relative freedom Perry feels today. As an African-American, Perry also wanted to honor them; all three are people of color.

Perry, who is 41 and was assigned female at birth, had top surgery at 33 and has been taking hormones for 4 years. Their voice is high, but their beard is heavy. Dressed, this morning, in a red-and-black-checked lumberjack shirt, with their hair in dreads, they looked “like a straight guy,” they said, quoting their friends. This characterization didn’t sit well with Perry. “Straight guy” was not how they felt. But Perry has been wearing thick flannels and hoodies as a nonbinary person since before the hormones and beard, when their round face was smooth and the masculine clothes signaled complication, and Perry wasn’t going to change styles now. They were tired of worrying about how they were perceived. They weren’t going to fret over their wardrobe. There was art to be made, history and progress to be commemorated.

Perry exuded a comfort with themself that was hard won. They grew up in Cleveland; their father was a preacher at an A.M.E. Zionist church where their mother was the music director; Perry was forbidden to attend health classes at school when the topic was sex education. Their father died before Perry identified as nonbinary; with their mother, Perry
attempted a delicate, incremental coming out, spread over more than a decade, with mentions of being trans and of “breast reduction” surgery. Their mother, Perry told me, refused to listen. She said she would rather be lied to. Perry still wasn’t sure whether she fully acknowledged to herself that Perry is nonbinary, but a year ago there was a breakthrough: She traveled to Brooklyn and joined Perry and their nonbinary partner, along with two cis queer friends and one of their mothers, for Thanksgiving dinner. “My mother misgendered me all night,” Perry said, “calling me ‘she’ and ‘girl,’ and it drove my friends crazy, but I told them, ‘You don’t know the way it used to be.’” Perry’s comfort seemed to come in part from age, from having lived longer than most outside the presumptive boundaries. The same seemed true for Laura Jacobs, the 49-year-old nonbinary therapist who spoke to me about the foggy mirror. As a boy in the 1970s, at around age 6, Jacobs remembered, they were enthralled by the way ailing characters on “Star Trek” were cured on a high-tech bed with a device that encased a portion of the body. On the playroom floor in the family’s suburban house, Jacobs lay on their back with a chair over them, imagining that this version of the Trekkian contraption would cure their unhappiness by turning them into a girl.

They were in their late 20s before they summoned the courage to raise their yearnings with their therapist, who had no relevant expertise, and in their early 30s when they started taking hormones, developed breasts and underwent genital surgery. But the straightforward wish of their childhood had, by then, grown complicated in ways they couldn’t find words for. “I remember wondering during those years” — the late ’90s, the early 2000s — “if a middle path was possible, but I had no idea what a middle path would be. I didn’t hear ‘genderqueer’ till years after my surgery. I thought gender was a binary choice, so I made the choice to switch sides.” In addition to their work as a therapist, Jacobs is a speaker at medical schools and trans conferences, a champion for both nonbinary and binary trans people and co-author of a book called “‘You’re in the Wrong Bathroom!’ And 20 Other Myths and Misconceptions About Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People.” Jacobs is also something of a visionary, outlining a future when technology that’s already near — sensate prostheses; virtual reality that’s thoroughly immersive — will make our relationships to our bodies “artistic, the results of acts of creation. We won’t have to stick with two arms and two legs, and our genitalia won’t necessarily look male or female, with merely a penis or a vagina.”

They thought back, during one of our many conversations, to the aftermath of their own decision to have a vagina surgically constructed, a decision made in the absence of the language and intricate self-understanding that defines their life now. They’ve always been sexually attracted to women and “femme-leaning” people. “I was having sex with women,” they said, “and a lot of women who have sex with women use strap-ons. I refused to even consider it. I couldn’t reconcile having made the choice to get rid of the real thing with using a plastic replica. The idea put me into shock; I would dissociate, become a deer in headlights. Wearing a strap-on symbolized a massive mistake. I felt that exploring it would lead to massive regret. But as the years went on, I started to dabble. It was hot, fun.”
Our talk shifted again from the past to the future. Jacobs spoke about foreseeing a time when people passing each other on the street wouldn’t immediately, unconsciously sort one another into male or female, which even Jacobs reflexively does. “I don’t know what genders are going to look like four generations from now,” they added, allowing that they might sound utopian, naïve. “I think we’re going to perceive each other as people. The classifications we live under will fall by the wayside.”

Among the voices of the young, there are echoes and amplifications of Jacobs’s optimism, along with the stories of private struggle. “There are as many genders as there are people,” Emmy Johnson, a nonbinary employee at Jan Tate’s clinic, told me with earnest authority. Johnson was about to sign up for a new dating app that caters to the genderqueer. “Sex is different as a nonbinary person,” they said. “You’re free of gender roles, and the farther you can get from those scripts, the better sex is going to be.” Their tone was more triumphal: the better life is going to be. “The gender boxes are exploding,” they declared.

A New Jersey-based therapist in her 50s, who describes herself as a butch lesbian and who has worked with nearly two dozen nonbinary high school and college students, is more circumspect. She guessed that many of her assigned-female nonbinary clients would once have lived as butch or — a subcategory — stone butch lesbians. “Are we just being faddish in the wish for more and more individualized identities?” she asked. And what percentage of the nonbinary kids now coming to her will be calling themselves nonbinary 10 or 15 years in the future? “To tell you the truth, I can’t be sure.” But despite her skepticism, her sense is that something urgent is going on, that new and necessary territory is being delineated. She’s not, at base, at odds with Jacobs, who wonders if we will all gradually question whether “the gender binary is inherent to human experience.”

In the months after Salem confided, on the Vietnamese hillside, that they were a trans woman, their two South Carolina friends went on ridiculing trans people, but the friends still played war games with them and slowly cut back on their jokes. Next, Salem informed their third South Carolina friend. He later replied, they said, with “a transphobic tirade — he called me a tranny and a faggot and told me to kill myself.” Within Salem’s family, too, there was the good and the not-so-good. When, in late August 2017, they told their parents about being a trans woman and about naming themself Hannah, they weren’t kicked out of the house. Their mother helped Salem find a therapist — Tate. And their father helped them paint their bedroom in light blue, white and pink stripes, the colors of the trans flag, though he also had counseled Salem not to consider themself transgender until they’d had sex, as if Salem’s first romp with a girl would fix everything.

Their father got them a job keeping inventory within the chain of auto-repair shops where he worked, advising Salem to use their deadname and hide who they’d become. (About this, and the suggestion that Salem not settle on being trans until they’d lost their virginity, Salem’s father told me alternately that he hadn’t said these things, that he might have implied something about the effect of having sex for the first time and that too much time had passed; I should “write whatever Salem remembers,” he said.) Salem lasted
through two days of training, anxiety spiking over what might happen if they were found out and depression deepening because they were making themself invisible, concealing Hannah and, beneath that, doubly burying their nonbinary self. “The salary was a good deal,” Salem said, but on the day they were supposed to turn in their paperwork and join the staff, “I just lay in bed.” They returned to being housebound. “I just couldn’t get out of bed.”

Salem had an inkling that there were other places, beyond their hometown, beyond North Carolina, where they might not feel quite so alien and alone. Tate had mentioned Philadelphia, where she’d trained, or Brooklyn. In therapy one day last spring, Salem talked about the main character in “Into the Wild”: a young man, cut off in the Alaskan wilderness, who starves to death because he’s unaware that there’s a spot, a half mile from where he’s wasting away, where he could cross the swollen river that entraps him. On the other side, he could soon get food. “People say the dude was an idiot,” Salem said to Tate, “because he could have lived if he realized there was a crossing nearby. But I can understand him. To me, he’s relatable.” It was as if Salem both knew and didn’t know that other places existed.

After the session, Salem drove northward on the state highway, toward the exit for their town. They passed the turnoff and kept going in the direction of the Virginia line. They’d never done anything like this before. They drove, they told me the next day, with their town behind them, for an hour before they turned around.

When I spent more time with them last summer, Salem had just noted their hormone treatment in a chat among players during an online game. Someone let loose with slurs, Salem fired back and another player piped up that she was a trans woman. This was a minor godsend amid the plundering and killing onscreen. Right away, the trans woman, who said she was 19, became Salem’s close friend, at a distance of hundreds of miles. They talked privately online every day and night; Salem listened to her troubles with her father, and she gave Salem the courage to try buying their first bra.

Salem’s breasts had grown. The plan was to buy a sports bra both for exercising and “to compress, because sometimes” — though the hormones seemed a success on most days — “I’m not a fan of my breasts.” Salem drove to Chapel Hill, the most liberal community in the area, and sat paralyzed in a shopping-center parking lot with the trans woman coaching them by phone. At last, they ventured into Target. They scouted the store, angling into the women’s section. They fled without touching an item, searching for a place where they could delay, bypassing electronics because a salesperson was sure to approach, and the last thing Salem wanted, in this state of mortification over bra shopping and over their mix of jeans, Vans, T-shirt, nail polish, mascara and small but noticeable breasts, was to interact with anyone. An aisle of groceries gave refuge. They stared at varieties of pasta. They got their new friend on the phone again and headed back to women’s clothing, figuring that this way it would seem they were shopping for someone else; they plucked two sports bras from a rack and made it through self-checkout.
To Tate, the friendship was reassuring progress, especially after Salem and the trans woman communicated by live video chat, proving that the friend was who she claimed to be. There was progress, too, in all the colors Salem had begun using on successive fingernails — greenish-yellow, pink, white, orange, purple, blue. Salem had by then finally explained to their parents that they weren’t actually a trans woman, that in fact they were nonbinary, but their parents, in Salem’s telling, were unresponsive, almost as if they couldn’t hear. (Salem’s mother had a different version: “We were just so open about everything,” she told me.) During therapy sessions, Salem still sometimes lapsed into despair, yet by this winter, online, they made some friends from Durham and Raleigh, an eclectic bunch, sexually queer, genderqueer, and started going out with them in public. Early this spring Salem took part in an International Transgender Day of Visibility, having their picture taken, in an orange dress and combat boots, with 10 or so binary trans and nonbinary people on a street in downtown Raleigh. The housebound Salem seemed to be in the past.

This May, pairing a rose-colored dress with their combat boots, Salem walked the paths on the campus of a Durham community college, where they had just enrolled, and began their required classes. Their plan is to transfer eventually to a four-year program far from home. Salem has always loved history; when we first met, our discussions detoured into World War II historiography. Lately, after reading, on their own, Peter Kropotkin’s “The Conquest of Bread” and listening to Slavoj Zizek’s lectures online, they imagine someday being a professor, teaching economic history and sparking social change. I asked, a few weeks ago, whether they ever envision teaching about gender.

“Obviously, talking about gender is something I can do, because I’ve been doing it for a year with you,” they said. “But I don’t want to make a career out of it.” They thought, then, about standing before a lecture hall filled with students. “As a nonbinary person, existing in front of people is a political statement. I will be there, existing in front of them.”
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