

Sifting Through Gen Z Stereotypes: Using Critical Empathy to Assess Writers' Invisible Learning

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What narratives shape the Gen Z experience and how do these impact instructor evaluation of student work? This article explores how cultural narratives can undermine student resilience and challenges educators to reframe rigor. The piece features assessment data to describe the impact of student self-annotation to help build positive academic self-concept. Using both close analysis of a student's self-annotations and reporting on macro-level program assessment efforts (N=65), the authors highlight the ways students developed self-regulation, metacognition, and agency. They call for critical empathy as a reflexive lens all instructors can use to disrupt stereotypes and forge more egalitarian learning spaces.

Keywords: Gen Z, resilience, assessment, self-annotation, writing, critical empathy

INTRODUCTION

If asked to recall a powerful memory, chances are good you would remember a story. If the memory was about your educational journey, you might talk about an inspiring teacher, about the triumph of adversity overcome, or about falling in love with a discipline. Thus, we can see the way narrative is connected to emotion. Cognitive neuroscientist Valerie Hardcastle (2003) asserts that emotion is the "core" around which we structure our views of ourselves and the world" (p. 43). Far from mere fiction, she reminds us that stories help us develop identity and make meaning, which in turn shapes our actions. In this way, fiction creates fact. When it comes to education, narratives can activate emotional engagement that can create more extensive neural networks (Byrnes, 2001), and learning proceeds better when students have internalized a positive self-narrative and feel emotionally secure (Jensen, 2005). Thus, "we use our emotions cognitively" (Hardcastle, 2003, p. 43). Therefore, it is worth considering what kinds of narratives dominate higher education today and what impact these might have on student identity, motivation, and learning.

Let us begin with the narratives we tell about academic rigor. How do we define rigor? Something that requires muscle, endurance, and may cause a degree of suffering to overcome? (A muscle-bound

weightlifter straining to lift 400-pounds?) Unyielding, inflexible, austerity? (A brutal economic regime to combat scarcity?) A condition that makes life difficult, challenging, or uncomfortable? (A Midwest winter?) Each definition evokes associations that might not lead to the kinds of engagement and emotional security most necessary for learning. Further, such harsh academic narratives, when they become unconscious commonplaces and when combined with certain cultural narratives, can have unintended deleterious consequences on students. Take, for example, the cultural narratives we tell about the current generation of traditionally-aged college students, Gen Z.

A caveat: there is nothing new about complaints about young people. Seder (2013) compiled quite a list of historical complaints about young people ruining everything. For example, in 20 BCE Horace despaired over “a progeny yet more corrupt” [than ever came before] (Book III Odes). The *Wise Man’s Forecast Against the Evil Time* (circa 1624) declared “Youth were never more saucy.” In 1780, Thomas Sheridan descried their “total neglect of the art of speaking... [where] English is likely to become mere jargon.” An 1853 issue of the *Mother’s Journal* described them as “full of self-conceit and admiration,” and an 1859 issue of *Scientific American* was horrified by a “pernicious amusement of a very inferior character” that was currently all the rage with young adults... referring to the game of chess.

STEREOTYPES ABOUT GEN Z

However, there do seem to be a powerful set of narratives that shape Gen Z identity in uniquely troubling ways. Gen Z are those students born mid-to-late 1990s through 2012. Some refer to them as the first generation of digital natives or as iGen because they were the first to spend their entire adolescence with SMART phones (i-Phone launched in 2007). Thus, one of the most common narratives we tell about Gen Z is that it is **always tethered** to an electronic device. For many educators, a tethered student is a distracted student, perhaps even a lazy and narcissistic student who prefers constant entertainment and peer validation to a 60-minute lecture on macro-economics. A second ubiquitous narrative is that Gen Z is **protected and privileged**, benefitting from helicopter/snowplow/lawnmower parents who monitor all aspects of their children’s lives and remove all adversity from their paths. These two narratives are stereotypes, as they certainly do not describe the experiences of all young people and are oversimplifications of complex social realities. Nevertheless, these stereotypes frequently find their way into faculty conversations about “students these days” and their perceptions of student entitlement and incivility, see examples in *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* Dear Student column: Dear Student: No I Won’t Change the Grade You Deserve or Dear Student: My Name Is Not ‘Hey’ (Patton, 2015).

How Gen Z Stereotypes Can Bias Assessment

Unfortunately, like any other stereotype, these narratives can unconsciously filter in and create bias. When not critically examined, they can affect how we build relationships with students and how we evaluate their work. Think about the extent to which these narratives can create a negative skew. Consider, for example, this first sentence from an essay written by a first-year college student: “*Most people have believed that relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, can be related to particular movies we would watch or from beliefs we have gained while growing up.*” Camfield’s informal survey of over 300 college instructors from both 2- and 4-year public and private institutions conducted through faculty development workshops in regions ranging from California to Ohio, to North Carolina, to Washington, D.C. revealed that approximately 80% of evaluators make negative judgments about the student’s work. The most common terms they used to describe the sentence were that it is “awkward,” “uninteresting,” “obvious,” and reflects “little effort” on the writer’s part. The latter judgment is particularly troubling in that it makes an assumption about the student’s effort without any direct evidence and implies that had she just worked a little harder she would have been more successful. Some are more gentle, saying “it’s not *totally* awful” or “it’s not *that* bad,” but even this faint praise is couched in deficit language, describing what the sentence is not, as opposed to what it is. More significantly, all who judged the sentence unfavorably reported that they would not hesitate to share their impressions with the student-writer. In fact, a number saw it as their “duty” to deflate what they perceived

as students' "overinflated senses of their own ability." Notable exceptions came from most, but not all, writing instructors. This cohort tended to ask questions about the writing context, to make observations about developing skills, and to comment on writing as a process. But, theirs were the notable minority voices. While not surprising to see such negative feedback (Bayers & Camfield, 2018), when combined with two other more hidden narratives that describe the Gen Z experience, a troubling trend emerges.

Gen Z's Hidden Narratives

The first hidden narrative that dominates the Gen Z worldview is that **perfect is possible**. Dacher Keltner (2011) of U.C. Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center described this as the Gen Z belief that they "not only have to do it all, they have to do it all perfectly." Gen Z high schoolers might tell themselves "In order to get into college, I've got to have a 4.6 GPA, 800s on my SATs, captain the soccer team, get elected homecoming queen, and start my own successful non-profit." Add to that the pressure to be an exemplary employee at an after-school job, a doting grandchild, and a model friend – for Gen Z everything is high stakes and everything is judged.

Another less-acknowledged reality that affects Gen Z is the narrative "**I am unsafe**." As discussed previously, the start of the "Gen Z" era coincides with the end of the "millennial" generation and the advent of the SmartPhone. However, it is important to note that the shootings at Columbine High School happened in 1999, and since then we have witnessed an exponential growth in school gun violence (both incidents and deaths). While tragic, the actual numbers of people involved in these incidents is fairly small. However, the ripple effect outwards and impact on all school children has been immense. According to *Washington Post* analysis, in 2018 alone more than 4 million children endured lockdown drills and active-shooter trainings, an experience that left many traumatized (Cox & Rich). Add to this the impending environmental peril of climate change and global pandemics, like COVID-19, and we have a population of young people feeling very vulnerable.

FOUR NARRATIVES: SAME IMPACT

It does not take much reflection to realize the way the four narratives that shape and describe the Gen Z experience mutually reinforce one another. The pressure to curate one's life on social media creates anxiety to appear perfect. The sense that perfection is required of one's progeny drives some parents to protect and (snow)plow. And, so it goes on in a vicious cycle. What has been interesting in our experience working predominantly with first-generation college students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (whose parents may neither have the financial wherewithal or the time to spend "helicoptering") is the degree to which these narratives still impact students because they are part of the Gen Z zeitgeist. What's more, students have commented on the burden of operating under all four narratives "all at the same time" and the sense that they are not allowed to complain because "somebody else has it so much worse."

Deeper thought reveals precisely how those intertwined narratives impact Gen Z. Though seemingly quite different, the four narratives that undergird Gen Z life experiences actually have one thing in common: each undermine student resilience. Resilience is the capacity to bounce back after experiencing a setback (Southwick & Charney, 2018), and resilience matters hugely in terms of student success and well-being. Even after controlling for intellectual aptitude and levels of past academic preparation, it is highly associated with learning and persistence (Cassidy, 2015). Perhaps the most notable feature is that resilience *requires* adversity, but just the right amount. Too little adversity gives us nothing to "bounce back" from; too much adversity is crippling. This is a useful lens for evaluating the narratives we tell about our Gen Z students. If "Protected & Privileged," one has experienced too little adversity. If "Perfect is Possible," one has experienced too much adversity. If "Unsafe and Under Threat," one has too much adversity. If "Tethered," one experiences too much (e.g., pressure to curate your life for social media's scrutiny) and too little (e.g., so easy to watch kitten videos instead of do homework) adversity simultaneously.

According to resilience theory (Southwick & Charney, 2018), certain known types of extreme adversity are labeled as risk factors, and these can be offset by protective factors. For example, most college campuses have things like wellness centers, summer bridge (or special programming) for 1st generation students, and tutoring support that serve as protective factors against stress and anxiety, lack of educational modeling, and academic difficulties. However, to what extent are we cultivating resilience in our college classrooms? As long as we conflate rigor with high failure rates and self-efficacy with self-confidence, we undermine the very resilience that our Gen Z students so desperately need. If we believe some students “just don’t have what it takes” to survive in college, or think all students need to be “taken down a peg” or have “reality checks,” we contribute to narratives that are having a troubling toxic impact.

Jean Twenge’s 2018 book *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy, and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* looked at data from four large, nationally representative surveys of 11 million Americans since the 1960s. Her analysis revealed a strong sense of disconnection, loneliness, and isolation and high levels of anxiety and insecurity in Gen Z. Indeed, she reported a 50% increased rate of major depressive disorder in teens between 2011-2015; suicide rates have doubled. In our work, we have also encountered students reporting adversarial relationships with time – it is the enemy, there is never enough of it – and revealing a strong sense of learned helplessness (Camfield, 2016).

Gen Z Narratives and Academic Self-Concept

To illustrate the ways in which Gen Z narratives can work their way into student identity, let us loop back to the student-author of the sentence so skewered by the critical gaze of college faculty in our informal survey. Let us call that student Emelina (not her actual name) and spend some time getting to know her. As the first in her family to attend college, Emelina was justifiably proud and ecstatic. Her joy was slightly diminished when she found herself placed in a developmental composition class; however, it was there that she had the opportunity to reflect upon her identity as a writer. Through her literacy narrative we see the way her cognitive bandwidth (Verschelden, 2017) is taken up by fear and a negative academic identity. Emelina wrote:

I find it weird that I hate writing, but I love to read... Every time I have an essay assignment for a class, I become very *anxious*. Before I even start writing down my outline, I *stress myself out* over *what will be good enough*. It takes me hours to even write my first sentence... No doubt, I have pressed the backspace button about a million times.

Later in the same piece of writing, she reported:

I try my best in every assignment, but *the outcome never comes out positive*... The bad scores I would get *from my teachers* caused me to *doubt myself, lowered my confidence*, and caused me to *panic* every time I would write an essay.

If we pay close attention to the words we italicized for emphasis, readers can see Emelina’s anxiety, negative self-comparison (to some kind of external notion of perfection?), external locus of control (the teacher alone is the one who determines the worth of her work), and sense of helplessness as evidenced in her categorical belief that “the outcome *never* comes out positive.” These, then, may be the hallmarks of the Gen Z learner’s mindset. So, what can we do about it?

REFRAMING RIGOR TO FOSTER GEN Z RESILIENCE

If resilience is forged through adversity, we must reframe our definitions of academic rigor and come to understand it as standards, curricula, and assessments that provide the *right amount of adversity* to support student growth. We must carefully consider the kinds of challenges we put before our students,

and we need to make careful choices about where we ask them to commit their limited amount of time (e.g., meaningful active learning vs. busy-work). And, we need to keep in mind the four narratives that negatively shape Gen Z identity. But before we can design a curriculum that empowers Gen Z resilience, we need to reflect on our own identities as educators.

Much as we want our students to have a Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2007) about their learning capabilities, instructors need to dispute the Gen Z narrative of “entitlement” and cultivate an asset-focused growth mindset *about students*. We need to see them as capable and interested in learning. In our classrooms, we need to counteract alienation and isolation with a sense of community, keeping in mind that student sense of belonging is highly associated with student persistence (Strayhorn, 2012). We need to counteract helplessness with agency, with pedagogy that empowers (Freire, 1970), through, for example, inquiry-based curricula, student choice, and asset-focused assessment. We need to build academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) through modeling and mastery experiences. We need to practice culturally responsive pedagogy and become warm demanders (Hammond, 2014), figuring out the balance between having high standards and providing students with the tools they need to meet those standards.

STUDENT SELF-ANNOTATION: ASSESSING INVISIBLE LEARNING

Once we have cultivated this growth mindset about students, we need to develop practices that force us to continue seeing them as capable and interested in learning. Otherwise, it is too easy to succumb to the norms of our academic culture of shame and judgement (Bayers & Camfield, 2018) and revert to inherited practices of mindless assessment (Camfield & Bayers, 2019). As Kevin Gannon (2020) concluded in his teaching manifesto *Radical Hope*,

Our advocacy of a better future, as well as our mission of empowering our students to help create it, depends on *praxis*... Moments of pedagogical liberation that spring into existence, but evaporate just as quickly, avail us nothing; in fact, their very evanescence promotes frustration rather than fulfillment. Only through a continuing praxis, a consistent and durable commitment to putting our foundational principles into actual operation, can we effect the changes we seek and offer all of our students the opportunity to meaningfully learn and succeed (p. 151).

We have found student self-annotation to be a powerful tool for elevating students as partners in their learning because the technique simultaneously inserts student narrative voice and de-emphasizes the instructor as judge. Simply put, self-annotation invites students to provide commentary about their thought process, intentions, and/or choices in an assignment. It can be (and has been) used in any discipline – for example, on homework problems in applied linear algebra, in lab reports in biology, and with multiple choice exams in psychology. However, because our backgrounds are in composition, we will describe the process and impact of using self-annotation in the writing classroom.

When we piloted the project, we first asked students to notice the stylistic choices the authors we were reading for our courses were making and the impact those choices were having on us, as readers. Through these conversations, students developed an *annotation bank*, a list of techniques that they appreciated or found compelling. Then, they used track changes in Word to insert commentary on their own essays that 1.) identified particular rhetorical moves they were trying out, and 2.) described the desired impact on the reader they hoped their language choices would have. Students were told their annotations would not be graded and that this was simply their opportunity to communicate their authorial intentions to their reader.

Micro View: Emelina’s Learning Made Visible

Focusing first on Emelina’s self-annotations, we aim to shine a light on the value of seeing students’ implicit understanding of rhetorical concepts.

FIGURE 1

You Cannot Believe Everything You See and Hear

Most people have believed that relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, can be related to particular movies we would watch or from beliefs we have gained while growing up. We build this fantasy of how life could be with friendships and romantic relationships by witnessing our own family members connections, reading books like *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, and watching movies such as, *Beauty and the Beast* or *Mamma Mia*. These examples consist of a giving a false reality by giving us hope that it can be easy to gain the "perfect relationship". Yet, in the real world, it is not quite exactly the same thing. I believe that most people have imagined the possibility of a perfect life and were faced with disappointments at some point stepping out into reality. We, all, have imagined what we would want to happen in our life. However, this image is mainly based on our safe bubble that we grew up in. Once we step outside our own environment and experience the world for how it truly is, we gain a new

Comment [1]: HOOK
Creates a hook that catches the readers attention by making a general relation toward our own personal relationships.

Comment [2]: TONE
By quoting "perfect relationship", it can create the tone as frustrated.

Figure 1 shows us the first page of Emelina's essay, and we see the same sentence that was discussed previously. Now it not only appears in context, but we also see it is annotated. Emelina tells us that this sentence is her "hook." Some evaluators may argue that this sentence fails as a hook (that's as may be), yet by asking Emelina to self-annotate we can see that she has learned the first sentence should "catch the reader's attention." In other words, she has latent understanding that she cannot yet operationalize, which is, of course, the definition of being a beginner. Perhaps even more importantly, it is harder for evaluators to make false assumptions about the student being "lazy," "entitled," or "putting forth little effort." (Especially when self-annotation is combined with a literacy narrative that described significant writing anxiety and "it takes me hours to even write my first sentence.... No doubt, I have pressed the backspace button about a million times.") In the second self-annotation appearing in Figure 1, we see Emelina signaling that she has intentionally used punctuation to create a frustrated tone.

Moving on to another page in the essay, in Figure 2 we see Emelina making deliberate pronoun choice to build a connection between herself-as-author and her reader. Had she not annotated this as a deliberate choice, most readers would miss it, especially those with a stack of 60 essays to grade by Tuesday. She also tells us she is emulating one of the authors read in the course to "create a serious tone" and that she is also trying to "signpost" the subsequent sections of her paper.

FIGURE 2

I did not think that these particular matters would happen until I actually experienced it. We create these false expectations by our inexperience of how the outside world truly is and once seeing the world for how it truly is, we gain a new perspective and lose the old one. I want to discuss here certain matters that have made me doubt the idea of friendships being able to last “forever”, just as books and movies generally portray. Prior to graduation, people often say to their friends: “Let’s always talk, even if we do not see each other everyday” or “Do not worry, we will not drift away!”. Most likely, many have heard these sayings from close friends you did not want to lose contact with and strongly believed at the time that it will not happen. In particular, I believed it, because I never wanted to drift away from my close friends. Who would, right? My friends and I have always been together since elementary school.

Comment [4]: Uses the word “we” to make the reader feel connected towards the statement.

Comment [5]: Uses similar writing methods by Mary Midgley, using “Trying Out One’s New Sword”. By using “I want to discuss here certain matters”, goes straight to the point which creates a serious tone.

Comment [6]: SIGNPOSTING

Comment [7]: Creates a question towards the

In Figure 3, we see Emelina emulating two more course authors, using Anzaldua’s *Spanglish* in order to express her own culture and Rose’s sentence length variety to create emphasis.

FIGURE 3

cautious. Necessarily not everyone is harmful but one can never know. One can't trust a shadow image of someone. Like my grandma once said *duerme con un ojo abierto*, sleep with one eye open. Growing up, being innocent gullible me, I began to believe anything people would tell me. Sometimes I still do. Hoping they'll follow through on what they say. Boy, have a been let down multiple times. Leaving the cave I realized not everyone is as honest or truthful as my family. My cave was harmless but it wasn't how the real world worked. Leaving it helped me understand

Comment [4]: Annotation (Spanglishism): Anzaldua usually demonstrates this in her writing and I believed I could implement this as well in to my writing. I wanted to show my culture and what I personally had to go through.

Comment [5]: Annotation (Short Sentences): Rose uses many short sentences in her writing and I wanted to try to do the same. I wanted to just have a sentences on where I can emphasize something.

After examining her self-annotation, we see that Emelina’s capabilities as a writer are more nuanced than what a cursory read of her essay might reveal.

Let us pause to examine the power of asking students to self-annotate. The ungraded margin is a low-stakes space that creates resilient thought patterns: 1.) It’s okay to take risks, which can be a game-changer for Gen Z students who feel generally unsafe; 2.) The habit of noticing and thinking about the

authors' style choices becomes more important than the content of any single annotation, so students can develop a healthier (more process-oriented) relationship with time; 3.) Students do not feel they have to be perfect, because they can clarify what they have attempted, resulting in reduced writing anxiety. Further, self-annotation is good for student learning: It slows them down (self-regulation); it encourages them to consider their reader (metacognition); it encourages them to take responsibility for their writing, instead of passively following directions (agency); and it helps to make skills salient (transfer).

Unexpected Empathy

Moreover, it can be transformative for teachers. Providing a window into the student's process/learning, making visible what was previously invisible, flattens hierarchy and creates an opportunity for dialogue (as opposed to deficit-judgments). For us, this dialogue profoundly activated instructor empathy and built the learning relationships that foster mediated-efficacy (Camfield, 2016). We found ourselves looking forward to collecting student work, eager to read their annotations, and anticipating our own learning about the student experience of our assignments. In turn, our faculty meetings were transformed from (at best) procedural and (at worst) spaces of grouching and complaint into lively exchange of student work and a shared sense of pedagogical purpose.

ENCODING EMPATHY IN PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

It would be naïve to suggest that the story ends there – with students and their teachers engaged in a meaningful learning dialogue that counteracts the harm being done to Gen Z students through the toxic cultural narratives in which they are forced to swim. We each inhabit institutional cultures that demand that we evaluate student learning and communicate that learning through assessment. While there is certainly great value to be found in assessment – light shone on ineffective pedagogical practices, enhanced equity and access to resources, etc. – the practice of doing assessment too often reinforces an instructor role as judge. Indeed, if the instructor is designing the rubric through which outcomes will be evaluated, it is solely that instructor's criteria that matter. If we can leaven that information with data drawn from the students' own commentary on their learning, we celebrate student agency.

Macro-View: Students Self-Annotating

During an iteration of program assessment, we incorporated information from the students' self-annotation in the following ways. A team of eight evaluators collected pre- and post- annotated writing samples in the first and last weeks of the semester from the cohort of students enrolled in our most basic writing course (N=65). These samples were first evaluated using a traditional writing rubric that separated essay elements into focus/thesis, support, coherence, correctness, and style. From this assessment we were able to note changes in writing performance over time. Next, we took a look at the students' self-annotations, paying attention to both quantitative and qualitative aspects.

Quantitatively

We counted the number of annotations in pre- and post- samples and noted a 46.67% increase in number of annotations over the year, suggesting students came to notice more about their writing over time.

Qualitative Content Analysis

We coded the quality of the annotations, marking a "+" if students identified a stylistic strategy and discussed a desired impact on the reader, an "N" if they did only one, a "-" if they failed to do either. After this we were able to notice a correlation: the most effective writers made the most dramatic improvements in their writing performance and also made striking improvements in their self-annotations. From this we could infer an operationalizable definition: As students develop as writers, they also develop more critical distance from their work and can meta-cognitively evaluate written communication

as a dialogue between a writer and a reader. In turn, we observed that the least effective writers were also students who struggled with self-annotation, merely repeating what had already appeared in the text (e.g., “here I quoted James Baldwin”), as opposed to revealing a previously-invisible insight into their writing intention and process. Therefore, they were unable to acknowledge the effect their rhetorical choices had on readers because they were unaware of making such choices. From this we could infer a direction for our instructional practice: less-developed writers need support to get critical distance and establish a sense of audience before we address more ‘local’ issues of sentence structure.

Another thing this qualitative work allowed us to see was that student self-annotation development was not just about an increase in quantity. For example, one international student, whose language skills were a barrier to her self-annotation, had someone else write six annotations in her pre-test sample. By the end of the term, she was still unable to accurately annotate her stylistic choices, but she did attempt the task herself, suggesting a degree of increased agency.

Reflective Analysis

In addition to scoring student essays and analyzing their self-annotation, we also examined short reflective essays students composed at the end of the semester, describing the experience of self-annotation. Coding these revealed three key themes that reflected powerful levels of learning. We use student language below to exemplify the themes and honor their ownership of their learning experiences. (Italics provide emphasis of the elements we found most striking.)

Development of Agency. “*I felt that I was discovering another side of myself. I had never thought about ‘what do I write?’*”

Increased Metacognition about Audience. “It made me really think about what I was writing and how it would make sense to *the reader*. I could give *the reader* an easier time explaining my essay rather than them having to figure it out.”

Importance of Modeling. “What I think has helped me the most [to become a better writer] is when we discuss the different writing styles that different writers use. More often than not, I have not heard of some of the different styles, so by being exposed to them *I can use some of those techniques in my own writing.*”

CRITICAL EMPATHY: IT TAKES MORE THAN GRIT

Much like some of the other narratives discussed previously in this article, the “grit” narrative (Duckworth, 2016) toxically pervades higher education today. By focusing on individual effort, grit fails to recognize the systems of inequity that have marginalized too many students (Nathan, 2017). Grit reduces the holistic education of character to a singular quality of achievement, which more often than not, is a conversation that excludes poor students and students of color, as it dismisses specific socioeconomic and physical hardships that prevent student learning (Rose 2015). It emphasizes a conversation of rigor, of competition, that encourages divisive classroom policies that reward the students able to perform and solidifies the inequities faced by students who need the extra support to navigate higher education. This competition of the performance of grit works to “weed out” typically perceived weak students, and is antithetical to the liberatory, community-based educational praxis described by foundational texts, such as Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Thus, it fails to acknowledge the solution to the problem of marginalization: connectedness.

Growth mindset could be criticized in a similar way, without the critical lens towards community-based and interdependent learning described above, supported by opportunities for student voice to shift our assessment strategies and feedback processes. Too often, grit and growth mindset allow us to evade the difficult work of revising our own pedagogy; the theories themselves do not interrogate the feedback

practices that contribute to students' senses of failure or imposter syndrome. We must put our practices and theories on student assessment under a microscope and allow students more agency in their learning process. Self-annotation gives students the chance to be actors in their learning process and to confront their fears of failure through critical conversation with themselves and their instructor, which changes the way they view the process of education. Such dialogues are about more than individual student achievement; it is the process by which we create engaged citizens, ready to participate in and help co-create our democracy (Nussbaum, 2016).

To foster a cultural shift we need a praxis of radical hope (Gannon, 2020) conjoined with *critical empathy*. At the center of the praxis of radical hope is rejecting pedagogy that impedes student engagement and the recognition that our curricular and assessment choices are never neutral. Intentional methods of reflection on the stereotypes our Gen Z students face and action that restores student agency can not only transform our classroom, but also the way our students are able to see themselves. It allows them access to the academic discourse of writing studies, developing their identity and belonging as college students.

We choose the term critical, (in critical empathy), for its dual-meanings. On one hand, empathy is critical as in essential to the mission of centering on students. On the other hand, a critical view through an empathetic lens forces instructors to interrogate their assumptions and practices -- to challenge, recreate and reimagine in a manner that is searching, persistent and resolute (Curzon-Hobson, 2010). Critical empathy asks us to change the pervasive narrative that our students are "not trying hard enough" or "they just don't have it" and give students a space to articulate their learning process in a safe and encouraging way. Their insights might challenge our perception of what students 'should' be retaining from certain lessons, providing us with the opportunity to revisit lessons, revise our curriculum for effectiveness, and model a mode of continuous learning that brings collaborative discovery back to our classrooms. In this way we claim the margins (quite literally in the case of self-annotation) and celebrate liminal spaces as the site for exploration and emergence.

CONCLUSION

In the end, a policy of asking students to self-annotate kept critical empathy at the forefront of our assessment practice. In line with Schwartz's (2019) observations about what can happen when we frame assessment as relational practice, we saw that students who have empathy-based relationships with their professors are more engaged, motivated, resilient, and efficacious. So, too, professors who have empathy-based relationships with their students become more engaged, motivated, resilient, efficacious. "In connection, we begin anew, each of us knowing less than we will and growing more than we thought possible... we create something bigger than ourselves" (p. 147) and build an academic community beyond stereotypes.

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