Midwife and Mother: Maternal Metaphors in the Composition Classroom

Cynthia Britt
Western Kentucky University

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MIDWIFE AND MOTHER: MATERNAL METAPHORS IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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By
Cynthia Embry Britt

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MIDWIFE AND MOTHER: MATERNAL METAPHORS
IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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[Signature]

Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

[Signature] 12/5/03
# MIDWIFE AND MOTHER: MATERNAL METAPHORS

## IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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This study examines the maternal metaphors of midwife and mother used to describe instructors and teaching practices in the composition classroom. In the introduction the author describes her interest in the topic based on her own experiences as a mother and as a beginning composition instructor. The paper explains the initiation of the metaphors, what the metaphors and maternal pedagogy mean in terms of classroom practices and philosophies, criticisms of maternal practices, and the relevancy and legitimacy of the metaphors and maternal pedagogy in classrooms today.

Section one explores the development of the metaphors to describe composition teachers related to the composition and literature agendas created in the nineteenth-century American university system. Other influences discussed in the metaphors usage and in the development of a maternal pedagogy are the 1970s revitalization of the women’s rights movement and of the process pedagogy revolution.

Section II surveys literature describing the philosophies of maternal pedagogy and maternal metaphors and their translations into classroom practices. Section III outlines the criticisms developed in reaction to maternal practices. Section IV details the results of surveys completed by freshmen composition students and composition instructors at Western Kentucky University.
In the conclusion, the author considers the information and opinions presented and the survey results and draws conclusions about the relevancy of maternal metaphors and maternal pedagogy to the composition field and for her own teaching practices and philosophies.
Introduction

One kind of feminist analysis might interpret my conversion [to a feminist composition pedagogy] as a natural movement into a more fully feminine subjectivity, the newer pedagogy allowing for the expression of a supported and nurturing ethos that my biology and cultural conditioning made familiar and comfortable to me. An alternative reading—[. . .] would seek the multiple discourses shaping me at that moment, the discourses of maternity, femininity, and nurturing being several among others and not biologically, politically, or theoretically privileged as an explanation of my narrative.

Susan C. Jarratt, from the introduction to Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words

Returning to college as a nontraditional student, mother, and nurse, I became interested in women’s issues in an attempt to better understand my experiences—past, present, and future—and to gain insight about the women who surround me—mother, sisters, and friends. I am a self-defined feminist in that I am offended when any woman’s potential is less than realized because of pre-existing prejudicial social, economical, and political conditions. Women’s roles have been and continue to be limited because of their sex.

Because I chose the field of English Composition as my second vocation and am now teaching introductory freshman composition, I began to read about women’s experiences in the composition classroom for purposes of self-examination and
exploration. I was interested in how gender impacts on perceived and actual classroom authority and how women's teaching practices may evolve differently than men's. How might women draw on characteristics more commonly perceived as feminine to provide a more effective classroom experience for their students? I found that the variations of and issues about feminist teaching practices are almost as numerous as the practitioners themselves. I was introduced to the concept of the nurturing classroom and the use of the maternal metaphors of midwife and mother to describe the teaching practices of, almost exclusively, female instructors. However, as a beginning instructor, I found it comforting to realize that because of the theoretical preparation I had received and a measure of intuitiveness, much of what I was trying to accomplish with my students seemed to be validated by what I was reading. My teaching evolved fairly smoothly and naturally into a "soft" pedagogy where I tried to function not as a strong authority figure but as a fellow writer—one who has a prior writing history and knowledge to share. My classroom practices were student-centered, expressive, and process-oriented. As I experienced the trials and pleasures of working with freshmen students, I tightened the subjectivity of my grading scale, tailored assignments to increase student interaction and dialogue, and became more comfortable in a leadership role.

As part of the requirement of being a graduate assistant in my first semester as an instructor, my mentor observed my teaching practices in one of my classes. During our conversation in the evaluation that followed, he said, "I hope you don't take this negatively, but you act motherly with your class, which makes a very comfortable atmosphere." Instead of causing offense, his comment reflected my feelings of involvement with my students, the relationships we were developing, the environment
being created. I did feel motherly toward my students. As a mother, I recognized that my interest in them was not only with their development as writers but also with their potential, for their uniqueness, and for the experiences and views they brought to the classroom. At the beginning of the semester, I had scheduled “connection time” for the first few minutes of our Tuesday class. This initial attempt to establish a friendly environment became a ritual where we each talked about what had happened over the weekend, what was coming up that week, or what good or bad things had happened. We sympathized with Amy when her sister was diagnosed with breast cancer, commiserated with Drew when he lost his driving license, and celebrated with Ryan when the football team won their game. They supported me when my son had to have surgery unexpectedly. Through my interactions with them, their writing, and student conferences, I knew about their illnesses, their families, their car accidents, and their freshman experiences in general. My students knew about my life: my children, my pets, my nursing background, my life as a fellow student, and my frustrations as a working mother whose husband traveled most of the week. We constantly crossed the teacher/student barrier I had experienced with the majority of my college instructors. With only one class of 21 students, intimacy was possible. Although I believe our classroom environment generated dialogue and our interaction produced meaningful writing, I also know it was more difficult for me to be an impartial judge of the quality of that writing or to be an authoritative presence in the classroom.

As I learned more about aspects of feminist pedagogy in the composition classroom, the metaphors of instructors as midwives and mothers produced an underlying and undefined uneasiness, enough to prompt more research into the use of the metaphors.
As my teaching load increased and I became less susceptible to hard luck stories to explain missed classes, lack of preparation, and incomplete or nonexistent essays, I became quite sure I did not want to be the mother of 44 freshmen. Why was it so easy to slide into the maternal role, and was my “mothering” style of leadership a beneficial one for my composition students? The greeting card version of motherhood denies the realities of mothering that deal with ambiguous child/parent relationships, familial power struggles, and conflicting culturally constructed role expectations.

As a registered nurse, I found the midwife analogy even more troubling. True, in some cultures and at certain points in history, midwives have been considered honorable and often mystical personages. However, in contemporary terms, the midwife (usually female) is typically utilized when a true medical doctor (usually male) is not available. The midwife is an active but not invested participant; it is the mother alone who carries the growing fetus and experiences the labor of birth. The midwife’s responsibility is for facilitating the emergence of a vulnerable, fragile (if potentially powerful) body. However, this role of facilitator is not passive. It is very involved, active, and hands-on. To midwife is not to abdicate responsibility for the final product, as the cost of obstetric malpractice insurance verifies.

The consideration of maternal metaphors in writing classrooms involves asking questions regarding the factors involved in the metaphors’ initiation and why the terms were adopted to describe composition teaching practices. As Susan Jarratt considers in the introductory quotation, are female instructors drawn to mother/midwife pedagogical
practices because of essentialized feminine characteristics or because of social, emotional, educational, and cultural constructual influences? Does this labeling of composition instructors act as an empowering or as a disabling descriptor?

To understand the development of maternal metaphors in the field of composition, I begin with the history of English studies in the American university system. In its conception, the function of composition faculty and programs was placed in opposition to that of literary studies. This adversarial relationship between composition and literature, coupled with women's emergence as educators, created a setting for the birth of maternal metaphors. To define the metaphor of composition instructor as mother or midwife, I will discuss different descriptions of classroom practices constituting a maternal pedagogy and how the maternal approach differs from other process-based composition pedagogies. After establishing why the maternal metaphor found a home in composition studies and what the metaphors signify in terms of practices, I will describe the considerable criticisms of maternal attitudes and their effect on both instructors and students. Next, the relevancy of maternal practices in contemporary classrooms will be considered. Based on the results of surveys completed by students and faculty, I will investigate current Western Kentucky University composition instructors' opinions of and practices involving maternal pedagogies and freshman composition students' expectations of and attitudes about maternal approaches in the writing classroom. Through these approaches the maternal metaphor will be situated within its historical and pedagogical situation, and the viability of the maternal metaphor in contemporary classroom practices will be evaluated.
Section I - Creating a Foundation for Development of the Mother and Midwife

Metaphors

By 1985, seventy-six percent of those receiving degrees in education were women. As school teaching became increasingly female-dominated, its status increasingly fell, so much that Clifford cites a feminist who, in 1978, declined to call teaching a profession precisely because women primarily do it.

Cynthia Tuell from “Composition Teaching as Women’s Work: Daughters, Handmaids, Whores, and Mothers.”

In the late nineteenth-century American university, the study of rhetoric, which had long been considered one of the main components of a classical education, assumed a lower status as the field of literature emerged as the dominant discipline in the newly developing English curriculum. This ascendency of literature studies occurred despite its separation from the traditional curriculum of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and its “soft” image. In “The Feminization of Composition,” Susan Miller explains, “the entirety of English, because it was comprised of vernacular language and literature, not the mystified classics, was at first associated with the dilettantish, womanish images of belles lettres. [. . . ] identified as a ‘pink sunsets’ tradition of teacups and limp wrists” (42-3). The mission to develop an American scholarly and critical curriculum for the study of both national and canonical world literature was infected with a moral zeal. In addition, the university experience, usually available only to men of privileged backgrounds training in
the professions of law, medicine, or the church, was becoming available to a new middle class. With the industrial and scientific advances being made in the 1800s and 1900s, new professions emerged requiring the university to develop an admissions policy based on the concept of meritocracy, the ability to pass the entrance exam (Berlin 21). Ironically, composition studies, in contemporary terms positioned as a democratizing agency, became the gatekeeper designated to filter out worthy from unworthy university candidates.

Harvard University is often considered the birthplace of composition studies. In 1869, Harvard President, Charles William Eliot, described his vision of the “new” English Department. Literature studies would cultivate in students the characteristics necessary to become educated, model citizens. The Harvard Entrance Exam, implemented in 1873, and the freshman composition course created a system for “winnowing and sifting within the newly elevated, central, field of English. [. . .] where Harvard could assure the worthiness, moral probity, and fitness of those who might otherwise slip through the newly woven net that would now take in additional, but only tentatively entitled, students” (Miller 44). Because the citizen-building function of literature studies was assigned a higher moral value than composition’s service/policing responsibility, the literature professor’s perceived and actual role combined the responsibilities of the development of theory and criticism, instruction of upper classmen and graduate students, and scheduled time for research and completion of scholarly work. In Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition, Susan Miller details attitudes towards composition instruction:
English studies first necessarily separated and subordinated the teacher of composition in those departments that were well enough supported to establish a division of necessary labor. This division would by definition be inequitable, considering the ideological motivations for including composition in literary English that explain its rise. And in smaller settings, where work could not be divided among different people, the work of composition could be compartmentalized from the leisure or "play" of literature. (12)

The two main activities of the English Department, whose relationship could have been conceived as tranquil bedfellows, assumed a hierarchal structure of entitled and oppressed. Cynthia Tuell succinctly describes Richard Ohmann's summary of the historical positioning of composition studies. This early arrangement created reverberations that are still felt in contemporary departmental politics: "[He] contends that American English departments grew out of a historical and social base of freshman composition, a base which our literary critical elite now devalues and disparages. The work of teaching composition, he says, is 'demeaning to professional egos'" (131). The aversion of "legitimate" faculty to engage in composition instruction along with the designation of the composition classroom as the place to assess the quality of students in the university setting created the need for a specific workforce suited to the ethics of service, self-sacrifice, and subservience.

The emergence of a definitive role and of a need for composition instructors coincided with the rise of women in the teaching profession and the development of culturally and socially acceptable reasons for placing them there. Eileen Schell in Gypsy
Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction credits women’s eventual contributions in the field of college composition as a result of two main factors: “the rise of industrial capitalism and the emerging ideology of domesticity” (21). As the industrial revolution continued metamorphosing the working practices of most of urban America, the roles of men and women in the work force diverged more radically than ever before. Men acted as breadwinners and assumed aggressive, competitive, world-shaping personas. Women (who traditionally made the family’s clothing, grew and preserved food, tended and butchered livestock, and made by hand most of the items necessary for comfort and survival) began to function less as producers and more as consumers of ready-made food, clothing, and household necessities (Schell 22). Women and men who used to work side by side in rural pursuits now occupied very different and distinct spheres, with the women functioning as the primary domestic agent. This new emphasis on homemaking and on the women’s place in the home resulted in the emergence of the field of domestic-economy. Attention to the science of homemaking was only one aspect of a new activism for women at this time. As Schell observes,

Domestic reform, however, was only one of many nineteenth-century women’s social reform movements—soup kitchens, orphan asylums, homes for indigent women, and Settlement Houses—founded to protect the interests of the family against capitalist principles and to minister to the needy, the sick, the poor, and the young. (22)

Although still located within the culturally accepted circle of legitimate female concerns, this very organizing and networking by women acted as a base from which they moved
forward with other concerns not traditionally focused within the scope of family interests. Women reaching towards and combining forces with other women spurred the desire for individual as well as collective achievement.

The classroom was the natural place of convergence between women’s previous realm of influence and a position outside the domestic sphere, resulting not only in women’s participation in more worldly, male-centered environments but also in the need for women to pursue higher education for themselves. The floodgates were opened, and Schell describes the dramatic activity prompted by women’s entrance into the teaching field on a broad scale: “1820-1860 resulted in the establishment of approximately two hundred female academies and seminaries, [and] a handful of women’s colleges, [. . .] In 1880, the percentage of women elementary and secondary teachers rose to 57 percent and to an unprecedented 84 percent by 1918” (24). However, women’s move into the almost exclusively male populated world of postsecondary education did not occur as rapidly or as painlessly.

It was extremely difficult for women in this period to obtain the qualifications necessary for the academic life. Because a doctoral degree was necessary for more than contingent, marginal involvement for female instructors in the university setting, women had to be willing to make economic and emotional sacrifices in order to succeed. The time commitment and financial resources necessary were overwhelming to most, and any plans to marry or to have children were considered barriers to serious scholarship. Women also had to cope with the emotional stress created by their venturing outside the culturally constructed views of women’s roles. Still, between 1890 and 1930, the percentage of female graduate students increased from 18 percent to 39 percent. Once
they earned advanced degrees, women still faced many challenges seeking employment in the university setting because of prejudicial hiring practices and sexist behaviors (Schell 25-27). However, because of the placement of composition in the work-centered function of the English curriculum, English departments found a place "appropriate" for female educators and their particular "talents."

Because of men's perceptions of women's service ethics, willingness to do repetitive and detailed work, and perceived lack of ambition, hiring practices soon began to assign women much of the responsibility for teaching freshman composition. The statistics Schell gathered from a 1929 publication, *A National Survey of Conditions in Freshman English*, speak for themselves: "By 1929 at state universities in the West and Midwest, 49 percent of all writing courses were taught by women. At women's colleges, both large and small, 80 percent of all writing courses were taught by women" (32). In the preface to *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education*, Redding Sugg writes, "The first profession opened to women consisted of the sale of sexual love and was called prostitution; the second, an initiative of nineteenth-century Americans, was a traffic in maternal love and was called pedagogy" (qtd. in Schell 20). Comparing the sexual exploitation of women for profit to the exploitation of their service in the education field does not seem unjustified when the difference in male and female salaries is considered. Not only were women popularly thought of as naturally suited to teaching because of temperament and training, they were paid at half or a quarter of male instructors' rates (Schell 24). In essentials, the relationship of women to composition instruction, according to their utilization, status, and reimbursement rates, very little has changed since 1929.
Sue Ellen Holbrooke delivered a paper at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1988, utilizing telling statistics. Although these data primarily consider the university as a whole, it accurately represents the position of women in English Departments:

[In] decades when women have “risen” in the academy, at least in numbers, they have concurrently assumed lower ranks in subject areas associated with feminine pursuits—home economics, physical education, humanities, social sciences, and education. They have, on average, been paid 18 percent less than men; as late as 1986, they earned but 85 percent of what men in the humanities earned. In addition, women hold the part-time appointments in academic institutions. In 1976, women occupied 25 percent of full-time positions, but 38 percent of the part-time positions.

[...] Holbrooke estimates that two-thirds of all who teach composition are female. (qtd. in Miller, “The Feminization of Composition” 41)

Women’s limited role in the decision-making positions in English Departments despite being a majority in the actual workforce represents an inversion of their involvement in the organizations and conferences concerned in their field, as Holbrooke’s statistical evidence shows: “Two-thirds of the NCTE College section membership are women. In 1986, 65 percent of the program participants at the Conference on College Composition and Communication were female; in 1987, 58 percent were female” (Miller 41). These contemporary statistics, the historical data presented earlier concerning women’s employment in the profession of teaching, and the history of composition within the English Departments at American universities show women as a vital and firmly
established, if underrepresented, part of modern composition programs. Clearly, women are leading the work of composition instruction. After establishing this truth, we can consider how the prevalence of female instructors affects the composition classroom. What types of teaching practices are women engaging in? Have male constructed goals and methodologies of teaching continued to dominate in women-led classrooms?

There is an absence of evidence to show that women who led composition classrooms between the early twentieth century and the 1970s deviated from the authoritative, product-centered approaches of the average male composition instructor. But two revolutions in the 1960s and 1970s—the development of a process-centered writing pedagogy and the second wave feminist movement—changed not only the way many male teachers approached composition instruction but also altered the way women considered themselves in the writing classroom.

In the introduction to *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, editors Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland list the grassroots concerns that led to the process revolution of the 1960s: “[the] weak correlation between grammar instruction and writing ability; the conflict of social, ethnic, and regional dialects with the standard dialect; the limitations of negative criticism and editorial marginalia; the frustrations of dedicated teachers; the alienation of students” (x). Because of changes in the student populations in composition classrooms, a new awareness of issues concerning students’ ethnicity, gender, and cultural influences, and new information about the cognitive processes that occur during learning, many judged the product-centered approach as inadequate to meet the goal of composition instruction, to assist students in becoming more effective and competent writers. In “Process Pedagogy,” Lad Tobin posits the same
revolution of the 1960s as, in part, a result of the synergistic upheaval of that period in American history and its disenchantment with the status quo in politics, education, and social hierarchies. He argues:

What process theorists were reacting against was as important to the movement as what they were arguing for. Process pedagogy was decidedly antiestablishment, antiauthoritarian, antiauthenticity. Process teachers [...] hated the kind of written products they claimed the traditional process inevitably produced—the canned, dull, lifeless student essay that seemed the logical outcome of a rules-driven, teacher-centered curriculum that ignored student interests, needs, and talents. (5)

The stereotypical authority figure that the new process-oriented practices were striving to unseat was a white male who ruled the writing classroom with a red pen through intimidation and a firm hold on the politics of power. Ironically—but understandably, given that the theorizing, publishing, and presenting of the composition field was being carried out by men—the process revolution gurus were generally white males: Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, and Peter Elbow. However, the field of composition began to establish a new voice and a theoretical base distancing itself from its relational and historical ties to rhetoric, resulting in women’s beginning to develop writing theory and research writing practices.

At the same time many writing instructors were embracing the practices and theories of the process revolution, second wave feminist initiatives gained momentum through the examples and experiences of the peace movement and of the Civil Rights Movement (much as abolitionists’ work created the women’s suffrage impetus). Books
such as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, published in 1963, which brought attention to the "problem that has no name," created an awareness of the real cultural and socially imposed limitations on women's potentiality, the legitimacy of their experiences and voices, and the need for consciousness raising among women. Although it is important to realize the limited population Friedan considered; she focused on white, middle-class women, resulting in a narrow representation of women’s issues. In "Transforming the Composition Classroom," Elisabeth Daumer and Sandra Runzo examine the "process of rendering explicit what so far has been implicit" (54) in the work of feminists such as Carol Gilligan and Sara Ruddick: "Both maintain that because of their socialization and social practices women have developed distinct ethical values, concepts of thought, and ways of perceiving themselves, their relationships to others, and reality in general" (64). All of these forces collided and created a desire for women to look at their own ways of teaching, leading to a more specific consideration of how women utilize their talents and inherent abilities to act effectively in the composition classroom and to the development of maternal metaphors.
Section II - Initiation of Maternal Metaphors—Their Practices and Practitioners

It is helpful to remind ourselves how much our work as teachers resembles the work of our mothers. [...] Mothering and teaching partake in an important social function: the work of “socializing” and “civilizing.” In raising children and teaching them to speak, the mother’s task is to transmit the values and ideology of the society in which she lives. A “good” mother is expected to raise her children according to societal norms to assure that they become acceptable “citizens”; the teacher by instructing students in the proper use of the standard dialect, correct grammar, and the basic skills of literacy extends the maternal function into formal education [...].

Elisabeth Daumer and Sandra Runzo from “Transforming the Composition Classroom”

The metaphors of mother and midwife were first utilized to describe teachers without special consideration of the field of composition. Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education by Redding Sugg explores the historical, social, and cultural forces that created the mother-teacher continuum considered earlier in this paper. (See pages 8-10.) In Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, the authors Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule describe the teacher as a midwife, one who facilitates the transition of knowledge from unconsciousness to consciousness. In their view, knowledge existing in a latent form is brought into the open through the activity of the midwife/teacher. They present philosopher Carol McMillan’s
description of the midwife metaphor in one of the earliest references to teachers as midwives. Section III of this paper will address concerns regarding usage of the midwife metaphor are addressed in. However, because *Women's Ways of Knowing* is a landmark work regarding women and education I confront the inadequacy of this particular description with its initial presentation. I find McMillan’s discussion of the midwife metaphor problematic because of its misrepresentation of the role of both the physician who participates in labor and delivery and the anesthetics sometimes administered during the birthing process:

> When anesthesia is administered to a woman in childbirth, the woman becomes, as McMillan says, “a passive spectator” of the birth of her child. She cannot participate actively because she cannot feel the contractions in the uterus. The physician “usurps the woman’s natural role during childbirth as he now ‘gives birth’ to the baby with the aid of an array of technological devices” [. . .] Midwife-teachers do not administer anesthesia. (218)

Midwives do not interrupt the natural birthing process by utilizing artificial elements, such as technological devices or anesthetics. Midwife teachers assist students not by stepping in and taking over but by using their knowledge and experience to assist in the creative process. McMillan’s narrow view of the physician as administering anesthetics not because of an altruistic desire to relieve pain but to “usurp” the birthing process vilifies the physician’s role and denies the palliative and beneficial function of anesthetics. In the case of nonsurgical administration of anesthetics, the uterus continues to play its part by contracting the muscles to expel the fetus. Pain is still present but not
perceived by the patient. Technological devices, which in the above passage assume a menacing quality, are often the differentiating factor between death and viability for the mother and the infant.

Although McMillan’s explanation of the midwife metaphor is unconvincing, the idea of the midwife/teacher as one who participates in and assists with the creative process without being an overbearing and critical force is persuasive. When teachers act as midwives, classroom practices and pedagogy focus not on the instructor but on the students’ writing processes. In “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Maxine Hairston describes the midwife as “an agent for change rather than a transmitter of fixed knowledge” (192).

In contrast, in the mother metaphor the instructor’s role becomes a more active one. Janet Emig considers teachers as mothers specifically in the composition classroom in “The Origins of Rhetoric: A Developmental View.” Although her discussion centers on the dynamics of education at the primary level, her description of the relationship between the mother/teacher and child/student accurately applies to the postsecondary composition classroom. As the mother traditionally has been the first to interact with the young child beginning to speak, the composition instructor is the writing student’s first sounding board. As the mother assists the child to clarify meaning, the teacher helps the student generate meaning in the emerging text. The teacher acts not as an evaluator but as a collaborator and “is free to meet students where they are and individualize their instruction. She prompts them to choose their own subjects and encourages them to interact with one another as well as with the instructor” (Lamb 50). The collaborative relationship between teacher and student is vital to maternal pedagogy. As Wendy Ryden
explains in “How Soft is Process? The Feminization of Comp and Pedagogies of Care,” the teacher who de-emphasizes her authoritative stance gains other benefits: “the false dichotomy between what is personal and what is public begins to blur. Intimacy develops; trust, too, perhaps. You and your students get to know each other through the writing that you read out loud; through the responses that you offer. [. . .] You tend to become interested in the writers and not just the texts” (58). The instructor’s primary authority transforms into the sharing of authority and responsibility—the result is the practice of caring assuming a high priority.

In “Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition,” Catharine Lamb outlines Sara Ruddick’s concepts of caring. Although her descriptions in Maternal Thinking are not specific to composition instruction, Ruddick elaborates on Emig’s conception of the maternal classroom by adding an emotive component: “Central to the idea and experience of maternal thinking is ‘attentive love, or loving attention’ [. . .] Loving attention is much like empathy, the ability to think or feel as the other” (16). Sally Miller Gearhart describes the maternal classroom as a “womblike matrix” (199), a term replete with feminine connotations, and a safe area where students can mature as writers in order to function independently outside the safety of the classroom. Ruddick further describes the ability to act as a nurturing agent as possible for both male and female teachers; she uses the term maternal because “women still have most of the responsibility for raising children” (Lamb 16).

The labeling of an instructor as feminine when discussing the nurturing classroom does not translate into a belief that only women can be considered as maternal, although the majority of practitioners of a maternal pedagogy are women. In “Gender Issues in
College Composition” Carol DeRuiter asserts, “If we accept maternal patterns as the basis for successful teaching and choose conference-based, process-oriented writing as a means of implementation in our composition classes, it is important to note that maternal behavior is not exclusively feminine” (50). However, the almost exclusive association of maternal with women’s practices and philosophies is as culturally established as the authoritative, male-centered associations of paternity. Considerations of maternal practices and the incorporation of the metaphors of mother and midwife represent a conversation most male instructors feel they are not invited to participate in. When describing maternal practices, the replacement of maternal, a culturally loaded term, with nurturing creates a more androgynous playing field, although the classroom practices are essentially the same.

The terms maternal and nurturing illustrate a metonymical relationship; the terms of mother and father exist in a more oppositional domain. In “Composition Teaching as ‘Women’s Work’: Daughters, Handmaids, Whores, and Mothers,” Cynthia Tuell explains the difference in the connotative meanings of mother and father: “Fathering implies a quick, decisive act that results in a physical product, [. . .] mothering implies an ongoing activity that helps to create the conditions in which someone else can grow” (132). This is no capitulation to essentialism, the belief that men and women exhibit stereotypical male or female behaviors or qualities because of their biological and physiological predisposition to those behaviors or qualities—the nature side of the nature/nurture dichotomy. However, because of historical and cultural positioning, the roles of nurturer,
caregiver, or conciliator have traditionally been more often adopted by women. Elizabeth Flynn, in “Composition Studies from a Feminist Perspective,” discusses research in androcentrism by Bleich and Grumet:

[They] see that males and females have, for the most part, had different interpretive perspectives. Grumet emphasizes women’s roles as mothers, as the primary nurturers of children, and males as participants in the work force. These different experiences have resulted in different value structures, different worldviews. Males can take on the perspective of females and females can take on the perspective of males. More often than not, though, the male perspective prevails because positions of power and authority within society have been held by males rather than females. It is quite usual for women to think as men do but less usual for men to think as women. (142)

This statement adds credence to the idea that male students, as well as female, respond well to a nurturing pedagogy. The mother/teacher can effectively draw the male student into a caring classroom and then draw out the individual within the male.

The instructor as mother and midwife creates an accepting environment in which all students can safely explore their differences and have individual experiences validated. This type of atmosphere requires a classroom organized in a very different way from the traditional structure that positions the instructor as the single supplier of knowledge and the holder of authority. A maternal pedagogy involves a replacement of “the figure of the authoritative father with the image of a nurturing mother. Powerfully present in the work of composition researchers and theorists is the ideal of a committed
teacher concerned about the growth and maturity of her students” (Flynn 423). Authority is not dissolved but disseminated. Instructors do not consider themselves as holders of knowledge which should be distributed, in timely, digestible quantities, but as motivators, leaders, and experienced writers in a classroom of writers, questioning the students in order to encourage them to consider the meaning and purpose of their text. The maternal composition classroom is a setting in which teachers and students work together preparing, producing, discussing, and evaluating each others’ writing in a democratic, nonhierarchical environment. Acting as midwives or mothers means utilizing influence versus intimidation, persuasion versus pontification, and affection versus admonition. The mother role is stereotypically perceived as nonthreatening and nonpunishing, and because the female is traditionally considered as the less powerful in the male/female dichotomy, the maternal teacher is able to adapt to a service-oriented role.

Important to the maternal classroom is the absence of the aggressive practice of argumentation. The creation of a harmonious, non-threatening environment in which students can write and learn in emotional comfort and safety is vital in process-centered pedagogies. In “Speaking, Writing, and Knowing as a Woman: Making a Space for Difference in the Composition Classroom,” Joni Carpenter describes the nurturing classroom:

During the last twenty years, the pedagogical focus in the composition classroom has increasingly moved toward a student-centered, process approach that privileges personal expression and empowerment. Prompted by a desire to foster the growth and maturity of her students (for this teacher is usually female), the instructor stakes out a supportive and
nurturing space for the nascent writer, hoping to facilitate the development of an authentic voice and sense of self. (screen 1)

The use of argument and persuasive behavior is associated with traditional product-focused pedagogies. Maternal techniques to avoid conflict and resolve differences depend largely on mediation and negotiation. Classroom practices avoid the silencing of individual voices because of gender, race, or class and focus on active listening and the desire to find commonalities and areas of agreement instead of differences. Feminist Sally Miller Gearhart describes the maternal teacher as a “co-creator and co-sustainer” and offers her often-quoted description of the use of argument: “The difference between a persuasive metaphor and a violent artillery attack is obscure and certainly one of degree rather than of kind” (qtd. in Jarratt 107). Although this rhetoric may seem severe (and persuasive), the degree of emphasis is understandable when considering how confrontational or aggressive argumentative practices have contributed to the voicelessness of marginal populations, especially women, in the classroom. An avoidance of conflict discourages classroom politics being dominated by the privileged and sponsors an atmosphere where previously silent students add their individual voices to written and spoken conversations.
Section III- Trouble in Paradise: Criticisms of Maternal Practices and Metaphors

[The] utopian image of a caring atmosphere has little to do with dynamics of power and conflict which are inherent to the classroom. “Maternal thinking” can’t alter the facts: we are still teachers, and our students are still students. Removing signs of authority and struggle will do nothing to alter the powers invested in us by the social and institutional politics of the educational process itself [. . .] The teacher may start out as a nurturer, but at some point stand back and gives grades. [. . .] it’s neither honest nor fair to pretend that we’ve given up all our authority. In short, we can’t turn the classroom into a classwomb.

Nancy Buffington from “When Teachers Aren’t Nice: bell hooks and Feminist Pedagogy”

The acceptance of maternal metaphors for composition instructors has helped change the way they approach their classrooms and, like process-centered pedagogies, has encouraged the participation of all students in the writing community. However, the very aspects of a maternal pedagogy that exert a positive influence on instructor and student experiences also have negative consequences.

Because women have protested against their procreative abilities reducing and representing their identity and activities, the creation of a maternal classroom and the use of maternal metaphors seem to indicate a willingness to reverse the progress made in issues of gender equality. Schell writes:
While a maternal pedagogy is a compelling approach to the writing classroom, it may reinforce, rather than critique or transform, patriarchal structures in the classroom and in the profession. [.. A] maternal pedagogy may reinscribe what Madga Lewis calls the ‘woman as caretaker ideology,’ the ‘psychological investment women are required to make in the emotional well-being of men’ [and others]—an investment that goes well beyond the classroom into the private spaces of women’s lives [..]. (Gypsy 73)

Because the midwife or mother/teacher offers both her intellectual and professional talents and her abilities to nurture, embrace, and care for her students, the emotional and temporal commitments often extend beyond “working” hours. Although maternal pedagogy shares many characteristics with other process-centered pedagogies, the difference lies in the midwife or mother/teacher’s incorporation of maternal thinking and the emotional support and care exhibited toward each student, mimicking the mother/child relationship.

However, the idealization of the mother as “the embodiment of [the] idealized virtues of forbearance, fortitude, care, and patience” (Ballif 2) is problematic in its oversimplification of both the mother and the mothering role. Mother and child relationships are never as neatly or as strictly defined as their binary, language-created representation. In “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” Susan C. Jarratt discusses her concerns with Carol A. Stanger’s view of maternal metaphors in collaborative pedagogy:
[She] does not guarantee that collaboration works for the woman writer, but she has strong confidence in the possibility of a transcendent, “oceanic” group experience mirroring the experience of “perfect oneness with the mother, a primary intimacy” [. . .] Anticipating such a positive response to teacher as mother naively ignores the deep ambivalence toward and repression of the mother in our culture. (113)

The idealization of motherhood developed to reinforce phallocentric purposes. In Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Adrienne Rich discusses the ways in which the symbols and connotative meanings of motherhood have changed related to the cultural and economic forces of the society that contain them. The continuum moves from the Neolithic worship of only female deities to the Renaissance belief of women as the epitome of either lofty perfection or licentiousness and moral depravity. Rich persuasively explains that the mid-nineteenth century move to firmly place the woman as the center of the home—which man enjoys as a sanctuary away from the dirty business of the outside world—served the purposes of the male social structures that created the phenomenon. Because women were utilized in the work force as an exploitable source of cheap labor, childcare became an important issue in regions where women were heavily employed. Also, the job market became more competitive for men as employers hired women at a cheaper rate and often assigned them longer working hours—thus the push for women to act as the “angel of the house” where their true “talents” could be more appropriately utilized.
Bearing the responsibility for the emotional and physical well-being of the family and meeting the sexual needs of the father was understood in the nineteenth century to be the responsibility of the mother. To this day, this idea represents to not only most men but also many women a natural and God-sanctioned arrangement. Because women are traditionally believed to contain the essential qualities to perform this role, they are expected to meet the responsibilities of mothering without selfishness, resentment, or anger at the often overwhelming demands placed upon them; in effect, they are censured if they reach for self-fulfillment (unless it can found within the traditional roles) and are expected to put aside their own emotional, physical, sexual, and psycho-social needs without rage or rancor—an expectation designed to produce feelings of inadequacy and failure. Therefore, mother guilt is inherent and generally unavoidable. The ambivalence of the mother role mimics the ambivalence of children who are dependent upon the mother to meet all their physical and emotional needs. This dependency creates feelings of both intense love and resentment toward the individual who has the power both to fulfill and to deny their wishes and desires.

The mother/child relationship is based in the confines of a family with an emotional and historical investment to protect and value. A different set of difficulties results from attempting the same type of relationship in the classroom setting. Students come into the composition classroom complete with prior histories, existing prejudices, and previous experiences that influence their perceptions and interactions. The instructor also carries her own emotional and experiential makeup with her in the role of mother or midwife. The activities of the composition classroom do not exist in an educational vacuum immune to mother/child frustrations and resentments or to the power struggles
Maternal pedagogy that bases its theories and practices on the positive aspects of
the maternal metaphor avoids the reality of the mother's stifling of language, the
midwife's bringing forth the stillborn infant. Contained within the mother's title of
creator is also that of silencer. In "Composition: What's Love Got To Do With It?"
Ballif writes,

It is my argument that essentializing and re-idealizing the so-called
"maternal" love instincts and nurturing capacities potentially blinds us to
the power of the mother, to the hierarchical relationships between mother
and child, and to her gendered and trained incapacities. [. . . Is it] women's
special knack not to resolve conflict, but to avoid it altogether? What does
a mother's lullaby serve but to silence the disgruntled child's cry? (4)

Although the one-sided view of the mother's lullaby being sung only to silence
ignores the more humane maternal purposes—to comfort, nurture, and validate—the
mother's tendency to act as peacemaker justifies the criticism of the maternal classroom
as unwilling or unable to deal with conflict. The instructor's endorsing of a nurturing
philosophy theoretically provides the base on which to build a classroom environment
encouraging and embracing all voices, but each unique combination of instructor and
students creates an atmosphere reflecting the personality of its constituents—either caring or threatening. A classroom with authority dispensed democratically is susceptible to domination by the most vocal and powerful personalities.

In reality, the mother or midwife composition instructor cannot delegate all of her authority as instructor to the students. In order to overthrow the idea of the traditional male authority figure, the maternal teacher must have a position from which to leverage the power to do so. The maternal classroom is placed in the same “precarious position” as the feminist classroom described by Diane Mowery in “The Phrase of the Phallic Pheninine: Beyond the ‘Nurturing Mother’ in Feminist Composition Pedagogy.” Mowery writes, “[One] can effectively undo authority only from a position of authority, a position that traps feminists within the very phallic economy they hope to subvert” (4). In actual classrooms it is impossible to dissolve or disseminate authority; the maternal classroom actually replaces the male-centered authority figure with another authority figure, albeit one more responsive to the emotional needs of the students and less eager or willing to be the only articulated voice.

However, the replacement of the father with the mother introduces new concerns. Ballif questions the legitimacy of the mother metaphor as a saving pedagogical force:

Is this mother truly the one who will lead us out of Egypt? [. . How] can they counteract or disperse the very real and threatening power of the mother? How can proponents of a nurturing classroom apologize for the mother’s power and desire? For behind the nurturing mother, lies the threat of being engulfed by her and of being denied her love. Just because our freshman composition students have survived high school, it doesn’t
mean they have survived the Oedipal relation and are able to deal with their ambivalent feelings toward the mother attempting to disperse the very real and threatening power of the mother. (8)

All women are not appropriate mother figures for their students, and not all students desire their instructors to exhibit maternal characteristics. Establishing a matriarch as leader in the classroom instead of a patriarch does not simplify or eliminate the power politics of the composition classroom.

The decentering of the instructor as an authoritative disciplinarian in process-centered pedagogies has proved a bigger threat to the perceived leadership abilities of female instructors than of male instructors. Father/child relationships and male instructor/student dynamics are not immune to conflict, disharmony, and self-interest. However, men’s leadership is still sanctioned by cultural and social expectations of authority. Male instructors are expected to exert more authority and to adopt a more mentor-like relationship with their students. Ryden illustrates this dilemma: “Sometimes I feel a little damned if I do damned if I don’t. Students expect me to be nurturing and yet when I provide such nurturing I take the risk of being regarded less seriously—a risk I suspect a male instructor exhibiting similar behaviors is less likely to run” (59). Women are criticized if they are not perceived as strong leaders but are also criticized when they exhibit strict authoritative tendencies instead of the expected “motherly” behaviors—a gender double standard.

In “‘Bitch’ Pedagogy: Agonistic Discourse and Politics of Resistance,” Andrea Greenbaum illustrates the professional and economic results of failing to meet students’ expectations of maternal behavior. She acknowledges the relationship between student
evaluations and success within the university setting in regards to rehiring opportunities or attempts to gain tenure. Creating and sustaining maternal metaphors in the academic setting accomplishes two things:

[It] systematically positions women writing instructors at an economic and political disadvantage; and, by doing so, it fosters an atmosphere of compliance—women cannot truly teach resistance and agonistic discourse because we cannot, we dare not, display it, because modeling argumentative behavior, something students might perceive as “bitchy,” is as Koblitz and Bauer suggest, fraught with job instability. (159)

The pressure on female instructors to perform in accordance with students’ expectations of appropriate behavior is a force to be reckoned with when issues of employment and reimbursement are on the table. The caring teacher’s behaviors may be influenced more by practical issues than essentialist female instincts. As Schell explains in “The Costs of Caring: ‘Feminism’ and Contingent Women Workers in Composition Studies,” caring may be a “survival mechanism” and “not merely a natural instinct or impulse [but] a socially and historically mandated behavior” (78). There is a degree of safety in maintaining culturally constructed ideals.

The potential for either meeting or disappointing students’ images of the composition instructor involves not only pedagogical behaviors but also physical presence and presentation. Greenbaum uses Dale Bauer’s study of student evaluations of feminist teachers to explore the pressure exerted by cultural expectations of female instructor’s behaviors and appearance: “[Women] must not only display the stereotypical feminine behavior of nurturer, but their bodies must also conform to students’
expectations of femininity” (158). Instructors are not immune to their students’ opinions and judgments on issues as personal and private as sexuality or perceived sexuality. Neither male nor female instructors are able to leave their sexuality at the door of the classroom. In “Feminist Pedagogy Theory in Higher Education: Reflections on Power and Authority,” Carmen Luke writes, “The speaking and enacting of knowledge in pedagogical relations are always produced through engendered and racialized bodies” (194). Women’s bodies have always been objectified to a much higher degree than men’s; the cultural emphasis placed on physical beauty creates a situation in which women are more closely scrutinized and criticized. This scrutinizing and judging by both men and women is very present in the composition classroom. Female instructors who are considered unattractive face greater challenges to their authority than males. Luke discusses students’ reactions to the physical, as well as the intellectual, presence of the instructor:

The cultural codes that operate among students in the reading of texts and the listening to lectures, also extends to their reading of the lecturer’s body, the knowledge she offers, and her performance of that knowledge. And since women generally [...] are not the standard bearers of intellectual authority and institutionalized power, we find ourselves in that unstable place of being institutionally authorized to speak, yet often de-authorized by students’ and colleagues’ cultural assumptions about female professors [...] . (192)
Utilizing maternal metaphors to describe female instructors also creates vulnerability because of their often contingent status in composition studies, which “defies the academy’s most liberatory rhetorics of affirmative action, equal opportunity, and gender inclusiveness” (Schell, Gypsy n. pag.). As discussed earlier (page 12), women occupy more part-time positions in English Departments, occupy fewer tenured positions, and are often reimbursed at a lower rate than men. Women are less often in positions of authority in composition departments and publish in professional journals less than men. The designations of mothers and midwives, titles traditionally not representative of positions of power or knowledge, are not labels for empowerment. The ability and willingness to nurture, support, and encourage beginning students in their search to find voice and meaning are not marketable traits in a culture which values aggression, assertion, and contention. Maternal metaphors contribute to gender stereotyping and essentialist thinking. Contingent or untenured instructors willing to teach the classes and students that tenured faculty members find demeaning and are usually deprived of any voice in departmental decision-making or opportunities for professional development. Ryden asks:

To what extent does the improvement wrought through process and care come at the expense of caving in to gender stereotypes? To what extent does the student-centered pedagogy we have come to value in writing instruction rely on an ethic of care that itself relies on a naturalization of the maternal role of women? Are we redistributing professional authority, or are we undermining the authority of women within the classroom and within the academy? (59)
The avoidance or dissemination of authority further marginalizes and emphasizes the lower-class status of contingent composition faculty in the contemporary English department.

The composition instructor as mother and midwife creates a disabling professional situation for the instructor; does it also create a negative learning environment for students? I found elements of a nurturing, accepting environment detrimental to student growth and performance. Within the very heart of the maternal pedagogy’s desire to be safe and to avoid conflict are issues troubling to many critics of the nurturing or caring classroom. A classroom where argument is not attempted offers little risk to students adding their voices to discussions and conversations, although some degree of risk is unavoidable and inherent to the process-centered pedagogy’s emphasis on producing writing with a strong personal element. Creating writing about issues close to students not only improves the quality of the work because of their willingness to invest more time, energy, and thought but it also exposes their experiences and emotions to the often critical eyes of others. Both students and instructors in the maternal classroom are vulnerable because they incorporate subjectivity and self-disclosure with the more objective aspects of composition study, although the relationship between the maternal teacher and student attempts to protect the interests of both. However, because the writing classroom is a microcosm of a larger world reality, the creation of a non-threatening environment can disable students who must eventually expose their writing and themselves. The early process-centered advocates proposed a classroom where the
emphasis was on finding commonalities and shared perceptions instead of voicing differences. Yet it is within those differences that learning and understanding can take place.

In “Feminism and Composition: The Case for Conflict,” Susan Jarratt critiques the process pedagogy’s insistence on the avoidance of conflict. The demand that students negotiate relationships on terms of equality and acceptance avoids the difference in students’ gender, class, and ethnicity. The university classroom itself is not an environment free from hierarchal or phallocentric representations and influences. The instructor still retains the aura of authority even if he or she would like to deny it. Jarratt discusses the approaches of Donald Murray in *Write to Learn* and Peter Elbow in *Writing Without Teachers*:

In classes and in books guided by these theories I find an intense and genuine desire to break down the barriers between teacher and student, between distant, academic discourse and personally meaningful writing. [However] the complexities of social differentiation and inequity in late-twentieth-century capitalist society are thrown into the shadows by the bright spotlight focused on the individual. [. . .] the ideal is homogeneity, another way of avoiding confrontations over social differences. (109)

Homogeneity is not only far from the normal condition in the typical freshman composition classroom but also misrepresentative of our culture, where diversity is the rule more often than it is the exception. Embracing individuality is vital to the production of authentic writing, especially creative writing, and the maternal pedagogy’s focus on
acceptance further endorses the validation of the opinions and experiences of others. However, this acceptance can alienate students whose experiences and personal histories differ from others and can exacerbate existing differences in race, class, and gender.

The encouragement to maintain a passive and neutral position belies the strong emotional reaction produced in the listener/reader when statements—such as those espousing racial or sexual discrimination—are voiced that offend the listener or endorse philosophies dangerous to individual or collective rights. The philosophy of process-centered practitioners, such as Peter Elbow’s advice in *Writing Without Teachers*, is inadequate and inappropriate to deal with this type of conflict-ridden situation:

You do your job as reader [or listener] best in the light of this paradox. You are always right in that no one is ever in a position to tell you what you perceive and experience. You must have a kind of faith or trust: not that your perception is always accurate, but that the greatest accuracy comes from using it more and listening to it better.[. . .]

But you are always wrong in that you never see accurately enough, experience fully enough. There are always things in the words you cannot get. You must always put more energy into trying to have other people’s perceptions and experiences—[. . .] Don’t stubbornly stay locked into your own impressions just because they are yours. (101)

When dealing with issues related to writers’ opinions about composition study, authorial styles, and writing practices, this position may be reasonable, but in the democratic nonauthoritative classroom, discussions revolving around the content of expressive, informational, and transactive writing venture far into the personal realm. Individuals and
groups become alienated when cultures and conversations conflict and collide. Both students and teachers must cope with opinions and statements that cross their moral or cultural lines in the sand. Instructors must decide how and if to validate or even accept writing that is offensive or prejudicial, such as my experience with a student describing listening to his neighbor “screwing his girlfriend” and Susan Jarratt’s example of a male student’s narrative about a male student committing an act of violence against a female teacher (105). These situations do not warrant the effort to “put more energy into trying to have other people’s perceptions and experiences” (Elbow 101). The maternal classroom environment must balance acknowledging individuality and preventing alienation; the conflict-free class is an ideal not achievable through the proactive nurturing intervention of the maternal teacher. It is productive for students to learn the power of language, the ability of language to bring together and force apart, and the idea that the production of language in the writing classroom is in spite of or reminiscent of the dominant cultural, hierarchal society using it. Carpenter writes, “When we teach writing, we are providing our students with methods of organizing and interpreting their reality; we are also demonstrating that language is never neutral—that it is situated in a particular social and historical context” (screens 3-4). Language lacking neutrality has the ability to offend, alienate, and anger; a writing classroom, maternal or otherwise, will never represent neutral ground.

The rhetoric of maternal pedagogy focuses on caring and judges argumentation and conflict as representative of the male-centered traditional approach. In her essay proposing a constructive use of conflict in the classroom, Jarratt describes Sally Miller Gearhart’s “passionate distillation of the position” (106). Gearhart vigorously rejects
argument on the grounds that "any intent to persuade is an act of violence" [. . . She] extends her attack on speech and writing even to education as 'itself an insidious form of violence' [. . .] Any attempt to change another person is the expression of a 'conquest/conversion' mindset" (106-7). Thus the creation of the womblike matrix Gearhart envisions.

However, the inability to remove conflict from the maternal classroom does not represent a disadvantage to many critics of maternal pedagogy. As Jarratt states, "Recognizing the inevitability of conflict is not grounds for despair but the starting point for creating a consciousness in students and teachers through which the inequalities generating those conflicts can be acknowledged and transformed" (119). The reality of the world students must navigate is that it contains opposition and conflict. Therefore, the ability to argue effectively and represent beliefs and opinions is a vital asset. Many endorsers of a feminist writing pedagogy feel not only that conflict is unavoidable in any social situation, including the writing classroom, but also that it is crucial for students, especially women and other marginalized populations, to embrace the opportunity to practice the skill of argumentation in order to combat the traditional and contemporary silencing of their voices in social and political environments. As Carolyn Heilbrun states in Writing a Woman's Life, "Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter" (18). Making "one's part matter" translates into the ability to describe, defend, illustrate, and elevate one's opinions and experiences by articulation or through the medium of writing.
Inherent in the act of defending and discussing what we think and believe to be true is the possibility of discovering the relevancy or legitimacy of not only our beliefs but also the beliefs of those who dispute our beliefs. As Michael Fullan succinctly states in *Leading in a Culture of Change*, “We are more likely to learn something from people who disagree with us than we are from people who agree” (41). If writing is in actuality the exposing and creating of knowledge, then the safety of the maternal pedagogy’s honoring commonalities and harmony potentially paralyzes the power of the composition classroom. In “Feminist Pedagogy Theory in Higher Education: Reflections on Power and Authority” Carmen Luke writes, “To pretend that social, cultural and economic differences do not define students’ identities and lives in and out of the classroom is to abandon the political and moral responsibility and authority we have as teachers to work on students’ consciousness through critique and analysis” (196). Differences abound in the composition classroom. Embracing these differences and encouraging conversations and writing focusing more on conflicting beliefs and opinions and less on those that are shared does not necessitate the silencing of voices other than those of white males assuming entitled positions in classroom power politics. Exemplifying and outlining platforms and protocols for reactions to discussions, writing assignments, and assigned reading creates an environment resistant to dominant masculine voices, which usually occupy entitled positions.

As the above criticisms of the use of maternal metaphors and practices illustrate, attempts to create a caring or nurturing environment do not guarantee each student will feel the freedom or confidence to contribute to classroom dialogue either verbally or through writing. With the dismantling of strong, authoritative instructor posturing the
politics of the classroom may be manipulated and not be easily controlled. Although voices traditionally marginalized and silenced are vulnerable by voices comfortable with assuming central classroom positions, I find disconcerting the tendency of much maternal pedagogy literature to portray students, especially women and minorities, as unable to function within any environment not insulated against conflict or argument. Do students’ positions, even those of traditionally marginalized students, warrant such careful and cautious handling? The process-centered pedagogies, in which the maternal pedagogy is legitimately included, utilize personal writing as a means of self-discovery and student workshops to increase the skills of reading carefully and critically, and they emphasize discussion over lecture and individualization over categorization. Within these activities and attitudes the potential for a democratic writing and learning environment emerges. With the leadership of an instructor sensitive to student differences and to the classroom politics of gender, class, and race, the insistence on only harmonious situations and uncontroversial subjects seems not only counterproductive to education through differences but also unnecessary for students’ emotional well-being. Taking into consideration that most freshman English classes are populated with more women than men and the increasing number of minority students enrolled in postsecondary education, traditionally silenced voices are less likely to remain muted. Instead of a classroom based on nurturing and caring, a classroom based on respect—for learning, for individuality, and for embracing and understanding differences—appears more beneficial and appropriate for students and instructors.
Section IV: Western Kentucky University English Faculty and Freshmen

Survey Results

Intersecting historical, cultural, and educational forces enabled the development of maternal metaphors and a maternal pedagogy. Although the ideas and beliefs that support their usage have validity, the practices and theories surrounding the maternal classroom and the utilization of mother and midwife metaphors are problematic. Because much of the discussion surrounding these issues was generated and published between 1985 and 1995, I sought to determine how freshman students describe nurturing experiences and what emphasis do they place on nurturing practices in the classroom. I also sought to determine how current composition instructors view the mother and midwife roles and if they describe their teaching practices as containing nurturing or maternal aspects. My ultimate goal was to answer one question: is there a place in contemporary composition studies for the mother and midwife in terms of appropriateness for instructors and effectiveness for students?

Student Surveys

One hundred freshman composition students completed a survey asking for information about their educational experiences. (See Appendix A.) Three instructors distributed the surveys without discussing the content in advance with their students. The purpose of the survey was to elicit student opinions on maternal practices and the differences in their expectations and perceptions of male and female instructors. The first questions asked about positive experiences and asked for terms to describe their male/female instructors. In order to avoid suggesting the pertinence or relevance of maternal practices, the term nurturing was not used until the last two questions on the
back page of the survey. The term *nurturing* was used in place of the term *maternal* in an attempt to avoid evoking the extreme gender connotations associated with the use of that term.

Question 1, "Briefly describe your best classroom experience with a female instructor," was answered with a wide variety of descriptions. The most common reason cited for a positive experience was the individual or extra help provided by a female instructor. Here are two sample responses: “My best classroom experience with a female instructor was when I couldn’t understand a math equation, and my teacher spent an hour just with me, in order to help” and “I was having a difficult time understanding what was being taught in the class. So I went up to her and she went through it again for me. She always did [that] if a student didn’t understand.” Descriptors of *challenging, helpful, fun,* and *humorous* were second choices all cited an almost equal number of times. Four students referred to issues of sexuality; for example, “My best experience with a female instructor was back in high school when my school’s cheerleading coach taught sex ed. The fact that she was hot as hell made it all the more fun.”

When asked in question 2, “List five qualities exhibited by the instructor in the classroom experience described above,” the term *caring* was listed most often, followed closely by *knowledgeable,* then *fun.*

Question 3 asked about positive teaching practices involving male instructors. The most common response involved the description of a male teacher’s specific classroom practice, such as “When my theatre teacher always tries to give examples related to today’s lifestyles. They are always so funny, but yet help me understand the concepts” and “My junior history teacher [. . .] did a trench activity for WWI which was
very entertaining.” The next most common response described experiences that spoke of the teaching promoting learning. The third descriptor, helpful, warranted nearly the same number of responses from students describing male instructors in question 3 as female instructors in question 1. Only once was a comment based on physical appearance; a student described a male instructor as “good looking.”

Interestingly, in question 4, “List five qualities exhibited by the instructor in the classroom experience described above,” the top descriptor named was that of humorous, followed by knowledgeable, and then caring. Experiences with female teachers and terms describing those experiences were based on traits demonstrating both caring behaviors and an effort on the part of a female instructor to assist a specific student. In contrast, male instructors were judged favorably on the specific activities in their classrooms and on their incorporation of humor into the student/teacher relationships, a combination focusing on both practices and instructor personality. Interestingly, only once in the discussions responding to questions one through four were the terms fatherly and motherly utilized to describe instructors.

Question 5 was framed to exclude the consideration of gender: “What would be the top three qualities you would expect from the ideal instructor?” The top two terms listed, knowledgeable and understanding, were utilized almost equally in answering this question. These results are interesting for two reasons. First, the term knowledgeable was the second most commonly offered descriptor when discussing specific male and female instructors but became the most common descriptor when gender was not emphasized. Second, the term understanding, utilized in a minor way on the previous questions, became, along with knowledgeable, one of the two most commonly listed descriptors for
the ideal instructor. This placement might suggest a balance between judgments regarding personality or perceived competency, or it might suggest a balance of male-designated and female-designated essentialized qualities. Before the term *nurturing* was specifically used in question 5, the term was only used once to describe a female teacher.

Questions 6 asked, “Please describe a classroom experience you have had with an instructor you would describe as nurturing and how you responded to the experience. What in the instructor’s practices would you describe as nurturing?” In responding to this question, students were more than twice as likely to name a female instructor as nurturing. They were three times as likely to cite the reason as the instructor offering assistance in a way not strictly defined as within the responsibilities of the classroom.

Here are two examples: “My former Algebra teacher was very nurturing. I had a death in my family and she took the time to help me and make me comfortable. She gave me the time I needed to recover” and “I guess my third grade teacher would be nurturing. Even though I’m in college now, she still sends me letter and postcards.” When male teachers were named as nurturing, the reasons again related to practices outside of the normal teaching responsibilities. One student wrote, “One time I had a teacher who absolutely acted like she hated me. My history teacher felt bad for my situation and he could always make me feel better. He noticed my moods and could always tell when I was upset. He talked to the teacher and things worked out well.” It is the “extra” attention, the instructor being perceived as going out of his or her way, which characterizes a caring or nurturing experience in students’ eyes. Three students in the survey responded negatively to the idea of a nurturing teacher; two stated that as responsible students they didn’t appreciate a teacher fulfilling that particular role.
In question 7, “What would you describe as your worst classroom experience or your least favorite teaching practice?” the descriptions involving a male instructor exceeded those involving a female instructor by two. However, within these negative experiences, the students were five times as likely to focus on an issue involving a teaching practice, an in-class behavior or procedure, as being the cause for dissatisfaction instead of negative involvement or the lack of intervention in an out-of-class experience. As in question 6, it seems the students’ expectations are based on appropriate and adequate in-class practices and behaviors. Personal intervention or attention on the part of an instructor is “icing on the cake” so to speak, behaviors not necessarily expected but appreciated by the student.

**Instructor Surveys**

Another survey (Appendix B) was responded to by 14 freshman English instructors: five full-time instructors, three graduate assistants, one professor, one associate professor, and three assistant professors. Seven of the respondents identified themselves as female and six male. One did not report gender. Together the respondents teach approximately 40 sections of freshman English in the academic year. When asked to provide descriptors that define their teaching practices, the most common terms listed were *engaging, challenging, comfortable, helpful, collaborative, and open.*

The instructors were asked to respond to this quote:

> Maternal thinking is the active force in a maternal pedagogy. Central to the idea and experience of maternal thinking is attentive love, or loving attention. The process requires, ultimately, more recognition and honoring
of difference than it does searching for common ground. The nurturing classroom is one in which the teacher’s authority is disseminated and where each student’s value is emphasized.

Of the female respondents, three responded favorably to the quotation either because it was reminiscent of their teaching styles or because of general agreement with the ideas. One instructor responded with this statement: “I suppose it depends on a definition of love, but mostly I agree that this type of thinking causes students to learn from each other as well as the teacher with a kind of community feeling formed of fellow writers. [...] Sharing and respecting each other is conducive to forming this community.” Four of the instructors responded with concerns about the statement, regarding either the translation into classroom practices or the essentializing nature of the term. One instructor wrote, “I have known male teachers who exemplified ‘maternal thinking’ and female teachers who didn’t. Therefore, I think the phrase is infelicitous and ‘loaded.’”

Of the remaining seven instructors, six males and one who did not specify gender, three responded to the statement in neutral terms, either reacting only to a phrase or restating the question. Four of the male instructors responded negatively to the quotation; of the four, three stated concerns with the essentializing nature of the term. The fourth instructor wrote, “Frankly, I’m put off by the language. On the surface, this sounds like it is suggesting teachers should have a mother’s natural love for children, which seems alienating to males.”

Of the seventeen teachers, only three responded favorably to the specific idea of a maternal pedagogy or maternal practices. In contrast, more than twice as many instructors were concerned with the connotative effects of the term.
The second quote the instructors were asked to respond to states:

The midwife teacher draws knowledge from students, supports their thinking but does not do their own thinking for them, assists in the development of ideas, and encourages students to speak their ideas in their own voices. Instructors focus not on their own knowledge as lecturers but rather on their students’ knowledge.

Of the seventeen respondents, five responded neutrally. One teacher questioned the students’ ability to be “intuitive enough to follow through.” Ten instructors responded favorably to this passage. In summarizing their responses, I found the instructors, surprisingly, considered the term *midwife* less gender-specific and therefore more accessible to both males and females. One instructor wrote, “In contrast [. . .] this seems on target. I wonder if the single reference (‘midwife’) makes it more palatable than all the ‘maternal’ and ‘love’ and ‘nurturing’ of the former paragraph. [. . .] This passage emphasizes the cognitive, rather than affective, domain.” The act of assisting in the production of knowledge and language was positively considered as less “touchy-feely” and more representative of what actually happens in the classroom. Several questioned the use of the term *midwife* being used to describe what they considered simply being a good teacher. Another instructor responded with, “This quotation is one I can support more fully both in theory and practice. I think it’s crucial that good teachers (esp. writing teachers) support student thinking/learning in this way [. . .] I don’t know that I would define these traits as a ‘midwife’ teacher. I’d say a good teacher.”

Although all instructors gave examples of classroom practices they would describe as maternal or nurturing, the overall impression of the instructor survey results,
considered in view of both the gender and tenure or untenured status of the respondents, reflects the irrelevance of maternal terms in the respondents’ teaching practices and theories. The acceptance of the passage containing the description of the midwife metaphor by the majority of the instructors occurred in spite of the gender associations of the term and not because of them. Although twelve instructors selected the term *Process Oriented*, (a pedagogy closely aligned with the maternal in terms of practice) from a list of pedagogies when asked “Which of the following descriptors most accurately define your teaching practices?” there remains a stated and unstated avoidance of the term *maternal* as a label for practices or theories. The use of the term in the survey not only resulted in alienating male instructors but also in the failure to connect with the majority of female instructors.
Conclusion

Delving into the causative circumstances, practices, and criticisms of the maternal metaphors and pedagogy was an exercise in self-interest. As a female healthcare professional, I was intrigued and irritated by the midwife metaphor. The association with this gender-specific term forces women back into an identification with the procreative aspects of our gender within the parameters of professional responsibilities as composition instructors. It is also difficult for me to rid myself of the certainty that, to most of the world, a midwife is considered only quasi-professional, someone to be utilized only when no risk is involved. If birthing complications are predicted or present, a “real professional” is needed. This idea bleeds into my mental picture of the midwife teacher, someone trained to do the job adequately and cost-effectively but lacking the mental dexterity characteristic of a “real professor.”

My feelings of uneasiness in my involuntary (or at least uninformed) decision to act as a maternal figure in the composition classroom made me eager to place my teaching practices in a context I could understand and hold up for examination. As I am the main caregiver for two teenagers, I found the thought of mothering other young people as well as my own, who are quite needy enough, overwhelming. There is a faint voice that whispers to me the seductive truth of my classroom practices. After all, if I have to fall back on love and caring as scaffolding for instructing methodologies, it must be because something more challenging and intellectual is out of my reach. If only I care enough and want it badly enough, my students are bound to learn and to emerge as more skillful.
Love for the students, it seems, replaces skill in instructing. However, the argument for the utilization of maternal pedagogy in my classroom and others is not that easily sidestepped.

Considering the history of the metaphors and of maternal pedagogy helped me understand how the terms and practices evolved in the cultural circumstances surrounding them. I understand and sympathize with the need women felt to develop teaching practices based on the skills they have historically practiced and monopolized because of their responsibility for the emotional and physical well-being of family. Maternal pedagogy and metaphors developed not as much in response to a need but more in rebellion to culturally and educationally supported male-centered authoritative classrooms. The non-authoritative, student-centered classroom offered encouragement and support to voices beginning to strive to be heard. However, an understanding of and sympathy for the past does not necessarily breed sympathy and complicity in the future.

The situation outside of the maternal pedagogy’s protective bubble is often contentious, argumentative, overbearing, and uncaring (not to mention sexist, racist, and intolerant of differences). The composition classroom should strive against these designators in order to create an environment conducive to learning. However, it will not benefit the student to pretend that they don’t exist. It seems to me the answer lies within individual instructors who value their students and attempt to lead them toward the desire and the ability to communicate effectively within not only supportive but also oppositional environments. Those who venture to teach composition should be skillful, knowledgeable, and dedicated instructors—not midwives and mothers.
Women’s struggle to be considered as separate from society’s sexual objectation of them and from their procreative abilities has resulted in a degree of political, cultural, and educational awareness of women’s issues, and some advancement in the resolution of those issues. These changes have encouraged a slow blending (if slight) of traditional male and female roles. Terms like mother and midwife do not encourage this move toward androgyny. Instead of the culturally loaded terms of mother and father for male and female family members, the nonspecific label of parent is more appropriate, moving toward some loosening of the rigid expectations regarding gender-specific responsibilities. Consider the difference in societal expectations for fathering in the 1950s with those in the 21st century. Providing financial support should not exempt contemporary fathers or male role models from being expected to contribute to the emotional well-being of the modern family, whatever form that family unit may take. Fathers are not the only breadwinners, and mothers are not the only caregivers. Stereotypical images of the mother in an apron and the father in a business suit blur and dim; eventually, they will fade away altogether, and a new image will emerge that is less caricature and more realistic portrayal. The maternal metaphors and pedagogy need to suffer the same fate.

Nurturing and caring in the composition classroom are not the sole dominion of the mother. The maternal metaphor and maternal pedagogy are based on male-created idealizations and stereotypical descriptors. The goals of supporting students, taking the time to appreciate each individual, and promoting comfort in the composition classroom are laudable. However, these goals could as reasonably be attempted and achieved in the name of the father as well as of the mother, or, more appropriately, for the sake of the
student. The results of both the student and instructor surveys in this study seem to indicate less polarized expectations of gender specific teaching practices than might be expected, considering the essentialist thinking still present in our cultural arenas. Overall, students valued knowledge and understanding, regardless of the instructor’s sex. The majority of the instructors who responded shared their concerns and discomfort with the gender specificity and affective focus of nurturing but were more comfortable with the supporting and assisting practices of the midwife. Because the two surveys incorporated in this project were limited in scope and number of respondents, a broader study incorporating other institutions and other categories of students would be appropriate for further investigation. Understanding how instructors treat the idea of maternal teaching compared simply to the practice of caring would be beneficial. It would be valid to determine if students associate caring practices more often with female instructors because students demand those types of behaviors and are therefore more likely to identify them.

There are many other questions left to answer involving maternal practices in the composition classroom. However, in the process of understanding the maternal metaphors, I have reached some conclusions regarding my own teaching. I have no doubts about my ability to care personally for each student. Without intention, I naturally move toward their validation and encourage their attempts to become writers. To balance what I consider a teaching strength, I choose to implement an engaged pedagogy instead of a maternal pedagogy—one that strives not only to recognize students but also to challenge them to produce their own knowledge and understanding; one that demonstrates both a caring and nurturing philosophy and the respect for and delegation of
responsibility to students; one that creates a comfortable atmosphere while challenging
students and forcing them to step out of their comfort zones. The ability to communicate
well through the medium of writing is a tool for empowerment; in order to encourage
students in their grasping of this power and in learning to utilize it effectively, I need to
provide leadership in the composition classroom more than I need to befriend my
students. Exposing students to the power of the written and spoken word and facilitating
their efforts to harness that power needs more than a mother or a midwife—it requires
what I hope to become—a dedicated, knowledgeable, and effective instructor.
Appendix A

Student Survey: Please answer the following questions as sincerely and as accurately as possible.

1. Briefly describe your best classroom experience with a female instructor.

2. List five qualities exhibited by the instructor in the classroom experience described above.

3. Briefly describe your best classroom experience with a male instructor.

4. List five qualities exhibited by the instructor in the classroom experience described above.

5. What would be the top three qualities you would expect from the ideal instructor?
6. Describe a classroom experience you have had with an instructor you would describe as nurturing and how you responded to the experience. What in the instructor’s practices would you describe as nurturing?

7. Describe your worst classroom experience or your least favorite teaching practice.
Appendix B

English 100 Instructor:

I am a graduate student and composition instructor in the English Department at Western. I am in the process of completing my thesis for a Master's with a rhetoric and composition focus. For a component of my thesis, “Midwife and Mother: Maternal Metaphors in the Composition Classroom,” I have developed a survey to elicit information on current Freshman English instructors’ views about nurturing pedagogies and how those views translate into their classroom practices. Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. Your participation will help me fulfill my thesis requirement. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me. My office is 16A, and my phone number is 55773. My e-mail address is cynthia.britt@wku.edu. Surveys can be returned by e-mail or left in my mailbox. Please return the survey before October 24, 2003.

Thank You,
Cynthia Britt

1. Title

2. Male or Female

3. How many sections of Freshman Composition do you teach per semester?

4. If you are not employed as a full-time staff member, will you explain why?

5. Briefly describe the teaching practices you utilize in your freshman composition classes.

6. Provide five descriptors that reflect the classroom environment you desire to create.
7. What is your reaction to the following passages?

A. Maternal thinking is the active force in a maternal pedagogy. Central to the idea and experience of maternal thinking is attentive love, or loving attention. The process requires, ultimately, more recognition and honoring of difference than it does searching for common ground. The nurturing classroom is one in which the teacher’s authority is disseminated and where each student’s value is emphasized.

B. The midwife teacher draws knowledge from students, supports their thinking but does not do their thinking for them, assists in the development of ideas, and encourages students to speak their ideas in their own voices. Instructors focus not on their own knowledge as lecturers but rather on their students’ knowledge.

7. Please describe any aspects of your composition classroom practices you consider to be nurturing or maternal.

8. Which of the following descriptors most accurately define your teaching practices?

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<th>Collaborative</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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Works Cited


<http://web5.epnet.com/citation.asp?...261+sm+ES+ss+SO+5E04&cf=1&fn=1&m=1>.


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