

JCLL

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The journal of the College Literacy and Learning ~ Special Interest Group of the International Literacy Association

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The *Journal of College Literacy and Learning (JCLL)* (ISSN 0738-9523) welcomes material related to advancing scholarship on reading, writing, and academic success at the postsecondary level. *JCLL* is published by the College Literacy and Learning Special Interest Group of the International Literacy Association and is intended to provide a forum for the exchange of information regarding research, theory, and practice.

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From the Editors

Rethinking and Re-evaluating Transitional Periods within Postsecondary Education

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Students placed in developmental courses have often been referred to as transitional students (Paulson & Armstrong, 2010) or students in transition. These terms simply refer to the idea that developmental students moving from high school to college are experiencing a transitional point in their educational experiences. As educators who work with these students through these transitional periods, we understand that there is more to this idea than just a simple transition. Students are faced with transitioning from one academic environment to another and with this come the need to understand culture, context, diverse academic demands, and the Discourses that are used and expected in this new environment.

Recently, there has been much discussion regarding the changing population of current college students. Today's college students are less likely to be "full-time residential financially dependent student[s]" (Carnevale, Smith, Melton & Price, 2015) and more likely to work full or part time, be raising children, be English Language Learners, be returning vets and/or be first generation college students. With such a diverse population of students sitting within our classrooms,

perhaps we, as educators or administrators, are in a transitional period as well.

During this transitional period, perhaps we need to rethink and re-evaluate the pedagogical choices we are making in the classroom so that we are best meeting the needs of all students and helping our diverse population of students negotiate this new academic environment. The articles presented in Volume 44 encourage you to do just that – rethink and re-evaluate current teaching and research practices so that all students, especially the nontraditional college student, are supported and encouraged during their transitional period.

Nicola Blake's reflective article "Using Visual 'Bait' to Hook, Engage, and Empower New Community College Writers" challenges students to negotiate the edges (Perl, 1994) of their lives, thoughts and experiences through the use of photo journals. Using their neighborhoods as texts, Blake provides a safe and supported environment for students to engage with the writing processes expected in college courses and beyond. For these students, often transitioning from high school English classes to college First Year Writing courses, the familiarity of the "text" with

photo journals allows for reflection and dialogue, in both their writing and through class discussions, that is often missing from the more formal and structured writing assignments.

In “Transitioning Counter-Stories: Black Student Accounts of Transitioning to College-Level Writing,” **Jamila M. Kareem** focuses on the high-school-to-college transitioning experiences of racially marked students, who are often absent from the conversation. Her work encourages all educators and administrators to bring the voices and experiences of racially marginalized students to the discussion and dialogue of high-school-to-college transitions and the transition into other academic areas beyond First Year Writing.

Davonna Thomas encourages post-secondary literacy educators to move beyond traditional developmental reading curriculum by sharing her research on incorporating literature circles within the developmental reading classroom. Her article “*Really? That Counts? A Sociocultural Examination of Post-Secondary Literature Circles*” discusses qualitative findings that indicate that using literature circles in a developmental reading classroom addresses the “dialogic turn” (Wilkinson & Son, 2011) which promotes discussion, agency, inquiry and collaboration to increase comprehension.

In **Ren VanderLind’s** article “A Sociocultural, Semiotic, and Cognitive Model of Postsecondary Literacy,” she explores a new model of literacy practices and processes

that builds upon the work of Steven B. Kucer (2014). Her work encourages educators to take a new stance on what is involved and included in postsecondary academic literacy, particularly the complexities of the reading and writing tasks placed upon students.

We hope the work presented in Volume 44 provides the necessary support and resources to help you consider the transitional period students are experiencing as new or returning college students. In addition, we hope the information shared will encourage you to rethink and re-evaluate your own teaching practices and research methods.

We appreciate the authors for allowing us to share their work and for showing us the importance of helping both our students and ourselves through transitional periods within our academic careers. We are forever grateful for their support and service to the field of college literacy and learning. We are also very fortunate to have a dedicated group of reviewers who not only contribute their expertise but their time and energy to make the *JCLL* a success. And, finally, we thank you, our readership, for your dedication to college literacy.

We are also excited to announce guest editors Samantha NeCamp and Connie Kendall Theado for a Special Issue for the *JCLL* Volume 45. This issue will focus on the question *What Does Working with Literacy Look Like in Adult Educational Contexts?* Volume 45 is expected to be published in April 2019.

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Using Visual “Bait” to Hook, Engage, and Empower New Community College Writers

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ABSTRACT

This reflective article focuses on a series of semester-long activities conducted with developmental writers in an urban community college classroom. It builds on the research of John Berger (1972) and Sondra Perl (1994) who highlight seeing and perception as key components of self-composition. The article showcases assignments where students created photo journals as a way to share their lives, thoughts, and experiences. The use of structured prompts allowed students to actively engage with their neighborhoods -- a sort of text to be read, captured, and ultimately decoded through written explanation. The examples will be useful to practitioners who may be thinking about how best to embrace student experiences within the classroom.

You know how children have secret hiding places or dream of a tree house or own one, well this track field is my “tree house.”

Student Writer

At a small urban community college, students are capturing their lived experiences through photo journals. This article focuses on a series of semester-long activities which encourages students to capture images of their neighborhoods that resonate with them -- a sort of text to be read, captured, and ultimately decoded through written personal narratives. By asking students to capture their lives – what they are seeing, photographing, and choosing to share – the assignment engages students as writers and provides a space to express thoughts about their communities and their traveled places and spaces. This assignment is implemented in a required six-week interdisciplinary three-credit

course, The Arts in New York City. Through experiential learning opportunities, the course engages students with the Arts and the art within and beyond their communities.

My goal in the course is to teach students how to make connections across and within texts while simultaneously bringing their voices into the classroom. Asking students to take pictures and write about their own environments encourages them to become more aware of their innate expertise as analyzers of their worlds. This awareness, in turn, facilitates writing practice because it gives students a concrete stake in the meanings that their writings convey and also enables them to take risks in their writing because they are comfortable (and expert) in their subjects.

Composing ourselves within the world involves the challenge of both seeing and using words to create meaning. Modeled on

John Berger's (1972) groundbreaking ideas on Ways of Seeing, the assignments I design focus on seeing. For Berger, individual realities are self-constructed within frameworks that are constrained by society, socioeconomic conditions, and language itself. Situating ourselves within texts and within the world is an active process of choice and engagement, in Berger's view, a sort of navigational orientation based on experiences and perception. "Seeing" is how we experience the world and how our perceptions cast meaning on what lies in front of us. Through processes of naming, recalling, and creating, in other words - through composing, we navigate the worlds we see.

For educator Sondra Perl (1994), Berger's (1972) definition of "seeing" as "composing" is a process of "negotiating edges" (Perl, 1994, p. 430). In a classroom setting, this process of negotiating edges is a difficult one for beginning writers who are also often beginning the process of transitioning from high school to college. Perl further asserts that "who we are and what we write is often in response to, and in dialogue with, the larger world that also lives within us" (p. 430).

According to Perl,

this interplay between individual experience and larger social and historical contexts only becomes composing when we give voice to what was formerly inchoate. And, it is by gaining access to and drawing upon the 'never before said' that we are able to create a new story, a new version of ourselves. (para. 19)

Perl's description of writing as a self-reflexive process perfectly describes what my students share about their experiences and themselves as they capture images of things they find meaningful. Many of the pictures they capture reveal deeply personal negotiations about their transitions to college, ways of navigating their emotions, and the spaces they encounter as young, and in most cases, first-generation community college students.

The Construction of Sight: Seeing the Unseen

To sharpen and make visible the skills students are already using to relate to different aspects of their lives, I incorporate photo journals within my course. In their article "Digital Storytelling in Placed-Based Composition Course," James S. Chisholm and Brandie Trent (2013) argue that digital storytelling provides a platform for rich personal expression. Chisholm and Trent write, "Digital storytelling provides students with multiple tools that they can use to mediate their thinking about concepts that are central to and extend beyond the curriculum" (p. 308). Following a similar model, I ask students to submit 10 photo journals to the course's online assignment toolbox over the course of the semester. For each, students upload a photograph they took and write a paragraph explaining the photograph and why they chose it for their submission. The baseline prompt for the first four photo journals follows: as you move about during the day, try to take pictures of things that stand out to you. Choose the one image you would like to write about for the day and explain to me why you chose this image. Photo journals five and six are focused on images of things students want to change in their neighborhoods. The prompt asks this: If you could take one shot of something that needs changing in your neighborhood, what would it be? Photo journals seven through ten are connected to themes we discuss in the course. Students are instructed in this way: Using your smartphone create a moving story on a theme connected to the class readings and theories.

As students sift through photographs and select ones to share for each class session, they actively use the creative, analytical, and composing skills Berger (1972) and Perl (1994) envision in their theories. For example, students sort through multiple pictures to present a representative story of what they find most important to share. The choice of

the image is only a first step. Students must then use language to explain why the selected image is important. The second written component, explaining the why, allows students to synthesize multiple ideas to present a coherent, cohesive, and grammatically correct response which frames the images they selected.

Sights and Insights

In reflecting on the photo journal assignment for the purpose of this research, I chose images from approximately 600 that resonated the most with me as I tried to understand my students' ways of seeing. In my selection for this article, I looked for images and narratives that were simple (every day engagement with elements of neighborhoods), yet compelling because of the depth of what students were trying to portray through these images. This was not a parameter for the assignments but more so a parameter for what I chose to discuss here. Furthermore, what resonated with me perhaps spoke more about my own filters such as the experiences I had, the echoes of things I read, and the sounds and images of my own neighborhood. As students were seeing themselves within their experiences, I read about them through my own lens of a similar socio-economic upbringing and experiences as a first-generation college student – the type of meta-cognitive composing Berger (1972) references.

The images I discuss here give a brief glimpse into the lives of these ten students and also showcase their responses to the writing prompt. For example, Ana (all names are pseudonyms) uploads a picture of candles that were lit in her neighborhood the night before. The image of extinguished candles on rigid iron gates is enthralling to me because the student chose a jarring image representing the violence plaguing her community. (Figure 1). With almost Stein-like precision, Ana simply writes:

There was a murder in my neighborhood and to pay their respects, there were



Figure 1: Image of neighborhood memorial.

candles put along the top of the gates to the entrance of where the person that was murdered lived. The candles used are also for Santeria [s] which I thought was very interesting. It's sad to know that murders that happen in neighborhoods like Queensbridge doesn't even make it to the news a lot of the time.

While simultaneously making a sociopolitical statement on racial and social inequality in how the media responds to crime, Ana acknowledges the murder as part of a routine. She also refers to the religious motif behind the candles by mentioning Santeria, an Afro-Caribbean religion that uses prayer candles, which highlights her community's cultural frame. Chisohlm and Trent (2013) assert the following:

Digital stories extend the meaning-making modes through which students can develop concepts. This development has implications for students as they engage in 21st century literary practices that demand their fluency beyond reading and writing print texts so that they can consider, in the case of digital storytelling, how multiple layers of meaning are conveyed and recast

across linguistic, visual, and aural semiotic modes. (p. 316)

As her chosen image and words reveal, Ana is using the assignment to process recent events in her community. She often moves from her seat in the middle of class to prop herself on the windowsill. Fidgeting as she stands by the windows overlooking Madison Avenue, she remains fully engaged and present in the discussion -- thinking through ideas of access and equality --while all the time perhaps carrying a lit candle within her for the murders she has had to live through. Ana shares an essay she wrote for another class which tackled issues of race, class, and poverty – familiar themes that deeply interested and impacted her. Her fidgeting during class reflected the weight of her thoughts as she processed her day-to-day experiences. It was only after several discussions did I fully understand Ana’s rationale and her physical discomfort in class as she shared and processed the barriers she faces in her community and beyond.

Another student focuses on the role of religion in commuters’ lives. On the way home, Vanessa sits in her usual subway seat and notices that in very small print, someone wrote the word pray on the handle of a lock (Figure 2). I am particularly interested in this piece because in a crowded New York City subway car, she has to have a keen eye and be acutely aware of her surroundings to see the word. She snaps a picture to capture the moment of “seeing” and then uses it for her photo journal entry. Vanessa expounds on her chosen image:

The word ‘PRAY’ is written on the door handle in a subway car. People will never really notice it until they sit down and actually observe. To me this picture represents the lack of ‘prayer’ in the sense that people never pray until something bad happens in their life.

Vanessa recognizes that although she detects it, others are not “seeing” the word. In the solitude and relative safety of a ride home on the train, Vanessa alludes that bad things are



Figure 2: Image of “pray” in subway car.

right below the surface of the everyday. She faults the commuters for their lack of seeing and indicates that if something bad happened, it would be only then that they would possibly need prayer.

Like Vanessa’s observation of a random word on the train that could have deeper contextual meaning in the face of tragedy, Bianca realizes that she has taken the subway from a local stop regularly without ever before questioning the name of the station. Observing the name and the image at the stop – a train station she has been using for multiple years – she uses the assignment as an opportunity to heighten her sensibility of her surroundings (Figure 3). She writes:

This picture is located at the heart of the Canarsie train station. Usually when I’m there, I am only concerned about getting a Metro card and leaving to get to my destination but during the weekend I had



Figure 3: Canarsie subway station, Brooklyn, NY.

to travel on the train and I noticed this sign presented at the entrance. The image makes me wonder if the name Canarsie has an American Indian origin. According to my research, it represented the ‘Canarsie Indians.’

Bianca uses the word research as she attempts to clarify the image she is seeing. She sees the image but then goes one step further to research the name of the station. Stopping to look up the meaning of an unfamiliar word or concept she encounters to fully understand and contextualize meaning, Bianca reads the station as students are taught when they encounter unfamiliar information in a text. The fact that Bianca stopped to capture the image is significant. Commuters in a busy New York subway station (even on a weekend day) can be run over if they stop mid step to do any activity at the turnstile. The student understood that to “see” she has to slow down from her daily routine, despite the bustle around her. In order to fully capture the things around her – even things that she saw every day that were overshadowed by the passing through of spaces - she needs to be cognizant of the everyday surroundings.

Many photo journal submissions over the course of the semester involve students commuting home on the subway. Like the student who researches the “Canarsie” stop, Evelyn rethinks the name of another subway stop and presents a picture that showcases liberty paradoxically (Figure 4). On her way home from the college, she sits on a bench at her local subway station. She notices the word LIBERTY -- barely visible through the thick metal poles across the tracks. She writes,

Sitting right in front of you, a word, and there is one single word with so much meaning. That’s Liberty, the so-called foundation of our country and the over bloated excuse used by politicians to get there [sic] way from us citizens. What does it really mean though? Protection, freedom, or honor? I don’t know and I bet they don’t either.

That’s why I named this Impossible Liberty, because in my eyes it is something that does not exist in our world anymore; they just really want us to believe it does.

When I first saw the picture, I stared at it and thought of Evelyn’s anger. In this simple assignment, the student reads the name of a train stop and uses the written explanation of the image to challenge the underpinnings of the American dream. In this student’s eyes, Liberty is impossible. Liberty is not free. Liberty is not accessible. And liberty is blurred by politicians and the media. Of all the images one could choose to shoot and of all the statements one could share with the class, I admired Evelyn’s insight as she captured and submitted her photo of the word LIBERTY barred between steel frames.

While none of our classwork focuses on despair, anxiety, insecurity, resilience, tenacity, and drive, the photo journals brought into the classroom the types of metacognitive reflections that shape our collective work in the course. While the photo journal assignments ask students to share only what they are seeing in their responses, they also show what they are feeling, thinking and how they are interpreting their realities as young students attending an urban community college in New York City. The images of Pray and Liberty illustrate that the photo journal assignments give students ways to read their



Figure 4: Impossible liberty.

urban surroundings as a sort of lived-in text. As the semester progressed, they become more aware of how they engage with what they encounter as they commute to and from the campus.

Transitions: Image to Text, Seeing to Writing, and More

The heightened perceptions students document in their photo journal submissions also help to strengthen their critical reading and writing skills within the classroom. Like the text on a wall in a train station or on a small handle below eyelevel, words in a literary work must also be deciphered and decoded. Through my students' journal entries, they question author's intentions when he or she uses a particular word, image, concept, or theory. Within the visually imposing metal bars that crowd a subway station's name, one student questions the actions in a text. Students use their critical reading and writing skills to make meaning. The short photo journal assignments help students to grapple with their awareness of, responses to, and interactions with their lived realities. As part of this process, they begin to develop, through their own perceptions and words, their abilities to make conscious choices as writers. These choices are apparent in the images they choose and in their descriptions of the things they see.

My students articulate deep concerns in their photo journal assignments, which in some cases inspire more research and exposition. Their perceptions of imbalanced crime reporting and police response in high-poverty neighborhoods, for example, or the role of religion in catastrophic or traumatic life events, or the meaning of Liberty across social strata and race serve as starting points for larger, more research-driven engagement with sociocultural, anthropological, and sociopolitical debates. As Nathan Mickelson (2012) argues in the article "Writing at Transitions: Using In-Class Writing as a Learning Tool," intentional in-class writing,

and in this case digital storytelling, "can support [student] learning and is not just a mechanism for assessment and evaluation (p. 26)." Rather, it is "a tool [students] can use to build skills and knowledge in future courses...focusing their attention and enabling them to make unplanned connections through their writing" (Mickelson, 2012, pp. 26-27). Sharing responses can offer the opportunity to not only seek and possibly find a "common ground," as Mickelson also suggests, but also to probe the identity of a writer.

Juxtapositions: Light and Darkness, Hope and Despair

In the photo journal assignments that my students composed, many focus on light as certainty and hope while hinting at shadows, darkness, and insecurity beyond it. Stefanie writes, for example (Figure 5),

One bright light; it's the sun rising. Looking at this picture you notice that there's one bright light and everything seems to be darker than the rest of the picture. The position I took this picture [from] makes everything point towards the light and even the cars point or make you focus on the light. Looking at the windows you see the slight reflection of light from sun shining down on everything around it. In this picture you notice how darkness consumes everything except for rising sun light.

Not only does Stefanie note the rising sun as a focal point of the photograph noting its pivotal role in the scene she records, she also recognizes her agency in taking the shot. She chooses her position in order to best emphasize the point of it – to highlight the power and contrast of darkness and sunlight.

Stefanie uses the word consumes which is an interesting word choice portraying darkness as an almost all-consuming entity constrained only by the emerging sunlight. Stefanie positions light as hopeful and her surroundings as dimly lit and grim.



Figure 5: Darkness and sunrise.

Similarly, Edgar describes the image of a block in his neighborhood in pitch darkness, with a small light streaking through the middle of the street (Figure 6).

He writes,

I know that on first sight it's just an unfocused picture but isn't that what life is in the first place; it is to me. That light is the clarity that we get a glimpse of every now and then. So as we age, we get closer and closer to this clarity and a better understanding but as the picture shows that out of sync feeling never really goes away. It just becomes easier to deal with.



Figure 6: Light at the end of the tunnel.

Edgar uses light and dark to express the general confusion and blurriness of life as he perceives it, in addition to the potential for clarity, symbolized by light. He thus reveals his ability to speak metaphorically and opens a window into his private world.

Maya also equates lights with hopeful actions in the face of uncertainty. As urban dwellers, we perhaps never fully read a walk light. We may barely take notice of the lights at the crossing; they mean nothing more than signals to cross a street or to wait for the traffic to pass (Figure 7). But Maya tells her reader,

I was crossing the street coming from the train station and when I looked up this is what I saw. You might just be like 'oh wow the walk sign and a green light' but I realized more. I blurred the background because it was pretty much irrelevant. But for me this is a real positive note. I'm not 100% sure how to put it into words but it's like – 'keep it moving'; 'the light is green' – 'the walk sign is lit' - and 'you have a way to go.' There is nothing there to 'stop' you from going where you're trying to go. You have the light!

The student's reflection that "she has the light" is deeply moving to me. I have been at thousands of crossing lights in my life, and never once did a simple walk sign prompt me into an inner dialogue and motivate me to keep walking and moving. Beckoned by the invisible walk signs to take a step onto the untrodden paths, Maya is compelled to see an ordinary walk sign as a symbol for the freedom and motivation to take another step in life.

Yet another student approaches the assignments more whimsically by looking at the dead tree trunks in her yard [Figure 8]. Her reflection is built on the notion that the actress Elizabeth Taylor, like the dead tree stumps in a Queens yard post-Hurricane Sandy, is the epitome of endurance and change. Jessica compares the violent shifts in a landscape with changes in ideas of 1940s femininity:



Figure 7: Walk sign.



Figure 8: Tree stumps.

What does a tree have to do with jazz, flapper girls, and Elizabeth Taylor? One word: change. The trees in my backyard changed my perception on its existence. We're constantly changing our actions for social acceptance. We went from big ball gowns and hidden legs to shorter dresses and more legs. As I get older my perception on things, people, and my surroundings needs to be altered.

Elizabeth Taylor went through change...8 times to be exact. The point is that change is a good thing and that's what my 3 trees and a stump represent.

Although the writing is not highly focused and Elizabeth Taylor is an amusing, not wholly unproblematic metaphor of resilience, Jessica associates Taylor's embrace of her highly glamorized marital discords with the resilience of the leafless tree stumps, bare and naked, yet still standing after Hurricane Sandy devastated parts of the East Coast in 2012. Taylor's personal life, like the tree stump, is stripped bare for the consumption of others. The student's identification with the tree stump as firm and resilient echoes in other students' association of the images they capture with inner strength.

Perseverance and Strength: Finding and Affirming Voice

Daniel, a single father, captures the image of Atlas, a bronze sculpture in midtown Manhattan, that depicts the ancient Greek

Titan bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders. He is drawn to it for its iconic depiction of physical strength, but his paragraph shows a deeper connection [Figure 9].

This statue inspired me so much because when you see him carrying the world he doesn't look like he's struggling; in fact, he looks like he's able to hold his own. To some he may look like he is crumbling to the weight of the world but to me he looks like he's pushing through against all odds. This is why I related to this statue because when I look at him I see that even though he has the weight of the world on his shoulders he is still willing to make it to the top. This statue motivates me to keep pushing forward even though it sometimes feels like the odds are stacked against me, but I know where I want my future to go and what it's going to take for me to get there.

The statue resonates with the student who shares the motivation he gains from the statue to continue on his own personal journey. Not only does he suggest that hardship and struggle in life can, as the powerful Titan suggests, be overcome, but he also identifies achieving his goals with the ongoing process of writing.

In her submission, Isabel makes meaning not only of her attraction to a particular setting but also expresses her preferences and boundaries. She touches on feelings of home

and belonging. Running helps her cope with things; she uses it as an escape. (Figure 10).

This park, this track field is my 2nd home. You know how children have secret hiding places or dream of a tree house or own one, well this track field is my 'tree house'. I like standing right in front of this field, right in front of #1 after stretching out and warming up to start my run. I feel that this track field is my escape of everything and that is why this is special to my friends and me. We can be mad, sad, and serious or in any mood but when we meet here it is as if it all goes away. I don't think anyone could understand how important this track field is to me. I also compare this field to life, we are always in a rush to get somewhere but we shouldn't, we should take our time and enjoy the moments.

The student recognizes that her neighborhood track is her "tree house" within a restrictive urban landscape of high-rise buildings. Her reading and decoding of the space is captivating because she transforms a mundane track to a space of creativity and identity. It makes me think about my own childhood spaces, cold hard floors much appreciated in the hot humid climate in the Caribbean, with Nancy Drew in my hand, a sacred place where I fell in love with words and ultimately pursued a life in academia. I grew up wishing for an impossible tree house,



Figure 9: Weight of the world.



Figure 10: When a track becomes a house.

the type of private getaways only seen in the movies. I had never met anyone who had a tree house and, similar to Isabel, growing up, I longed for one.

Composing the Composition Class: Scholarly and Pedagogical Connections

Whether focused on freedom and light, darkness and inner strength, or the possibility of a tree house escape, my students' photo journals demonstrate the benefits of the kinds of "engaged pedagogies" and "common ground" bell hooks (1994) and Kurt Spellmeyer (1990) theorize in their respective approaches to composition and rhetoric.

hooks posits:

Engaged Pedagogy necessarily values student expression. [...] When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not simply seek to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. (pp. 20-21)

Spellmeyer asserts that creating a "common ground" is important in the classroom in

order to foster a collaborative learning environment where both student and faculty are meaning makers. Like hooks, he argues that “education should demystify knowledge by showing it to be something made, something anyone can make, [and] made through the activity of dialogue” (pp. 334-335). As the students write their thoughts and analyses, their reflections pull me closer to the things they experience which, in turn, enrich the dialogue in the classroom.

In asking students to peel back the layers of text, song, or landscape embedded in their daily experiences and to dig into them with words, we ask them also to peel back the layers of who they are in the midst of transitions. We ask them to develop as critical writers and thinkers while also developing as human beings. I would not have seen the images I share in this essay nor heard these additional vignettes had I not assigned these low-stakes writing assignments. Through the individual and collective efforts of producing, sharing, and discussing the photo journals, my entire class ultimately engaged not just with what students see and experience, but moreover, with how each is beginning to write him or herself into the places and spaces of their everyday lives. By asking students to capture their world visually and make connections relevant to our course topic, I ask them to engage in critical reading and writing tasks that ultimately shape and reshape us all as students and teachers.

Prior to this assignment, it was not always clear to me who the students were beyond the classroom. Perhaps that does not matter nor should it. And yet, the glimpses of the students’ neighborhoods and their thoughts about each individual photo choice reshaped classroom discussions on equality, equity, race, and political structures. Students shared images and paragraphs about graffiti that needed to be changed, empty lots that could be transformed into community gardens, and shuttered businesses that devalued a community. One student was chased away by a neighbor who yelled “snitch, snitch,” as the

student took pictures of overfilled garbage pails. These are riveting; nothing prepared me for these simple photos and the few sentences that revealed the anxieties that would have never become apparent in assignments driven by content alone. The photo journals provided an incentive for writing and each set of writing prompts moved students toward increasingly complex analysis.

Students who have difficulty writing responses to purely abstract questions can use images to enter into class discussions. In their written compositions, my students demonstrate a heightened awareness of the community around them and the ability to directly connect course material with issues in their lives. Writing and rewriting their comments give students opportunities and a safe and controlled environment in which to practice writing and revision. Students learn from the ways their peers approached the assignments and gain better insight into neighborhoods and issues of New York City through the photos and comments each of their classmates shared with the class.

To return to the words of Sondra Perl (1994), my students’ photo journals help me see that “teaching allows me to utilize myself [and] enables me to think, to shape, to compose both the class and myself” (para.19). Perl writes,

On the playful side, I want to liken it to fishing, where I cast out a line and see, first of all, if it stays poised on the surface or if it sinks. Is there a bite? Does someone have something to say? Then comes the reeling in, when someone grabs hold, sometimes two people or more, wrestling, thrashing. Landing the fish is never my job alone, but the job of the entire class. And, when a point emerges or an insight is shared, the joy is shared too, because we have worked at it together. (p. 429)

Low-stakes writing assignments that actively involve photography are perfect examples of Perl’s “bait.” Once the students are “hooked” to the format and routine of the photo journal

assignments, it becomes clear how smoothly and effectively they can practice John Berger's

(1972) "ways of seeing" in and beyond the classroom.

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Transitioning Counter-Stories: Black Student Accounts of Transitioning to College-Level Writing

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ABSTRACT

Historically, in the field of writing studies, critical conversations around transitioning from secondary to post-secondary academic writing situations have centered on pedagogical and programmatic perspectives. For the most part, student experiences have been absent from these conversations, and voices of racially marked students have remained all but entirely absent. This article details some of the writing and high-school-to-college transitioning experiences of nine Black American students collected from interviews at a predominantly White university in the southern United States. These accounts show what gaps exist in current scholarship and disciplinary knowledge about student writers and transitioning as well as how college educators might create antiracist, culturally sustaining writing pedagogy at the transition level.

“How can you have your mission statement say you strive for diversity and inclusion but most of the content that is taught say the opposite?”

--Interviewee NF2

When students transition from high school to college writing, their success is measured on their ability to meet institutional, programmatic, and cross-curricular outcomes in writing competencies. As most students have had limited exposure to the specific ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing practiced in college-level writing (Bartholomae 1986), they are often, for a period, caught between their primary or previous academic discourses and the academic discourses they have yet to

master. Even with this reality, student experiences of transitioning across the high school-college writing threshold are difficult to find. Research and theory on postsecondary writing practices focus on curricular infrastructure from the institutional side of the story, suggesting that before bringing in student voices, the institutions need to get their own houses in order. Where student voices are included (Carpenter & Falbo, 2006; Denecker, 2013; McDonald & Farrell, 2012), the accounts of students whose

experiences are ordinarily diminished within predominantly White spaces, such as majority White research universities, remain unheard.

In particular, to develop more culturally sustainable (Paris & Alim, 2017) anti-racist pedagogies (Condon & Young, 2016), writing programs and teachers at predominantly White colleges and universities need to investigate the transition experience accounts of these Black American students. In an effort to expand the scope of disciplinary knowledge about transitioning from high school to college-level writing for college first-year writing (FYW) instructors and writing program administrators (WPAs), I chronicle the transition perceptions and experiences of nine Black American students, at a predominantly White, metropolitan research university, with a student population of 74% White American and 11% Black American. For these students who have transitioned from one upwardly mobile predominantly White space to another, this study gives authority to their experiences in majority White institutional spaces and counters common conceptions of students of color as underprepared, underdeveloped, and unspoken in academic writing practices. Moreover, the results better prepare educators to help these students succeed beyond the college transition level.

This study uses counter-story to illustrate why racial identities might shape high school to college transition experiences, including the relationship between past literacy education and racialized experiences. Through this examination, I seek to show what educators of writing and scholars of transitioning can learn from racially-subjugated students about “minding the gap” (Farris, 2010; Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007) from writing in high school to writing in college.

A Review of the Literature: Transition Framework

Sullivan and Tinberg (2006) suggest that the field has yet to come to a consensus on

what exactly constitutes college-level writing, since the meaning of college-level writing is layered by many contexts outside the classroom and even outside the writing program. Within these layers exists “a whole range of interrelated and interdependent skills associated with reading, writing, and thinking” (Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006, p. xix). Farris (2010) explains that the perceived gap between writing expectations in high school and college derives from unequal rigor across all institutions involved in transition, from high schools to two-year and four-year colleges, because each requires a different degree of rigor (p. 272-73). This gap is perhaps furthered by the lack of student perceptions in college writing scholarship.

College students offer perspectives on transitions through literacy narratives in one section of Sullivan and Tinberg’s (2006) *What is “College-Level” Writing?* By comparison, Carpenter and Falbo (2006) analyze “the written literacy narratives of students working as undergraduate Writing Associates at Lafayette College” to consider how students who succeed in transitioning to college-level writing practices construct identities through literacy (p. 92). Denecker (2013) offers an additional perspective by interviewing students in a dual-enrollment program. These firsthand accounts illustrate the significance of including students in our scholarship on secondary to postsecondary transitions. I further these efforts by emphasizing the accounts of students whose bodies are marked but whose narratives are ordinarily marginalized (Royster & Williams, 1999) within predominantly White spaces. Frequently, if race is not ignored entirely in transitioning studies literature, then it is referenced as almost a footnote (Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006; Hansen & Farris, 2010) or associated with remedial and basic writing courses (DiPardo, 1993; Royster & Williams, 1999).

Transitioning studies, a term coined by the creators of the Transitioning to College Writing Symposium at the University of

Mississippi, has generally relied on the experiences of the generic student. Royster and Williams (1999) describe the representation of the generic student in writing studies scholarship. For these authors, “[w]hile this seemingly neutral approach could be thought of as placing all students on equal level, the neutrality often erases the presence of students of color with the resultant assumption that, in not being marked as present, they in fact were not there” (Royster & Williams, 1999, p. 568). The lack of attention to identity leaves a gap in the understanding that the field has about writing movement across academic sites of writing. The accounts of Black American students transitioning across sites of academic writing offer a unique voice of color that may guide WPAs and writing instructors towards more culturally sustainable and life-relevant curriculum early in the college years.

Studying the academic writing practices of students from subjugated raciolinguistic identities helps us rethink our pedagogical practices in the teaching of writing. For example, Balester (1993) interviewed Black American college students for a study that worked towards understanding the dialectical “cultural divide between many composition teachers and their students” (p. 1). Whereas Balester analyzes applications of the Black American rhetorical tradition to examine the approaches that some bidialectical Black Americans take to academic writing expectations, I analyze my participants’ attitudes towards high-school- and college-level academic writing to understand how they perceive their fit and potential success within higher education culture.

Kynard (2013) began some of the work of tracing the high-school-to-college “composition-literacies” at predominantly White institutions. While this study specifically looks at how Black American students adapt to the shift between high school and postsecondary written literacies, Kynard examined “Institutionalized Freshman English” as the “longstanding gatekeeper for

success in the white, bourgeois literacy codes of college” which plays “an important lens into the ongoing racialized and political boundaries of who can and should have a right to higher education” (p. 8). I draw from Kynard’s engagement with current first-year writing courses as historically and ideologically linked to Freshman English with a seeded history of hierarchical academic culture oppression. Just as is the case with broader social culture, academic culture maintains hierarchies of valued identities, and in most cases, introductory college writing courses are designed to enforce these hierarchies through the literacies privileged in the curriculum. Literacy practices and discourses are “stacked” (Delpit, 1995, p. 165), glorifying the dominant literacies preferred by the educated White American middle-class majority and delegitimizing Black, indigenous, and other marginalized literacy practices.

The interview conversations with these Black American students reveal both conformity to these oppressive structures and resistance to these structures as they find their way as college-level writers. Kynard (2013) asserts that examination of racially-oppressive structures within academia must attend to the individual student and institutional histories beyond “the scholarship and theories of college classrooms” (p. 12). Other scholarship considers some of these student (Farris, 2010; Jennings & Hunn, 2002; Sommers & Saltz, 2004) and institutional (Denecker, 2013; Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006) histories, but their analyses overlook the racialized standards within institutionalized writing expectations.

Jennings and Hunn (2002) exemplify how race is an unfronted factor in much research concerning basic college-level writing in “Why Do I Have to Take Remedial English?: A Collaborative Model to Solve a National Problem.” This chapter within *Teaching Writing in High School and College: Conversations and Collaborations* describes the rate of students from Salem High School who enroll in remedial English at a local community college, Tidewater Community

College. The authors conclude that “aligning instruction, empowering students, decentralizing classrooms, and heightening attention to better serv[e] the needs of the graduation high school student/incoming first-year college student” is critical to writing instruction at both secondary and postsecondary institutions (Jennings & Hunn, 2002, p. 199). However, their analysis omits discussion of the racial identity and racialized experiences of those students.

In the 2015–2016 school year, 60% of Salem High School students were of a racial or ethnic minority, and 37% were considered economically disadvantaged (Virginia Beach City Schools, 2016, p. 2). Tidewater Community College reports that Black students comprised 34% of the Fall 2014 student population, but the authors of the study leave the racialized aspect of their college-remedial-English-bound students unexplored. Per the college’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness Quick Facts, the school has the “[l]argest undergraduate African American enrollment in Virginia higher education and 7th largest associate degree producer among two-year colleges for African American students” (The Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 2016). With at least some of the 49% of Black students from Salem High constituting over a third of the student community at Tidewater, the inattentiveness to racialized experiences in Jennings and Hunn (2002) and similar studies (Denecker, 2013; Farris, 2010; Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Sullivan & Tinberg, 2006) leaves wide gaps in any conclusions drawn from the study. I see the inclination of equating American blackness to basic, remedial (Royster & Williams, 1999, p. 571), and underprepared writing carried into transitioning studies research by eliminating Black students’ transitional experiences from disciplinary conversations and critical spaces. If the field of writing studies has historically expected the majority of Black American students to enroll in developmental, remedial, or basic writing courses (Royster & Williams,

1999, p. 570), then this common expectation is not worth noting in transition writing scholarship. The focus of this study counters this expectation by using a critical race methodology to highlight the perspectives of Black American students in traditional and advanced FYW courses at a predominantly White university.

Method

Research Questions and Methodology

My research questions for this study included:

1. What is the correlation between positive and negative racialized experiences with past literacy education and current perceptions of FYW courses?
2. How might racial identities shape transition experiences?
3. What do the transition accounts from racially-subjugated students help writing studies teacher-scholars learn about the transitions from high school to college writing?

This project aims to use critical race methodology to centralize Black American student perspectives of transitioning into college-level writing. In conjunction with racial methodology, which I use to interrogate the role of race in writing studies research practices around institutional transitioning, critical race methodology marks racially underprivileged or underrepresented narratives as central. One central tenet of critical race theory argues that in a society ordered in part by racial identifications, racialized experiences may allow writers and intellectuals of marginalized races to communicate issues to the Eurocentric culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2006, p. 4). I am especially interested in racially-subjugated students, because many Black American students must contend with the lower social status of their racial identity which requires more focused rhetorical writing education

than that for their less racially dominant counterparts.

The racialized other who cannot pass as the racialized norm, historically, has been absent in composition and writing studies scholarship (Prendergast, 1998; Royster & Williams, 1999). Martinez (2014) argues that critical race theory and particularly counter-story can be used as a testimonial method of narrative methodology to bring to light persistent racism in the field of writing studies and the academy itself (p. 34). Critical race researchers see “counter-story [as] also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) clarify that “majoritarian stories . . . are stories that carry layers of assumptions that persons in positions of racialized privilege bring with them to discussions of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination” (p. 28). Rather than including the unique voice of color to construct a counter-story, I use it here to emphasize how underrepresented racial identities can shape educational experiences in predominantly White spaces.

Data Collection and Analysis

Students in the Cultural Center’s Early Arrival Program at this predominantly White, metropolitan research university located in midwestern United States were initially surveyed. The Cultural Center’s (2017) website describes that the program was “created to help ease the transition of incoming students of color including African American males, Latin[x] students and Woodford R. Porter Scholars, from high school to college and to teach them the tips and tricks of prospering in their first year of college.” Survey questions, found in Appendix A, were sent to nearly 150 students in the program through the web application SurveyMonkey.com, and 37 viable responses that included all contact information were returned. Due to time constraints during the

initial round, I contacted 30 students for the preliminary interviews; however, of the 30 participants I contacted, 15 responded, and 6 scheduled interviews. Although the other seven respondents to the survey received invites after the initial round, they declined to participate. All of the self-selected participants identify as Black American or as more than one race including Black American.

The additional three participants came from contacting composition program faculty for students who would be willing to participate as well as contacting my previous students from English 101 Introduction to College Writing and English 102 Intermediate College Writing. I reached out to students regardless of racial formation. Although Black and White American students responded, only Black American students followed through on the interviews. This response scheme could indicate a philosophical investment in this research project by the student population I aimed to give a voice.

The nine Black American students in this study shared their perspectives through semi-structured interviews, and three of the interviewees participated in in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for first-year college students (Balester, 1993; Selfe & Hawisher, 2012), because participants may be more at ease with the slightly guided format rather than a completely open-ended structure due to their unfamiliarity with me as the researcher and timidity about discussing their writing practices. By applying a racial methodology from my selection of participants through my data analysis and conclusions, I attend to, rather than ignore, race in interview questions around transition experiences.

The survey results, aggregated with SurveyMonkey.com’s survey tool, captured an overall depiction of the sample and developed the participant descriptions found in Appendix B. The student participant names were coded by designating the month of their interviews, their gender identities, and the

order of the interview within that month (e.g., A female participant interviewed third in December would be DF3). Using grounded coding, the following classifications emerged from the interview responses and discussions with the participants to understand the responses as they relate to race, academic writing experiences, and transitioning across institutional contexts:

- Experiences with past literacy education,
- Current perceptions of transitioning and FYW courses, and
- Racial identity in the transition to college writing

These categories and their subcategories created the primary structure for the accounts provided in this study.

Results: Counter-stories to Transitioning

Experiences with Past Literacy Education

The participants consider how the academic writing experiences during their time in college match and differ from their high school experiences. The students' literacy education and academic writing histories reveal their thoughts on how they believe college writing compares to past writing experiences, both in and out of school. In the tradition of counter-story, the significance of these accounts is not their dissimilarity to White American perspectives, but their contrast to the stories that popular American culture has constructed about young Black Americans.

How College Writing Practices and Expectations Differ. With the study participants, I wondered what stories from high school teachers and administrators influenced their perceptions about college-level writing. Extended from this, I questioned how and why they approached previous academic writing practices. Second-year student, MM1, explains that “in high school, I would just start writing, and that usually helped me out. But with college

courses, they're a little more complex, so I can't just start writing without a focus on where you're going before you start.” First-year student, FF1, expresses a similar attitude to MM1. “I make sure I understand what's being asked of me,” she says, “and then I always always make an outline--it doesn't matter what I'm writing.”

Considering the types of writing and intensity of writing, FF1 explains, “In my [high school] history class, it was just that research paper. But in my English class, we did responses, we did essays. The final was a research paper. And then like a few writing assignments for homework, just like reflections and stuff.” Compared to the college writing expectations, she adds, “Since I've been in college--I've only been here one semester--and I've written six research papers and a whole bunch of essays.” Participants suggest that, in addition to intensity and volume, their preparation for writing assignments in college has changed. OM1 notes how his approach to college papers changed but also extended from practices he learned in high school. “Usually I read the ... grading rubric,” he said. “Then I look at the question. And in high school, I was taught to do some type of pre-writing, so it doesn't have to be elaborate, but I usually just write my main points on a piece of paper.” For OM1, the invention and pre-writing practices he learned in high school transitioned with him into college-level writing tasks. Both JF1 and FM1 note the importance of outlining as part of their invention practices for college writing assignments. Each convey how this practice has become even more important as college students than as high school students, suggesting that they must give more thought to the process of invention itself.

The significance of invention leads some participants to understand the differences in format that their teachers emphasized. According to DF3, high school teachers stress the three-point-five or three-point-eight essay structure and thesis statements in academic writing. The former is the stereotypical five-

paragraph essay structure with which most secondary and postsecondary writing educators are familiar, but the latter constrains the five-paragraph structure by requiring eight sentences in each of the three body paragraphs. Secondary juniors and seniors are often told by their teachers that college professors want very particular form and structure in their writing (Denecker, 2013; Farris, 2009; Mosley, 2006; Strachan, 2002; Van DeWeghe, 2006). Perfection in style and mechanics takes precedence over analysis and description. One of the instructors participating in Denecker's (2013) study suggests that "an emphasis on format is a distinctive element of [high-school] writing instruction" and "since a five-paragraph essay has typically allowed students to pass" standardized graduation exams, students and teachers have difficulty moving past this format (p. 34).

Many students need less preparation to perform those approaches to academic writing. However, the emphasis on structure and form rather than inquiry, research, and exploratory analysis gives some students a false impression of what college-level writing will entail (Farris, 2009). OM1 shares that his senior English teacher told him "it was going to be a lot longer and a lot more writing, and more papers and things like that." By comparison, FF1 says she heard that "college writing's a lot harder than high school and my English teacher tried to prepare us." These narratives of college writing preparation are common (Jordan et al., 2006; Mosley, 2006; Winalski, 2006).

Challenging the common myth of college rigor, three of the nine participants note that the writing requirements in their high school English courses feels more demanding than their college writing courses. NF2 also detail an experience that counters the common rigor myths. Responding to meeting the writing standards expected of her, NF2 says,

In high school, they're [stricter] on how your paper's supposed to be. You know like the 3.5. I hated it! I was like, why do

we have to do all this? But it was different, because you know here, I don't think professors care about the format or the method that you do, as long as you have the information there. So that's one thing I do like about college. I just feel like if you have all your information there, and it's like in a good range, you got an A basically.

Similarly, one of my former FYW students, FM1 details that "we did really rigid format for research papers, but of course it turns out not to be true at all" of college writing assignments, and OM1 notes that "it turns out my high school teacher gave us a lot more work than my class now." OM1's response suggests that both high school and college writing teachers might better prepare students for adaptable writing skills by preparing them for "lifelong literacy" (Budden, Nicolini, Fox, & Greene, 2002, p. 80) rather than specific types of writing with goals that "may be inherently different" (Denecker, 2013, p. 35).

Confidence and Insecurity in Writing for School. Richardson (2003) contends that "unlike most other American groups, African Americans' experiences ... have established a history of mistrust of American institutions" which has led to "oppositional attitudes and behaviors, because their upward mobility" in whiteness-centric American society has required them to intentionally exterminate their linguistic histories (p. 32). Many current college writing professors recognize these complications, but the college academic literacy expectations can be a rough transition for Black American students with closed-minded professors. More than just discussing how writing in high school and college courses differs, I wanted to know how students' psychological connection to academic writing influences their transitions.

Participants described in-school writing situations that made them feel both confident and insecure. According to writing studies scholar Lunsford (2015), in regard to relationships to writing, "In some instances, prior knowledge and experience are necessary

and often helpful; in others [sic] they can work against writers” (Naming What We Know). Examining the psychological relationship between students and prior writing education can help FYW teachers understand some of the choices their students make in writing. As Lunsford suggests, prior experiences contribute to these relationships, and “[f]or many people ... prior experience with writing had been negative, and this attitude and these feelings went with them throughout their lives” (*Naming What We Know*). In the case of Black American students, the insecurity is often linked to the irrelevance of the curricular content to their lives and lived experiences.

OM1 explains that he feels most insecure “when I have no connection or relation with the topic at all.” However, he feels most confident with “argumentative writing. Ones where we pick sides and you defend that side--I think that usually caters to all. Because then if you disagree, you can switch to another topic--then whether you disagree or not, rather than writing about just disagreeing when you don't really disagree.” Research suggests that novice college writers are more comfortable composing argumentative essays than analytical essays, because it closely relates to the kinds of writing they performed in high school (Gentile, 2006; Mosley, 2006; Sommers and Saltz, 2004; VanDeWeghe, 2006; Winalski, 2006). Writing from a student point of view, Winalski (2006) suggests that high school academic writing strongly centers around the argumentative thesis, when, in fact, college writing is more concerned with “the raw qualities of the ideas” (p. 304). Rather than reading OM1's experiences and preferences for connecting with his topic as high-school-level literacy, critical race theorists may read these Black American discourse features of community consciousness, cultural references, and field dependency (Gilyard and Richardson, 2001; Smitherman, 1993), which writing professors should build upon.

When we consider the multiple discourses that students use to compose, we must think beyond morphology, tone, and style. Field dependency (Gilyard and Richardson, 2001, 42; Smitherman, 1993, 13), for example, helps writers connect content between their own experiences and new information. These connections are important for all students, but Black Americans' historical relationship to American dominant culture makes it especially necessary to develop culturally-sustainable curriculum (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1-2). Per Richardson (2003), many educators continue to neglect culturally appropriate curriculum, because “[f]or the most part, America continues to teach us to accept the status of lower achievement for Black students as the norm” (p. 8). Richardson describes “White supremacist literacy” as “consumption, consent, obedience, fragmentation, singularity (as opposed to multiplicity), and positivism” (p. 9). For example, traditional writing assessment practices encourage student obedience, not only to the instructor's standards but to institutional standards which often prize these White supremacist literacy practices.

These standards and practices privilege meritocracy and falling in line, which key assimilationist approaches apply through literacy and rhetorical education. One assimilationist approach includes what is commonly referred to as process pedagogy, in which students are expected to revise and polish until they shed their native discourses for dominant discourses (Delpit, 1995, p. 164) and the “rhetorical and intellectual traditions” of racial and ethnic groups marginalized in the academy (Kynard, 2008, p. 5). When, after prewriting, drafting, conferencing, and revising, students engage in common Black American literacies such as resistance and survival literacy (Richardson, 2003), they may be penalized.

DF1 did not mention an issue with accommodating academic voice, but she did concur with NF2 about page-length requirements. “I just had to write a seven-

page paper,” she said. “I was, like, this is ridiculous. My argument is just diminishing, because I’m just putting stuff in there so I could get to seven pages.” The pressures of assessment, evaluation, and general judgment seemed to shape the students’ response to insecurity and confidence in academic writing practices. For example, FM1 explains, “When I’m given a rubric that’s not so picky or you have to have perfect grammar, or each paragraph needs to be this long and ... more it has to be MLA format and has to be this length, I kind of like that.”

The participants often felt more comfortable being assessed when they related to or had some passion for the topics they were assigned, such as MM1, who states, “I like to have structure and kind of have someone help me out--guide me-- and then once I push towards the topic, I find the passion and write about it.” These accounts are not intended to suggest that all Black American students have insecurities about academic writing expectations or that their insecurities are any more intense than the White American students in college courses. The honors, dual credit, and AP high school English statuses of most of the interview participants match the academic resources accessed by many middle-class White American students entering the university. As OM1 notes about his experience of being in a predominantly White high school preparing him for a predominantly White university, “I haven’t really thought about it. My English teachers have always been extremely nice to me, so I don’t know. They were really good teachers.” The complexities surrounding the transition from one whiteness-invested academic space to another often involve general socialization aspects involved in rhetorical education.

The Act of Writing In and Out of School. Several interviewees discuss how school affects their personal relationship to writing and how this difference became more pronounced in the move to college-level writing. JF2 describes how writing outside

school comes more naturally than writing for school, “because when I do write, it’s because I have an idea. If somebody gives me a prompt, I don’t have an idea right then. I’ve have to read it and research.” OM1 explains how the struggle with writing for school becomes more pronounced as education progresses. “I think for school writing, the teacher should set less boundaries just to explore the creativity of the student,” he recommends “But making someone--making a group of people--write about the same thing is kind of challenging for some of the people in that group, because someone might have a background in that writing,” which gives them an advantage and others a disadvantage. He stresses the need for choice in academic writing, because “if it doesn’t connect with you, you’re obviously not going to put a lot of research or anything like that.” FM1 concurs, stating, “It’s kind of weird of that someone asks you to write a long paper about something you probably didn’t even pay attention to.” He describes a preferable situation as “if ... you kind of get to choose your own direction, then maybe I’d be a little more interested, but it’s hard to keep focus.” As shown previously regarding what makes him feel insecure in writing, MM1 agrees with the necessity of choice but discusses its limitations. He would rather be guided through the options, which he finds does not always happen.

By the time students reach our FYW and other writing intensive courses, they already have a toolbox of discursive instruments for composing academic writing. Some of these instruments for Black Americans include the rejection of their home or non-academic linguistic practices. For example, NF2 notes “I like to write how I talk. Even though I know that may not be academic voice. Sometimes I feel like when I write in my academic voice, it’s not me.” Rejecting her natural writing voice for academic writing tasks, or “fronting” (Canagarajah as cited in Richardson, 2003, p. 17) is a common practice that Black students apply to “make the grade”

(Richardson, 2003, p. 17). NF2 and MM1 describes learning academic voice as one of the outcomes of FYW at this university.

Considerations of students' past literacy education should investigate more than discrepancies in rigor, requirements, and format, because some new college students are not only transitioning across academic sites of writing. They are transitioning across raciolinguistic literacies as well, such as from Black English Vernacular to secondary academic writing and from Black English Vernacular to postsecondary academic writing. Therefore, thinking of writing transitions in terms of literacies transitions could be especially effective. Critical race methodology and counter-story helps teacher-researchers understand the connection between raciolinguistic literacies and transitioning to college-level academic writing.

Both participants who did and did not identify with marginalized raciolinguistic literacies recognize the shift in written literacy practices at the college level. OM1 describes the FYW course he was taking as a themed course and how he had to shift his thinking about writing to succeed in it. "Like for my English class right now, the whole class is based on music, and I'm not very musical," he explains. "I have no rhythm in my body in any way. So, writing about how much I like music is really hard." He describes his solution as "I ended up having to like, I don't want to say lie my way, but I had to stretch a few things." Based on common stereotypes about Black American males and how they might connect to academic content, teachers may not expect this response from OM1. After all, a Black young man with "no rhythm" might as well be an anomaly based on cultural narratives about that group. This assumption is but one majoritarian perspective that studying secondary to postsecondary transition counter-stories can disrupt.

Current Perceptions of Transitioning and FYW Courses

Students perform the identity of academic institutional culture, in part, through academic writing (Williams, 2006), so transitioning to college-level writing means that the space of the university and the university classroom help construct college-student identity. The participants described here made numerous connections between writing and the college-student identity. DF1 notes, in her response, "I think writing helps you clearly communicate what you're trying to say. I feel like if I didn't go to college, that skill would diminish because I wouldn't be writing as much." DF1 sees college-level writing as a key factor in learning to communicate clearly and effectively, whereas FM1 believes the written communication practices he has learned thus far have made him a more critical reader. FM1 clarifies,

Some of the social issues we were writing about [in English 102], it's kind of like you know what social is and why it's happen, but the page length requirement kind of made you have think a little further. So that's cool, and you can kind of use that a lot more. Whenever I read an article on the internet now, I'm not just reading it; I'm reading it and kind of analyzing it and think deeper about points. Otherwise, I would just read an article and directly take it as it is.

These perceptions of college writing are linked, in part, to the many identities of the participants.

In the next section, I examine the interviewees' responses to conceptions of transitioning by presenting how they perceive the connection between writing and the college student identity, what they emphasize about the teacher-student relationship, and what they reveal about the relevance of writing curriculum.

Writing and College Student Racial Identity in the Transition. As a metropolitan research university, the institution that these participants attend encourages particular ways of being collegiate through writing practices outlined in the

General Education and first-year composition program curriculum. Much of the preliminary conversations with the first-year students focuses on writing practices and preferences rather than issues of race. For instance, OM1 suggests a relationship between evolving in college student identity and adjusting to college-level writing. “Your writing develops as you grow as a college student,” he explains. The continuing students gave more attention to the connection between their racial identities and the curriculum. Second-year student MM1 comments that “as I have grown, I have surely begun to love the fact that I am a black, African American male ... [a part of] the culture that thrives in America despite the racial profiling and blatant racism that still lingers, even on the [college] campus. I realize the responsibility I have to be unapologetically me, unapologetically black!” Held in conjunction with NF2’s challenge in the opening epigraph, the “officialized narrative” (Royster & Williams, 1999, p. 579), formal school curriculum acts as an artifact of white supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 21), and institutionalized literacy education seldom recognizes the rich cultural history of Black American discourses and rhetorical traditions (Richardson, 2003).

The difficulty of transitioning to college literacy practices from secondary literacy practices entails more than the intellectual aspect of the work. Some participants, like JF2, connect their identity as a college student to writing for nonacademic situations. JF2 states, “I know with my career, I’m going to have to write research papers, so just knowing how to communicate your thoughts effective through writing I think is important.” Some of the participants hint at the invisible influence of racial perspectives on their academic and social engagement as well as the influence of stereotype threat on performing academic writing. One first-year academic advisor for STEM disciplines at the participants’ university details, “Basically, I want a whole picture of what their life is like right now and that means inside and outside

of the classroom, because everything outside of the classroom is going to affect their experience.” The changing “contact zone” of not only the classroom but the college campus also places Black American students in close contact with unfamiliar members of the dominant culture. Although all the study participants transitioned from predominantly White high schools, those spaces contained people that they at least knew, if not trusted.

This new space puts higher stakes on adopting whiteness-centric rhetorical behaviors. Even though OM1 remarks that he never felt mistreated by his White teachers in high school, he also explains, “I actually have to think: what can I say, what’s the teacher going to think of what I say? I didn’t want to jeopardize my scholarship.” OM1’s concern indicates that because many Black American college students at this university receive acceptance through programs such as Woodford R. Porter Scholars, TRIO, and others (U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Cultural Center, n.d.), these programs shape their approaches to coursework. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that teachers and educational institutions have been conditioned to reward “conformity to ‘white norms’ or sanctioned cultural practices” (p. 59), which scholarship programs promote with their focus on meritocracy. This added pressure means that their relationship to course curricula has a different dynamic from their relationship their high school curricula. The tension between racial identity and school curriculum is further emphasized through the lack of legitimate representation of Black American experiences in the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1977). They are less likely to challenge, resist, or question the curriculum or pedagogy, even when their experiences or experiential knowledge urges them to do so. For Black American students on scholarships, transitioning requires learning the difference between high school and college-level coursework as well as networks of relationships that influence that coursework.

In describing how these differences relate to their perceptions of enacting college student identities, most interviewees did not emphasize the impact of racialized experiences directly, but some of their responses denote an invisible influence. For example, racial ideologies in the curriculum are embedded in practices as basic as citations. For example, features of Black American discourses linked to citing sources include incorporating cultural references—some of which their instructors are not familiar with—field dependency, and structural call and response (Gilyard & Richardson, 2001, p. 41-42; Smitherman, 1993, p. 13). FF1 and DF1 discuss grounding part of their success as college writers on their fluency with citation styles and grammar usage. FF1 reflects that her FYW English 101 course “really didn’t do a lot of different stuff. It was MLA and that was basically it.” She adds, “We didn’t do APA and Chicago or any of that. I know Chicago’s more like history based. In my history class now, we have to write a paper, and we have to use Chicago. And I’ve never used Chicago before.” Similarly, DF1 notes the emphasis on MLA in her AP English course. At the time of our interview, she felt she was a less successful college writer, because “I still have to look up like MLA or I didn’t remember how to do in-text citations, and I still make simple grammatical errors.” In addition to being typical of new transitioning students, the focus on citation practices and style conventions eliminates recognition of culture on writing practices such as citing.

Most of the perspectives on race in the interviews arose indirectly. MM1 remarks that “I find inspiration from my experiences to direct that towards a paper or assignment, if it’s a paper that we can just write about an argument or something.” Those experiences include being a Black American male in the American higher education system. He adds in a follow-up interview, “As I matured and truly started to find myself in college, which I am still doing constantly, I realized who I was

as a black man in America and the pros and cons that go along with that identity.”

Other participants confront race head-on. Regarding the curriculum in writing and English courses at the university, NF2 notes that most often “no Black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, gay/lesbian authors ... get brought up nor read” and neither do the worldviews or lived perspectives of these groups. Although the English department offers courses that focus on these groups and their literary perspectives at the 300 level, chances are that NF2 and her non-English major friends stopped taking the required English courses at the 200 level. They will not have had the 300-level literature courses. She explains her struggles with making connections with faculty and the curriculum and describes feeling forbidden to use her authentic voice to show what she is learning. Nevertheless, NF2 also indicates that writing in academic voice makes writers “sound smarter” but requires her to lose her authentic voice.

This perception of conveying intelligence through writing styles is based in constructions of whiteness. Ladson-Billings (1998) describes some of the traditional constructions of whiteness accepted as “‘school achievement,’ ‘intelligence,’ ‘middle classness,’ and ‘science’” (p. 9). Loss of a writer’s authentic voice can also be linked to the White supremacist literacy practice of obedience that Richardson (2003) describes. FM1 additionally questions this obedience during our interview. In discussing the literary-analysis assignments common to high school English courses, he suggests, “Even though it was open, there pretty much was a right answer, so it was a little hard to be creative. And even if you were creative, your teacher would go back and say, ‘no this is wrong, and this is why.’” Most likely, at least some of the reasons given for the flaws in FM1’s and other students’ literary interpretations speak to their failure to meet whiteness-centric values in the curriculum. Whiteness-centric interpretations do things

such as fashion Rosa Parks as “a tired seamstress instead of a longtime participant in social justice endeavors” and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as “a sanitized folk hero who enjoyed the full support of ‘good Americans’ rather than a disdained scholar and activist whose vision ... challenged the United States on issues of economic injustice and aggression in Southeast Asia” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 21-22). As Richardson suggests, in many cases when students do not ascribe to such interpretations—students whose worldviews have not been shaped by discourses of whiteness—they receive negative evaluations of their written work.

Relevance of Writing Curriculum.

Even though constructing cultural knowledge through writing practices has been an interest of composition scholars, as explored in the sub-field of community literacy (Adler-Kassner, 2008; Guerra, 2008; Kirsch, 2009; Long, 2008), it has been central to the learning experiences of Black American communities. JF2 chooses her first paper topic for her college Honors Composition course by writing “about a letter that a doctor wrote to the National Organic Standards Board concerning carrageenan,” because as an aspiring scientist she “wanted to research more about the effects of carrageenan and if it is actually as harmful as people were claiming it to be.” In an extended email interview, JF2 discusses how FYW curriculum relates to her in the long-term. She writes, “I think this class has prepared me well for other assignments that I will have to complete for the rest of my college career and my career in general.” In reflecting on whether or not FYW should prepare her for all writing situations, JF2 suggests, “I definitely think that these types of courses should prepare students for writing in the rest of their careers regardless of whether they are English majors or not because I think that writing is an incredibly important skill.” Because JF2 notes that she believes a self-taught and well-practiced high-school graduate can write at the same level as many college students, her view on how FYW

courses should prepare students is more complex than has been suggested by teachers and public discourse.

NF2 views the necessity of FYW with a practical, almost utilitarian attitude. “When I got here,” she said, “you guys¹ talked a lot about using the library like online library sources and stuff to like incorporate into your writing.” She uses those skills in her upper-level courses, as she describes:

You don’t forget. Because even currently in my nutrition class, we have to use the EBSCO and CINAHL searches. We have to find diabetes and hypertension and stuff, and literally write a paper about the stuff. [The instructor] says we have to use those links and it’s mandatory. I don’t know how some people don’t use it. I mean, it does help.

This statement indicates that in addition to the practice of writing itself, the ways academic writers select, evaluate, and report information (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 4) should be made relevant as well. FM1, describes the relevance to his personal life of vetting sources and reading critically as part of the research process. As my student in his second-semester first-year course, FM1 had extensive choice in his writing topics, though the topics had to fit within the realm of social criticism. The assignments required him to research and explain the history, cultural relevance, and possible solutions for a social issue affecting the many communities he belongs to—local, virtual, and national. FM1 explains that, as a result of the class, “I feel like I have more critical analysis about things.” He learned that experienced academic writers “have to really research who wrote it. I didn’t really ever think about [that].” Perhaps, FM1 finds encouragement to follow-through on the research practices that we all try to teach due to his connection the topic and the relevance of the curriculum’s content.

¹ Here, NF2 includes me among her first-year writing instructors.

Conclusion: Adding a “Unique Voice of Color” to the High-School-to-College-Writing Transition Tales

To build our knowledge as teachers and program administrators, I offer the results of this study to act as a catalyst for bringing marginalized student voices into critical dialogues on transitioning across sites of academic writing. The voices, and the experiences, of Black American students gives authority to their perspectives. In a space, such as a predominantly White higher education institution, foregrounding the voices of Black American students who physically disembody the whiteness values of the institution provides more critical knowledge about transitioning. Martinez (2014) describes counter-story in writing research as a rhetorical method for investigating dominant racialized ideologies in the field. These ideologies represent the influence of institutional racism on research, pedagogy, and administrative practices within writing studies which we must continue to interrogate and eliminate.

Referencing a unique voice of color affords us a stronger understanding of how race and institutional whiteness might shape transitions from high school to college literacy engagement. The accounts given by my interview participants disrupt the common association of Black American students and other racially-marginalized students with basic and remedial writing curriculum. Most of the interview participants do not recognize the influence of race on their academic success in writing, because it has never been discussed. Some of us American citizens of color may not be aware of how usual racism within academic institutions is because, as suggested by Brandt (1992) and Prendergast (1998), it is

so much a part of the way society functions. With the continued disciplinary interest in writing and transitioning, these student perspectives work towards complicating “majoritarian stories” about bridging (Hoffman et al., 2007) and minding (Farris, 2010) the gap from high school to college writing. From these “unique voice of color” accounts, writing teachers and writing program administrators can learn what culturally sustaining, antiracist curriculum at the transition level may look like for this historically subjugated student population.

In my current FYW pedagogy, I challenge these embedded structures in a number of ways. One, I require students to contemplate and respond to the racial ideologies in their own literacy education. We read primarily from scholars of underrepresented, disenfranchised, or derogated racial and linguistic identities. With discussions of authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Amy Tan, Vershawn Young, and Toni Morrison, I localize the curriculum for the diverse raciolinguistic population at the University of Central Florida. I make race present in an opportunity for many racially-marked students to see themselves in academic writing curriculum and to apply what they learn to real-life issues around race, language, education, and public discourse. These counter-stories link past racialized literacy education experiences to college-level writing practices for students whose voices have traditionally been silenced in writing studies scholarship. With these experiences, writing educators interested in this transitional moment in higher education can develop curriculum and pedagogy that resists majoritarian stories about academic writing transitions.

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Appendix A

Initial Survey Questions

Name:

Email address where you would like to be contacted:

1) Academic major/program (please write “undecided” if applicable):

2) Year in your undergraduate program (select one):

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior

3) Name of High School and State Located:

4) Please provide your gender identity (i.e., female, male, transgender, etc.) _____

5) Your Racial Identity (please select as many as apply, as *you* identify):

- Black/African Descent
- Latin@/Chican@/South American Descent
- White/European Descent
- Asian Descent/Pacific Islander
- East Indian/North African/Middle Eastern
- Native North American
- Mixed or Multi Racial (please specify):

6) Total Family Income Designation, when growing up (please select only one):

- Below poverty line
- At poverty line
- Just above poverty line
- Well above poverty line, but still working
- Wealthy/Affluent
- Uncertain

6) Family Makeup, prior to attending college:

- Two-parents (married or unmarried)
- Divorced parents, but co-parenting
- Single parent female
- Single parent male
- Extended family parenting (aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.)
- Adopted, including any of the above family makeups
- Foster care

Appendix B

Description of participants

OM1

First-year student, Black American male, Mechanical Engineering major, Boone County High School (Florence, Kentucky), single-parent female living in poverty.

NM1

Older second-year student, Black American male, Accountancy major, Central High School Magnet Career Academy (Louisville, Kentucky), and single parent female living in poverty.

NF2

Third-year student, Black American female, Exercise Science major, duPont Manual High School (Louisville, Kentucky), and two-parents in home (married or unmarried) living well-above poverty but still working.

NF3

First-year student, Black American female, Biology major, Montgomery County High School (Mt. Sterling, Kentucky), and single-parent female living just above poverty.

DF1

First-year student, Black American female, Biology major, Bryan Station High School (Lexington, Kentucky), and uncertain of single-parent female income.

JF2

First-year student, mixed race African descent and European descent female, Civil Engineering major changed to Physics major, Atherton High School graduate (Louisville, Kentucky), and co-parenting divorced parents (with single-parent female as primary) living well-above poverty but still working.

FF1

First-year student, Black American female, Political Science major, out-of-state high school (Georgia), both parents in home, and uncertain of income.

FM1

Second-year student, Black American male, Atmospheric Science major, Ballard High School (Louisville, Kentucky), and uncertain of parents' income.

MM1

Second-year student, Black American male, Business Major, Male High School (Louisville, Kentucky), and single-parent female above poverty but still working.

Preliminary Interview Questions:

1. Can you describe your experiences with writing when you were of grade school age? What about the kinds of writing you did for high school?

2. In which high school courses were you required to write? How did you approach writing assignments?
3. How has writing for school made you feel? When have you felt confident or good about things that you've written? When have you felt insecure or discouraged? When have you cared little or sincerely cared about the writing you do for course work?
4. Can you talk about the connection you make between writing and being a college student? Describe your own personal connection between these aspects or how you associate the two
5. What had you been told about college writing prior to attending college (either in school, at home, or by experts)? Who conveyed these ideas to you?
6. How are you approaching college writing assignments? How, if at all, does this differ to how you approached writing for high school courses?
7. What resources in-class and on-campus have you used to help with writing? How helpful have these resources been? Describe your experiences as best you can.
8. For what purposes do you write outside of school? What makes this easier or come more naturally than in-school writing?
9. What are some descriptors or adjectives that you associate with writing or "doing writing" in general?
10. What do you think when you hear the term "academic?" Would you consider yourself to be academic? Why or why not?

Follow-up Interview Questions

How do you think your racial identity has influenced your transition to college from high school? Please let me know whether the influence has been positive or negative. (Also, let me know if you think racial identity has had no influence.)

Really? That Counts? A Sociocultural Examination of Post-Secondary Literature Circles

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the qualitative portion of a larger mixed method intervention study that examined the effects of literature circles (peer-led small group discussion of an assigned reading) on the reading achievement of college students in developmental courses. An experimental design was used to measure the effectiveness of the researcher-developed intervention, and grounded theory was employed to analyze reading attitude, reading motivation, response to participation in a literature circle, and textual engagement. Thirty-seven college students in required reading courses participated in the five-week study. Quantitative analysis revealed that literature circle participants outperformed their control group counterparts on all measures of comprehension, and qualitative analysis revealed that literature circles increased depth of textual engagement and provided opportunities for discourse, collaboration, and social interaction. These findings, supported by a strong theoretical base, suggest that literature circles would be an effective addition to a post-secondary developmental reading curriculum.

“With book reports, I just think too much about it. I can’t think of what to say, but when we talk about it [in literature circles] and hear other people’s stories, it helps me bring out mine.”

The Context

“Really? That counts?”

When I meet with a group of literature circle participants for the first time, I give a short talk in which I list “all the things you can and should do” in a literature circle (defined for the purposes of this article as peer-led small group discussion of an assigned reading). Some of the things that I list might seem painfully obvious to someone already

entrenched in mainstream academia: asking questions to clarify meaning, relating personally to the text, agreeing or disagreeing, and making connections with other texts. After my first semester as a reading instructor and literature circle facilitator at a public university in the southeastern United States, I experienced first-hand that even the most basic ways of connecting with books were, for various reasons, beyond the reach of the literature circle participants. This is not to say

that the participants were incapable of asking, connecting, disagreeing, and discussing. On the contrary, the developmental reading students were particularly adept at these skills—listening to them talk in the hallway before class was proof positive. However, these same students were struggling to achieve successful outcomes on class activities and assessments.

What happens when developmental students walk into the classroom, then? The answer is at the same time both simple and frustratingly complicated. Somewhere along the way, these students have been made to feel that their “ways of taking from” a text (Heath, 1982) are not given credence by the educational system. In other words, their inventories of skills and knowledge are not valued by the discourse of power (Foucault, 1972). When I tell literature circle participants that it is not only “okay” but actually very good to make a connection between the book and their own lives, students’ responses range from confusion to disbelief. “Really? That counts?”

The ever-changing landscape of developmental education at the college level forces educators and administrators to make critical decisions regarding what should be taught in these courses, how it should be taught, and in what ways skills and knowledge should be measured. There is no time to be wasted in a developmental classroom; therefore, any activities and instructional strategies should be vetted through research—ideally, before implementation and certainly before inclusion in a mandated curriculum. While a common sense understanding of literacy suggests that peer-led small group discussion of an assigned reading (henceforth referred to as a literature circle) improves reading outcomes for developmental students at the college level, at the time of this inquiry, there were too few studies on the subject to constitute what would be considered a compelling research base.

An extensive database and hand search yielded five intervention/implementation studies on literature circles and their impact on post-secondary developmental reading students. Two descriptive articles (Dillon, 2007; Valeri-Gold & Commander, 2003) simply describe literature circle implementation and give instructions for how to use literature circles in the classroom. One unpublished dissertation (Byrd, 2002) employed a qualitative methodology and a self-identified “naturalistic” approach. Outcome measures included individual interviews, audio and video taped discussion sessions, focus group sessions, a final reflective essay, journal entries, and a concluding group session. According to Byrd (2002), literature circles offer cognitive, affective, and social benefits to developmental reading students. Students co-constructed meaning through connections with self, others, and texts. Finally, interaction patterns support the suggestion that adult learners need the opportunity to engage in “grand conversations” in order to better understand text and self.

Another dissertation (Kozak, 2008) used a self-described “mixed method action research” method which included an observational checklist, reflective journals, pre- and post-reading and speaking assessments, and pre- and post-self-assessments. While general “improvements” were cited in the findings chapter, no statistical tests or analysis were shared. Through the self-assessments, Kozak found that students’ confidence in reading and speaking improved. The participants of this study were English Language Learners at an English Language School, which is nested under the University of New Brunswick. Technically, the participants in this study were not college developmental reading students, but given the lack of research in this area and the fact that many of these language school graduates are eventually admitted to the university and placed in developmental reading, the study was included.

The most promising study on literature circles and post-secondary reading students is a study described by its author as a quasi-experimental design with a qualitative component (Willingham, 2009). Outcome measures included the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (forms G & H), an attitude survey, and a qualitative questionnaire. While no significant difference was found between the treatment and control groups, the qualitative component of the study was beneficial. Through the attitude survey, Willingham found that students believe vocabulary instruction is important at the college level, and through the qualitative questionnaire, it was revealed that literature discussion groups enhance vocabulary acquisition. The design of Willingham's study serves as a model for this inquiry.

In summary, the qualitative body of work on literature circles is strong, but the research is not equally distributed across all age groups, leaving an opportunity to do more work with college students. There is a respectable body of work on literature circles and their benefits for pre-service teachers (i.e. education majors), but this is very different than using literature circles in college developmental reading courses.

This inquiry was conducted in direct response to the dearth of research, hoping to demonstrate that the collaborative nature and depth of discussion in literature circles can equip nontraditional students with skills that will help them not only with standardized tests, but also with the rest of their journey as college students and beyond, as lifelong readers and critical thinkers.

Purpose Statement

In the developmental classroom, literature circles offer a meaningful supplement to a traditional reading textbook, which often forms the only curriculum in these types of courses. In the language arts/English world, literature circles offer an alternative to the traditional instruction of a text, in which an

entire classroom reads a novel and takes notes as the teacher shares his/her interpretation. While some discussion of the text might take place, students look to the teacher for the "right answers" with regard to the "true meaning" of the text. In the world of college reading instruction, literature circles offer an opportunity for small groups of peers to read and discuss a meaningful, high-interest book. It seems obvious that struggling college readers should have an opportunity to interact meaningfully with a book, but in order to defend this common sense assumption, I analyzed literature circles through both the quantitative and qualitative lenses. This article, however, focuses only on the qualitative methodology, data collection, data analysis, results, and discussion.

Theoretical Perspectives

As with almost any modern inquiry into educational practices, a theoretical and philosophical debt is owed to Dewey (1902). Particularly in the case of literature circle research, Dewey's theories ring true. Education is a social, interactive process, and the school should be a vehicle for social reform. Students should be empowered to take part in the learning process. The goal of education should not be hinged on a pre-determined set of skills, but instead 1) self-realization and 2) the ability to use academic skills to make the world a better place. In *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey argues that content must be presented in a way that allows the student to make connections between the new information and prior experiences, which deepens the connections with material taught in school.

Freire (1970) takes Dewey's (1902) argument a step farther in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he looks at education through a Marxist lens. He labels the traditional pedagogy originally identified by Dewey as the "banking model" because it treats students like empty piggy banks, waiting to be filled with knowledge. Like Dewey,

Freire argues for learners to co-create knowledge. The act of learning is necessarily social and political. This empowering pedagogical approach is especially critical for developmental students, who tend to be marginalized both in society and by the institution.

If Dewey (1902) and Freire (1970) view learning as an act of democratic empowerment, then Vygotsky (1978) views learning as an act of social interaction. He describes the process of guided participation, during which creative thinkers interact with a knowledgeable person. Vygotsky gives accounts of guided participation in cultures around the world and suggests its use as a model for classroom instruction. Indeed, the theoretical underpinnings of literature circles mirror Vygotsky's original conception of guided participation and the zone of proximal development. Through guided participation, our social and cultural practices become internalized and determine the way we think and learn. The supportive yet minimalist role of the literature circle in this study utilizes the zone of proximal development in order to bolster the participants' confidence and independence as meaning-makers.

Perhaps no other theorist is better suited to rationalize the implementation of literature circles than Bakhtin (1981), for his view is that thought, language, and thus texts, exist in dialogue. In other words, language is a social phenomenon that exists as it is used by people to address one another. When the language is used to create a text, it retains its dialogic identity and function. Taken to a theoretical extreme, texts carry out "conversations" with each other. In other words, intertextuality is ever present, which is why "other books" earned a spot on the Star Connections graphic organizer (see Appendix B). Every word that has been spoken or written exists in response to things that have been said and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. We do not speak, write, or live in a cultural vacuum; thus, texts are incapable of neutrality. Every word is bound to the context

in which it exists: this is the cornerstone of sociocultural theory.

Bakhtin's (1981) theory of polyglossia—the hybridity of language—supports the argument that the concept of a "standard English" or "correct English" is a social construct. There is no "pure" language, which is something to be celebrated. Every text is a chorus of different registers, language use, dialect, and borrowed vocabulary—Bakhtin's heteroglossia. According to these principles, literature circles could and should be a place for language hybridity, contact, and meaning-making.

The emergence of literature circles and book clubs in school settings over the last thirty years is just one of the many manifestations of the philosophical shift from a banking, or transmission, model of learning to one where education is social and dialogic. Literature circle proponents draw on many theories that inform educational philosophy, the nature of the reader/text, how we gain knowledge (epistemology), and sociocultural context. One such theory is transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1969). The act of reading involves a transaction between the reader and the text; this transaction produces meaning, which is said to exist within that reader-text interaction (as opposed to fixed, innate within the text). Each reader brings individual background knowledge, beliefs, and context to the reading event. As a result, any given text has as many different meanings as there are readers. Rosenblatt's work led directly to reader-response theory, in which the reader, an active agent, completes the meaning of a text through engagement and interpretation (Fish, 1967).

Heath (1982) suggests that the ways in which people "take from books" (i.e., engage with a text) is informed by culture, and that there is a mainstream "way of taking" that is rewarded in the classroom. Students who exist outside this mainstream are less likely to succeed in school. While they are interacting with texts as much and as meaningfully as their mainstream counterparts, their approach

is not recognized as valid, and thus, it is not rewarded. Heath (1989) studied the language ideologies of “the other” and how they stand in contrast with transmission ideology. Students outside of the “mainstream” learning and communication patterns have talents from which the entire classroom could benefit, such as community interaction and the oral interpretation of written materials in a social context. Much can be learned from non-mainstream language ideologies (both oral and written), and literature circle discussions could be facilitated in a manner that welcomes simultaneous and overlapping talk, latching (adding onto another’s utterance), and repetition (repeating own or other’s utterance for emphasis) (Heath, 1989).

Students walk into the classroom with “funds of knowledge” they have gained from their families and communities (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Whether or not these “funds” are valued by those in power depends on which language (or language ideology) exists in the mainstream. Communities are made up of individuals with varying amounts of power and agency (Pratt, 1987). As a result, students form their language in the larger context of the dominant group/ideology. In the seminal work, *Other People’s Children*, Delpit (1995) illustrates how the issue of language legitimacy is politicized and viewed as a problem of access to power. In the educational system, it is a problem of access to the strategies needed to succeed in mainstream academia. Within the scope of Delpit’s philosophy of education, literature circle facilitators have the opportunity to guide students to make important connections between home culture and the knowledge acquired in school. Per her pedagogical approach, teachers should be vigilant and self-critical in the ongoing effort to eliminate the bias against “otherness.” Delpit’s work paved the way for teacher-authors such as Christopher Emdin (2009) and his theory of “Reality Pedagogy,” in which teachers are encouraged to acknowledge the realities of their students’

lives and use them as a foundation for culturally relevant instruction.

Since each student is a product of a particular sociocultural context, whose knowledge is a result of world view (Delpit, 1995), it follows that some learners’ ways of knowing will be looked upon more favorably by teachers than others. Heath (1982, 1989) argues that non-mainstream ways of knowing, learning, and using language are not valued, that there is only one particular way of taking meaning from books that is privileged in the school setting. Those who do not fit the mold of the preferred way of knowing (in our case, the preferred way of comprehending a text) are placed at a distinct disadvantage.

James Gee (1990, 1992), best known for his work in Discourse Analysis, New Literacies, and Video Games (namely, “good learning principles”), is not typically associated with literature circles; however, his work in discourse analysis and sociolinguistics can be used to make the case for literature circles as part of a developmental reading curriculum. The view of language as a social network suggests that knowledge is constructed in contextualized social settings in which information is exchanged with others. Collective knowledge is valued, and language “otherness” (outside the mainstream) is a cultural resource, not a problem to be fixed (1990, 1992). In fact, classrooms should be a site of language contact (Hornberger, 2002; Pratt 1987; Winford, 2003). Just as we can view otherness as a resource, we can also view mistakes or miscues as resources in a group discussion setting. Goodman (1984) expands on this view by adding that mistakes made in groups of learners have a unique value and provide insight into cognitive processes.

Building on Goodman’s work, Short et al. (1996) described and analyzed classroom behaviors through the lens of an inquiry curriculum. As its name indicates, an inquiry curriculum is built upon questioning. The questioning process is more the focus than any particular solution or correct answer. The theoretical assumption behind the inquiry

curriculum is that students will end up knowing more from the process of working through a process of inquiry, even if the problem at hand is not solved, *per se*.

Closely related to inquiry curriculum and other sociocultural perspectives to text is critical literacy, a theoretical and instructional approach born out of critical pedagogy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Janks, 2010). Critical literacy argues that the practice of literacy is more than decoding words—it is discourse about and analysis of a text using critical thinking and questioning. Critical literacy allows for multiple readings (interpretations) of the same text and use of multiple texts to create meaning (intertextuality).

Alim and Baugh (2010) claim that the classroom is the primary site of “language ideological combat” (p. 155). If classrooms are the site of language combat, then literature circles are the front lines. In a format where every student is given a voice and a chance to talk, the sky is the limit in terms of diverse language ideologies. Instead of viewing this arena of language contact as a problem or source of tension, developmental reading instructors should consider all the opportunities for learning. As participants in a literature circle, students can discuss language, power, and identity in the setting of a literature circle. They can investigate the language ideologies present at school, at home, and elsewhere. Through the critical exploration of language and identity, students can become critical thinkers, even “language and cultural theorists” (Fecho, 2000).

Methodology

In order to examine the complexities of a literature circle in READ 1000, a mixed method design was selected to best address two research questions: Compared to independent reading, to what extent does participation in a supplemental literature circle 1) improve reading comprehension for college students in a developmental reading course

and 2) impact the quantity of textual connections made by college students in a developmental reading course? This article focuses on the second question, which represents the qualitative portion of the study.

Participants

All participants in this study were students registered in READ 1000 at the university (see Appendix C for READ 1000 student demographics). READ 1000 is a required pre-curriculum course for students who are accepted with low verbal/reading scores on the typical standardized college admissions exams, such as the ACT, and unable to demonstrate college readiness through the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. READ 1000 has three course requirements: In-class reading skill kits, outside-of-class textbook exercises, and outside-of-class book reading.

Novels Used in the Study

In an ideal classroom setting, students would have freedom to form groups and choose books on their own. Four novels were pre-selected before the semester began, so that the measure of reading comprehension could be developed and validated in advance. Together, the four books are considered high-interest, culturally diverse, critically lauded, “buzz worthy” young adult novels.

Many factors were taken into consideration for book selection. Using only two of the four books, I was able to honor participants’ first or second choice for the literature circle condition, and I was able to honor control group participants’ top choice. In terms of data analysis, two books were better than four, but even the added complication of two different texts would somewhat weaken the consistency of the intervention and related measures. However, this sacrifice of study design was outweighed by the importance of student choice—especially for college reading students. When readers have their say in selecting books, they exercise agency in the development of their identities and create richer relationships with

the texts (Bang-Jensen, 2010; Paulson, 2006). Furthermore, use of CRE (Culturally Relevant Education) practices, such as selecting books which align with student demographics, leads to increased student engagement and motivation (Hill, 2012; Ortega, 2003). Other factors taken into consideration included length, Lexile, and various requests from the READ 1000 program director (e.g., no film adaptations).

The two chosen books were *Shine* (2011) and *I Am the Messenger* (2006). *Shine* is a young adult novel written by Lauren Myracle. When her best friend, an openly gay teenager named Patrick, falls victim to a vicious hate crime, sixteen-year-old Cat makes a promise to God that she will figure out who did it. Cat delves deep into the dark secrets of a small town in the South and finds out how much strength it takes to challenge and question everyone you know in the name of doing the right thing. *Shine* touches on many sensitive topics: poverty, drugs, bullying, and intolerance. *I Am the Messenger* is a young adult novel written by Marcus Zusak. Ed Kennedy is a young taxi driver with no ambition. The only things he cares about are his best friend, Audrey, and his coffee-drinking dog, the Doorman. His life is pathetically predictable until he unwittingly stops a bank robbery and begins receiving cryptic playing cards in the mail. The cards send Ed on a series of missions in his community, but he does not always know what to do or how to do it. What he does know, however, is that he faces death if he does not comply. *I Am the Messenger* contains themes including poverty, domestic abuse, existentialism, and ethics.

Literature Circle Format

During the introductory meeting, the facilitator distributed materials, including a copy of the signed consent form, the book, a custom bookmark, page stickies, an expectations “contract,” and a Star Connections insert (Appendices A and B). Also, the facilitator read aloud a script

detailing the many ways in which one can participate in a literature circle. Participants were directed to the Star Connections infographic, at which point the various types of connections were explicitly named by the facilitator. Together, the participants and facilitator filled out the meeting days and times on the custom bookmarks. The facilitator read aloud the “ways to talk about books” on the back of the bookmark (see Appendix D). Throughout the intervention, participants were reminded to refer to the bookmarks and Star Connections sheets any time they ran out of things to say. Finally, the facilitator went over the “normal” discussion meeting format and the post-testing procedures, and the group confirmed the following week’s reading assignment. The facilitator asked students to read to the page listed on the bookmark and urged students not to read past that point.

After the introductory meeting, the “normal” book discussion meetings followed a set format—a three-part researcher-developed intervention comprised of a collaborative oral re-tell of what was read that week, a short written activity, and an open discussion. The facilitator played a minimalist role in the open discussion and only spoke if more than five seconds of silence passed in order to provide a somewhat standardized amount of wait time that would allow students to have an opportunity to speak up.

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each study participant (after the completion of the literature circle meetings and all other post-tests) in order to gain a deeper understanding of the backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes of the participants, as well as to assess the depth of engagement with the assigned novel. See Appendix D for the interview script. The questions for the semi-structured interviews were conceptualized based on Seidman’s (2006) three-interview design; however, due to testing time restraints, I conducted one 30-

minute interview with three sub-sections mirroring Seidman's structure: life story (specific to sociocultural identity, reading, and education), reconstruction of experience (in a literature circle, reading independently, giving a book report, etc.), and reflection on meaning (various affective factors).

Interview questions were conceptualized as a direct result of my reflection as a college reading teacher and literacy researcher. I conducted a series of brainstorming sessions and jotted down the types of information I wanted to learn. Using Seidman's three sub-section structure, I streamlined and organized my questions into categories and arranged them into a logical order. I conducted a series of practice interviews using a loose adaptation of the cognitive interviewing process. I instructed interviewees to provide instant feedback on each question and to "put the question into their own words" in order to verify that they were answering the question I thought I was asking. Through this method, I was able to eliminate or re-structure weak items.

Each participant was asked four "connections questions," such as "Did you make any connections between the people you read about in book and yourself?" The respondent first answered "yes" or "no." If the respondent answered "yes," then the individual was asked to provide one or more examples of the connection. The respondent earned one "point" for each discrete connection articulated, which resulted in a simple score for each type of connection. If a respondent initially answered "yes" but could not articulate a connection, no point was earned. Multiple scorers volunteered to tally the interview responses, and inter-rater reliability was 100%.

Results

The second research question (textual connections) was addressed with two distinctly different methodologies. First, the question was explored through quantitative

analysis of three sections of the semi-structured interview: general questions about textual connections, specific questions about textual connections, and specific questions about the lasting impact of the assigned book. While these results will not be discussed here, it is worth noting that the literature circle participants articulated statistically significantly more textual connections than their control group counterparts. The research question was further explored through a sociocultural, qualitative lens. The specific questions about textual connections and the last impact of the assigned book were analyzed using grounded theory techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Responses were transcribed and read multiple times through an analytic, sociocultural lens. Then, utterances were organized into descriptive categories. Interview data were collected from 37 participants; of these, 20 participated in literature circles, and 17 were in the control group. Twenty-three participants read *Shine*, and 14 participants read *I Am the Messenger*. The findings are presented and discussed by interview question.

Participation in Literature Circles

Only participants who participated in literature circles ($n = 20$) were asked a set of questions about the activity: 1) How did you feel about participating in a literature circle, 2) How would you compare literature circle discussions to book reports, 3) How did literature circle participation impact your reading experience, and 4) Did literature circles harm your reading experience in any way? Each of these questions was intended to elicit responses which would reveal what, if anything, was gained by those who participated in the literature circles. Since the questions were all closely related, responses were combined for purposes of analysis.

Response to the literature circles was overwhelmingly positive ($n = 17$). Positive responses were defined as any utterances synonymous with "like," "love," "enjoy," or

“fun.” More specifically, three individuals explicitly expressed a desire for more opportunities to participate in literature circles. One student who was initially reluctant shared, “I was hesitant at first. I didn’t quite like the idea. Now that it’s over, I really liked it, and I’m sad that it’s over.” When asked if literature circles harmed participants’ reading experiences, 17 individuals answered “no.” For the three participants who responded with either mixed or neutral feedback to this question, the emergent theme was that the forced pacing of the activity was uncomfortable for them. For example, one respondent explained, “I felt that I was slowed down with the pacing, which was frustrating.” However, other students noted the exact opposite:

If you did it on your own you wouldn’t have read as much at all, and you would have waited until the last day to read it.

With the literature circles, you stayed on top of it and remembered it and talked about it.

Beyond the general positive reaction to literature circles, analysis of the responses yielded five descriptive categories.

Discourse. This category contained any utterances which mentioned an exchange or sharing of ideas. More than half of the literature circle participants cited discourse as part of the literature circle experience (n = 12). One participant said, “I got to argue with people ... I got to tell people what I thought and vice versa.” Another participant felt that literature circles “combined all the thoughts in a room,” and that “maybe you understood something in a different way than they did.” One participant enjoyed literature circles for reasons related to discourse: “I can get other people’s opinion on the book, and I can think more about what will happen.”

Social Interaction. Distinct from discourse, several participants spoke fondly of the purely social aspect of participating in a literature circle (n = 8). One particularly endearing description of the social benefits of literature circle participation was a respondent

who said, “It reminded me of what you see on TV, like people having tea parties and talking about books.” Another student reported that he “saw a few people around campus, and we’d talk about the book.” One initially reluctant participant explained, “I thought it would have been weird with people I don’t know, but after giving details about what we read, it actually opened me up.”

Support and Collaboration. While closely related to discourse and social interaction, support and collaboration emerged as a third distinct category of comments. This category was comprised of all utterances mentioning the phenomena of helping, supporting, or working with other literature circle participants. Almost half of the respondents articulated the ways in which literature circle participants helped and supported one another (n = 9). The phrase “vice versa” was uttered over and over again by participants to describe the literature circle as a space of mutual support. One such literature circle participant describes a phenomenon commonly discussed among READ 1000 students: the paranoia of “missing something important” during the book report:

[The literature circle experience] was good because if I missed something they would’ve said it. If I said something that they missed, they would’ve got onto it. We all came together and was like, ‘Aw, this happened to so and so.’

Another respondent described a specific example of how mutual support plays out in a literature circle: “Maybe I will pick up and they may know the points I’m talking about but elaborate on it or give specific details on it, to help people ... understand it.” One student felt empowered by the ability to provide support for peers: “It gives me a sense of knowledge that I can know something and somebody else might not know it. They can help me out, and I can help them out.”

Motivation. Several participants expressed that membership in a literature

circle motivated them to complete their reading (n = 7). As opposed to coming from a place of fear of failure, the motivation seemed to come from a desire to contribute to discussion and make good use of the time spent in the literature circle; in other words, “It encouraged me to keep reading.” Some students felt a sense of duty as literature circle participants. One said, “When you read together, you have to give feedback,” and another said, “I didn’t want to miss [meetings].” Another respondent enthusiastically proclaimed, “Just make sure you read the book before the circle!”

Improved Comprehension. Any utterances related to improved text comprehension or vocabulary, deeper engagement, improved understanding, or improved “book memory” were coded as the broader category of improved comprehension. Half of the participants identified ways in which literature participation improved their reading comprehension (n = 10). One respondent very directly stated, “I think I understood this book better having that group than I would without.” One of the English Language Learners felt that literature circle participation directly improved his vocabulary. Another participant made a connection between discourse, literature circles, and improved comprehension: “Literature circles help you understand more details because everybody has some differences in understanding.” One of the central arguments of this inquiry is that deeper engagement with a text leads to improved comprehension; as a result, utterances related to depth of engagement were included in this category. Any utterances related to overall connection with the text, as well as any mention of opinion, prediction, or other types of higher order thinking were considered types of textual engagement. One student reflected, “My mind opened more when we talked about the book instead of just doing a book report.” Another described the benefit of prediction-making in the literature circles: “We got to play around with how we

thought the book was gonna end: not just one way, but multiple ways.”

Textual Connections

Each week, literature circle participants were asked to describe the connections they made with the assigned book. In order to maximize the quantity and quality of feedback, four types of connections were defined for the participant, and examples were elicited based on the four categories: book to self, relationships in book to personal relationships, book to other texts, and book to society.

General Connections. Just over half the participants confirmed that, yes, they make connections to “the self” (n = 15) and “other texts” (n = 15) when they read a book. Another portion was a bit more reluctant, saying that they sometimes make connections to “the self” (n = 12) and “other texts” (n = 10). Some participants did not seem to understand that it was possible to connect to a fictional text; for example, one respondent said, “Well, I like to read books that are real, so none of them relate to my life.” Another participant explained a unique way of connecting text to self: “I put myself in the character’s perspective and envision myself being that character but changing what they do to what I want.” Yet another participant shared that, through participation in the literature circle, she realized that she should be working harder to make connections while she reads: “I don’t usually, but for this book, I did [make connections], and I feel like I should start doing that more with other books to make it [gestures with hands to indicate waves].”

In terms of intertextuality, several participants misunderstood my question or had a very narrow concept of the question. Responses included statements such as, “I will compare the movie and book versions of the same thing,” or, in response to the question “Do you tend to make connections between a book and other books, television shows, or movies?”, answered, “No, not unless I’m reading a book that already has a movie out.”

Seemingly, these students are under the impression that the only possible connection is “Book A” to “Movie adaption of Book A,” as opposed to connecting “Book A” to “Movie B” or “Book A” to “Book B.”

Other participants described the ways in which they make intertextual connections. Three individuals mentioned that their ability to make intertextual connections “depended on the book.” When asked about intertextual connections, one student replied, “If I’m not into [the book], not at all.” Participants mentioned other books, television shows, video game, and other texts when responding to this question. One participant even described a connection he made from the QRI test passage to his Marine basic training notebook: “You have to learn the Tet date to earn your pen, so every time I read about it in this story, I was going back to when I was reading my [Marine] book.”

Another participant shared a personal anecdote about how he connected READ 1000 texts to his own life. In his response, the word kits refers to the short passage skill development drills which are the primary activity in READ 1000:

In the READ1000 kits, there was a passage about a black kid. I was like, “Oh, okay.” Anything along the lines of African Americans or poverty, single parent homes, I instantly think about my own life, and intrigues me to know that somebody else has ventured on in these types of things as well, and I’m not the only person. I’m not alone in these things. Their life would interest me, and I would be like, “Hey, I’ve done that before, too. I know what that’s about.”

One particularly memorable intertextual connection took place when a literature circle participant who had read *Shine* told his peers about a documentary, titled *Snow on the Bluff*, which explores drug use in an Atlanta neighborhood. Later, during the interview, the same student told me about how he had gotten some friends together over spring

break to watch the movie again, since he kept thinking about it after reading *Shine*.

The ability of students to identify and articulate intertextual connections was limited yet promising. Simply put, the more texts one consumes, the more intertextual connections one can make. For developmental reading students who have not read as much as their peers, a lack of intertextual thought may very well be due to a lack of texts, period. While no pre-testing was conducted, I observed a slow but steady increase in intertextual discussions over the course of the literature circle meetings, which show the great potential of how intertextual connections could be used to empower students and improve not only reading achievement but also enjoyment of reading.

Book to Self. Participants were asked, “Did you make any connections between any person or people you read about in *Shine/Messenger* and yourself?”

Shine. Participants made connections to most of the characters in *Shine*, but the majority of respondents made a connection to Cat, the protagonist and narrator of the story (n = 10). Several students related to Cat’s detachment from her friends during high school. “When bad things happen, I kinda shut down.” Others related to Cat’s loyalty to her (then former) best friend: “Things that Cat did for her friend, I feel like I do for my friends, too. People aren’t perfect, but when you have a person that you care about, you’re gonna help that person.” Still others related to Cat’s environment and her ability to rise above: “I grew up in a neighborhood where everything was surrounded by drugs and violence, and I didn’t get involved in that. I wasn’t a product of my environment.” Another emergent theme, especially for the male participants who chose to read *Shine*, was a connection between the self and Christian, Cat’s older brother (n = 3): “Christian kinda reminds me of me. How he was protective with his sister, I’m that way with my two sisters.”

Messenger. Participants made connections to most of the characters in *I Am the Messenger*, but the majority of respondents connected specifically to Ed, the book's protagonist and narrator (n = 7). Specifically, respondents tended to relate to Ed's lack of direction in his life: "There was a portion of my life where I thought I wasn't much of anything." One interviewee seemed to reason through his connection and make a discovery in the moment of his response: "Ed. Because I like helping my friends. Ed was helping strangers, though. Maybe I should help strangers."

Relationships in Book to Personal Relationships. Participants were asked, "Did you make any connections between relationships in *Shine/Messenger* and relationships in your own life?"

Shine. While many relationships were identified in *Shine*, the relationships that participants most connected with were the friendship between Cat and Patrick (n = 8) and the sibling relationship between Cat and Christian (n = 6). Among those who related to Cat and Patrick's relationship, the connection was either based on having a best friend with a major problem ("me and my suicidal friend") or losing touch with a best friend ("when they stopped talking, she noticed she needed to be there for him"). Among those who related to Cat and Christian's relationship, the connection was either based on being a protective older brother, having a protective older brother, or a lack of closeness with a sibling. One respondent describes the coexisting contradictions of sibling love brilliantly:

My brother wasn't really a 'brother' brother. We were never close to each other, but we were close. He was protective in a secretive way. If I was teased, he would talk to them. Like Cat and Christian. He was protective but didn't let it be known.

Messenger. The social network of *I Am the Messenger* is much smaller than that of *Shine*, so participants had fewer relationships to

connect with. The most common relationship mentioned by respondents was the friendship/romance between Ed and Audrey (n = 8). Of those who related to Ed and Audrey's relationship, the connection was based on being on one end of unrequited love ("me and this girl I loved") or the other ("I had a guy who felt that way about me"). A few respondents mentioned the friendship between Ed and Marv; namely, they related to the kind of friendship where you don't talk about important things (n = 3): "Ed and Marv are close friends who don't say everything in their lives to each other."

Book to Other Texts. Participants were asked, "Did you make any connections between the plot, setting, or characters in *Shine/Messenger* and any other books, movies, TV shows, songs, or video games?" Because the word text was defined broadly in this study, participants were invited to connect not only to other books but also to movies, television shows, songs, video games, and more.

Shine. Participants made a variety of intertextual connections. The most popular types of intertextual connections were to movies (n = 8), television shows (n = 5), and books (n = 3). Below are three particularly compelling connections articulated by participants:

1. Movie: Shank. "In the movie, it was about a gang who jumps a gay guy. One of the guys in the gang felt bad, and he was secretly gay. He went back to the guy, and they get together." In *Shine*, a member of the "Redneck Posse" is secretly gay and turns out to be both Patrick's secret boyfriend and his attacker.
2. Song: "Hometown Glory," by Adele. "In the song, Adele is talking about the things she remembered from her hometown. It's a pretty song. It reminds me of *Shine*. Cat is always reminiscing about her childhood memories."

3. Video Game: general connection. The respondent describes the climactic scene in *Shine* (where Cat climbs up the edge of a cliff to stop a murder) to “climbing up the wall to the ‘final box’ in a video game.”

Messenger. The smaller cast of characters and quirky group of friends reminded participants of a variety of formulaic “sitcom” television shows, including *Friends*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *That 70s Show*, and *Big Bang Theory*. Many respondents noted the pop culture trend of the group of friends which contains a possible (but usually unrequited for some time) romantic pairing. Overall, textual connections articulated by participants included television shows ($n = 6$), movies ($n = 4$), and books ($n = 4$). One particularly fascinating intertextual connection came from one of the international student participants: “There is a Nigerian novel about a rich man with an irresponsible son who is always messing around. He gives the son tasks. If he doesn’t complete them, he’ll lose his inheritance.” Indeed, this is similar to Ed’s situation, in that he is being given “good Samaritan” tasks to complete, or else face death.

Book to Society. Participants were asked, “Did you make any connections between what happened in *Shine*/*Messenger* and what has happened, is happening, or might happen in the world you live in?”

Shine. Participants who read *Shine* were reminded of several things they had seen in the news, including Trayvon Martin, Sandy Hook, and Matthew Shepard. The themes which emerged from the responses mirrored issues faced by students. Most students, still only in their freshman year at the university, drew primarily on their high school experiences. Some students were concerned about homophobia and the difficulties of “coming out” in a hostile environment ($n = 8$). More specifically, participants discussed bullying, hate crimes, and suicide as a result of both homophobia and racism ($n = 11$). Participants represented a range of relative

acceptance of homosexuality, yet even those who were strongly against it did not agree with bullying or hate crimes: “I don’t agree with it, but that’s their choice. That’s their decision. If it makes you happy, go with it. I’m not gonna hate you because you’re gay.” Another emergent theme was the prevalence of drugs in the small community of Black Creek (the setting of *Shine*), which reminded many students of the prevalence of drugs in their own communities, both past and present ($n = 6$): “Drugs is out there. It’s taking people’s lives when we could be doing something far more.”

Messenger. *I Am the Messenger* is less politically overt than *Shine*, but participants still made connections between the world of the novel and the world in which they live. One such theme was rape and domestic violence ($n = 3$). Indeed, one of Ed’s first missions in *Messenger* was to stop a man who raped his wife every day. Ed observes the family, talks to the young girl whose mother is the rape victim, and eventually runs the rapist out of town. This particular scene in the novel seemed to resonate with readers. One participant shared a story from his past that he had been thinking about more since he had read *Messenger*:

I was at work (at a grocery store), and a cop received a domestic violence call. He could hear what was going on, but we couldn’t. It’s sick how he has to hear that stuff on the radio. It brings reality back to you.

The other emergent theme was the act of helping strangers ($n = 4$). Participants interpreted the question about connecting the book to society as an invitation to imagine how the world could be if more people were like Ed. One participant shared how he connected Ed’s transformation from doing nothing to Good Samaritan to his vision for how the world could be: “I want it to happen in the world. If everyone would actually help people—if you could start with the street you live on—that would be amazing.”

Findings and Implications (Impact on Textual Engagement)

Guthrie and Humenick's (2004) meta-analysis on reading motivation pointed to four motivational practices which impacted reading comprehension: content goals, student choice, interesting texts, and collaboration. No doubt, each of these factors was present in the implementation of the literature circles in this study. Students were able to rank their preference for high-interest young adult novels, and those assigned to literature circles had the opportunity to collaborate as they discussed and made meaning with the novel. Overall, participants were very satisfied with the novels. Literature circle participants discussed the ways in which the meetings and reading goals motivated them to complete the assigned readings.

Comparison to Book Reports

The subset of the participants who participated in literature circles were asked to directly compare literature circles to book reports. I asked this question to elicit more information from literature circle participants about what they gained from the experience; however, some students chose to explicitly state a preference. Seven participants said that they preferred literature circles. No participants said that they preferred book reports to literature circle. One student stated that she had no preference either way but humorously noted, "It takes you five minutes to talk about a book in a book report and a month to talk about a book in a literature circle." Some students chose to compare the two activities by describing the things they did not like about book reports. Three themes emerged as criticisms of the book report format: the relatively superficial content of book reports ($n = 4$), the solitary nature of book reports ($n = 8$), and the fear of forgetting something during a book report, ($n = 3$).

In terms of content, one respondent noted that, in book reports, "you don't get to

play around with ideas as much." Another student seemed to be touching on the relative lack of textual engagement: "During a book report, you don't get into as much detail or what you think about what happened." The solitary nature of book reports emerged as a theme when respondents kept using words and phrases such as "alone," "by yourself," "on your own," "only you," and "one person." One example came from a respondent who explained, "In a book report you pretty much read a book by yourself, and you have to say what it's about by yourself." For some, the solitary nature of book reports led to a fear of "forgetting something important" in a book report: "If you're just giving [a book report], there's no one helping you. If you forget something, it's hard to go back."

Participation in Literature Circles

While no hypothesis was developed for the qualitative portion of this inquiry, the findings related to this construct are not surprising, given the theoretical perspectives and solid body of qualitative work on the power of literature circles. Response to literature circle participation was overwhelmingly positive. To put it plainly, the students in this study—even those who were initially reluctant—enjoyed being in literature circles and talking about books.

The fact that a majority of literature circle participants explicitly mentioned the exchange, the sharing, and/or comparison of ideas comes as no surprise, given the body of work on language contact (Bakhtin, 1981; Hornberger, 2002; Pratt 1987; Winford, 2003). The oral exchange of ideas led to linguistic contact, which resulted in any number of language and literacy phenomena: bilingualism, vocabulary borrowing, polyglossia, latching, and choral speech are just a few examples. One participant described the benefit of discourse better than I ever could: "Other people have their own opinion and can agree or disagree with your opinion of the book ... and having them all

come together brings the book to life and adds more curiosity.” Indeed, discourse was directly related to the depth of engagement with a text (Lawrence & Snow, 2011). Their theoretical assumptions included the belief that participation in oral discourse is a vehicle to internalization and scaffolding of comprehension processes, which pointed straight back to Vygotskian (1978) theoretical perspectives. Book reports and literature circles were both activities of oral production, but the latter was an act of dialogic discourse. When asked about book reports, several participants stated that they liked to talk about the assigned novel, but none of the participants mentioned an oral exchange of ideas, something that emerged as a theme when they were asked about literature circles.

Interview responses revealed that literature circle participants enjoyed the element of social interaction, which is inexorably tied to discourse. In addition to data formally collected in this inquiry, as a literature circle facilitator, I often observed students talking excitedly about the book before and after literature circle meetings. From both a “common sense” and theoretical stance, these findings are not surprising. The inherent social nature of “talking about books” touches on the connection between speech act theory and literacy. Analysis of the speech act considers the context of the statement, the intentions of the speaker, and the roles of the participants. Analysis of the literacy event also considers context, intent, and role (Goodman, 1984). There is a transaction between text and reader during every literacy event, but in literature circles, an additional component of transaction and meaning-making is introduced through peer groups. The findings of this study confirm the importance of social networking (Gee, 1990, 1992) and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) to textual engagement for READ 1000 students. If the standardized placement tests are accepted as valid indicators of reading achievement, the students who must enroll in READ 1000 have not benefited from

traditional reading experiences (i.e. independent, solitary reading).

The sheer number of participants who explicitly described the process of mutual (“vice-versa”) support in literature circles was a significant, yet not surprising, discovery. Mutual support was described in a variety of ways, including a described model of “coverage” (“If I missed something, they would’ve said it”) and a more structured prompt-and-response model (“I give the main idea; someone else gives the supporting details”). Students felt empowered when they were given the opportunity to provide support from a peer. This phenomenon is notable and should be considered by anyone weighing the benefits of adding literature circles to their curriculum. The importance of collaborative learning has been discussed extensively for both K-12 (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1988) and college (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Nelson, 1994; Slavin, 1983) populations.

Connections

Participants were asked about the ways in which they connected to the literature circle books. Students described a variety of rich connections that mirrored the scaffolded connections built into the “STAR” literature circle format. These results point to the importance of the role of critical literacy in K-12 education (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Janks, 2010), as well as the importance that students be empowered to interact and make meaning with a text (Rosenblatt, 1969).

Another exciting finding of this qualitative analysis was participants’ ability and willingness to make connections between the assigned novel and “what’s going on in the world” (i.e., society). One participant stated, “The activities where you connect to yourself and other things; it helps you remember the book longer than just the week I need to do the book report. I’ll remember the book a year from now if someone asks me about it.” Participants enjoyed tying the books to “issues”: homophobia, hate crimes, bullying,

and drug use with Shine, and domestic violence to *I Am the Messenger*. These findings point directly back to Dewey's (1902) important foundational work on the connection between reading, education, and democracy. Literature circles are an ideal space for the intersection of literacy and social progress.

Conclusion

One of the new chapters in the most recent edition of *The Handbook of Reading Research* (HBRR, Volume IV, 2011), titled "A Dialogic Turn in Research on Learning and Teaching to Comprehend," notes and encourages a "dialogic turn" in literacy research (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). The authors define "dialogue" in multiple, co-existing ways: discussion, voice/agency, collaborative inquiry, and the co-construction of knowledge. When the qualitative findings of this study are viewed through the lens of this multi-faceted definition, literature circles are found to address the dialogic turn on all counts. Indeed, "the interaction among different voices is the foundation for comprehension" (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 361).

In the chapter on dialogue, Wilkinson and Son (2011) identify four waves of comprehension instruction are identified: strategy instruction, multiple strategy instruction, transactional strategies instruction, and dialogic approaches. Within the "fourth wave" (dialogic approaches), four sub-topics are categorized: content-rich instruction, discussion, argumentation, and intertextuality. Literature circles fall squarely into this fourth wave, and I contend that the literature circles relate to each of the identified sub-topics. While literature circles do not involve direct instruction, they could be included as one of many activities in a content-rich literacy curriculum. Discussion is the bedrock of literature circles, and argumentation touches on both the role of discourse in literature circles and the

connection between text and society, which almost always manifests as a sociopolitical debate. Texts do not exist in a sociocultural vacuum (Bakhtin, 1981), so a literature discussion group is necessarily a space for intertextuality. Wilkinson and Son (2011) refer to intertextuality as "the sine qua non of dialogic approaches to teaching comprehension" (p. 374).

While, the HBRR (2011) offers valuable insight, the assumed student population is K-12 with the exception of one chapter devoted to "Adult Literacy," which covers all readers aged 18 years and older. *The Handbook of College Reading and Study Strategy Research* (Second Edition) offers an entire tome dedicated to college learners. Perhaps most relevant to the exploration of the impact of literature circles are the chapters on "Comprehension Development" and the "Reading-Writing Connection." Holschuh and Aultman (2009) discuss the importance of "generative strategies," those in which readers actively construct knowledge by linking new ideas to old ones. They argue that instructional strategies must have cognitive, metacognitive, and affective components in order to catalyze generative learning in students. These requisite elements seamlessly map onto the structure of the STAR literature circle approach developed and implemented for this inquiry and—for that matter—literature circles in general. Jackson (2009) provides an extensive historical overview of the relationship between reading and writing in college settings, critically analyzes "the split," and calls for transparency in instruction. While the word explicit is typically associated with direct instruction of discrete subskills of reading comprehension, Jackson leverages the term to prove an important point: teachers can and should also make explicit the "transferability between reading and writing" and the "sociocultural elements of reading and writing" (p. 167).

Explicit strategy instruction and dialogic approaches need not pointlessly compete for space in the reading classroom; instead, these

complementary methods could and should be used in tandem. While teacher modeling and supervision of comprehension strategies gives students an opportunity to add “tools” to their reading “toolkits” and practice using them under the helpful guidance of an expert, literature circles create a space where students can be empowered to use their favorite tools, trade tools with a peer, use the same tool together with one or more peers, or create a brand new tool through collaboration and discourse.

It is in the spirit of the idea of complementary instructional methods and classroom activities that I suggest that literature circles be added to the college reading curriculum. This study found that literature circles improved reading achievement and the quality and quantity of textual connections for college reading students, compared to independent reading, as determined by a reader-developed book test and a semi-structured interview. However, the connection between gains in text comprehension and

motivational/affective variables is likely at play in this inquiry and should be more thoroughly explored in future studies. No matter what the underlying cause-and-effect chain connecting intervention to gains in reading achievement, given that only five weeks of participation in a literature circle led to significant group differences, peer-led book discussion groups seem to be a promising addition to college reading classes.

There is power in talking about an interesting book with a group of one’s peers. Literature circles improve reading comprehension, facilitate deep and meaningful textual engagement, motivate students to read, and—perhaps most importantly—provide true enjoyment. One participant perfectly described the potential of literature circles as a permanent fixture in college reading courses: “I feel like if I got to do [literature circles] a lot more ... if people got to do that a lot more, it would strengthen their reading experience, because it really drew me in. I loved being with people I could discuss the book with.”

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Appendix A

Literature Circle Expectations

What is a literature circle?

A literature circle is a group of people who read, reflect, and talk about books together.

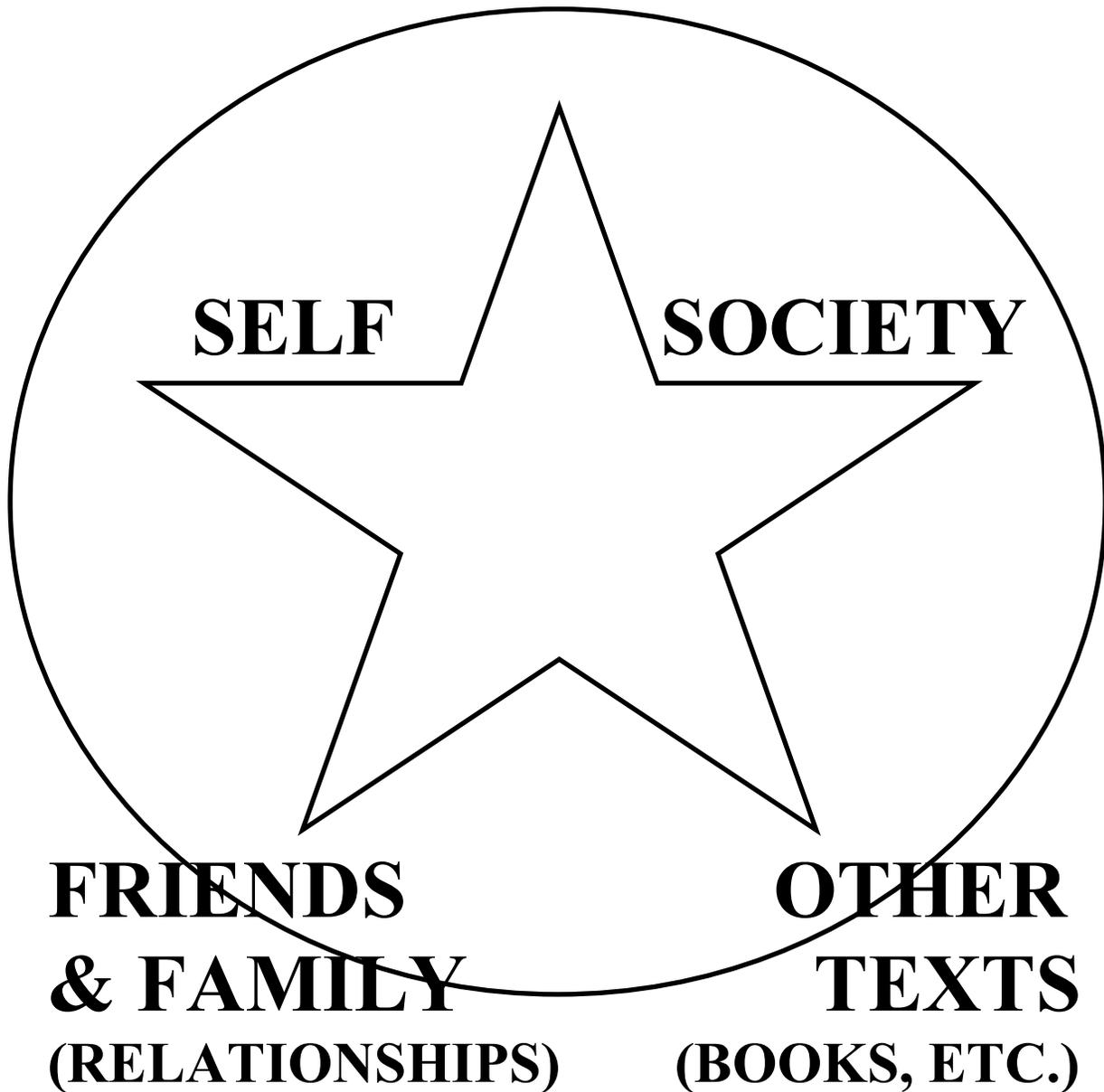
What can/should you do in a literature circle?

1) Ask questions!

- There are no stupid questions or wrong answers in a literature circle.
 - Asking questions about the book is just as important as “saying something interesting” about the book.
- 2) Be **respectful**: Please listen to and respect your literature circle peers. Avoid hurtful words.
 - 3) Be **yourself**: Use the words/language/accent/dialect you are most comfortable using.
 - 4) Don't forget the **Star Connections!** (They are on the back side of this card!)
 - You could make comparisons between your literature circle book and...
 - Your own life
 - Another book
 - Your friends and family
 - Society/culture (something you saw on the news or online)
 - 5) Don't worry too much about the facilitator. **You aren't reporting to the facilitator**; you are having a discussion with your peers.
 - 6) **Use your book**: If you forget something you read, you should look it up or ask someone about it!
 - 7) **Use your bookmark**: The bookmark has your reading assignments, meeting schedule, and suggestions for ways to “talk about books.”

Star Connections for Literature Circles

LITERATURE CIRCLE BOOK



Appendix C

READ 1000 Student Demographic Data

Variable	Fall 2012	Spring 2013
Total students enrolled	311	142
Residency		
In state	88.1%	72.5%
Out of state (within U.S.)	3.5%	2.8%
International	7.1%	24.6%
Unknown	1.3%	0.0%
Gender		
Male	37.0%	43.7%
Female	63.0%	56.3%
Ethnicity		
African American	44.1%	39.4%
European American	19.0%	19.0%
Asian	4.5%	8.5%
Native American	0.6%	0.0%
Latino	0.3%	0.7%
Other	0.3%	0.0%
Not available/Not specified	31.2%	32.4%
Median Age	18	19
Mean ACT reading score	15.50	14.94
Most popular majors		
Undeclared	17.4%	12.0%
Nursing	12.2%	9.9%
Science	11.6%	9.2%
% of students repeating READ 1000	N/A	52.1%

Appendix D

Ways to Talk About Books (back side of bookmark)

- Discuss how something from the book reminds you of something from your own life or the lives of your friends and family.
- Explain why you agree or disagree with something that one of the characters did or said.
- Discuss how something from the book reminds you of something else you have read.
- Discuss how something from the book reminds you of something that is happening in the world/ country/ community right now or has happened in the past.
- Predict what might happen next in the book.
- Explain why you were surprised or disappointed by something that happened in the book.
- Find a theme in the book: black/white, rich/poor, men/women, family relationships, sex/romance, war, politics, crime... these are just a few possibilities!
- Ask about something that you don't understand—a word or phrase in the book or something that happens in the plot.

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Part I. Life Story.

- 1) Please tell me about your childhood.
 - a. Where were you born?
 - b. Where did you grow up?
 - c. Who raised you?
 - d. How did you spend your time?
 - e. What is your fondest memory?
- 2) Please tell me about your school life before college.
 - a. Where did you go to school?
 - b. What was your school like?
 - c. What was your favorite thing about school?
 - d. What was your least favorite thing about school?
- 3) Please tell me about the role reading has played in your life so far.
 - a. What are your memories of reading in school?
 - b. What are your memories of reading outside of school?
 - c. Did your high school experience prepare you for college?
 - i. (if no) What could they have done differently?
- 4) Tell me the story about how you decided to go to college.
 - a. Why are you going to college?
 - b. What do you want to do after college?
- 5) How do you feel/what do you think about being in READ 1000?
 - a. Do you think you should be in a college reading class?
 - b. How do you feel/what do you think about the test you took? (Nelson-Denny)

Part II. Reconstruction of Experience.

- 1) For all participants:
 - a. How do you feel/what do you think about how you are asked to read books in READ 1000?
 - b. How do you feel/what do you think about giving a book report?
 - c. How do you feel/what do you think about the test on the Malcolm X story?
 - d. How do you feel/what do you think about the test on your assigned book?
 - e. Did you like the book? Why or why not?

- 2) For literature circle participants:
 - a. How do you feel/what do you think about participating in a literature circle?
 - b. How would you compare talking about a book in a literature circle to giving a book report?
 - c. How did reading and talking about the same book with a group of your peers affect your reading experience?
 - i. Did it improve your reading experience? How so?
 - ii. Did it harm your reading experience? How so?

Part III. Reflecting on Meaning.

- 1) When do you feel most motivated to read a book?
- 2) When do you feel least motivated to read a book?
- 3) Do you think you will be a lifelong reader? (describe if necessary)
 - a. (if no) What would it take for you to become a lifelong reader?
- 4) When you read a book, do you make connections to your own life? Can you give an example?
- 5) When you read a book, do you make connections to other books? Can you give an example?
- 6) Describe your attitude toward reading.
 - a. Do you enjoy reading?
 - i. Why?
 - ii. Why not?
 - b. What do you like to read?
 - c. Do you think you are a good reader?
 - i. Why?
 - ii. Why not?

Part IV. Engagement with Text. (after re-tell)

- 1) Did you make any connections between the people you read about in book and yourself?
 - a. (If yes) Describe the connection.
- 2) Did you make any connections between the people you read about in this book and your friends or family?
 - a. (If yes) Describe the connection.
- 3) Did you make any connections between this book and any other books, movies, TV shows, songs, or video games?
 - a. (If yes) Describe the connection.
- 4) Did you make any connections between what happened in this book and what has happened, is happening, or might happen in the world?
 - a. (If yes) Describe the connection.
- 5) What do you think you will remember about this book, even in a few months from now?

A Sociocultural, Semiotic, and Cognitive Model of Postsecondary Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Postsecondary academic literacy comprises multiple facets: the sociocultural, linguistic/semiotic, and cognitive dimensions. This article explores the nuances of postsecondary academic literacy through a new model building upon that of Steven B. Kucer (2014). This new model integrates the sociocultural milieu in which students exist and its influences on meaning-making processes alongside the linguistic/semiotic considerations such as modality and cognitive considerations like strategic reading. Through this multi-faceted lens, we can begin to make sense of the academic demands placed upon students as related to literacy practices. By integrating theory and research into Kucer's existing model of postsecondary academic literacy, a more nuanced picture of postsecondary literacy practices emerges, as does a new model of literacy practices and processes.

Academic literacy encompasses myriad facets (Alexander & Fox, 2013): the sociocultural, the semiotic/linguistic, and the cognitive (Kucer, 2014). This complexity inherently lends itself to a new model of literacy practices, one that resists the oversimplification of what postsecondary literacy comprises. Reflective of society and language, what it means to be academically literate fluctuates as cultural values shift (Alexander & Fox, 2013), although changes in literacy expectations placed upon postsecondary students straddle the line between the past and the present, meaning they are rooted in more traditional, standards-based pedagogy (like that focused on placement testing) alongside newer literacy considerations such as New Literacies. It is little wonder that so many students find academia overwhelming and not in line with the educational practices they have been

exposed to prior to college. Not only do academic expectations exist in unfamiliar territory for new students, they also do not parallel the expectations they often find in secondary education, particularly in terms of domain-specific epistemology (Alexander & Fox, 2013). Some students may not anticipate the new cognitive demands being placed upon them as they enter academia. This is especially true when considering the amount and variety of literacy practices students are expected to engage in across their academic disciplines.

Considering all of the above, it is important that literacy practitioners become aware of the many dimensions of postsecondary literacy practices. To that end, I have constructed a new model based on that of Kucer (2014). My model (see Figure 1) of postsecondary academic literacy practices will address the complexities of the reading and writing tasks students encounter. Kucer's

Figure 1. Model of Academic Literacy Dimensions

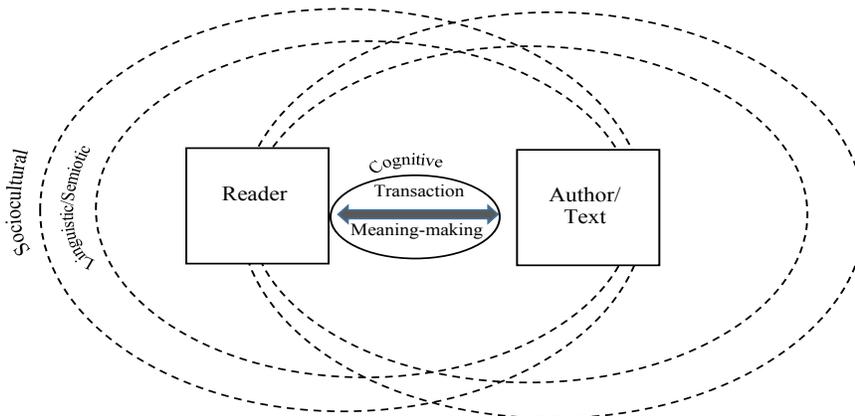


Figure 1. A model of academic literacy comprising the sociocultural, linguistic/semiotic, and cognitive dimensions. The outer rings represent the sociocultural dimension which subsumes all other literacy dimensions; everything related to literacy practices occurs within the sociocultural circles. The inner rings represent the linguistic/semiotic dimension comprising language and mode of communication which is influenced by sociocultural factors. Both sets of rings are dashed to represent the migration of aspects of each dimension from space to space, including between reader and author/text. The parts of the rings that are conjoined represent the shared sociocultural and linguistic/semiotic knowledge and experience of both reader and author/text. The innermost circle represents the cognitive dimension, influenced by both the sociocultural and linguistic/semiotic dimensions, where transaction and meaning-making occur between reader and author/text.

model provides a solid groundwork for the paradigm of postsecondary academic literacy practices and processes, but his model could be benefitted by some expansion and clarification of the interaction between literacy processes (i.e., the sociocultural, linguistic/semiotic, and cognitive). My new model emphasizes the nuances that emerge when considering Kucer's model alongside other important theoretical and research-based texts (e.g., Gee, 2013; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Smagorinsky, 2001). This new model is intended to inform classroom practices as well as how we conceive of literacy practices at the postsecondary level.

The difference between Kucer's (2014) model and this new model of postsecondary academic literacy lies in how Kucer situates the sociocultural and cognitive dimensions separately, not allowing for the potential that

as students develop their linguistic reservoirs, for example, they may begin to share more sociocultural aspects with the author/text. My new model allows for this transfer between dimensions, noting that students will develop their literacy skills and, as such, have knowledge and experience that can shift between literacy dimensions, such as the sociocultural and the cognitive.

Kucer's (2014) model, although foundational in its recognition of the layered facets of literacy events, does not allow for as nuanced a picture of literacy as is desirable. This is where my new model of literacy comes in: to demonstrate the nuances of meaning that exist within the framework of Kucer's model that he has not explicated. My new model of postsecondary academic literacy, then, builds upon what Kucer has constructed and breaks down how each layer of literacy

practices interplays with the others. Kucer situates what he calls the literacy event at the center of four circles: development, sociocultural, linguistic and other sign systems, and cognitive. This new model includes aspects of Kucer's, such as the sociocultural, linguistic/semiotic, and cognitive dimensions, but also situates the author/text and reader slightly differently than Kucer does. Instead of existing at the center, where the literacy event lies, reader and author/text intersect with the sociocultural and linguistic/semiotic dimension; they are still placed within the cognitive dimension, but these dimensions play more of a role in the transactive meaning-making that occurs between the author/text and reader. The major difference between these two models is where the meanings and contexts become shared between author/text and reader as the nuances of meaning-making shift as the reader develops and author/text changes. This piece will explicate the dimensions and nuances of postsecondary academic literacy, including the sociocultural, linguistic/semiotic, and cognitive dimensions as well as their many facets alongside the need for such a model for instructive purposes.

Postsecondary Academic Literacy

Students entering college will be expected to produce and consume a wide variety of texts, including textbooks, essays, presentations, and lectures, something they may not have been prepared for during high school. A singular piece of evidence for this lack of connection between what students have come to expect from high school and what they face in college lies in the standardized testing students have become accustomed to before they enter higher education (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001); they must figure out how to navigate the drastic shift from learning at surface level for a test to learning in complex ways (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Spiro et al., 2013) which may be considered more

authentic than what they've encountered before college (Smagorinsky, 2001). In collegiate settings, students are more likely to be expected to both consume and produce texts without overt guidance in how to navigate these complex tasks compared to when they were in high school. Additionally, students must change literacy lenses from discipline to discipline (Shanahan, Shanahan, & Mischia, 2011), learn to situate themselves within the epistemological stances of each (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2011), and determine how to access the deep structure—the underlying meanings—of a variety of texts such as those mentioned above (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Spiro et al., 2013). Often, students are expected to accomplish this with little guidance (Gee & Edutopia, 2012). It is little wonder, then, that incoming students may struggle with the literacy demands placed upon them, especially considering the complex nature of postsecondary academic literacy.

Academic literacy has become a daunting task once students enter higher education. Although students might have been expected to do so in high school, making meaning from text now becomes more than memorizing facts or regurgitating a teacher's textual interpretation (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001; Spiro et al., 2013). In college, meaning-making involves activating appropriate background knowledge, accommodating and assimilating new information into existing schema, knowing when to pull from one's sociocultural experiences, unpacking and internalizing complex academic language, and switching or intermingling semiotic lenses to delve beyond the surface structure and into the rich ideas which lie beneath (Connors, 2013; Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Nagy & Scott, 2013; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Paivio, as cited in Norman, 2012; Rosenblatt, 2013; Spiro et al., 2013). This points to the sheer complexity of how students effectively make meaning from text; these processes involve cognition, semiotics,

and the sociocultural nature of language, a rich intermingling of processes that may require special attention for students to access the deep meaning of text. Although researchers and theorists (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Matusitz, 2005; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Smagorinsky, 2001; Yu, 2014) explicate the value in allowing students' sociocultural backgrounds into the realm of academic literacy instruction, such implementation is far from universally accepted (Alexander & Fox, 2013). In this model of postsecondary literacy (see Figure 1), sociocultural influences subsume all other parts of the process; the sociocultural cannot be separated from the linguistic/semiotic or cognitive components of literacy. To overlook the sociocultural effects of students' literacy practices is to remove all context from consideration. This means one envisions academic literacy as devoid of influences from culture or society writ large, which is contrary to how language is constructed and used.

Great potential lies in tapping into students' sociocultural knowledge, as it contains pre-existing strategies students use to make meaning with text; they might not fit into the traditionally prescribed notion of being literate because these beliefs are heavily steeped in an idealization of past pedagogical practices. This, however, should not render illegitimate what they carry with them into the college experience (Gee, 2013; Rose, 2005). For example, students already know how to transact with a variety of modes, a complex cognitive process (Connors, 2013). Multimodal literacy may be viewed as a new practice (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Connors, 2013; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009), but students carry the knowledge and skills for engaging the requisite schema and semiotic lenses before entering a college classroom (Kucer, 2014). For example, students are already consuming a wide variety of texts in their everyday lives, particularly multimodal ones like social media platforms that intermingle text and image to create complex meaning. Students may enter college without

an awareness of their own capabilities, perhaps because of their epistemologies of literacy. What students and faculty view as valid literacy practices may overlook the multimodal texts students encounter regularly in their everyday, nonacademic lives, thus missing the opportunity to build on students' existing skills with shifting semiotic lenses to make meaning from text, whether producing or consuming it.

It seems rather than viewing students as deficient in literacy knowledge—deeming them illiterate, as Rose (2005) describes it—students at all levels bring literacy practices that can be tapped into to foster the construction of postsecondary academic literacy knowledge. It will certainly require guidance for students to internalize appropriate and effective literacy practices in this new setting, but they possess the potential within what academic literacy comprises: the sociocultural, linguistic, semiotic, and cognitive (Kucer, 2014).

Figure 1 shows the complex interactions between these facets of academic literacy. These dimensions converge when reader transacts with text. Literacy practices sit at the center of the model, where cognition occurs. Around that lies the linguistic/semiotic, including text design, vocabulary, D/discourse (Discourse entailing language with all its inherent values, belief systems, and power structures, and discourse representing the spoken/written word as a mode of communication without taking into account the aforementioned aspects of Discourse), and linguistic reservoirs either specific to or shared by reader and author/text (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; New London Group, 1996; Rosenblatt, 2013). Encircling all is the sociocultural; literacy practices cannot be separated from the sociocultural milieu in which text, author, and reader are situated (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Rosenblatt, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001).

The Sociocultural Dimension

The acknowledgement of literacy as a sociocultural act emerged around 1986, as mentioned by Alexander and Fox (2013) during a review of literacy movements, which resulted in a view of literacy comprising multiple knowledges reflective of the sociocultural backgrounds of learners, their D/discourses, epistemologies, and dialects (Gee, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001). This acknowledges that literacy is not a simple or straightforward concept, but rather a complex one that faculty should be aware of to effectively guide students through becoming members of the academic Discourse community; Discourse is used here instead of discourse to indicate the values, beliefs, and power structures inherent within the particular Discourse community that students must acclimate themselves to and become aware of.

Alongside this emergent view of literacy came the idea that literacy engagement, intentional or not, begins in childhood; regardless of socioeconomic status or geographical location, children engage with literacies by existing within a society (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Smagorinsky, 2001). For example, as Kucer states, although traditional views of literacy hold interacting with print text as the literate act, even children who lack availability of books at home or in their communities encounter what have now become included as literacies (i.e., the multimodal). These New Literacies exist in the college classroom in forms as simple as PowerPoint presentations or graphics in a textbook. These may be familiar modes of text for both students and instructors, which may be a common misconception (that they are familiar) across academic disciplines and even within the field of postsecondary literacy instruction. Rendering these literacies illegitimate may lead students to feel as though they do not possess the requisite skills to successfully navigate academic texts. Instead of overlooking the role of shifting semiotic engagement with such texts, faculty can capitalize on the literacy capital students bring into the classroom.

Texts in the form of visuals, such as advertisements and signage, exist in all social realms. A push towards inclusion of these as legitimate forms of literacy dates back to 1996 with the work of the New London Group; the relevance of other-than-print texts in society has likewise been stressed by other theorists, researchers, and organizations (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Connors, 2013; Hull & Nelson, 2014; Matusitz, 2005; NCTE, 2005; New London Group, 1996; Norman, 2012; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Sung & Mayer, 2012; Yu, 2014). A multimodal view of literacy indirectly emphasizes how the sociocultural milieu in which students exist is the origin of literacy practices; without consideration of both student and text's sociocultural context, the layered processes of becoming literate may be overlooked (Gee, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001). When literacy practices involve the sociocultural context, students may be able to better activate relevant background knowledge to make connections to the text, thus helping them internalize what they are reading. It stands to reason that if students can navigate multimodal texts in non-academic contexts, pulling upon their sociocultural resources and knowledge of the context surrounding the text, they can make this application in the academic realm. All that may be required is explicit instruction and making connections between students' everyday literacy practices and their academic ones.

Literacy is situated within the sociocultural milieu of both reader and text (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Rosenblatt, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001). If literacy is a transactive process between reader and author, as Rosenblatt (2013) and Smagorinsky (2011) suggest, to ignore the context in which texts are created and read limits meaning-making potential. Both reader and author draw upon schema (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Spiro et al., 2013), background knowledge (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2011; Smagorinsky, 2001), and linguistic reservoirs (Gee, 2013; Nagy & Scott, 2013; Rosenblatt, 2013;

Shanahan et al., 2011; Smagorinsky, 2001). Schema, the ways in which individuals cognitively organize information (Alexander & Fox, 2013), comprise background knowledge and linguistic reservoirs. The linguistic reservoir, as defined by Rosenblatt (2013), includes the language accessible to both reader and writer, extending to the language present in a text. In this way, language may be shared between reader and text if background knowledge, language, and sociocultural situations overlap (Gee, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001).

As shown in Figure 1, author/text and reader may share sociocultural backgrounds, enhancing the ways in which students make meaning by transacting with text. This connection of the cognitive and sociocultural underlines the importance of the sociocultural nature of literacy: shared linguistic reservoirs, for example, can lead to stronger understanding of a text. The same holds true if the reader possesses background knowledge relevant to the author/text. In these ways, the sociocultural and cognitive aspects of literacy interact to begin creating a complex process for meaning-making.

Difficulty for students arises when sociocultural influences and the language used therein do not overlap. As Smagorinsky (2001) asserts, signs—whether letters, words, or images—do not carry universal meanings for all readers; thus, if text is composed of signs foreign to the reader, such as disciplinary language, decoding texts becomes a challenge for students. This is further complicated when considering the hegemonic structures inherent in academic language: what is valued and what is not reflects sociocultural values, beliefs, and discourses, among other things (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Smagorinsky, 2001). “Traditional” notions of being literate, such as those present in how literacy is measured via standardized testing or rooted in more traditional conceptions of literacy (e.g., New Literacies versus traditional, print-based text), may hold primacy and render illegitimate the critical literacy valued in

postsecondary settings that moves beyond mere memorization of print-based textual information (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Smagorinsky, 2001). In other words, high-stakes testing evaluates students’ ability to identify meaning viewed as existing solely in the text (Alexander & Fox, 2013), which “dismiss[es] as incorrect or irrelevant” other potential interpretations beyond “an officially sanctioned meaning” (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 137). This notion undermines the goals of postsecondary academic literacy: teaching students to find deep meaning in texts and delve beyond the surface structure to make meaning independently, perhaps with little guidance from the instructor. The demands of postsecondary academic literacy require that students move beyond memorization of prescribed textual meaning to analysis and application of concepts, a goal of the academic experience.

Although postsecondary literacy encourages critical thinking and shifting epistemic beliefs towards multiplicity of meanings within a single text (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Rosenblatt, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2011; Smagorinsky, 2001; Spiro et al., 2013), even this setting holds hegemonic structures (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014). Regardless of the discipline in which students are making meaning from texts, there is an underlying power structure that includes values and ideologies of that discipline. These are often tacit, not overt, characteristics of disciplinary literacy. Students must, often without guidance, learn to navigate these Discourse communities and understand their unique values and ideologies. Furthermore, certain types of literacy practices hold greater value in different settings than in others, even within academia because of the multiplicity of discourse communities with specific epistemologies of literacy (Kucer, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2011). Not all disciplines share the same values related to literacy practices, making it challenging for students to navigate the shifting epistemologies of

literacy they encounter in each class. To effectively engage with texts in these different contexts, students may need to develop an awareness of the characteristics of each Discourse community. This harkens back to the inherently sociocultural nature of literacy—the context influences the values related to literacy practices. Induction into these diverse Discourse communities requires learning to navigate ways of meaning-making that shift from discipline to discipline (Shanahan et al., 2011). As Gee (2013) states, becoming literate in different disciplines requires developing a social identity for each domain. Becoming literate within disciplines builds schema specific to those disciplines, concurrently inculcating students with the values within those Discourses. Regardless of the literacy situation, sociocultural values and ways of knowing pervade and cannot be removed from how literacy practices occur.

The Linguistic/Semiotic Dimension

Sociocultural values and preferred ways of communication exist within how text is constructed by authors and deconstructed by readers. How the linguistic/semiotic dimension of literacy interacts with the sociocultural and cognitive dimensions can be seen in Figure 1. Note how the sociocultural may influence the linguistic/semiotic dimension, as text does not exist in isolation but within a rich context. Furthermore, the linguistic/semiotic dimension comprises the ways texts are structured—their linguistic or semiotic design as well as how this relates to meaning-making potential. Literacy practices that hold sway within academia encompass this linguistic/semiotic aspect of literacy (Smagorinsky, 2001; Kucer, 2014). Certain modes of communication—ranging from text design to vocabulary—carry more value in academic literacy practices than others (Connors, 2013; Matusitz, 2005). For example, primacy tends to be given to print text, an oversight that misses the many opportunities for meaning-making within a variety of modes

that may be more easily consumed by students. Although students are familiar with the textbook format, for example, they may not have the tools to unpack the complex meaning therein. If students could apply what they know about language, perhaps via multimodal texts, they may experience more success in navigating their academic readings.

Traditional notions view language as static (Gee, 2013), give preference to print texts (Connors, 2013), and value certain dialects over others (Kucer, 2014). The difficulties of these expectations, much like those that arise from teaching literacy practices for high-stakes testing purposes (Alexander & Fox, 2005), lie in how they may devalue students' sociocultural discourses, rendering becoming academically literate an even more difficult process when students must learn to code switch when entering into academic Discourse (Kucer, 2014).

This code-switching process is requisite for all aspects of students' academic literacy experiences and even extends into their non-academic daily lives. What makes code switching problematic is when students are not given the necessary guidance in how to switch from the Discourse of their everyday lives to the Discourse of a given classroom. Students already possess the ability to switch Discourses based on their circumstances, say when speaking to a teacher versus speaking to a friend, but may not see how this transfers into the academic realm. This renders becoming academically literate challenging, as students' sociocultural backgrounds could be capitalized upon to help them gain academic literacy skills, but these backgrounds may be devalued or undervalued once students enter the classroom. This makes clear the connection between the sociocultural and the linguistic/semiotic: students' cultural capital related to literacy includes not only their contexts for literacy practices, but also the function text design plays within this process because students inherently have the skills to make meaning effectively from a variety of textual modes (Connors, 2013). This

disconnect between the sociocultural and linguistic/semiotic can lead to a lack of understanding of how text structure relates to function, perhaps posing difficulties to students effectively making meaning from the deep structure of text.

Upon entering postsecondary education, students are expected to navigate texts of varying structures (such as expository, argumentative, or multimodal) and understand—often without explicit instruction—how the form of text relates to its function (Kucer, 2014). The layout of a text, considering both print and image, drives how the author intends the reader to move through the text and make meaning from it (Kucer, 2014; New London Group, 1996). Added to the expectation that students enter college sufficiently “literate” to negotiate increasingly complex modes of text is how students must learn other ways of making meaning via academic Discourse. Such academic language is a specialized way of expressing meaning often unique to each academic discipline; each has its own epistemology and subsequent ways of reading for surface and deep structure (Kucer, 2014; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Shanahan, et al., 2011).

If one considers each discipline a society with values, beliefs, goals, and ways of acting in the world, comprehension and meaning to be constructed from texts are inextricably tied, as well as specific, to students’ functioning in that particular domain (Gee, 2013). This expectation alone places significant demands on college students; becoming a member of academia necessitates becoming literate in various discourses simultaneously, recognizing the differences in epistemologies and acceptable literacy practices across domains. This is a complex process that places high demands on students who may be expected to figure out what it means to be literate across discourse communities, a particular problem facing students who are new to college. Again, explicit instruction about introduction into a Discourse community would be desirable to

avoid potential for student confusion or inability to navigate this code switching.

For students entering college, being literate no longer equates to reading for a singular Truth (Alexander & Fox, 2013); students are expected to become literate in finding multiple truths via multiple meaning-making practices (Shanahan, et al., 2011). This expectation is often accompanied by a lack of explicit modeling or instruction in finding a multiplicity of truths using a variety of meaning-making practices, which is problematic because students new to college may not understand the differences between high school literacy expectations and postsecondary literacy expectations, which are often more demanding. This gap in instruction leads to the possibility that students will feel lost when engaging in their homework assignments or with in-class literacy activities (e.g., lectures), something that would be desirable to avoid.

Dialects in Academic Literacy

In light of its highly specialized, contextual nature and how students are initiated into each discipline’s Discourse community (Gee, 2013)—again, not necessarily with explicit instruction of disciplinary literacy practices—academic Discourse becomes a series of dialects students must learn. This likely requires them to code switch between their personal dialect and that of varied academic situations (Kucer, 2014). As Alexander and Fox (2013) mention, dialects relate “to social roles” (p. 9). The sociocultural, and the hegemonic practices within it, pervade the very language of academia. This can pose problems to students when they do not recognize that these underlying power structures influence the dialects of the different disciplines. These tacit values and ideologies may not be evident to students, rendering it difficult for them to enter into these Discourse communities, thus making it challenging for students to effectively engage in literacy practices across disciplines.

Although academic Discourse in general has specific standards, such as the preference for Standard English, “conflict can occur [between] different discourse communities [within academia] because [they] hold different preferences for how language is to be used” (Kucer, 2014, p. 240). Between the social groups of academic disciplines (e.g., chemistry, history, education) exist different valued practices, ways of making meaning, ways of communicating, and ways of determining truth (Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Shanahan et al., 2011). Each group, then, possesses its unique dialect reflecting its beliefs and goals, much like Gee (2013) describes the action and identity embedded in discourses. That postsecondary students must learn to internalize these situational literacy roles may contribute to what makes academia, including academic literacy, foreign to many students. They may need to learn new languages to successfully comprehend academic texts and communicate within disciplinary Discourse; if students have not been previously exposed to the expectations of academic literacy, including its preference for so-called Standard English, their personal dialects become illegitimate (Rose, 2005; Kucer, 2014).

There may be one-way students can bring valued dialects to academic literacy without leaving behind their nonacademic experiences: engaging with multimodal texts. This is another aspect of the linguistic/semiotic dimension of the literacy model (see Figure 1); text design relates to how students make meaning during their literacy experiences. As students progress through schooling, they encounter more of such texts, often in the form of textbooks with graphics such as figures, tables, and charts (Kucer, 2014), something Kucer does not acknowledge as dialect. Although their existing skills in reading multimodal texts may not transfer into academic literacy, students often enter higher education with a wealth of experience in this dialect (Gee, 2013; NCTE, 2005; Kucer, 2014; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009;

Matusitz, 2005; Yu, 2014). This form of specialized language lies both in college students’ academic and nonacademic literacy practices (Kucer, 2014; NCTE, 2005; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Matusitz, 2005; Yu, 2014). As Gee (2013) argues, even experiences are retained in images, not in words.

Students are already part of discourse communities including multimodal texts from childhood, thus they are not learning a new dialect or how to enter into this type of discourse when entering college. Although some explicit instruction in multimodal literacy practices might be desirable, it is not as necessary as may be the case with print-only text. Again, the sociocultural influences the linguistic/semiotic: students’ background knowledge from nonacademic contexts can be capitalized upon in the classroom when students encounter texts of unfamiliar modes or organizations. Multimodal texts offer students a way into academic Discourse if they are strategically used.

Potential difficulties and successes in multimodal literacy practices. Even though most students enter—or are expected to enter—college with knowledge of multimodal literacies (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Matusitz, 2005; NCTE, 2005; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Yu, 2014), how students have learned to navigate these texts may provide challenges. Making meaning from multimodal texts involves complex interweaving of semiotic lenses, heightened cognitive processing, and awareness of intertextuality (Connors, 2013; Hull & Nelson, 2014; Kucer, 2014; New London Group, 1996; Paivio, as cited in Norman, 2012; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Sung & Mayer, 2012). Here, the linguistic/semiotic dimension begins to interact with the cognitive dimension (see Figure 1). The text’s design, particularly when considering multimodal texts, influences the cognitive processes the student engages in. What’s clear from research is that the more complex the text, in terms of its linguistic/semiotic design, the more complex

the cognitive processes involved in the literacy practice. Student interactions with more complex texts like multimodal ones involve deeper processing skills than their interactions with less complex or unimodal texts, making the former preferable in terms of building student skills and learning.

One kind of awareness of advanced cognitive processing, intertextuality, is key to making meaning from multimodal texts (Hull & Nelson, 2014; Kucer, 2014; New London Group, 1996; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009). This kind of cognitive flexibility applies across academic literacy, as students must learn to create meanings between different disciplines (Kucer, 2014; Spiro et al., 2013). Thus, if skills can be successfully transferred, learning to transact with multimodal texts can benefit students across domains of academic literacy. A type of multimodal text students typically have been acquainted with prior to higher education is hypertext—reading on the internet (Kucer, 2014; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009). Hypertext literacy involves, according to Pawan and Honeyford, two overarching ways of reading: hierarchical and heterarchical. Students reading such texts must decide how to navigate them, either from the top down or moving between information sources via links (Kucer, 2014; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009).

A danger that lies in such texts are the seductive details that do not relate, in terms of relevant information, to the text; while it has been shown that reading texts with informational graphics can increase students' comprehension and retention, seductive graphics interfere on the cognitive level, leading to less success in text processing (Sung & Mayer, 2012). Although these findings relate solely to graphics, the concept may transfer to hypertext, as some links within a text can draw the reader away from his/her original purpose much like Kucer (2014) discussed. Given the exposure students have to such texts in everyday life, learning to strategically read them seems crucial (Kucer, 2014; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009; Matusitz, 2005), particularly if considering the

connections that can be built between students' nonacademic and academic literacy practices.

If students are acquainted with reading multimodal texts successfully, there stands potential for deep learning. Research has demonstrated the complex cognitive demands of reading such texts which lead to increased comprehension and retention of information (Hull & Nelson, 2014; Kucer, 2014; New London Group, 1996; Paivio, as cited in Norman, 2012; Sung & Mayer, 2012). Because of the increased cognitive demands of collegiate learning (Spiro et al., 2013), the inclusion of other-than-text modes within literacy practices holds promise for students' learning. For example, graphics may serve to strengthen how ideas are organized within a text (Norman, 2012), and “people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone” (Sung & Mayer, 2012, p. 1618).

Learning the dialect of multimodal literacy may pose challenges to postsecondary students, much like the dialects of academic Discourse, but the possibility remains that students entering college may have prior knowledge with processing such texts. Often, without realizing it, students engaging with multimodal texts use complex literacy practices (Connors, 2013). This may be attributable to their previous experience in nonacademic settings with other-than-print texts; as Kucer (2014) states, before students enter elementary school, they already have vast exposure to these kinds of literacies and the practices associated with them. Once more, students' sociocultural backgrounds can influence their academic literacy engagement, particularly given the increased call for (and current use of) multimodal texts in postsecondary education (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Matusitz, 2005; NCTE, 2005; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009). Part of why multimodal texts may be so effective in student learning is because they require code switching; for example, when reading a graphic novel, students must move between text and image to make meaning from both in conjunction.

In this case, students are using intertextuality to make meaning from the two semiotic elements of the text. If these skills can be transferred into other literacy settings, students may have greater success in their literacy practices across contexts. This, in turn, could lead students to more effectively navigate the multiple discourse communities to which they belong, particularly if they understand the need to switch dialects when moving from discipline to discipline. This would allow them easier entry into the dominant Discourse of each classroom.

The Cognitive Dimension

At the center of academic literacy lies the cognitive dimension: the act of making meaning with a text. In this space, transaction occurs between student and text. This is where the sociocultural and linguistic/semiotic experiences of readers and authors engage. In the transactive literacy practice, students pull upon their schema, background knowledge, life and literacy experiences, and their linguistic reservoirs as they read (Kucer, 2014; Rosenblatt, 2013; Smagorinsky, 2001). As exists in the sociocultural and linguistic/semiotic dimensions of literacy, readers and authors may share some of these components (see Figure 1); in the case of academic literacy, however, this may not always be the case.

In terms of academic Discourse, students need to become acquainted with ways of processing “foreign” language structures in order to make meaning when reading. For example, students in the sciences must be familiar with long noun phrases such as pathogen-associated molecular patterns, a specialized disciplinary language (J. Holschuh, personal communication, October 29, 2014). Without sufficient or appropriate background knowledge, schema, strategies, and epistemologies, students may find it difficult to pinpoint the author’s intended meaning (Kucer, 2014). Even though a text contains possibilities of meaning as opposed to one

absolute Truth, some are more fitting than others (Rosenblatt, 2013). Helping students understand the difference between absolutism and relativism, as well as the stances in between, again requires explicit instruction; students will naturally develop their epistemologies as they progress through college, most likely, but may not perceive their epistemologies as interfering with the efficacy of their literacy practices. One example of this would be reading to memorize facts versus reading to connect ideas and construct new knowledge. Additionally, students will need to know how to activate appropriate background knowledge, including what parts of their linguistic reservoirs to pull upon, to be able to effectively make meaning from a text.

Academic literacy becomes, then, more than reading text: it becomes a complex process involving tailored strategies and purposes (Kucer, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2011), internalized specialized vocabulary (Gee, 2013; Nagy & Scott, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2011), and developing interconnected schema (Kucer, 2014; Spiro et al., 2013). When these skills are applied, students may effectively transact with academic texts across disciplines. Then a heightened level of transaction can occur in which students may begin to share more knowledge, experience, and language with an author than before reading (Kucer, 2014). This is crucial for students’ development of literacy practices: the more they are able to share with the author/text, the more likely students are to have deep, effective transactions with text. This, in turn, should lead to increased learning.

The Role of Background Knowledge and Schema

Background knowledge and the associated schema are significantly tied to learning (Kucer, 2014; Spiro et al., 2013); they are also tied to sociocultural experience (Kucer, 2014). What students bring to a text reflects their previous experiences in the world, in educational settings, and in literacy acts (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Smagorinsky, 2001).

Depending on the sociocultural influences a reader carries when reading, connections may be made with the author if all parties share similar sociocultural experiences and/or backgrounds. This does not always occur, however. Students need to strategically activate relevant background knowledge and schema when making meaning with a text lest they project information onto the text that is not there (Kucer, 2014). Even though students should be moving away from an absolutist stance into a more relativistic stance in their epistemic beliefs as they (the epistemic beliefs) develop, there may be resistance to making meaning with text without being told what the Truth of the text is. This is to say that students whose epistemic beliefs are not grounded in the relative nature of knowledge but rather in one, absolute Truth may not readily engage in the meaning-making process with text because they may be relying on the instructor to tell them the Truth of the text. The better students can understand the connections between the sociocultural, linguistic/semiotic, and cognitive dimensions of literacy, the more likely it seems they would develop more expert-like epistemologies (i.e., relativistic) and have more meaningful interactions with text, making them more prepared to read academic texts across a variety of genres and disciplines. This would also lead to deeper learning.

Using schema effectively involves cognitive flexibility: knowing when to use particular schema and building connections between ideas (Kucer, 2014; Spiro et al., 2013). When such flexibility is applied, students' retention of information increases due to creating structured, interrelated knowledge in the long-term memory (Kucer, 2014). Activating the appropriate schemata at the appropriate times will help students in their meaning-making endeavors. When this does not occur, however, learning still may take place depending on how the student views knowledge. Here lies potential for growth through dissonance—when reading academic texts, students may encounter

information contrary to their beliefs, values, epistemologies, and associated existing schema (Kucer, 2014). Through cognitive dissonance such as this, students may either accommodate this new information, revising their schema to fit what they have learned, or resist accommodation, holding onto their existing schema (Kucer, 2014). This is a stronger strategy for learning and will lead students to having more effective literacy practices in terms of learning. This can lead students to either have meaningful transactions with text or to miss an opportunity for learning. Accommodation occurs in another iteration during literacy practices. As students transact with texts, new possibilities of meaning may arise, causing students to revise their perception of what the text means while still reading (Kucer, 2014; Tierney & Pearson, 1983).

The role of schema has the potential to change students' epistemic beliefs, which may be essential as they move from the role of novices to that of experts in different academic disciplines (Shanahan et al., 2011). Academic literacy involves such cognitive shifts—to successfully make meaning from complex texts in varying disciplines (e.g., biology and history), students need the cognitive flexibility to accommodate and assimilate new ideas into their existing schema and beliefs about how knowledge is constructed (Kucer, 2014; Shanahan et al., 2011; Spiro et al., 2013).

This circles back to the change in conceptions of literacy from secondary to postsecondary education as mentioned by Alexander and Fox (2013), the move from reading for Truth to reading for possible truths. Even moving towards making meaning in a more relativistic than absolutist way requires students to change their schema for reading itself (Pawan & Honeyford, 2009). Entering into a postsecondary setting with new literacy demands and expectations, students will be required to revise how they conceptualize the process of reading; not only will they need to build new schema, they will

also need to develop awareness of their purpose(s) for engaging with a text and how to effectively do so (Kucer, 2014; Rosenblatt, 2013).

The Role of Purpose and Strategic Reading

Reading with a clear purpose in mind is key to cognitive engagement: it drives how a student makes meaning from a text by directing attention to textual features such as structure and function, among other things (Kucer, 2014). As Rosenblatt (2013) describes literacy practices, readers may choose a stance towards a text when making meaning. Although new postsecondary students often transact with text using a stance from either end of the spectrum—aesthetic or efferent—academic literacy does not necessarily require a dichotomous view of purpose, much like it does not necessarily involve the dichotomy of true versus incorrect meaning (Rosenblatt, 2013; Pawan & Honeyford, 2009). This is part of building more expert-like epistemologies and acknowledging that there may not be one correct meaning. Danger lies here if students come to the conclusion that all meanings are equally valid (i.e., if they take too aesthetic a stance to the reading). Students have to learn how to transact with text in a way that allows them to make meaning in a way the author intended. This process involves an awareness of the author/text's sociocultural context, the linguistic/semiotic characteristics of the text, and aspects of the cognitive dimension such as schemata.

According to Rosenblatt (2013), students often approach text either for information or for enjoyment (the efferent and aesthetic stances, respectively) with a preset stance regarding how to read it. They do not perceive this as a spectrum on which they can fall between the two stances, something Rosenblatt argues tends to be based on discipline, not text structure. This may be reflective of students' epistemologies, particularly those for the purpose of reading. Another important consideration here is

students' epistemologies specific to different academic disciplines; this also influences the stances students choose when reading texts. Students need not apply an aesthetic stance when reading a science textbook, but it remains important that they actively decide to take the efferent stance (Kucer, 2014). The sense of purpose readers carry into text may help them activate relevant background knowledge and schema as well as select appropriate strategies for making meaning (Kucer, 2014), hence the importance of explicit instruction in how to go about these processes.

Discerning features of a text can assist students in determining its function; that is, text design relates to the author's purpose (Kucer, 2014; New London Group, 1996). Knowing what an author wishes to convey through text can help readers select an approach to reading conducive to comprehension and retention (Kucer, 2014). For example, if reading a novel for an English class, a student may decide the author's purpose is to entertain; the reader then might take an aesthetic stance and read without any strategies. It is also possible that student might decide the author's purpose is to teach; then an efferent stance and reading strategies such as critical reading for important ideas and an overarching theme might be suitable. Another possibility would be the student reading from a stance between the strictly efferent and strictly aesthetic, in which case s/he might elect to vacillate between reading for enjoyment and reading strategically for information. Regardless of how a student perceives the function of the text, selecting the appropriate strategy (or strategies) for reading can support the meaning-making process, additionally increasing information processing and retention (Kucer, 2014). Strategic reading is particularly requisite in postsecondary academic literacy because of the multitude of academic Discourses and related epistemologies, text designs, and authorial purposes (Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; Rosenblatt, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2011). The

complexity of postsecondary academic literacy is clear: students must consider the implications of the sociocultural background of both themselves and author/text, the linguistic/semiotic characteristics of the text, and the cognitive processes to engage when transacting with the text to make meaning.

Conclusions

Postsecondary academic literacy can be complex and difficult to untangle because of the interaction of multiple dimensions that permeate every step of the meaning-making process. At the cognitive level, sociocultural influences on reader, text, author, and academic discipline play a role in each part of strategic reading because of all it involves. The same is true of linguistics and semiotics. Both the sociocultural and linguistic/semiotic dimensions of literacy influence how meaning-making occurs (Connors, 2013; Gee, 2013; Kucer, 2014; New London Group, 1996; Smagorinsky, 2001). As shown in Figure 1, all of these dimensions converge when a reader transacts with text.

Because of its complex nature, academic literacy cannot be boiled down to a linear or simple process (or series of processes). It is little wonder, then, that the gap between secondary and postsecondary literacy expectations occurs (Alexander & Fox, 2013; Kucer, 2014). The walls which separate these practices from one another should, as Kucer (2014) asserts, be broken down to facilitate effective transition into the academic Discourse of college for new students. This ultimately requires taking a new stance on what postsecondary academic literacy comprises: it is a complex interaction of the sociocultural, linguistic/semiotic, and cognitive. Taking away one piece causes a breakdown in effective literacy practices, as all are necessary for students when making meaning from the texts they encounter in the college classroom.

The implications for instruction are clear—students may require explicit

instruction in how to access the sociocultural aspects of author/text and their own lives and make effective connections between the two to bridge potential gaps between author/text and student. It also requires attention to the linguistic/semiotic features of literacy and how these may be influenced by the sociocultural milieu of the literacy act. Students should experience some guidance in becoming members of diverse academic Discourse communities, as this facet of postsecondary academic literacy may be overlooked. Finally, students may require instruction in effective activation of the cognitive processes involved in making meaning from text, from activating schema to taking an appropriate stance when reading a text. Postsecondary academic literacy is not a straightforward process; my new model is designed to highlight its nuances.

In practice, one should be aware of the many sociocultural influences on the reader-text transaction and make these as explicit to the student as possible. One way of implementing this model could be to use a culturally-rich visual literacy activity with students in which they are required to use multiple semiotic lenses, pull on their background knowledge and schema, and use their sociocultural awareness to make meaning from a text. One way I have implemented this in the classroom is via use of graphic novels: these require students to use different semiotic lenses (the visual and textual) to make meaning of multiple modes of representation. When engaging in such an activity, it would be beneficial to pull upon what students already know about reading visuals such as graphic novels by activating their background knowledge prior to an activity with reading the graphic novel. Then, the instructor can make explicit how students' prior sociocultural experiences may influence how they make meaning of the text by asking students how they think their unique perspectives shape their textual interpretation. One can also ask students to consider authorial intent—what the author wanted

readers to take away from the text—and how that might differ from their interpretations as well as the reasons why. This is only one example of utilizing this model for literacy instruction; there are a myriad of ways it can

be implemented, and these activities should be tailored to the student audience as well as the instructor's sociocultural background.

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