Grit Is Not It: Reckoning With Resilience in “Post”-Pandemic First-Year Composition

### 

### 1. Title: Grit Is Not It: Reckoning With Resilience in “Post”-Pandemic First-Year Composition

**Abstract:** Resilience has taken center stage in higher education since March 2020. However, its connotations of personal grit do not account for the structural inequities and material constraints that make perseverance beneficial for some and downright harmful for others. Our “post”-pandemic era is an optimal time to reckon with what resilience means and whose resilience matters in first-year composition (FYC). This workshop asks: How can we approach resilience relationally and intersectionally? And, how can we harness the potentials of FYC to amplify relational, intersectional resilience? This workshop seeks to bring together folks teaching and administering FYC across different contexts to explore these questions and to create an open-access digital archive of flash prompts that activate resilience for FYC students, instructors, and administrators. This archive is intended to initiate a longer-term collaboration with workshop participants in creating resilience-promoting curriculum and assessment methods that are transferable across the field of FYC.

### 2. Facilitator information:

**Emily Rónay Johnston** (she/her/hers) ([emilyjohnston@ucmerced.edu](mailto:emilyjohnston@ucmerced.edu)) is an Assistant Teaching Professor in Writing Studies at the University of California, Merced. She brings to this project a wide range of professional and personal expertise on resilience. Emily’s social work experience in domestic violence shelters and an addiction recovery center for women has taught her that resilience is agency—the capacity to exercise choice in the face of adversity—and that it is a basic human right. Through her twenty years of experience teaching first-year composition and eight years of experience administering writing programs, Emily has explored how writing can, at once, facilitate and inhibit agency. Through this exploration, Emily has come to understand that resilience is cultivated at the intersections of *telling our stories* and *thinking and feeling in community with others.* Emily’s own lived experiences as a White bisexual ciswoman with clinical anxiety and post-traumatic stress constantly remind her that resilience is structural—that it is possible only when our material needs are met and the institutions with which we interface are conspiring to support our agency. Emily has published articles on the relationship between writing and adversity, as well as the restorative promises of writing pedagogy in the face of adversity, in *College Composition and Communication* (2023), *Writers: Craft & Context* (2022), *Rhetoric of Health and Medicine* (2020), and elsewhere, and in the edited collections *Systems Shift: Creating and Navigating Change in Rhetoric and Composition Administration* (2023) and *Composing Feminist Interventions: Activism, Engagement, Praxis* (2018)published by University Press of Colorado.

**Eileen Kogl Camfield** (she/her/hers) ([ecamfield@ucmerced.edu](mailto:ecamfield@ucmerced.edu)) is a Teaching Professor in Writing Studies at the University of California, Merced where she also serves as Acting Director of the Center for Engaged Teaching and Learning. She is also a former Writing Program Director. In all of those roles, with over 35 years spent as an educator, interest in the ways student self-efficacy develops has centered her research (perhaps due to her own imposter syndrome in college). This focus has landed on resilience as an essential tool for disputing harmful self-beliefs. Currently, she directs the interdisciplinary Resilience Research Group at UC Merced, collaborations from which have generated two articles that have relevance for the Watson Conference. *Sifting Through Gen Z Stereotypes: Using Critical Empathy to Assess Writers’ Invisible Learning* (2020) details the ways common ‘beliefs’ about today’s students undercut their resilience and demonstrates how alternative assessment strategies might better serve. *Cultivating Student Resilience to Resist Institutional Replication* (2022) voices the worry that resilience is not always well-defined, despite the word being ubiquitously used, and sometimes is unfortunately messaged in ways that might simplistically force student assimilation. Instead, much as resilience must be seen as the capacity of individuals to bounce back from adversity, so, too, must institutions develop a capacity to change in ways that allow students to flourish, especially those most unfamiliar with the norms of the Academy. Most recently, *From Antagonist to Protagonist: Shifting the Stories to Support Gen Z Students* (2023) argues for an expanded view of student assets that might allow educators to become more resilient teachers.

**Samantha Tetangco Ocena** (she/her/hers) ([socena@ucmerced.edu](mailto:socena@ucmerced.edu)) is an Associate Teaching Professor at the University of California, Merced and former Associate Director of UC Merced’s writing program. She has 16 years of teaching and administration experience and has been an active voice around anti-racism initiatives on our campus, including the co-facilitation of an anti-racist pedagogy series and the chairing of an anti-racism task force charged with reflecting on the writing program’s pedagogical approaches and practices. As a Filipino lesbian whose parents had an atypical immigration experience, she has a unique understanding of what it means to navigate educational spaces which are often saturated with people whose experiences with the world do not reflect her own. A creative writer by trade, along with her publications in fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction, she’s become known for curating spaces for writers to build community, set writing goals, and share advice and resilience strategies in a field that is ripe with rejection. For Sam, considerations about resilience in the classroom are similarly connected to having a strong sense of one’s relationship to writing, to writing feedback, to building community, and to one's own sense of their writing’s worth. She is currently working on a collection of pedagogical essays by people of color for people of color and her first poetry collection, *Hope You Blend In: Studies in Color & Light*, which explores her own intersectional identity as it navigates white spaces, is set to be released next year.

### 3. Primary Contact: Emily Rónay Johnston, [emilyjohnston@ucmerced.edu](mailto:emilyjohnston@ucmerced.edu)

### 4. Description (please include a Works Cited):

What are the purpose and goals of this collaboration? Who are the intended audiences? Why is this collaboration important to start? Why now?

#### Introduction

Resilience has taken center stage in higher education since March 2020 (Thurston et. al, 2021). In response to COVID-19, institutions have proselytized about resilience, touting perseverance amidst “the unprecedented.” However, the term “resilience” is fraught. Its connotations of personal grit do not account for the structural inequities and material constraints that make perseverance beneficial for some and downright harmful for others. What’s more, these individualized connotations obscure the social-emotional toll of anti-Blackness, xenophobia, racism, misogyny, transphobia, disaster capitalism, and the myriad systemic oppressions saturating higher education. They disregard the ways in which adversity can impact the human capacity to learn (Verschelden, 2017) and create learning environments that trigger an “amygdala hijack” (Hammond, 2014), limiting students’ cognitive load and emotional bandwidth.

#### Purpose and Exigence

Our “post”-pandemic era is an optimal time to clarify what resilience means and whose resilience matters. We contend that reframing resilience as an agential response to collective pandemic trauma is a form of trauma-informed pedagogy; and, that this reframing is a necessary pedagogical tool to add to what Thompson and Carello (2022) call a “trauma-informed teaching toolbox.” In this new phase of pandemic, we are beyond clear that resilience in the face of trauma is neither grit nor assimilation; that it beckons us to change systems, not personal characters; and, that to do so, we need to learn/teach resistance. As a result, we find ourselves hungry for dialogue with colleagues near and far around how we and our students might access agency and collectively resist harmful systems when trust, safety, and belonging have been upended. In this context, we are reconsidering traditional notions of “rigor” that suggest learning is about endurance or even pain, and that our courses should be built on a construct that promotes potentially insurmountable adversity. We, thus, seek community in our endeavor to reframe rigor as the optimal amount of challenge to generate the “productive discomfort” (Hammond, 2014) that seeds resilience.

First-year composition (FYC) is a generative space for doing this work of reckoning with resilience. With its focus on critical thinking, self-discovery, engagement with difference, and transitioning into the academy, FYC is conducive to exploring how individuals and systems persevere, and the consequences of perseverance. That said, the study and practice of academic writing can engrain compliance, inhibit choice, indoctrinate—even (re)traumatize. We align with those in our field resisting that pattern (Inoue, 2022/2019; Young, 2018; Ruiz, 2016). We embrace writing as a conduit for agency and resistance, for resilience. As one of us postulates, resilience is a rhetorical tool: a flexibility that can emerge as writers adapt to adverse rhetorical situations, reflect on their adaptation, and make strategic choices about how to language in the face of them.

#### Goals and Audience

To that end, this workshop asks: *How can we approach resilience relationally and intersectionally? And, how can we harness the potentials of the FYC classroom to amplify relational, intersectional resilience?* As co-facilitators, we approach these questions from the positionalities of being queer, of Color, women in the academy, some of whom are living with mental illness. We approach these questions as former writing program administrators with different disciplinary backgrounds (Emily in Rhetoric and Composition; Eileen in Education Studies; Sam in Creative Writing), administering writing at very different institutions with different configurations of teaching writing. We approach these questions as, now, teachers of many “firsts,” with the majority of students at our home institution (UC Merced) being the first in their families to go to college in the United States. We seek collaboration with folks teaching and administering FYC at other institutions and intersections to explore these questions.

The specific goal for this workshop is to create a digital archive of “flash prompts” that activate resilience. This archive will be an open-access resource containing digestibly-brief prompts (for everything from reflective writing, in-class activities, and discussions, to extended individual and group writing projects) that activate agency and resistance for FYC students, teachers, and administrators alike. The archive will contain prompts for teachers and administrators around unlearning mindsets and practices that inhibit curricular change, and prompts for students around cultivating curiosity and joy in the writing process. We envision that this archive will initiate a longer-term collaboration with workshop participants to create a resilience-promoting curriculum and assessment methods that are readily-transferable across FYC programs and contexts.

#### Emergent Outcomes

Some emergent outcomes we have drafted for this workshop include the following:

1. Exploring and generating in-class activities that activate agency and resistance (i.e., resilience).
2. Revising assignments commonly found in FYC classrooms to center resilience.
3. Developing robust metacognitive activities that promote resilience.
4. Expanding assessment strategies.
5. Anticipating and responding to obstacles that individuals may face when attempting to shift/adapt FYC curriculum and pedagogical practices.

**References**

Hammond, Z. L. (2014). *Culturally-responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic*

*engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin

Press.

Inoue, A. B. (2022/2019). *Labor-based grading contracts: Building equity and inclusion in the*

*compassionate writing classroom.* University Press of Colorado.

Ruiz, I. (2016). *Reclaiming composition for Chicano/as and other ethnic minorities: A critical*

*history and pedagogy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Thompson, P., J. Carello. (Eds.). (2022). *Trauma-informed pedagogies: A guide for responding*

*to crisis and inequality in higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Thurston, T. N., K. Lundstrom, and C. González. (Eds.). (2021). *Resilient pedagogy: Practical*

*teaching strategies to overcome distance, disruption, and distraction*. Utah State

University Press. <https://doi.org/10.26079/a516-fb24>

Verschelden, C. (2017). *Bandwidth recovery: Helping students reclaim cognitive resources*

*lost to poverty, racism, and social marginalization.* Routledge.

Young, V. A. (2018). *Other people’s English: Code-meshing, code-switching, and African*

*American literacy*. Parlor Press.

### 5. Annotated schedule:

What will you do when you are together? Please consult the [schedule](#_ki6kpi377q9r) for the number of hours per day you have together. Zoom-only facilitators, make sure to build in lots of screen breaks. (Note that Zoom-only groups meet for slightly fewer hours than in-person groups because of the additional intensity of meeting on screen.)

#### **Day 1: Thursday, March 7, 2023**

Day 1 will focus on establishing a shared understanding of resilience as a relational and intersectional concept: a form of agency and resistance in the face of adversity generated in community with others that accounts for the ways that we experience adversity differently based on intersectional differences.

**11:15 a.m.-1:00 p.m. EST: Work session (includes breaks)**

* *What is and isn’t “resilience”?*   
  To initiate our conference workshop and start building community as a cohort, we will crowd-source conceptions of resilience through sharing our “resilience artifacts” (a component of the preparatory work for this workshop), found objects and texts representing resilience, resilience thinking, and/or resilience rhetoric in higher education.

**2:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m. EST: Work (includes breaks)**

* *Resilience As Agency, Resilience As Resistance (Part 1)*   
  Crowd-sourcing will segue into a discussion of expanding our conceptions of resilience away from grit and assimilation, toward agency and resistance. To frame our discussion, we will unpack Ilham Sebah et. al’s (2021) “Resilience Enhancement Programme for Students” (REP-S), a biopsychosocial intervention for students to enhance their resilience in higher education, and Tricia Hersey’s (2022) concept of “rest as resistance,” a form of Black feminist resistance to grind culture that asserts our basic human need for rest. (Reading an article about REP-S and the introduction to Hersey’s book will be part of the preparatory work for this workshop).
* *Resilience As Agency, Resilience As Resistance (Part 2)*  
  We will continue to explore resilience as a form of agency and resistance by discussing how resilience is generated in relationship with others*—*our families, communities, and social networks. We will introduce Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality, a framework for exploring how identity categories (e.g., race, gender, class) intersect and create overlapping forms of oppression, Tara J. Yosso’s (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, a model for understanding different assets (forms of capital) that students of Color bring into higher education, Trabian Shorters’ (2019) concept of asset framing, an approach to defining people and communities by their aspirations and contributions rather than their challenges, and Vershawn Ashanti Young’s (2010) concept of code-meshing, a pedagogical approach that treats all languages and dialects as equally valuable in and beyond the academy.
* *As the culminating activity for Day 1, we will co-create a concept map of resilience.*

#### **Day 2: Friday, March 8, 2023**

Day 2 will build upon yesterday’s work by turning our attention to the specific ways in which FYC can inhibit, but also cultivate resilience. The primary activity for today will be generating content for the resilience flash-prompts digital archive.

**9:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. EST: Breakfast & work session (includes breaks)**

* *What barriers to resilience does FYC pose?*   
  Resilience is widely understood as perseverance in the face of adversity, but what does “adversity” actually mean in the context of FYC? We will discuss the experiences of adversity that students, instructors, and administrators may bring into FYC, and the kinds of adversity that FYC in particular poses for all constituencies. We will emphasize discussion of adversity in this “post”-pandemic era and how it may be impacting engagement for students, instructors, and administrators alike.
* *How can FYC reconceptualize resilience? (A.K.A., Building the Flash Prompts Archive)* Building on yesterday’s resilience concept map and this morning’s conversation about adversity, we will discuss resilience as a pedagogical approach to FYC. This discussion will launch our work of building the resilience flash prompts archive, with an emphasis on how the models we have explored—REP-S (Sebah et. al, 2021), rest as resistance (Hersey, 2022), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), asset framing (Shorters, 2019), and code-meshing (Young, 2010)—might transfer into an FYC context to support resilience pedagogy. We imagine that creating these prompts will take place in smaller working groups that self-organize around a focus on different FYC constituencies (e.g., instructors, administrators, students, etc.) and at different stages of the learning/teaching process (e.g., prompts for brainstorming ideas, prompts for drafting projects, prompts for implementing ideas, etc.).

**1:00 p.m.-4:00 p.m. EST: Work session (includes breaks)**

* *Continuing the Flash Prompts Archive*  
  As we build the digital archive, activities will include creating the prompts, trying them out, and building a design for a digital platform to house them.

#### **Day 3: Saturday, March 9, 2023**

9:00 a.m.-10:30 a.m. EST: Work session (includes breaks)

Day 3 will focus on finalizing content for the archive and creating a plan for presenting the resilience concept map and the resilience flash prompts archive in the showcase.

#### **All three days of the workshop will include:**

* Small-group and whole-group components
* Obstacle role-playing activities to get us practicing the resilience strategies we explore and to experiment with how those strategies might be taken up by students and colleagues
* Guided meditation breaks
* Reflection prompts
* Metacognitive pauses on/around workshop activities
* Anonymous check-ins on how the workshop is going for folks

#### **References in Annotated Schedule**

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist

critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of*  *Chicago Legal Forum, 1*, 139–167.

Hersey, T. (2022). *Rest as resistance: A manifesto*. Little Brown Spark.

Sebah, I., O.C. Robinson, I. McNay, J. Field, J. Wragg, M. Stevenson, and P. Newton. (2021).

Evaluating the REP-S brief resilience intervention for students in higher education: A

multi-study mixed-methods programme of research. *British Journal of Guidance and*

*Counseling, 49*(5), 672–688. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2021.1888372>

Shorters, T. (2019). The power of perception. *Change Agent: The Journal of the*

*Communications Network (Racism issue).* <https://changeagent2019.comnetwork.org/2019/the-power-of-perception/>

Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose cultural has capital?: A critical race theory discussion of community

cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education, 8*(1), 69–91.

Young, V.A. (2010). Should writers use they own English? *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies,*

*12*(1), 109–118.

### 6. Modality:

Please indicate one preference.

1. Zoom (Feb 28-Mar 1)
2. In-person (Mar 7-9) [Note: [Question 15](#_zzvbchdpa95) asks if you are interested in a hybrid option]  
   We prefer the in-person modality.

### 7. Number of participants:

Please estimate the minimum and maximum numbers of participants that would make sense for your group. (For budgeting purposes, we are estimating 20 people per group for a total of around 240 participants, but your project might require more or fewer people, which is perfectly fine.)

10–20 participants

### 8. Participant background:

Are you looking for participants with certain kinds of skills (e.g., language, artistic, technical skills), roles, backgrounds, interests, or identities?

We are looking for participants with specific interests and backgrounds in FYC with a range of relationships to this subfield (e.g., contingent faculty, graduate students, tenured/tenure-track faculty, administrators, etc.). We are especially interested in participants coming from HSIs and MSIs who work with multilingual students and underrepresented minoritized students. Folks with technical skills in web design are particularly welcome!

### 9. Preparation:

Would participants need to read, do, and/or bring anything in advance? (As the [Timeline for Facilitators](#_ucjgu6b0q58q) indicates, they would be informed of their group a little over a month in advance of the conference’s start.)

To prepare us for our opening discussion of what is/isn’t resilience and how the concept of resilience shows up in academic contexts, we ask that participants:

* Find and bring in a shareable form of a resilience artifact(s), which could be a text(s) or object(s) representing resilience, resilience thinking, and/or resilience rhetoric in higher education.
* Read these two texts (the co-facilitators will provide digital copies to participants):
  + Sebah et. al's (2021) article, “Evaluating the REP-S Brief Resilience Intervention for Students in Higher Education: A Multi-Study Mixed-Methods Programme of Research
  + Introduction to Tricia Hersey’s (2022) book, *Rest As Resistance: A Manifesto*

### 10. Final-day deliverable:

What deliverable would your group share with the whole conference on the last day? It can be very rough—we recognize that these collaborations are only just beginning—but there should be at least something that your group could present.

The final-day deliverable will be a handmade concept map of resilience that represents our group’s brainstorm of resilience from Day 1. This map will be accompanied by a digital archive of flash prompts designed to activate resilience. As described in the Workshop Description (section 4), this archive will be an open-access resource of digestibly-brief prompts for FYC that activate agency and resistance for students, teachers, and administrators alike. Our vision is for the concept map and digital archive to lay the groundwork for a longer-term collaboration with workshop participants around building a resilience-promoting FYC curriculum that is readily transferable across institutional contexts.

### 11. How will participants get credit?

Will participants be coauthors who could list a publication on their CV? Will they be credited in some other way? Please explain their role in the project and how credit will work.

Since the longer-term goal of this workshop is the creation of a comprehensive FYC curriculum that promotes resilience, we envision multiple opportunities for participants to be listed as coauthors on materials and to list activities/publications on their CVs:

* The creation of a full website on promoting resilience in FYC, which would include
  + the concept map created during the conference workshop,
  + the digital archive of flash prompts created during the conference workshop, and
  + a complete resilience-promoting FYC curriculum created in the weeks/months following the conference.
* The co-authorship of a white paper on promoting resilience in FYC, written in the weeks/months following the conference.
* Contributions to a book project on promoting resilience in FYC (currently in progress with a facilitator of this workshop), in the weeks/months following the conference.

### 12. What happens after the conference?

How will the project develop after the conference? What opportunities for further collaboration will participants have?

Following the conference, participants will have the opportunity to contribute to any or all of these ongoing projects related to the workshop, as described above: a website, white paper, and book on promoting resilience in FYC.

### 13. Working and learning environment:

What strategies might you use to foster an inclusive, accessible, “post-White” (Croom, 2022) environment founded in collective accountability and radical care (Johnston et al., 2022)? Feel free to make use of the [2021 Watson Conference Commitments](https://louisville.edu/conference/watson/history-and-conference-archive/conference-archive/past-conferences/2021-watson-conference/2021-watson-conference-commitments) in your planning. (We will revise them slightly for 2024.)

We will foster a working and learning environment where participants feel safe and welcome to bring their full selves to the workshop experience, including especially critical feedback. To do so, we will foreground intersectional scholars and thinkers in our conversations about resilience, as referenced in the “Description” (section 4) and “Annotated Schedule” (section 5). Throughout the workshop, we will utilize strategies suggested by these scholars and thinkers, alongside other strategies that affirm our collective endeavor to reckon with resilience while we also humanize the individual needs of workshop participants. Those strategies include:

* Making “asset maps” of ourselves that showcase our aspirations and contributions related to FYC.
* Interspersing metacognitive reflections throughout the workshop (with anonymous options) to “temperature check” what/how participants are learning and how we may need to adjust workshop activities.
* Creating opportunities for engagement through a variety of mediums, including art making, individual writing, small-group activities, whole-group discussion, and movement (e.g., posting post-it notes around the room).
* Integrating regular breaks for guided meditations on self-compassion.
* Centering the use of multiple languages, dialects, and discursive forms that students and instructors might utilize in responding to the flash prompts we create for the digital archive.

### 14. (IN-PERSON PROPOSALS ONLY) Space and material needs:

Are there any particular requirements you have for space or materials that the conference planning team might be able to help you with?

We will need the following materials for our workshop and would appreciate support from the conference planning team with securing them:

* A working space that supports small-group work
* Laptop projection capacity in the room(s) where we meet
* A post-it pad for every participant
* A small notebook for every participant
* 2-3 pens for every participant
* Several easel pads with stands (ideally 1 pad with stand for every 3-4 participants)
* Several sets of markers with different colors (ideally 1 set for every 3-4 participants)