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SLIDE 1: Opening Email

> Sorry so last minute but I just can't get to class tomorrow. I have lots of family stuff going on…late August is such odd timing with the school schedule. But I really look forward to checking on blackboard for what I missed. Thanks so much!

I sent this half-hearted and utterly bogus excuse note from the back seat of the family minivan, mid way through a week's vacation. I knew very well when the first day of classes were to begin. I had secured permission with the instructor, with IRB, and with my department almost a year earlier so that I could be a student in my college's first year comp course. And yet I began the semester like so many students begin every semester of required comp: by trying to avoid it.

SLIDE 2 Writing at the Beginning of an Age of Complexity (2 questions)

This presentation is a brief version of a yearlong study I am doing as part of a book called Writing at the Beginning of an Age of Complexity. The book asks two questions: *What does it mean be a beginner writer in a complex age?* And *What does a beginning writing course do in a complex age?*

The book tries to answer these questions with data from this yearlong ethnography of first year composition and through readings in complexity theory. Before getting to that, let me offer two quick definitions. When I use the term "beginner" here I mean anyone who is identified as belonging in an introductory,

required college writing course. When I use the term "complex age" I refer to our highly networked culture, made up of "complex systems"—systems like the web and the global economy. Such systems are defined by 1) their interconnectedness and 2) their self-organizing properties—their ability to use their own parts to generate something new. Ant colonies and migrating birds are complex systems. So are social media and writing. Each creates patterns among individual parts and in relation to the whole, doing so in non-linear, dynamic, self-making ways.

Today, information through writing is dominating almost every other kind of system. Ours is the age of "perpetual publishing, digital dissemination, and authorship" writes sociologist and computer scientist Dennis Pelli and Charles Bigelow. How to make sense of this writing age programmatically has been challenging for American colleges and universities. Over the last few years our answer to this challenge has been to reform, to create curricula, in the words of *New York Times* editorial writer Thomas Friedman, tailored to "our complex, advanced-skills age." But the march towards advancement leaves beginners in a precarious place and with no certain identity. This is evident in a host of national reforms aimed at the coming complexity, reforms that, as the recent 4Cs Chair Howard Tinberg pointed out, first relegated beginning- writing courses to two years schools, then high schools, and now, really nowhere. My university, the City University of New York, is undergoing one such reform and freshman comp course is first in line for its makeover. And that is why I decided that I needed to find out what this course could teach me about beginning, (for me beginning again) in an age of complexity.

SLIDE 3 Strategic Avoidance and The "Adjacent Possible"

The most important thing it taught me is that avoidance, like the kind I practiced in that email, where I run from writing (or in this case, from my writing class) by using writing—is a ubiquitous and a woefully unexplored innovation of our complex age. I call this writing practice "strategic avoidance." It sends you away from the assigned writing event or text and into another writing experience. This "other" experience requires the constraints of the first year composition course and its beginners' assignments, but makes something new out of the constraint.

Stuart Kauffman, a Biologist and one of the founders of the Sante Fe Institute for Complex Systems, has a generative term for innovation through orbiting or avoiding something. He names it "the adjacent possible." Kauffman sees our heightened information age and our move towards evolutionary complexity as the result of recognizing the adjacent possible: the inventive possibilities that come *not* from generating something brand new, but from attempting new combinations from existing, prescribed reality. Kauffman sees the evolution of new species as the result of the adjacent possible. Bestselling journalist Stephen Johnson described the invention of the internet out of the technology of the VCR as recognizing the adjacent possible. I will describe the relationship between the adjacent possible and the first year comp course. But first, a detour.

SLIDE 4 Pathways

So earlier I talked a little bit about complex systems. Well, my decision to spend a year taking freshman comp happened not because of these complex webs but because I was recruited for a program called "Pathways." Pathways is a

university-wide initiative started by the Board of Trustees aimed at all 23 campuses of CUNY. The stated goal is to streamline courses so that transferring between colleges is simpler and more economical. One example of this kind of "advanced efficiency" is cutting hours from introductory writing classes, so that students can, in the words of the Trustees, "move forward."

In January I was asked to be a Composition committee member for Pathways and by March I had resigned. Not because I think we can't reform for the future but because I don't think we know enough about how the future is happening in the courses we have right now. Is complexity always found in the new, or is there innovation is the combinations of now?

SLIDE 5 Assignment 1: How to Avoid The Assignment

I registered for the fall 2012 semester of English 110, effectively reorienting what I thought would be a sabbatical in the library in order to spend a year in freshman composition. In the next two minutes I crib from what is a much more detailed account of just one scene from that experience.

After two weeks preparing for the first assignment, to write a "descriptive essay of an influential teacher" we met in the computer lab to begin composing. Though I often compose in public, the pressure to do so as a student made me freeze. That is, until the professor caught my eye. I felt obliged to do something. So I began typing. Here's what came out:

> My teacher's short grey hair looks like a ball of yarn that has been stepped on many times by frustrated cats and when she walks, the uneven clump of fuzz doesn't move much.

The teacher of this piece is a well-regarded scholar, someone I've known for over fifteen years. But for this descriptive essay, I could only come up with this weird image of her hair. I was mortified, and in response, turned away from my computer screen and immediately to another screen, my phone. I began an email to an old friend with the subject "I am boiling down a decade-long mentorship to a hairdo." And then I kept on writing.

The email recounted how I met my mentor but then veered off into a discussion of the historical circumstances surrounding the moment when I met her—my first month of graduate school, the height of the culture wars, the start of the crisis in higher education, the public anxiety about the twenty-first century. I looked up from my phone only when I heard the professor announce "five more minutes." I quickly posted those riveting sentences about my teacher's hairdo to the class wiki, and left.

Two nights later I finished what was a conventional five-paragraph essay. Though I left out the material from the email in the final draft, these ideas did return—in two separate combinations. First, when the class met again, instead of following our professor's prescribed peer review protocol, my group talked about the many ways we avoided what we named our "lame" assignment by writing something else. There were twitter and facebook posts, photos and texting, and there were doodling and emails, notes and journal writing. Then, there was also my email, which found its way to the group's conversation and into this convention center.

That writing does not fit into the categories of Pathways or into any other curricula reform. It wouldn't necessarily "transfer" from this course to the next one and therefore would be lost on many rubrics, including my own. For instead of helping me generate, revise, or relate to the assignment, this writing helped me circuit it, steering me to places that complicated or broadened out the subject. And the only way I found this out was to be a beginner, and to be in a beginning course, a course structured to account for these kinds of transgressions, mistakes, errors, orbits, and strategic avoidances. Being a beginner led me to recognize the complexity of strategic avoidance and the possibilities *not* found in Pathways.

Slide 6: Adjacent Possible

In books like *At Home in the Universe* and *Investigations* Biologist Stuart Kauffman mapped out the coming complexity moment as a series of such orbiting. In his study of prebiotic evolution, he shows how there were "first-order" species, what he calls "members of the actual" primordial soup (methane, hydrogen, and cyanide for example). He then shows evidence of a second-order species of evolution, those combinations that almost, but did not actually, happen at the start of the universe. He calls these combinations "*one reaction step away from the actual."* These combinations continue to evolve today, and prove, says Kauffman, that there is an "ever-expanding adjacent possible" (172). Sunflowers and plastic are two examples of later order combinations. I would add first year composition to this list.

Steven Johnson defines the adjacent possible as "a kind of shadow future, hovering on the edges of the present state of things, a map of all the ways in which

the present can reinvent itself." To me that is as strong an argument as any for first year writing: a laboratory for beginners, who are, after all, the creators of the next possibles.