

# LiCS

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## LITERACY IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

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## *LiCS* MISSION STATEMENT

*Literacy in Composition Studies* is a refereed open access online journal that sponsors scholarly activity at the nexus of Literacy and Composition Studies. We foreground *literacy* and *composition* as our keywords, because they do particular kinds of work. Composition points to the range of writing courses at the college level, including FYC, WAC/WID, writing studies, and professional writing, even as it signals the institutional, disciplinary, and historically problematic nature of the field. Through literacy, we denote practices that are both deeply context-bound and always ideological. Literacy and Composition are therefore contested terms that often mark where the struggles to define literate subjects and confer literacy's value are enacted.

Given its ideological nature, literacy is a particularly fluid and contextual term. It can name a range of activities from fundamental knowledge about how to decode text to interpretive and communicative acts. Literacies are linked to know-how, to insider knowledge, and literacy is often a metaphor for the ability to navigate systems, cultures, and situations. At its heart, literacy is linked to interpretation—to reading the social environment and engaging and remaking that environment through communication. Orienting a Composition Studies journal around literacy prompts us to investigate the ways that writing is interpretive as well as persuasive; to analyze the connections and disconnections between writing and reading; and to examine the ways in which literacy acts on or constitutes the writer even as the writer seeks to act on or with others.

At this time of radical transformation in its contexts and circulation, *LiCS* seeks submissions that theorize literacy at its intersection with composition and will prioritize work that bridges scholarship and concerns in both fields. We are especially interested in work that:

- provides provisional frameworks for theorizing literacy activities
- analyzes how literacy practices construct student, community, and other identities
- investigates the ways in which social, political, economic, and technological transformations produce, eliminate, or mediate literacy opportunities
- analyzes the processes and power relations whereby literacies are valued or circulated
- adds new or challenges existing knowledge to literacy's history
- examines the literacies sponsored through college writing courses and curricula, including the range of literate activities, practices, and pedagogies that shape and inform, enable and constrain writing
- considers the implications of institutional, state, or national policies on literacy learning and teaching, including the articulation of high schools and higher education
- proposes or creates opportunities for new interactions between Literacy and Composition Studies, especially those drawing on transnational, multilingual, and cross-cultural literacy research.

## Editors' Introduction To Issue 10.1

With this issue, we welcome you to nearly a decade of *Literacy in Composition Studies*! We plan to recount and honor the work that has brought us this far in our spring issue, but for now we are delighted to welcome Al Harahap to our Editorial Team, as well as to express our appreciation to Kara Poe Alexander for stepping into the role of Submissions Editor. We send our heartfelt thanks to Chris Warnick for his ten years (so far!) of partnership with *LiCS* and wish him productivity and rest on his sabbatical this term.

This issue explores the ways literacy educators navigate constraints linked to context, dominant language ideology, and expectations about failure and success. A variety of sites are explored in this issue, from classrooms in prisons, classrooms as borderlands, and social justice community-engaged projects focused on children and families. All of the authors offer subversive ways to reimagine existing paradigms around common assumptions of literacy, including the dominant culture narratives about failure we are too often tempted to believe.

In “Prisons, Literacy, and Creative Maladjustment: How College-in-Prison Educators Subvert and Circumnavigate State Power,” Logan Middleton discusses the “literacy violence” that carceral institutions enact and perpetuate on incarcerated people. Building from this understanding, Middleton describes how “prison educators mobilize complex and highly situated literacy practices to subtly and quietly bend the rules in carceral environments” (1). At the beginning of his article, Middleton offers a rich exploration of literacy, which he calls a “chameleonic tool,” as a concept in relation to carceral environments. Middleton then reports findings from his ethnographic research into a prison education project linked to a midwestern university. Drawing on educator interviews, Middleton proposes using Herbert Kohl’s concept of “creative maladjustment” as a useful frame for understanding the seemingly modest ways these educators circumvent restrictions on their students and educational materials. Middleton concludes with a set of five implications for thinking about literacies-in-context in relation to power dynamics that are instructive for any literacy educator.

In his article “Using the Mother Tongue as a Resource: Building on a Common Ground with ‘English Only’ Ideologies,” Andrea Parmegiani provides a “constructive critique” of language rights discourse which, he contends, can too often be trapped in “a zero-sum game” of either privileging access to English or prioritizing languages other than English (26). As his primary example, Parmegiani describes a translingual writing program he began at his Hispanic Serving Institution, a program that necessitated finding common ground with “English only” ideology. The result is a dovetailing of Spanish writing courses and English as a Second Language writing courses within a learning community that nonetheless disrupts “unilateral monolingualism” (Horner and Trimbur 595), in spite of the fact that it foregrounds the need to facilitate English academic literacy acquisition. Through this example, Parmegiani illustrates how stepping outside the binaries offered by language rights discourses—or sneaking mother tongue languages “through the back door”—may at times be necessary to achieve diverse and effective language programs on the ground, as well as to further social justice-oriented literacy aims.

Thir B. Budhathoki returns to the oft-researched subject of literacy narratives, a popular

assignment in college writing classrooms, in “Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Literacies in Literacy Narratives.” Budhathoki argues that the role of context and interaction in students’ writing is understudied. To fill this gap, Budhathoki shares findings from a qualitative case study where he collected literacy narratives, reflective letters, personal interviews, and individual conferences with English monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual students. Results of his study demonstrate that when our classrooms adopt a “translingual orientation” to literacy, encourage cross-cultural conversations between students, and emphasize the role of “little” narratives, both English monolingual and bi- and multilingual students benefit (47). The literacy narrative assignment is thus an avenue to fostering a complex understanding of literacies among student writers and mutually enriching all students’ understanding of literacies. In this process, the writing classroom becomes a borderland space where the instructor and students become border crossers. That is, through the process of centering difference, the classroom becomes a space where teacher and students not only encounter diverse cultural and historical narratives, but they also use difference as a resource to pave the way for border thinking.

The final article returns to community-engaged projects, book-ending this issue. In “From Failure to Inquiry: Three Problem-Solving Strategies for Community Literacy Researchers,” Amanda Berardi Tennant, Carolyn D. Commer, and Mary Glavan offer three case studies of their own experiences of “failure” in community-engaged projects. The projects include a graduate student movement to persuade the university to establish affordable childcare, a rural literacy program for girls in Appalachia focused on digital storytelling, and the creation of an advocacy resource guide for parents of disabled children. This article offers a model for reframing and engaging differently with the “failures” and “disappointments” that may occur in community literacy work. This is a significant contribution to building resilience for these efforts, since perceived failure can result in “hesitance” to “approach . . . community based work again” (74). The dialogic exploration of these failures allow the writers to recognize that they were “attribut[ing] our disappointments to deficits of personal responsibility or systemic problems far beyond our control” (ibid). However, they discover that by using adaptive problem-solving frameworks “to analyze [their] initial, stigmatizing interpretations of [their] failed community-based work,” they are able to “transform” their initial sense of failure and recognize “unacknowledged consequences,” including generative effects on their continued scholarship and teaching (75). The authors offer their case studies as models for scholars engaged in community work to “transform failure into inquiry” (90).

Finally, Amanda Hayes reviews the book *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History* by Mara Holt. Hayes writes her review from a unique position—as a former student of Mara Holt. This personal perspective allows Hayes to write through both a lens of admiration and one of critical engagement. She argues that “Holt’s history [of collaborative learning as democratic practice] can help us build upon and learn from the past, specifically in how it demonstrates the links among the composition teacher’s intentions, their theories of writing and democracy, and wider historical/ideological situations in the nation at large” (94). She notes that Holt brings us an in-depth understanding of “collaborative learning’s roots,” a history that has largely been missing from the field of rhet-comp (ibid).

As always, we hope readers will encounter this range of research exploring literacies across many sites and instantiations with the joy and interest we did. Happy reading, happy winter, and thank you for continuing to support and share literacy studies research with your networks and communities.

*Kara Poe Alexander, Brenda Glascott, Tara Lockhart, Juli Parrish and Helen Sandoval*

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# Prisons, Literacy, and Creative Maladjustment: How College-in-Prison Educators Subvert and Circumnavigate State Power

Logan Middleton University of Denver

## KEYWORDS

prison literacies; higher education in prison; creative maladjustment;  
state power; carceral state

**E**ven as education is always a high-stakes endeavor, the stakes of prison education contexts are even higher. This is, of course, due to the nature of the carceral state and the means through which it sustains jails, prisons, and detention centers as “death-making institutions” of state control (Kaba). Given the power of prisons to harass, confine, and further segregate incarcerated people without explanation—populations that are disproportionately Black, Brown, and/or Indigenous (Sawyer and Wagner)—it comes as no surprise that students in prison education programs are neither immune nor protected from these violences.

I’ve worked as an educator with the Midwest Prison Education Project (MPEP), a “comprehensive college-in-prison program” (Midwest Prison Education Project 5), for the past five years.<sup>1</sup> Through this work, I’ve come to understand firsthand how the prison, as enacted through arbitrary bureaucratic policies and the whims of individual staff, interrupts education on the inside and further oppresses incarcerated people. At the same time, I’ve witnessed how prison educators navigate and push back against these regulations to support the teaching and learning of incarcerated students.

It is at this nexus of carceral bureaucracy and prison education that I stake my intervention in this article. I argue that prison educators mobilize complex and highly situated literacy practices to bend the rules in prison contexts. Deploying these subversive acts of “creative maladjustment” (King Jr.; Kohl), as I’ll describe later, enables these instructors to circumnavigate state power as they sustain educational commitments to incarcerated students in the face of state violence. Considering that literacy is often a tool used by the state (Chávez; Epps-Robertson; Vieira, *American*; Wan) to regulate and control (incarcerated) people, it’s critical to spotlight how individuals work against the grain of such directives to aid others in meeting their material needs. Attending to these practices can assist educators and researchers in better making sense of how literacy can simultaneously

“liberate and oppress” (Vieira, “Writing” 283) as well as how it enables and constrains possibilities for resistance to the power of the state—in carceral institutions or otherwise.

In the pages that follow, I first explicate the theoretical framework I draw from in statecraft, an abolitionist conceptualization of state power. I go on to articulate how statecraft informs my understanding of literacy in this article, both as a multiply layered, sociomaterial phenomenon and as an object of inquiry in prison-based scholarship. I then describe two key concepts for making sense of how prison educators negotiate carceral policies on the inside in the Carceral Communications Framework (Cavallaro et al. 2)<sup>1</sup> and creative maladjustment, after which I detail the contradictions present in the prison regulations that govern MPEP programming. In the remainder of this piece, I draw upon research from a qualitative, IRB-approved study that examines prison educators’ literacy and teaching practices in the context of the carceral state and abolition. In particular, I describe and analyze the accounts of Jim and Michelle,<sup>2</sup> two MPEP instructors who leverage their institutional knowledge of the prison to work around its rules in working with incarcerated students. I find that both educators use literacy to decode complex institutional contexts, identifying and working within the ambiguity of the prison’s regulations to get educational materials to students through underground channels. In the final paragraphs of the article, I reflect on what these accounts can tell us about researching and resisting the violence of the state. More specifically, I conclude with implications for (prison) literacy educators that speak to the importance of bending institutional rules, divesting from carceral logics, and enacting subversive literacy practices in those textual bureaucracies created and maintained by the state.

## ABOLITION AND STATECRAFT: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We cannot understand how educators subvert the institutional policies of the prison without first theorizing state power. I do so by drawing upon the work of abolitionist organizers and scholars who seek to address and combat “the root causes of state violence” (Spade, Kaba, and Dixon) in leading anti-policing and anti-prison struggles for liberation. As a theoretical framework, abolition helps elucidate how the state itself fundamentally commits violence against racialized, queer, trans, disabled, and/or poor people. Abolitionist praxis guides communities toward collectively building anew more just and humane worlds.

To these ends, I comprehend the state’s relation to the prison through Savannah Shange’s notion of statecraft, a “Black-centered political framework that theorizes the state as a set of

***“Abolitionist praxis guides communities toward collectively building anew more just and humane worlds.”***

practices that exceed any single apparatus or even a collection of them” (5-6). In conceptualizing the state less as a singular, monolithic institution and more as relationships of power that are continually made and remade over time, Shange emphasizes the everyday “state practices that render blackness itself *as* abjection” (6, emphasis in original). As Shange points out through her analysis of the

Movement 4 Black Lives' vision statement, these extractive practices include the corporate and governmental degradation of Black neighborhoods; the criminalization of Black youth in schools; lending practices that target poor Black folks; and the incarceration and murder of Black people, particularly queer and trans individuals (5–6, M4BL). Taking stock of these structural harms helps us identify state power as expansive and foundationally violent. So too does this vantage point necessarily entwine the varied practices of the state with institutional “racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia” (Spade 5–6), the likes of which enable the mechanisms that sustain mass incarceration itself.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *statecraft* both highlights the expansive foundations of state power and provides a heuristic for examining the situated, day-to-day interactions that uphold structural violence—an exchange with a prison guard or the arbitrary denial of important bureaucratic paperwork in the prison.

Even as *statecraft* helps us draw important connections between prisons and universities, both institutions of the state, it's important to note that state power functions differently across these sites. Prisons and universities have both historically excluded minoritized people, and each enacts carceral logics, meaning that they exert pervasive control through “policing [and] punishment” (Kaba and Hayes 24). That said, there are many more rules, written and unwritten, in prisons; so too are the consequences for transgressions much more severe. University practitioners bend rules all the time, often with little by way of disciplinary response. Similar infractions by incarcerated people in prisons, jails, and detention centers, however, can result in extended physical isolation, extreme bodily harm, and/or the further restriction of movement and socialization—all without reason or recourse. Such disparities in punishment can also, of course, be traced to the anti-Black foundations of the prison itself. I mention these differences because it's necessary to understand prison education—and the work of prison educators—in the context of the carceral state. Just as state power functions differently in prisons than in mainstream university settings, so too are the capacities of literacy to inflict harm different in these institutions.

## THE (CARCERAL) VIOLENCE OF LITERACY

In this section, I trace connections between *statecraft*, carcerality, and discipline-specific notions of literacy. Before doing so, though, it's necessary to explicate how I'm understanding literacy as an unbounded meaning-making process. In the text that follows, I point to how MPEP educators enact broad and expansive literacy practices in contrast to the control of the carceral environments they work in. Beyond solely engaging with alphabetic text, literacy constitutes a range of sociomaterial meaning-making activity that encompasses a wide range of “literacy performances” in addition to written and verbal communication, namely “sense-making, discernment, and methods of encoding and decoding various signs and symbols” (Pritchard 19). Highlighting these everyday means of “complicated, rhetorical, and embodied ways people make meaning” (Davis 56) is especially crucial to the literacies I'll be discussing in this piece, as it's of the utmost importance for prison educators and incarcerated students to consistently and carefully “read” the nuances of their surroundings.

It's also important, though, to gesture toward the nature in which literacy constructs—and

is reciprocally constructed by—the material realities of the prison. Speaking of the papers that immigrants use to cross borders, Vieira notes how “documents . . . make subjects ‘legible’ to the state” as well as how such papers are used for identifying and regulatory purposes (8). This reality is also true in US carceral institutions. Papers issued by prison staff determine incarcerated people’s schedules for movement outside of their cells, access to commissary, and other vital day-to-day functions. Other documents such as Department of Corrections directives, policies, and rules govern what prison educators can and can’t do to support incarcerated students in teaching contexts—obviously with much less material consequence. In both cases, these textual bureaucracies make incarcerated and nonincarcerated subjects alike legible to the state while occluding the actors, processes, and power used to do so.

None of this is to say, however, that literacy is inherently harmful when mobilized in state contexts. I reject totalizing, one-to-one connections between literacy and violence, as noted by J. Elspeth Stuckey:

Literacy . . . is a matter of access, a matter of opportunity, a matter of economic security—a total matter. The violence of literacy is the violence of the milieu it comes from, promises, recapitulates. It is attached inextricably to the world of food, shelter, and human equality.

When literacy harbors violence, the society harbors violence. (94)

A chameleonic tool, literacy can take on multiple meanings and values enacted by actors in carceral institutions, all for a variety of purposes. As such, documents are sometimes used to carry out oppressive sanctions. A prison guard, for instance, could very well choose not to distribute papers to an imprisoned person, effectively restricting their access to commissary or preventing them from making a phone call home. These acts, though, always involve individuals; documents themselves do not oppress individuals on their own. Yet because literacy is a double-edged sword, and as I’ve witnessed through my work in MPEP, there is also room for it to be used in service of creative resistance to state power in institutions where violence is normalized.

Stuckey’s work is useful, nonetheless, for connecting the interpersonal and infrastructural valences of literacy in prison environments. As Alexandra Cavallaro has rightfully pointed out, Pritchard’s notion of literacy normativity is useful to understanding the relationships between literacy and the carceral state (5). In *Fashioning Lives*, Eric Darnell Pritchard theorizes literacy normativity as a means of identifying “incidents where literacy operates with the power of regulation, imposition, surveillance, and other forces that do damage or inflict harm on individuals” (12). Though they develop this concept in relation to Black queer folks’ literacy practices, I see in their description of literacy normativity the functions of policing and prisons, both of which are unambiguously anti-queer, anti-trans, and anti-Black institutions.

As it relates to this exploration, then, prisons are built to dehumanize the populations within them. Accordingly, the documents that uphold such structures—and specifically, the prison staff who enforce literacy normativity through these rules—dehumanize incarcerated people by means of literacy as well. Although these frames are perhaps most useful to those studying or working in prison environments, literacy studies can also benefit from more deeply examining such mechanisms of state violence, the implications of which I’ll tease out more extensively in this article’s conclusion.

## POWER, FRICTION, AND INSTITUTIONAL CONFLICT: A PRISON LITERACIES LITERATURE REVIEW

While the specter of repressive state power looms large in the background of prison literacies research,<sup>4</sup> the frictions between prison educators and departments of corrections are largely relegated to the periphery in this scholarship. Such moments of tension arise in different ways across this body of work: through references to the harsh materiality of prisons and jails, broad references to the power of carceral institutions, and in a few instances, moments of conflict between outside educators<sup>5</sup> and prison staff. These insights from the literature, of course, would not be possible without the scholarship of incarcerated scholars, particularly MPEP students and educators whose work is referenced throughout this article (see Castro Brawn, Graves, Mayorga, Page, and Slater; Castro and Brawn; Cavallaro; Cavallaro et al., Lee Harrell, Villareal, and White; Rogers Hinshaw, Holding, and Jacobi; Sosnowski). Not only is it of the utmost importance to center the accounts and perspectives of marginalized people in research. Those who've survived the carceral state also have especially valuable perspectives on prison policies and regulations, some of which pertain specifically to Eastern Correctional Facility (ECF), the prison out of which the Midwest Prison Education Project operates.

The materiality of carceral space, as described in prison literacies work, often signifies state power. As Libby Catchings observes, the physical surfaces of the prison—and how outside instructors experience them sensorially—function as metonyms for how the carceral state dehumanizes all who come into contact with it (40). Common to such descriptions of prisons and jails are invocations of razor wire (Catchings 45; Jacobi, “Slipping Pages” 67; Malec 71); the clanging of automated prison doors; harsh, chemical smells (Curry and Jacobi 5); and the loud jangling of keys, fans, and “metal scraping metal” (Plemons, *Beyond Progress* 5). These jarring details, which are often narrated upon outside individuals' entrance to jails, prisons, and detention centers (Curry and Jacobi 5; Malec 68; Plemons, *Beyond Progress* 5), serve to mark the movement of nonincarcerated people into institutions of total control and to highlight cultures of authority and surveillance. Just as importantly, the absence of certain technologies in prison environments also indexes the power of the state. Whether through lack of access to computers (Berry 50) or Internet on the inside (Rogers Hinshaw, Holding, and Jacobi 79), these details gesture toward broader regimes of social control imposed by departments of corrections.

Other prison literacies scholars remind readers of these institutions' power by referencing the regulations and policies of carceral institutions. As Mo, Stephanie Bower, Raymond P., Emily Artiano, William M., and Ben Peck reflect on navigating parole board hearings on the inside, they speak to how incarcerated people “must confirm the power of the state, even when doing so is otherwise untrue and illogical” (103). Others, such as Rachel Lewis, reference more wide-ranging mechanisms of control such as mail surveillance, censorship, and book banning (194). And writing as a group of nonincarcerated and incarcerated scholars, Amos Lee, Michael Harrell, Miguel Villareal, and Douglas White detail how drafts of their work were screened by prison officials throughout their writing process. As one might suspect, these institutional regulations make it difficult to sustain educational

programming on the inside (Jacobi and Becker 32–33), not to mention how these “moving walls of carceral policy” (Jacobi, “Against Infrastructure” 68) capriciously shift over time, stymying the efforts of prison educators to address such changes.

Across these handful of accounts, state power is rendered nameless, faceless, and free from accountability. Locating the oppression of carceral institutions in objects, policies, and rules, though, obscures the people who carry out such injustices. As challenging as it can be to contend with carceral bureaucracies, facility administrators, guards, and others uphold these repressive policies across such spaces of education. So while it’s crucial to develop analyses that understand state violence as structural, erasing individual actors from these accounts presents the power of the prison as invisibilised and monolithic, unable to be navigated at all.

The prison literacies scholarship that mentions conflict between prison educators and DOC staff are few and far between. Michelle Curry and Tobi Jacobi remind readers of the authority of jail staff, as well as the arbitrariness with which they wield it, when they note that guards have “the power to deny [incarcerated students’] attendance for behavioral concerns or simply because they would rather not pull people from their cells” (9). Other narratives highlight accounts of disruption in prison classrooms, with instructors being told that they need to change rooms in the middle of class (Plemons, *Beyond Progress* 93). Instances such as these, which are rarely if ever explained, are usually justified as “security measures,” which Laura Rogers, Wendy Hinshaw, Cory Holding, and Tobi Jacobi pinpoint as the always-present institutional justification for any disruptive or oppressive action in the prison (80).

These accounts of conflict between instructors and jail or prison staff most often seem to be deployed as scene-setting mechanisms in the literature, signaling to readers how oppressive these facilities are as well as how difficult it can be to teach and learn on the inside. They can also situate moments of resistance. As Megan G. McDowell and Alison Reed write,

To counter the guards’ presence, we gathered around the tables placed furthest from their station. This choice felt like our unspoken and modest effort to reappropriate the space for our own purposes, to use the relative distance, noise, and heat emanating from the cellblocks to buffer our conversations. In a space of hypervisibility, our group desired to keep something for ourselves. (149)

Such moments in this scholarship are important because they illustrate how instructors can tactically resist the overriding power of the carceral state. As Anna Plemons argues, literacy can be mobilized in the name of “acts of creative resistance” on the inside (“Literacy” 39).<sup>6</sup> These acts, though, are not without substantial risk and threat of violence, as “the rules of the [prison industrial complex] may, over time, be negotiated, but they cannot be ignored (“Literacy” 45). This matter is especially urgent on account of the fact that incarcerated people, and not prison educators, are those punished for indiscretions on the inside.

In the following pages, I build upon this literature by zooming in on these tensions and exploring how prison educators negotiate state power on the inside. Focusing on programmatic scales in prison education contexts can help us understand the development and circulation of prison literacies and student-composed texts on the inside. But here, I’m more interested in the qualitative dimensions

of how outside educators make sense of and grapple with state power. In what ways do individual educators deploy literacy practices to navigate the oppressive regulations of carceral institutions when teaching in these contexts? To what ends?

## CONTROL AND CREATIVITY: PRISON POLICIES AND MALADJUSTING TO CARCERAL REGULATIONS

In this section, I introduce two concepts that help identify how prison educators subvert state power through literacy in MPEP spaces: the Carceral Communications Framework and creative maladjustment. These terms, which emerge from prison literacies and education contexts respectively, unite the structural and interpersonal dimensions of the prison. In addition, they aid me in locating individuals—and their resistance to carceral regimes—in the matrix of textual bureaucracies.

Paramount to the above discussions of prison education and state power is Alexandra Cavallaro et al.'s notion of the Carceral Communication Framework (CCF), a network of tangled and commingled rhetorical practices that collectively “isolate, silence, and contain” communication within prison environments. While scholars often point to how the material structures of prisons and jails confine individuals, the CCF highlights how carceral institutions control incarcerated people by dictating what forms of speaking, writing, and sociality are permissible in carceral settings. Communication that might appear typical in educational settings—the passing of notes from one person to the next and extended discussions with students, for instance—are subject to surveillance and punishment in the CCF. Even as this structure is staunchly authoritative and hierarchical, it nevertheless channels state power through unspoken and ever-changing rules, regulations, and policies, the likes of which impact incarcerated people and outside educators alike (Cavallaro et al.).

Not only is the CCF an invaluable tool for understanding negotiations of state power in prison contexts, but this framework was developed by a group of MPEP students alongside their nonincarcerated instructors. As conceptualizing life on the inside ought to come from incarcerated people themselves—I've personally worked with some of the MPEP students who co-theorized the CCF—this concept provides a telling depiction of the day-to-day uncertainty regarding regulations at ECF. It offers a useful lens for examining how the slipperiness of carceral regulations creates opportunities for negotiation and resistance as well as how MPEP educators deploy nuanced literacy practices in the face of the CCF's variability.

As is hopefully clear at this point, the policies governing incarcerated people are oppressive and unjust. Not only is the CCF designed to further isolate and marginalize incarcerated people, but since its mandates remain unknowable, variable, and subject to individual interpretation, they place individuals in a constant state of guesswork, always speculating about whether their actions will be subject to extreme scrutiny or punishment.

Given these systemic injustices that impact incarcerated people in educational contexts and beyond, what is the ethical obligation of nonincarcerated people to resist or subvert such policies, especially considering the punishment that befalls incarcerated people in prisons and jails? These

questions, which are centrally concerned with power, are of primary concern to abolitionists working on the inside or in solidarity with incarcerated people. One possible response rests with ideas of (creative) maladjustment, as coined by Martin Luther King Jr. and revised by progressive educator Herbert Kohl.

In his 1958 speech delivered to audiences at the University of California, Berkley, King advocated for the necessity of maladjustment to segregation, discrimination, mob rule, and militarism. In contrast to psychological understandings of “maladjustment,” which emerged from ableist psychiatric diagnoses, King calls upon individuals to “maladjust” to these damaging social ills (King Jr.). Decades later, Kohl extended King’s ideas of maladjustment by reflecting on his experiences with educational hierarchies in K-12 contexts. He recounts how he learned to navigate school policies when he was instructed to implement racist, sexist directives from administrators. In these teaching situations, Kohl realized he either needed to “[conform] to the demands of the system or [meet] the needs of [his] students” (128). And so over time, Kohl practiced and refined what he came to call “creative maladjustment”—unmarked, tactical, everyday actions that refuse to comply with unethical rules

***“As acts that operate in the face of repressive systems (Kohl 130), creative maladjustment emerges out of critical reflection and acknowledges the necessity of 'go[ing] beyond what authorities tell you to do . . . [to] create new forms of association' (146-47).”***

(130). As acts that operate in the face of repressive systems (130), creative maladjustment emerges out of critical reflection and acknowledges the necessity of “go[ing] beyond what authorities tell you to do . . . [to] create new forms of association” (146–47).

Acts of creative maladjustment can be deployed in prisons, jails, and detention centers to resist the CCF,

though certainly not in the same ways as in mainstream educational institutions. What was ultimately at stake for Kohl in his refusal to comply with unjust school policies was his job, and his status as a cis, straight, white man further insulated him from negative repercussions at work. Maladjusting to the carceral state, however, can spell much more severe consequences. When prison educators from the outside bend or break rules, punishment can be visited upon incarcerated folks through harassment and abuse, transfer to other prisons, and solitary confinement. The worst-case scenario for MPEP instructors, on the other hand, is to be permanently banned from entering state prisons. Nonetheless, prison educators must navigate these differentials in risk and punishment in such institutions that erratically wield state power.

## THE MIDWEST PRISON EDUCATION PROJECT: LOCAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Before turning to a comprehensive, research-based discussion of how Midwest Prison Education Project educators navigate these systems, it’s important to provide institutional context for the program itself. MPEP is a higher education in prison program that functions as a unit of the



Midwestern University's (MU) College of Education (Midwest Prison Education Project 5). Its prison-based programming is based in Eastern Correctional Facility, 45 minutes east of the university. At ECF, MPEP offers a wealth of educational options ranging from upper-division, for-credit courses in ethnic studies, physics, and other disciplines to extracurricular programs such as writing workshops, a language learning program, and a Community Anti-Violence Education (CAVE) group. MPEP additionally facilitates work on the outside through its Reentry Guide Initiative, which supports people released from prison, and it maintains connections with the Midwestern Coalition for Higher Education in Prison and the Learning and Liberation Campaign, both of which are state-wide, prison advocacy organizations (5). Though I don't discuss these complementary endeavors at length in this article, I mention these components of MPEP because they exemplify the program's expansive understanding of the carceral state.

To interrogate how prison educators understand connections among literacy, teaching, and higher education in prison as they related to their own literate lives, I conducted an IRB-approved qualitative study with MPEP instructors beginning in Summer 2020. To explore these topics, I designed and carried out a three-tiered, iterative approach to qualitative research, in which I conducted and transcribed 33 interviews with 15 MPEP instructors from June through December 2020. Although my study design only recruited MPEP instructors who had taught, facilitated, or worked on site at ECF, our conversations weren't confined to prison curricula or pedagogies. Through these conversations, I invited participants to share experiences related to schooling, education, and their diverse literacy practices; their teaching experiences on the inside and outside; and finally, topics pertaining to higher education in prison and prison abolition more broadly. In this third round of data collection, I posed questions to MPEP educators as to how they understood the goals of prison education and abolition—as distinct projects and in relation to each other. Collecting data on these topics demonstrated to me how carceral logics shape teaching and learning in prison education environments.

In this article, I draw on data from these interviews to explore how MPEP educators navigate and negotiate state power in prison education settings. It was through these contexts that I identified connections between teaching, Midwest Department of Corrections (MDOC) policies, and how instructors bend such rules in their educational work at the prison. In particular, I focus on qualitative accounts provided by Jim and Michelle, two veteran MPEP instructors. Jim is a PhD graduate from Midwestern University; he currently teaches at a local high school in the same town as the university. Michelle is a former doctoral student who also did her PhD work at MU. Both have worked with a handful of MPEP programs throughout their tenure with the organization. The insights from these two educators, as contrasted with the directives issued by the carceral state, comprise the bulk of analysis in the work that follows.

Here, I'll note one more significant aspect of institutional context. As a program, MPEP has faced numerous interruptions, MDOC investigations, and suspensions over the years. In November 2014, the then-warden of ECF suspended all MPEP programming; courses and extracurricular activities were reinstated in June 2015 (Midwest Prison Education Project 13). A few years later, MPEP's computer lab—an important site where students write, research, and study together—was

shut down by prison staff from May through September 2017 due to an ongoing investigation. And most prominently and publicly, on-site MPEP activities were delayed for weeks after Eastern Correctional Facility staff raided MPEP's library in January 2019, removing over 200 books from its shelves, the majority of them about race (Gaines). These interruptions, in addition to a year-and-a-half suspension of on-site MPEP programming due to COVID-19, has meant that MPEP has experienced lots of starts and stops over the years. In these regards, not only has MPEP been programmatically forced to contend with the unpredictability and volatility of state power. So too have individuals in the program had their lives upended by these interruptions.

## COMPREHENDING THE TEXTUAL BUREAUCRACIES OF THE PRISON (OR NOT)

One of the most relevant sets of MDOC documents for MPEP educators concerns what materials—learning and otherwise—can or cannot enter ECF. These policies, featured in MDOC's administrative directive on publication review, went into effect in November 2019 after ECF's aforementioned book banning incident earlier in the year.<sup>7</sup> As this act of censorship gained notoriety in national news, MDOC released this revised administrative directive (Jones, "MDOC Clearance Policies") to "establish review procedures for the admissibility of publications into [facilities]" (MDOC, "Internal Administrative Directive" 1) and to outline more explicitly constituent screening and distribution processes.

There are a few points from this directive that are useful for considering how MPEP educators navigate state power as it relates to what published materials enter the prison. Section G.2 highlights criteria that might result in publication disapproval, some of which aren't surprising: documents that contain explicit sexual content, actively encourage violence, or provide instructions for creating weapons (MDOC, "Internal Administrative Directive" 4). Other criteria, however, are incredibly nebulous. If, for example, a publication is "detrimental to the security or good order of the facility," it might not be admitted into the prison (4). What constitutes a threat to the security at the prison is, of course, subject to vast and arbitrary interpretation. As noted by Rogers, Hinshaw, Holding, and Jacobi above, this language provides institutional cover for prison administrators and staff to deny materials for whatever reasons they like.

In addition, this directive explains that publications intended for use in approved programs at Midwestern prisons are "reviewed by the Assistant Chief Administrative Officer of Programs" (MDOC, "Internal Administrative Directive" 1). Elsewhere, in a press release pertaining to the same revised publication review policy, MDOC notes that "Reading materials for educational programming are now assessed by the Educational Facility Administrator of each institution" (MDOC, "Press Release"). To me, though, it's never been totally clear who ECF's Assistant Chief Administrative Officer of Programs actually is. In addition, a former MPEP administrator observed that, to their knowledge, the Educational Facility Administrator was never responsible for reviewing educational materials—at least pre-COVID (Jones, "More MDOC Questions"). From my experience, inconsistencies such as these are fairly common in communication with MDOC.

On the whole, however, this MDOC administrative directive and press release appear to speak more to instances like book banning than to everyday prison education contexts. As the same former MPEP administrator noted, the directive was never explicitly intended to address the logistics of approving educational materials for entrance into ECF; it was instead a hastily drawn-up response to national press about ECF's library raid (Jones, "MDOC Clearance Policies"). Nowhere in any of these documents is it explicitly described how material clearance processes actually work in relation to education contexts—MPEP in addition to GED, community college, vocational, and religious education programs—in which books, articles, and other materials routinely move in and out of the prison. And based on my own MPEP experiences, policies from these directives were rarely, if ever, invoked by ECF staff when there were delays in material clearance processes. Instead, issues with the clearance of educational texts usually needed to be resolved behind the scenes by an assistant warden.

These contradictory documents and accounts provide only a glimpse into the byzantine and near-impenetrable textual bureaucracies of the prison. As such inconsistencies might suggest, it was often incredibly difficult to sustain educational programming at ECF amidst these conditions. The opaqueness surrounding the approval of MPEP curricular materials made it next to impossible to

***“[T]he bureaucratic textscapes of the prison exert state power, one that continually obfuscates, regulates, and upholds the literacy normativity of the institution...”***

register or resolve these issues with prison staff. And even as revisions to publication review took root, they didn't make any tangible differences in the day-to-day workings of MPEP educators, who continued to contend with lengthy clearance times for

educational materials and lack of clarity around such directives. In this regard, I'd contend that the bureaucratic textscapes of the prison exert state power, one that continually obfuscates, regulates, and upholds the literacy normativity of the institution as evidenced by these substantive interruptions to teaching, learning, and access to education at ECF.

## WORKING WITHIN AND AGAINST THE CARCERAL COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK

The MPEP educators I interviewed are familiar with ECF's policies on clearance, both pre- and post-library raid, even though the revised publication review directive changed little for MPEP educators. As these individuals bring in curricular materials on a regular basis, they must submit such materials beforehand for review and approval by ECF staff. This process was often unpredictable and could take up to months on end (Sosnowski 160).<sup>8</sup> From my time in MPEP, material clearance was not a particularly smooth affair. Instructional documents were frequently lost, misplaced, or delayed to the point where they weren't approved in time for extracurricular programs. According to Jim Sosnowski, educators were reluctant to bring new materials into MPEP spaces in the first place, citing the length and confusion of these processes (160). Just as detrimental, items that were cleared to bring

into ECF were occasionally denied at the front gate, the guard on duty offering little reason as to why. Of course, the shifting and variable nature of the CCF means that even these policies and processes of clearance are subject to change. Writing as a collective of incarcerated and nonincarcerated MPEP scholars, Erin L. Castro, Michael Brawn, Daniel E. Graves, Orlando Mayorga, Johnny Page, and Andra Slater underscore this reality when Michael Brawn, one of the student authors of the piece, speaks to how “[i]nformation in prison is provided to us as it is deemed necessary by authorities in charge of the facility” (21), a point also represented in additional scholarship from Castro and Brawn (117). From an outside MPEP educator point of view, these perspectives were also shared by Jim, who pointed out, “What you could bring in changed this week [or] maybe two or three times in the last couple months. And so who knows the current policy? And who’s going to enforce it even?”

I mention this context to sketch the administrative mechanisms MPEP educators contend with as they teach in the prison. These instructors also, however, grappled with MPEP’s interpretations of these processes. Michelle, for instance, reported that she never received explicit instruction from MPEP as to what kinds of non-curricular student writing she could bring into the prison or leave with after instructional sessions—documents such as memoir chapters and program proposals that might not have been composed explicitly for MPEP purposes. She went on to speak to the ambiguity around this question, acknowledging MPEP’s “Don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to situations such as these. In this regard, prison educators working with the Midwest Prison Education Project not only navigate the unknowable policies of the state as they teach and learn with incarcerated students, but they’re forced to constantly feel out and interpret MPEP’s stance toward these directives as well. As Michelle observed, if you asked every MPEP educator what the policy is for bringing materials in and out of the prison, “You would get 50 different [accounts].”

Reflecting on these ambiguities of state and organizational policy and the inconsistencies with which such regulations were enforced, some MPEP educators acknowledged that they regularly bent these rules. Most of these practices related to fulfilling MPEP students’ ad-hoc requests for bringing in additional learning resources without going through the proper material clearance channels. Michelle described the processes of bringing informational materials to individual MPEP students as “underground,” explaining that although it would depend on how well you knew the student in question, “everybody [was] doing it.” Michelle’s observation aligns with my own experiences in the program as well.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, I’d argue that these practices of bringing unapproved materials into the prison—whether by educators for students or in other contexts—constitute the underlife of the prison. As Erving Goffman theorizes, the underlife of an institution points to those behaviors of individuals that diverge from their organizationally prescribed roles (qtd. in Brooke 142). Just as critically, underlife activity is mundane, quotidian, and unexceptional. As Goffman observes, all members of institutions participate in such behaviors because they maintain complex, multifaceted identities (qtd. in Brooke 142–3). I don’t believe that conceptualizing Jim and Michelle’s acts of creative maladjustment as a part of the prison’s underlife makes their literacy practices any less noteworthy. Rather, I do so to suggest that actions that “work around the institution” (Brooke 143) are not only normal, but they’re necessary for such systems to operate in the first place. The prison is no exception.

If we consider circumventing state policy to bring in educational materials as a normalized, complex, and situated literacy practice, then what does this look like in practice? What sorts of spatial, temporal, and interpersonal knowledges do prison educators leverage to enact these literate acts of creative maladjustment?

The majority of my participants did not address rule bending or subversive literacy practices in our qualitative interviews. My felt sense is that many educators were nervous to speak on the record about how they maladjusted to the prison's regulations—out of fear of both retaliation from ECF administration and potential reprimand from MPEP leadership. In addition, a handful of my interviewees were graduate student instructors at the time of this research. As such, I suspect they harbored anxieties about their own institutional precarity in relation to discussing such sensitive topics.

Those MPEP educators who talked about bending the rules in their work with students on the inside did so through a variety of means. As Michelle alluded to, some acknowledged that, even though they weren't supposed to bring texts in for individual students, they printed out such resources from the Internet and did so anyway. Others looked to ways they could work around the prison's rules against "fraternization," which prohibit outside volunteers from spending "too much time" or "becoming too close" with incarcerated individuals. As my participants recognized that good teaching is built from developing strong relationships with students, they developed strategies for circumnavigating these regulations. Some found pedagogical workarounds involving student group work that allowed them to continue tutoring the same student(s) on challenging math problem sets longer than ECF staff might have permitted. Others just opted to boldly bend the rules on this front when the "coast was clear." For instance, in describing how addressing MPEP students by their first names or nicknames was forbidden by ECF administration, some instructors nevertheless used these forms of address when guards weren't present. These acts, I believe, are fairly subtle and unremarkable. Yet taken together, they not only speak to patterns of creative maladjustment across this study, but they also demonstrate how prison educators strive to support their students in spite of the prison's dehumanizing effects.

### "THOSE POLICIES CHANGE DEPENDING ON WHO'S PASSING BY THE GATE AT THE TIME"

Insights from Jim prove especially helpful in providing a more situated view of these phenomena. Given the variable options for programming at ECF—morning, afternoon, and evening hours—Jim has had plenty of experience working with students at different time blocks throughout the day across programs. Over the years, he's developed a flexible approach to navigating MDOC rules surrounding clearance. While he observes that there are scenarios in which educators technically shouldn't bring texts into the prison, he also acknowledges the "gray areas" of these regulations. To this point, Jim spoke to the importance of trying to determine and comprehend the impacts of any possible rule-bending on students, though he also identified the practical realities of knowing where "he can push those edges and where [he] can't." In speaking specifically to navigating clearance materials at the

front gate of the prison, he offered this account, which is worth reproducing in full:

[There was a] difference between the daytime shift and the nighttime shift and what could get in and what couldn't. And even those policies change depending on who's passing by the gate at the time. So you know, one guard, for months, never looked at our papers. And all of a sudden, the same correctional officer is asking us, as we're going by, to open all our notebooks and everything. And it's like "What's going on? This is weird." And you look over your shoulder and the warden's coming out, and it's like, "Oh, I get it now. You have to do your job now or make sure it looks like you're doing your job."

Was that person looking at our papers at all? Probably not. But it was just a matter of "Oh, here comes the warden; I'm supposed to be checking these things. I don't really care, but I'm going to look like I care."

The ways Jim is reading the prison's spatial, temporal, and institutional contexts, as well as the embodied and interpersonal dimensions of the actors within it, are striking. Only someone with ample experience entering and exiting the prison would be able to discern differences in how ECF staff check incoming materials (or not) across shifts. Jim also recognizes the tendencies and patterns of individual ECF guards. From months of continuous interaction, he's observed that this particular staff member doesn't ask MPEP educators to open their notebooks, scan their materials for anything that might raise red flags, or check to see if instructional materials have been formally approved. It's also notable that Jim can tell who the warden on duty is—certainly not a given because MPEP educators rarely, if ever, interact with ECF administration. More important, though, is his understanding of staff hierarchies at the prison. Stories of ECF guards being reprimanded or transferred to other posts within the facility for making mistakes on the job are not uncommon. And so, per the observation above, the guard on duty needs to present himself as if they're following prison regulations by asking Jim to open his notebooks—likely to check for contraband tucked between the pages—in front of the warden.

Even though he spoke about pushing at the edges of MDOC policies, I want to make clear that there's nothing about what Jim's doing here that would explicitly constitute a violation of MDOC policy. Nor would attempting to bring in something that was unapproved or deemed questionable likely spell punishment for MPEP students. As Jim later explained, he believed that the worst-case scenario in a situation like this one at ECF is that a guard would stop him from bringing such materials into the prison and that he'd have to go put them back in his car. These acts, as he elaborated, were not so much a challenge to the carceral state as they were enacted with the spirit of "irreverence," attempts to prevent the prison from exerting oppressive power over himself and MPEP students.

Regardless, Jim's multiple acts of decoding the prison environment to discern what's permissible on account

***"Institutional knowledge can be leveraged to determine when and how one can maladjust to [prison] regulations, and, by extension, defy state power."***

of who is stationed at the front gate, at what time, and in who else's company constitutes a highly complex and situated literacy practice. There's nothing inherently subversive about this kind of know-

how. Yet Jim's account demonstrates that this institutional knowledge can be leveraged to determine when and how one can maladjust to MDOC regulations, and, by extension, defy state power.

## “AS LONG AS YOU DO NOT TALK ABOUT IT VERY MUCH, THEN A LOT IS POSSIBLE”

Michelle is another MPEP member who mentioned that she's done “[her] fair share” of circumventing MDOC policies regarding the entrance of unapproved materials into the prison. Like Jim, she thought deeply about risks to students and the program in working within the interstitial spaces of ambiguous prison regulations. For Michelle, these acts of creative maladjustment typically took the shape of bringing in additional instructional materials for students who personally requested them or fulfilling MPEP students' asks for additional written feedback on their work. So too did she research non-curricular topics for MPEP students on the outside and communicate such information at the prison—for example, helping a student understand the logistics of GoFundMe so he could tell his mother how to set up a fundraising page. These acts, Michelle realized, might constitute acts of fraternization according to prison regulations. Yet as she explained, “I never did anything that was really unambiguously against the rules, I think,” explaining that she took special care to ensure that any materials she carried into the prison “[wouldn't] look shady” to the guards at the front gate. To this end, she'd bring in resources for students that might only be a few pages in length, documents that would be easy to overlook if a guard were to quickly flip through her materials upon entering the prison. Michelle would additionally leave MPEP students' names off resources she brought into the prison and, on the other end, instruct students not to write their own names on writing that she took out of the prison. This tactic preserved individuals' anonymity in the chance that these documents would be flagged by ECF staff and possibly used to punish students on account of fraternization.

To illustrate these tactics, Michelle described a time she left the prison with a proposal for MPEP programming written by Hugo, an MPEP student, because she didn't have enough time to review his work with him during scheduled MPEP programming hours. Soon after, Michelle sent me a scan of Hugo's proposal at his request. I had previously worked with Hugo on workshopping his proposal, and as such, he wanted me to take another look at his draft to see how his writing was shaping up. The next time I went to ECF, I brought a printout of Hugo's proposal, newly annotated, with me into the prison; we were able to discuss his ideas in the education building hallway in between MPEP programming sessions. Michelle, Hugo, and I repeated this cycle once more in the following weeks, after which Hugo felt his proposal was ready to share with MPEP's director.

I can't speak for Michelle's experience, but from my vantage point, MPEP educators often worked with students in these capacities: bringing papers in and out of ECF and sharing materials with other instructors to give to students. As MPEP students don't have access to email, and seeing that ECF is 45 minutes from Midwestern University, around where most MPEP educators live, it's logistically challenging to ensure that students' learning needs and requests are met. All of these difficulties are compounded by the ambiguity surrounding what's permissible when it comes to institutional material clearance in educational contexts. But as Michelle reiterated to me, “As long as you do not

talk about it very much, then a lot is possible.”

As Michelle narrated her experiences in fulfilling MPEP students’ personal requests for information outside of MDOC regulations, I asked her why she engaged in this kind of work. What motivated her to bend the rules in this way? When I posed this question, I was thinking of other MPEP educators I interviewed who took a firm stand against working around such policies.

After reiterating that she never violated the prison’s clearance regulations in big or flashy ways, Michelle explained that students’ asks were often small, quick, and easy to fulfill. Her willingness to do this kind of tactical work was also rooted in the empathetic relationships that she cultivated with students. She noted, “I can imagine the frustration of whenever [MPEP students] get a document, it’s always really full of links to websites they can’t ever visit until they get out. I can imagine that when you have an idea you’re trying to develop, you’re just missing a lot of resources to write even the smallest piece about it.” Fulfilling these underground requests might not have contributed to MPEP’s big-picture educational goals, but these acts of creative maladjustment were still meaningful to Michelle because they “[helped] someone do something that they’re working on.”

## COMPLICATING THE WHO, WHAT, AND WHY OF CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT

Even as Jim and Michelle both narrated how they worked around MDOC’s labyrinthine policies, it’s worth explicating the similarities and differences in their approaches to this work. Here, the prison context helps us better theorize why people maladjust to state power, what circumstances create the condition for these subversive acts, and how and why people participate differently in these literacy practices. In drawing these connections, I seek to productively complicate the notion of creative maladjustment by attending to some of the complexities present in these everyday practices.

What I find most striking about both Jim and Michelle’s explanations as to why they work around MDOC policies is that their responses aren’t necessarily rooted in upending carceral logics. Though both educators demonstrate an understanding of the prison’s authority, neither explicitly describes the regulations of the prison as unethical, nor do they unequivocally cite an unwillingness to comply with unjust rules. I don’t mention these points to critique Michelle or Jim’s politics. Rather, I do so to illustrate how acts of creative maladjustment don’t render or reveal themselves as overtly political displays of resistance. What I see most present in Michelle and Jim’s interview responses is not so much evidence of political intent or visioning, which I think is less relevant here than the practical impacts of their actions. I instead see a commitment to ensuring that MPEP students have the resources and information they need to carry out the tasks that they find important, and with them, the cultivation of trust over time. Such actions might seem small or unmarked, especially considering the scale at which prisons oppress people. But given how the carceral state fails—and kills—people on the inside every day, the fact that educators can work with incarcerated people to meet their needs, even in small ways, is worthwhile.

These descriptions of creative maladjustment are partially why I was surprised to learn that Jim previously considered himself “a rule follower” in MPEP contexts. Thinking back to his early



days of working with MPEP, he described how he was consistently worried about surveillance from ECF staff. But over time, Jim became more and more emboldened in pushing at the boundaries of MDOC regulations. The reason? MPEP's suspension of programming in 2014. As Jim explained, once programming had been halted in November of that year, MPEP educators were barred from the prison for the next seven months. Jim quickly realized that ECF could shut MPEP down and revoke the clearance of its instructors without notice or rationale. Through our conversations, he went on to conceptualize educational programming, MPEP included, as just another avenue for carceral control. Jim articulated how he saw MPEP as a program that made the entire Midwest Department of Corrections look good. In the eyes of MDOC officials, MPEP's national prestige brought positive attention to MDOC, promoted education-as-rehabilitation discourse, and suggested that incarcerated people were "better adjusted" thanks to state-sanctioned programming. At the same time, he noted that MDOC could put an end to MPEP at any moment and without explanation. And so given the absolute power of ECF administration to suspend programs, transfer MPEP students, and bar individual educators from the prison, Jim came to comprehend that prison staff didn't need a reason to permanently ban him from the prison—or to commit any form of violence in the first place. This realization, in turn, compelled him to "[be] less afraid of pushing buttons" when it came to enacting subversive literacy practices in MPEP. Ironically, then, the restrictive actions of the prison are what engendered Jim's increased determination to maladjust to ECF's rules in the first place. Put differently, state power paradoxically creates resistance to state power.

Michelle, on the other hand, was not particularly cavalier in describing or enacting acts of creative maladjustment in prison education contexts. In spite of the means through which she brought unapproved materials in and out of ECF, she described herself as "[not] very confrontational." In speaking about other male-identifying MPEP educators who were more inclined to be "buddies" with guards to get what they wanted—maybe opening up an additional classroom in the education building or ensuring that students could attend MPEP activities even if they forgot the proper paperwork—Michelle stressed that she was "afraid to play" with this dynamic too much. She instead mentioned that she was inclined just to "do [her] own thing," more than happy to steer clear of pushing institutional boundaries on site beyond what she described to me. I don't get the sense that Jim cozied up to ECF guards as a means of bending the rules. Yet it is worth noting that, as a white man, Jim shares a number of demographic similarities with ECF staff (something he stated himself in one of our interviews) that Michelle does not. As such, it's difficult not to understand Jim's actions as at least somewhat informed by the fact that he inhabits some of the same identities as the prison's guards. Michelle's orientation toward state power, in turn, helps us remember that gender always informs how individuals maladjust to oppressive systems—especially in carceral environments where hyper-surveillance and obfuscation are normalized.

I don't want to draw too stark or flattening a dichotomy in parsing Jim and Michelle's orientations toward their approaches to creative maladjustment on the inside. But I do believe that these differences are worth drawing attention to because they push back against stock images of what resistance—and by extension, what challenging state power—look like. None of the stories of creative maladjustment that either educator shared conjure commonplace images of outspoken

action or militant protest against the carceral state, though this opposition is also necessary. Instead, these tactical, underground actions gesture toward what Michelle referred to as the “smaller, less glamorous” work of MPEP. And I would argue that Jim and Michelle’s acts “create new forms of association,” which Herbert Kohl describes as important to the boundary-crossing capacities of creative maladjustment. At least from my own experiences in working with incarcerated folks, this kind of work can often up space for deepening connections between MPEP educators and students. In speaking to this type of relationality, Alayna Eagle Shield, Django Paris, Rae Paris, and Timothy San Pedro state, “[R]elationships and learning opportunities open deeply, quickly, and beautifully when the stakes are so high, so immediate” (11).

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD ETHICAL NEGOTIATION AND A PRAXIS FOR SURVIVAL

In this article, I’ve illuminated how carceral institutions use textscapes not only to inflict the violence of literacy but to materialize state violence itself upon incarcerated populations. So too have I detailed how college-in-prison instructors creatively maladjust to the oppressive regulations of the prison by deploying highly situated and complex literacy practices of their own, ones that require depth of institutional knowledge and context. Rather than prepare a set of practical recommendations for how I think (prison) educators should bend (the state’s) rules, I instead conclude with a handful of implications for this study as they relate to negotiating and navigating power.

*1.) Prison literacy educators should recognize that they bend the rules all the time—in prison contexts and beyond.*

It’s critical for educators working in jails, prisons, and detention centers to take stock of and better comprehend underground circuits of literacy and learning. Incarcerated and nonincarcerated people alike will always bend the rules, especially regarding communication and meaning making; recognizing this fact is imperative for prison educators. It’s important for college-in-prison instructors to understand how submerged literacy networks operate in these programs so they can more ethically negotiate the stakes of participating in these practices with other outside colleagues. More fundamentally, it’s imperative to stage these conversations openly with incarcerated students, who stand to be more severely punished by the state for any transgressions related to teaching and learning.

*2.) So too must prison literacy educators attend to how bureaucratic textscapes mediate their experiences.*

One crucial way that prison educators can cultivate an awareness of how they interact with state power is by looking to textual regimes. These instructors can facilitate transparent and explicit discussions of how textual bureaucracies operate and how prison educators participate in these mechanisms of control. Similar conversations can also take place in mainstream university contexts, where institutional texts structure individuals’ teaching and research lives.

3.) *All literacy educators ought to divest from carceral logics in their curricula and pedagogies.*

Whether working on the inside or the outside, educators should reflect on how they internalize and/or enact punishment mindsets in their teaching. Here, I'm reminded of Paula X. Rojas's call to readers to "identify the cops in our heads and hearts" (213), urging us not to internalize carceral logics and police ourselves because these functions are those of the carceral state. As Jim and Michelle show us, instructors can and should be more "answerable to learning, knowledge, and living beings' needs" (Patel 5) than to the opaque and punishing directives of the carceral state.

4.) *We should all be aware of how we engage with state power on a daily basis.*

Prison literacy educators, of course, need to be acutely aware of how they wield, exert, and/or negotiate state power. Yet even those instructors and researchers not working on the inside would still do well to pay close attention to how students, other faculty, staff, and workers negotiate state power—for varying purposes, aims, and ends—in everyday settings.

5.) *It's not only crucial for literacy researchers and educators to study how people maladjust to oppressive rules but to practice these subversive literacy practices themselves.*

Looking to situations in which individuals bend or break rules—without judgment or punishment—can shed light on how and why certain regulations prevent people from having their essential needs met. Investigating these scenarios, I believe, can help scholars better understand both how documents in the form of administrative and legal texts shape individuals' actions and how such regulations systemically oppress minoritized populations. This research might ideally create space for collaborative interventions or creative solutions to address and overturn such injustices in local contexts.

Just as importantly, enacting subversive (literacy) practices is perhaps more important than ever given the ongoing crises of COVID-19; neoliberal austerity measures; and anti-Black, white supremacist violence. We know that everyday people are struggling to scrape by, not in spite of the state but because of its pervasive neglect and institutional harm. Whether through occupying foreclosed homes, creating pop-up community food pantries, or finding inventive ways to get reading materials to incarcerated people, individuals on the inside and outside alike are resisting carceral logics in innovative ways to survive the state (Shange 10). We'd do well to follow their lead if we're all to survive too.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Editorial footnote:* We wish to acknowledge the full list of authors who contributed to this text: Cavallaro, Alexandra J., Melissa K. Forbes, Larry Barrett, Robert Garite, Christopher Harrison, Reginald Jones, Igor Kazakovs, Otilio Rosas, Luis Saucedo, Tobias Thurman, Agustin Torres, and Antonio Walker. It is *LiCS'* editorial policy to name all authors of a text instead of using “et al.” We do this because “et al.” can obscure the full contributions of all authors, instead centering the efforts of a single author. We also recognize that when many authors have contributed to a text, the list of names in a citation can make it hard for readers to follow the paragraph they are reading. In such cases, we include a note like this one to name and make visible the efforts of all contributors.

<sup>1</sup> The Midwest Prison Education Program (MPEP) is a pseudonym, as are the department of corrections (MDOC) and educational institution (Midwestern University) centered in this article. When citing MPEP and MDOC internal documents as sources, I have changed the names of these texts to preserve the anonymity of these institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Some participants have chosen to use pseudonyms out of concern that they’ll face repercussions from MPEP and the Midwest Department of Corrections; others have chosen to use their names.

<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, I often refer to the state as the “carceral state” throughout this piece. As opposed to comparable terms like “prison industrial complex,” carceral state indexes the heterogeneity of state practices and highlights how institutions of “police, incarceration, and surveillance are . . . fundamental to the structure of the United States” (Carceral Studies Consortium).

<sup>4</sup> Building on the work of Cavallaro (18), I use the terms “prison education” and “prison literacies” interchangeably throughout this piece. These terms are fairly compatible here given the breadth with which I’m understanding literacy in this article and how literacy necessarily informs learning.

<sup>5</sup> I apply the term “outside people” as a synonym for nonincarcerated people and the phrases “inside people” or “people on the inside” to describe incarcerated people. I draw this language from prison education and reentry contexts where such terms are commonly used. It’s also worth noting that I avoid and reject dehumanizing language such as “prisoner,” “criminal,” or “inmate” because these terms reduce imprisoned people to their status in the criminal legal system and make presumptuous judgments as to the guilt of people who are locked up (Mason, Czifra, Ricks, Cerda-Jara, and Zohrabi).

<sup>6</sup> While Plemons’s discussion of literacy as creative resistance (“Literacy” 45) also makes a case for the necessity of tactical action on the inside (“Literacy” 43), I believe my argument is more interested in (1) drawing attention to how prisons reproduce state power through texts and (2) adding to these conversations by qualitatively demonstrating how prison educators use literacy to maladjust to these systems.

<sup>7</sup> According to this directive, publications constitute “any book, booklet, magazine, newspaper, periodical or similar materials” (MDOC, “Administrative Directive” 1).

<sup>8</sup> It’s worth noting that, although these setbacks were common at ECF, every state prison and

department of corrections approaches matters of material clearance somewhat differently. Some staff are quite restrictive, and others may be more lenient.

<sup>9</sup>Though MPEP's handbook stresses the importance of obeying ECF and MDOC policies (51), there is little description of what these policies are, what they entail, or where they can be found on the Midwest Department of Corrections website.

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# Using the Mother Tongue as a Resource: Building on a Common Ground with 'English Only' Ideologies

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## KEYWORDS

translanguaging; multilingual pedagogies; academic literacy; language ideology;  
writing programs; language and social justice

The choice of the language(s) of learning and teaching (LOLT) is of the utmost important for access to higher education and social justice in multilingual societies. Students who are proficient in the language used by instructors, in books, and for assessment are given the opportunity to earn degrees and enter the job market with skills that are likely to command higher salaries. Students who do not have this proficiency are excluded from this opportunity unless they manage to develop a sufficient level of command of the language in question. This is the case of many language minority students (LMS) in the United States, for whom the appropriation of English is a precondition for academic success and upward social mobility.

For decades, critical applied linguists have been alarmed by the dominance of English as a global language that spread through the rise of the British Empire and US economic, political, and cultural hegemony. Sharing Pierre Bourdieu's premise that language attitudes, policies, and practices are never neutral, but always related to identity construction and socio-economic hierarchies, these critics have argued that the dominance of English is a form of imperialism that has outlived colonialism (Phillipson), an unseen gate-keeping mechanism that re(produces) socio-economic inequality (Pennycook), an assimilationist cultural force that promotes Western-centric values (Wa Thiong'o), and a linguistic poacher that exterminates endangered indigenous languages which is responsible for a form of cultural genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas).

Within writing studies, the need to question the assumptions about language that shape our teaching practices has been acknowledged since at least the mid-eighties with the CCCC seminal declaration of Students' Right to Their Own Language. More recently, the idea that the dominance of English within writing instructions should be challenged has gained traction with more and more scholars sharing concerns about the way monolingual ideologies reproduce socio-economic inequality by excluding LMS from meaningful academic participation (Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur; Canagarajah; Horner and Trimbur; Flowers). As a critical language and literacy scholar,

college writing instructor, and former LMS, I share these concerns, and I am delighted to see more and more members of English departments in the United States questioning Anglocentric assumptions and experimenting with different forms of multilingual pedagogies. At the same time, however, I am also concerned with some of the radical positions that have been taken within the debate about the language question in composition. In particular, I am alarmed by the suggestions that the English language should not play a central role in US college writing courses (Horner and Trimbur) and that language rights activism should make no concessions in addressing monolingual ideologies (Flowers).

***“I am alarmed by the suggestions that the English language should not play a central role in US college writing courses (Horner and Trimbur) and that language rights activism should make no concessions in addressing monolingual ideologies (Flowers).”***

In this paper, I seek to offer a constructive critique of the idea that the language question is trapped in a zero-sum game, or that in order to make room for linguistic diversity within writing instruction, English needs to be sidelined. My critique is based on a theoretical analysis followed by a reflective component.

I review seminal moments in the language debate within writing studies, and building on Susan Peck MacDonald’s work, I show that language rights rhetoric relies heavily on binaries that present first and second language development in terms that are mutually exclusive. Making a connection with the US bilingual education debate of the eighties, I challenge this logic with empirical evidence suggesting that first and second language and literacy development are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. I also show that a binary logic that constructed minority languages as an impediment to English acquisition was the rhetorical pillar of an “English only” movement that succeed at banishing other languages of instruction in several states. I will argue that rather than fighting “English only” tendencies with an oppositional rhetoric that dismisses the importance of English, language rights activism should engage with monolingual orientations more constructively by emphasizing the complementarity of first and second language and literacy development: that is, the idea that welcoming other languages in the writing classroom can strengthen considerably LMS’s command of English for academic purposes.

In the second part of my article, I further illustrate this argument by reflecting on a bilingual writing program I started at Bronx Community College (CUNY) that links Spanish and English college writing courses for ESL students within a learning community program. The positive impact this writing program has had on English acquisition and retention has been documented by a longitudinal study which has been fully discussed in the book *Using ESL Students’ First Language to Promote College Success* (Parmegiani). In this reflection, I discuss how the more conciliatory stance I am recommending for engaging with English monolingual orientations allowed me build consensus to run a program that placed Spanish—alongside with English—at the center of writing instruction within a course cluster offered by a community college where English is the sole medium of instruction.

## LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF NORMATIVE MONOLINGUALISM IN THE US

The US is often thought of as a giant Anglophone monolith, but in reality, linguistic diversity has always had a strong presence on the land (Macías 16; Rumbaut and Massey 1). Today, approximately 20% of the US population speaks a language other than English at home (LOTE), and in most cases, this language is Spanish (Ryan).

The impact “of globalization on higher education has been immense” (Lau and Lin 16), giving rise to a situation throughout the world where “linguaculturally heterogenous groups of learners are no longer rare” (Smit 10). While the US and Anglophone countries enjoy the lion’s share of the lucrative international higher education market driven by elite students who cross borders to enhance their resume with degrees from prestigious universities, many of the linguaculturally heterogenous groups attending institutions of higher learning in the US are language minority residents whose socio-economic circumstances and levels of academic preparedness are very different from those of the international students who are in the US because their parents can afford to pay astronomical fees. The presence of such high numbers of less privileged LMS in American universities is in part due to a surge of migration from developing countries (Rumbaut and Massey 1), which brought about an explosion of linguistic diversity, with a 148% increase in US residents speaking a language other than English (LOTE) from 1980 to 2010 (Ryan 5). While a few of the students who came to the US as part of these immigration flows might end up attending prestigious universities alongside privileged international students, many more enroll in community colleges where fees are more affordable and admissions criteria more inclusive. It is important to notice that while they are international, in the sense that they come from all over the world, language minority students who attend community colleges in the US are likely to be “non-traditional.” They tend to be “adults, parents, people with full time jobs, people returning to school after years away” (Carey); hence, the difficulties they face with English monolingual academic writing are often compounded by a host of socio-economic challenges that elite international students are not as likely to face.

Within this context, it is important for college writing scholars and educators to challenge the “ideology of normative monolingualism,” or the idea that US citizens should speak only one language, and that English should be that language. This ideology, which constructs “linguistic diversity as an impediment to unity” and “relies on the erasure of the fact of multilingualism in the US” (Fuller 10) is pervasive, in spite of the picture painted by language demographics and the fact that English does not have official status in the US. Given the way language shapes power relations (Bourdieu; Pennycook; Phillipson; Parmegiani, “Inviting”), interrogating pervasive ideologies around the medium of instruction in the writing classroom is a social justice concern.

## LANGUAGE INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Bourdieu’s theory of language and symbolic capital is useful for understanding that choices around language are not politically neutral but have profound implications for access to socio-

economic goods. He points out that “there is no such thing as linguistic communism” (3), meaning that while all languages might be considered equal in terms of their ability to make meaning, some languages dominate over others in terms of granting access to social identities and forms of knowledge whose ownership is vital for upward socio-economic mobility. While it can be proven that any language or dialect is systemic and has the ability to meet the communicative needs of the community that speaks it, only the language of the elite is considered a “legitimate” communication tool for the production and circulation of knowledge in sociolinguistic domains where wealth and status are allocated. In these prestigious domains, the mastery of the dominant language is a precondition for exercising the “right to speech” (648), or the ability to say anything that will be considered a legitimate speech act worthy of attention.

Given the growth of linguistic diversity in higher education and its correlations with racial diversity and socio-economic inequality (García and Kleifgen 18; Parmegiani, “Inviting” 13–17), it is increasingly important to examine the way our assumptions about language legitimacy and writing give or take away the right to speech within academic discourse. The idea that dominant languages and dialects create additional difficulties for students who do not inherit them from birth is fairly intuitive: academic knowledge is created and transmitted mainly through language; hence, it is impossible to participate in epistemic production without at least some level of proficiency in the language being used as the medium of communication. It is also intuitive that developing proficiency in the medium is easier for students who are exposed to it from early childhood in their homes and primary communities. Nevertheless, it would be unproductive to theorize about linguistic inequality and access to academic discourse from the premise that dominant languages cannot be fully appropriated by non-native speakers. Restricting the ownership of a dominant language to birthright reifies the power of this language to exclude (Parmegiani, “Dis(ownership),” “Reconceptualizing”). Making its ownership inclusive can turn it into an instrument of democratic transformation by giving more people the opportunity to harness its power.

The need to appropriate English for socio-economic mobility, which is a paramount concern for LMS, is a factor that needs to be taken seriously when pushing for a greater use of marginalized languages in education. The reality is that the mastery of the dominant code is a necessary, albeit not always sufficient, condition for escaping from socio-economic disadvantage. While battles can be fought and won to push for greater linguistic equality, it is hard to envision how a situation of linguistic communism could possibly be achieved in our lifetime: there will always be some codes that dominate and people for whom the appropriation of those codes will be more difficult than for others. Finding pedagogical and programmatic solutions to make dominant codes more accessible is therefore paramount for using language as an instrument of social justice. Students need to be heard and taken seriously when they try to earn college degrees, send resumes, and go for job interviews, and this cannot happen without a sufficient level of command of the language of power. In a world where the way a person speaks this language affects their “chances of getting a place to live, a job, a degree, a promotion, a teaching credential and health care” (Zentella 621), every student must be put in a position where they can claim the power that comes with the appropriation of this language (Delpit; Nieto; Parmegiani, “Inviting”).

## WRITING STUDIES AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

One should be wary of making sweeping generalizations about the stance writing studies has taken vis-à-vis linguistic diversity and inequality over the decades, but it would probably not be unfair to say that normative English monolingual tendencies have been present since the inception of formal US college writing instruction, given that the pedagogical rationale behind the creation of the first composition courses was to “remediate” students’ alleged weaknesses in written English (Connors). While the students in question were much more likely to speak English as a home language than many of the students enrolled in US colleges today, the impetus behind the birth of college writing instruction was nevertheless assimilationist in that it sought to move students towards dialectal and discursive conformity, rather than to embrace linguistic diversity.

Bruce Horner and John Trimbur have also argued that the birth of college composition entrenched monolingual ideologies in higher education by expunging the Latin- and Greek-based classical curriculum, which found expression through an academic discourse that “was predominantly oral” and based “on performative pedagogy” (599) and replaced it with “now standard literate practices as lectures (delivered from written texts) and student production of written texts (e.g., daily themes, note taking in lectures, written examinations, lab reports, abstracts, research papers)” (599). As a result, “English was separated altogether from Greek and Latin as the vehicle of writing instruction,” and concomitantly “the modern languages settled into their respective departments as national literatures” (599), giving “the status of a living language to English only, making it alone the primary vehicle of instruction in writing and speaking” (603).

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that writing studies does have “a long history of countering this [monolingual] orientation” (Flowers 34). A milestone in this history was the 1974 CCCC Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) policy statement, which was built on the premise that no language variety is intrinsically superior and that banishing non-standard English from academic discourse is discriminatory (Smitherman; Kinloch; Sledd). Since the 1974 statement, the language rights discourse within writing studies has become more and more concerned with Languages Other Than English (LOTE), questioning the idea that only English should enjoy “the status of a living language” (Horner and Trimbur 603) within US college writing instruction. The “monolingual orientation” (Canagarajah 1) of the field has been the object of intense scrutiny (Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur; Cushman). Some critics have even argued that the 1998 CCCC National Language Policy, which called for the need to embrace linguistic diversity, unintentionally reified this monolingual orientation by failing to challenge the idea that English should play a central role within writing instruction.

Horner and Trimbur question “a tacit language policy of unidirectional English monolingualism” (594) that reigns in English departments and warn against giving “primacy of place to English in the modern curriculum” (607). In their view, this “primacy of place” provides a series of concessions to monolingual ideologies that reify the notion that the US is a giant Anglophone monolith where linguistic diversity has no place, if not at the margins of society. They point out Anglo-centric rhetorical continuities between “English Only” discourses propagated by conservative forces that

have sought to curb the use of languages other than English in the United States and critiques of the “English Only” movement put forth by progressive writing scholars seeking to protect linguistic diversity.

Horner and Trimbur are particularly concerned with the idea that “learning, maintaining, or increasing knowledge of a second language is often encouraged primarily as a means of improving one’s knowledge of English” (615), as implied by the National Council of Teachers of English Resolution on Developing and Maintaining Fluency in More Than One Language. This resolution cites Jim Cummins’ seminal research showing that mother tongue and second language and literacy development are complementary, and that consequently, LOTE are not a threat to English acquisition. This, in Horner and Trimbur’s view, delegitimizes the status of other languages in education by relegating them to an ancillary role and mirrors the rhetoric of English exceptionalism that lies at the root of “English Only” sentiments (615). Similarly, they critique the 1988 CCCC resolution on a National Language Policy for stating that “English, the global lingua franca and the language of wider communication in this country, is not threatened” given that “most immigrants learned English within a generation without any law compelling them” (CCCC National Language Policy Statement). In their view, this statement is problematic because it fails to “question whether such an ideal should remain uncritiqued or form the guidelines of writing instruction” (616), the ideal being the allegedly inexorable anglicization process of native speakers of other languages.

In a more recent article, Katherine Flowers echoes Horner and Trimbur’s sentiments and is even more explicit in her call for the need to decenter English from writing instruction in US colleges. Focusing on CCCC’s 1988 National Language Policy, Flowers argues that this document, which was intended to be a critique of “English Only” and a defense of linguistic diversity, is problematic because it sets “English above and apart from other ways of communicating [. . .] ceding rhetorical grounds to monolingual ideologies” (32–33). What Flowers finds most alarming is the fact that “the executive director of the most prominent English only organization in the country, *US English*, actually went so far as to praise CCCC for prioritizing English” (33). The rhetorical concessions in question, which earned the executive director’s praise, include statements such as “English has become the language of wider communication” and the policy’s commitment to “ensuring respect for both English, the common language, and for the many other languages that contribute to our rich cultural and linguistic heritage” (CCCC National Language Policy).

Flowers is dismissive of the construction of English as a language of wider communication: “for some people, classrooms, workplaces, communities, and activities, whether in the United States or not, this statement does not hold true” (36). Similarly to Horner and Trimbur (614), she draws on translanguaging theory to argue that “the monolingual orientation is not just politically harmful but untenable, since there is no way to draw clear-cut boundaries around different language varieties” (35). Finally, she questions the need for the policy’s commitment to respect English in conjunction with other languages: “this commitment to respecting English is striking, given that English has been a global language of commerce and culture for several centuries, and it does not require any organization to ‘ensur[e] continued respect’” (36). She recommends avoiding rhetorical concessions when negotiating language policies with opponents: “rather than try to find common

ground with English-only policies, what writing studies needs now are policies that directly counter the monolingual orientation” (50).

In this article, I would like to offer a radically different position. I support wholeheartedly Horner and Trimbur’s call “for an internationalist perspective” on “written English in relation to other languages” and Flower’s advocacy for more emphasis on “language rights” and a “translingual practice.” I also argue, however, that it is misguided to fight for linguistic diversity in writing instruction with a rhetoric that refuses to “try to find common grounds with English only” sentiments (Flowers 36). Seeking to counter the monolingual orientation with provocative statements such as CCCC does when asserting, “policy writers can abandon the notion that English is a necessary component of composition” (Flowers 51) in the US will reinforce this orientation. These kinds of statements feed into the irrational fears that lie underneath monolingual ideology and provide opponents with rhetorical points that are very easy to attack. First, I problematize these points by showing how they rely excessively on binaries that constrain conversations about language in higher education, misconstrue the nature of second language acquisition, and alienate potential allies.

Then, I discuss a mother tongue-based writing program I implemented at Bronx Community College to improve success rates among Spanish-speaking students. I reflect on my deliberate decision to center English while pushing for this program in order to circumvent English monolingual orientations and build consensus for this initiative. Admittedly, this program sneaked the mother tongue through the backdoor (Parmegiani, *Using*), but at the same time, it succeeded at carving out a space for a language other than English within writing instruction at a US college. I argue that this space, which did facilitate English acquisition, did more to promote linguistic diversity within writing instruction than did an antagonizing rhetoric that is dismissive of the need to provide access to English to native speakers of other languages in the United States.

## AVODING BINARIES IN LANGUAGE RIGHTS DISCOURSE

Acknowledging that promoting English acquisition is a fundamental part of our job description as English professors and writing scholars does not mean that the status quo cannot be changed and that we should not push for more linguistic diversity in our curricula, research outlooks, departmental ideologies, and policy statements. As prominent language rights activists have warned, it is counter-productive to present the language question in terms of an “either English” or “mother tongue” logic (Alexander). Tove Skutnabb-Kanga, Robert Phillipson, and Miklos Kontra, for instance, point out that

[i]t is perfectly possible to match up ethnolinguistic and socio-economic concerns—there is no necessary contradiction. Likewise, children need two or more languages in education, learned additively. It is not a question of either the mother tongue or a dominant language, but two or more. No language needs to be sacrificed in additive learning. (148)

Unfortunately, there can be quite a lot of binary thinking in language rights discourse within writing studies. According to Susan Peck MacDonald, the SRTOL statement “embodied important understandings about language and sociolinguistics that are beneficial for teachers of English to

acquire” (599); however, “part of the legacy of the SRTOL has been to undermine other aspects of language education through its binary framing” (599), which implicitly set up the notion of students’ own language in opposition to Standard English, presenting language policy in the classroom dichotomously:

The binaries focus attention on how dialects of English vary, whether we hurt students more by teaching them EAE [Edited American English] or not doing so, and how teaching the grammar, punctuation, and mechanics of EAE may be hurtful. With such distinctive binaries, there may appear to be only two positions, which, by implication, are mutually exclusive. (601)

MacDonald shows how the “only two positions” approach has made it hard to have conversations about language within writing studies “without these now familiar binaries determining and constricting the discussion” (600). Claiming that acknowledging the central role of English in US college writing inevitably leads to “a tacit language policy of unidirectional monolingualism” (Horner and Trimbur 595), or that it can “make it so difficult to imagine writing instruction in any language other than English” (595), continues this unfortunate tradition of limiting what is possible to envision as we grapple with questions of linguistic diversity, pedagogical effectiveness, and social justice. Not only does this sort of binary thinking create intellectual straightjackets, but it is also an ineffective rhetorical strategy for building consensus around the need to include LOTE in US academic discourse.

***“More than a “rhetorical concession” that “leave[s] unchallenged several of the key assumptions made by those arguing for English only” (Horner and Trimbur 615), the National Council of Teachers of English 1997 argument that “English language learners acquire English more easily if they are literate in their native language” is the assertion of a research-based pedagogical fact that debunks the rhetorical pillar of English normative monolingualism: it’s either English or other languages.”***

First language maintenance and development and second language acquisition have often been portrayed by English-only advocates as being dichotomous. In fact, the idea that making room for LOTE in education would prevent immigrant students from learning English, exclude them from society, and divide the nation has been *the* rhetorical pillar of English-only discourse. For example, in making a case for proposition 227, which *de-facto* outlawed the use of LOTE in Californian schools, Ron Unz claimed that bilingual education “has proven

itself a dismal practical failure” and “that the unity and prosperity of our society is [sic] gravely threatened by government efforts to prevent young immigrant children from learning English” (in Crawford 106). Similarly, in a monolingual manifesto published in the *Reader’s Digest*, Linda Chavez suggested that bilingual education was a product of a racist agenda that forced Hispanic students to study mostly in Spanish, which held them back academically. Rep. Toby Roth referred to bilingual education as a “human tragedy” that is “consigning an entire generation of new Americans—unable



to speak, understand, and use English effectively—to a second-class future.” To illustrate this “tragedy,” he quoted a Hispanic parent as saying, “My children learn Spanish in school so that they can become busboys and waiters. I teach them English at home so that they can become doctors and lawyers” (13).

In reality, from a pedagogical perspective, the idea that first and second language and literacy development are mutually exclusive couldn’t be further from the truth. As early as the 1970s, single studies based on particular programs provided evidence of benefits associated with bilingual education (Rosier and Farella; Troike). Later, more statistically advanced research based on meta-analysis methodology confirmed that programs that support students’ first language lead to better educational outcomes (Willig; Greene; Rolstad, Mahoney, and Glass). A longitudinal study of particular significance was mandated by the US Congress (Ramirez, Youen, and Ramey); students “can be provided with substantial amounts of primary language instruction,” the findings concluded, “without impeding their acquisition of English language and reading skills” (39). Other studies suggest that first and second language literacy development are interrelated, and that “among students learning English as a second (or third or fourth) language, those with a more solid academic grounding in their home language have a much easier time both learning English and learning new academic content and skills” through the medium of English (Lukes 64).

In light of this research, I would argue that more than a “rhetorical concession” that “leave[s] unchallenged several of the key assumptions made by those arguing for English only” (Horner and Trimbur 615), the National Council of Teachers of English 1997 argument that “English language learners acquire English more easily if they are literate in their native language” is the assertion of a research-based pedagogical fact that debunks the rhetorical pillar of English normative monolingualism: it’s either English or other languages. The two cannot coexist. The last thing we should do to promote multilingualism is reinforce this false dichotomy by arguing that English needs to be displaced in order to make room for other languages.

## TRANSLANGUAGING AND BINARIES

On the one hand, translingual theory has brought about a great opportunity for moving beyond binary thinking in grappling with the role of language within writing studies. The idea that languages can be conceptualized as “whole bounded systems associated with whole bounded communities” (Heller 11) has been called into question by translanguaging scholars who have argued that “the original complex interrelated discursive practices” of people that speak more than one language “cannot easily be ascribed to one or another traditional definition of language” (García and Wei 22). Within this framework, it should be easier to conceptualize the need to promote linguistic diversity and facilitate access to the dominant language as two sides of the same coin, rather than competing pedagogical goals. In fact, a lot of the impetus for the advent of the translingual paradigm came from the need to acknowledge the complementarity of first and second language acquisition and challenge the strict separation between languages that characterized bilingual education in the United States.

On the other hand, translingual theory has come with normalizing tendencies and its own set of

binaries that are limiting what can be envisioned in conversations about language, pedagogy, and social justice. To begin with, translanguaging is often presented as “the normal mode of communication

***“Translingual theory has come with normalizing tendencies and its own set of binaries that are limiting what can be envisioned in conversations about language, pedagogy, and social justice.”***

that, with some exceptions, in some monolingual enclaves, characterize communities throughout the world” (García and Beardsmore 44). Keith Gilyard warns that normalizing tendencies within translanguaging theory run the risk of causing a “flattening of language differences” that

can elide the power asymmetries that characterize linguistic exchanges in a racialized society (286). This elision, he maintains, can “become off putting to scholars of color in the manner that post-modernist and post-structuralist theory were in the 1980s and 1990s” when “the preference to valorize theories of fluidity and decentering” at the expense of racial injustice “reigned supreme in English departments” (287).

As a linguistic minority who has lived bilingually since the age of eleven, studied on four different continents, and lived across a wide range of sociolinguistic communities, I would argue that there is no “normal mode of communication,” and monolingualism is not the exception: it is an integral part of linguistic diversity. While monolingualism might be more prevalent in certain parts of the world than others, suggesting that monolingual populations such as 80% of US residents are an “enclave” and an “exception” does not do justice to the linguistic complexity of our planet. I would also argue that theorizing about monolingualism as an abnormality that is set up in opposition to a translingual norm does not provide the best starting point for engaging monolinguals with difficult conversations about language ideology, pedagogy and power relations.

While it is important to keep in mind that boundaries among languages are fluid and that many of our students cross these boundaries seamlessly as they live transnational lives, it is dangerous to argue that “languages do not exist as real entities in the world and neither do they emerge from or represent real environments; they are in contrast the invention of social, cultural, and political movements” (Pennycook and Makoni 2). First of all, there is no reason why a translanguaging approach should be conceived as being dichotomous with the idea that there are separate languages that do exist as “real entities in the world.” Languages shift, they evolve, they can be mixed, molded, and reinvented through agentive practices that have been described as “crossing” (Rampton), “polylingualism” (Jørgensen), “metrolingualism” (Otsuji and Pennycook), multivocality (Higgins), and “codemeshing” (Canagarajah), just to name a few. At the same time, however, languages do exist as distinct communicative systems and markers of identity, with their own rules, which might be ever morphing, multifarious, and contestable, but nevertheless present enough consistency to allow verbal communication and identification within a certain group of speakers. As Gilyard puts it, “when I am around a group of people who speak a language foreign to me, it amounts to nothing to counsel myself that language is really an abstraction and that those speakers don’t really have that language that I don’t comprehend” (287).

Just as it would be limiting to think about different languages as tight compartments that are stored in different parts of our students' brains and that should only be used separately, it would be limiting to think that there can be no thinking about language outside translanguaging. How could we even have conversations about monolingualism, multilingualism, and language hierarchies if boundaries among languages were so blurry that the concept of separate languages did not exist as "real entities in the world?" How can we argue in the name of translanguaging that "the monolingual orientation is not just politically harmful, but also untenable, since there is no way to draw clear-cut boundaries around . . . language" (Flowers 35) without, by virtue of this argument, acknowledging the existence of languages as distinct systems of communication that function as distinct markers of identity within socio-economic hierarchies?

Finally, I would like to suggest that just as boundaries between languages are porous, contested, and ever shifting, so are boundaries between ideologies. While concepts such as monolingual orientation and language rights are very important for conversations about language, pedagogy, and social justice, they should not be conceived as diametrically opposed ways of thinking that cannot find a common ground. For sure, there are fundamental differences in the way normative English monolingualism and a linguistic rights perspective conceive of the role of diversity in US national identity, but a language rights discourse that equates "identifying with opponents" (Wible 109) with the danger of "ceding rhetorical grounds" (Flowers 36) is more likely to feed polarization and entrench conservative positions than bring about a constructive dialogue that can build consensus for progressive change.

## REFLECTING ON LANGUAGE AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AT BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

The need to have a constructive dialogue about language and educational outcomes at Bronx Community College (BCC) has been close to my heart for variety of reasons. Part of the City University of New York, this institution of higher learning is a Hispanic Serving Institution with 66.5% of first-time freshmen identifying as Latinx in Fall 2018 ("BCC Office"). Academic success rates are low: the one-year retention rate for the entering class in 2008 was 65%; only 20% of the entering class of Fall 2003 completed their associate degree within six years ("BCC Office" 1). I was aware that structural barriers to academic success related to socio-economic inequality play a big role in shaping these educational outcomes ("BCC Office"), but given my background in critical sociolinguistics, I was convinced that BCC's monolingual policy created an additional barrier that could have been mitigated through teaching practices that acknowledge and build on students' diverse linguistic capital. Except for the courses offered by the Department of Modern Languages, Standard English is the only language of instruction and assessment. Yet, 40% of first-time freshmen self-identified as native speakers of LOTE ("BCC Office").

As a member of the English department teaching both developmental ESL writing and credit bearing composition courses, the extent to which LOTE played a part in the learning process was evident to me. Although classes were taught in English, texts were read in English, and essays were

written and rewritten in English, the moment students carried out the literacy tasks I had assigned in groups and pairs, translanguaging took over, creating scenarios that resembled the one Ofelia García and Claire E. Sylvan capture so aptly in the following vignette:

[Students are] talking, arguing, trying to make their points and collaborating on a project together. In so doing, they are using different language practices, including those they bring from home . . . . [Y]ou find students . . . using bilingual dictionaries (both electronic and paper) . . . . Multiple conversations are happening at multiple times in many languages with occasional breaks in the “chaos” for the teacher to explain a concept or practice a skill collectively that students immediately apply in the work they are doing. . . . Students have considerable choice in how they arrive at the final project, including the language practices with which they negotiate, and the eventual form that the project takes on, but activity guides and rubrics (often collectively designed between teachers and students) establish parameters in which students operate . . . . Students depend on one another to share their experiences, knowledge, perspectives, and understanding of the text; they teach each other. The teacher is not the only “expert” in the room, and considerable control is handed over to the students. (393–94)

Perhaps because I have spent most of my life living as a language minority, I did not feel threatened by this apparent babel-like “chaos,” even at the beginning of my teaching career in US colleges, before I encountered research on bilingual education and culturally responsive pedagogy further along in my doctoral studies. Although by the time I started teaching college writing it had been several decades since English supplanted Italian (my mother tongue) as my primary language for academic purposes, I hadn’t forgotten that when you are trying to make sense of a language that doesn’t make sense, your mother tongue is your first go-to place. Maybe that’s why, although I always encouraged my students to practice their English as much as possible, unlike a few of my colleagues, I never reprimanded them for speaking another language in class, or for thinking in another language when they wrote, if their essays showed signs of a literal translation from the home language that didn’t work.

After I started grappling with critical language and literacy theories, it became evident to me that there was so much more the mother tongue could do to improve academic achievement if used strategically. It was especially Cummins’ linguistic interdependence theory and culturally responsive pedagogy’s insistence that students’ cultural capital be validated through our teaching praxis that prompted me to try to find ways to create a writing program that would bring the mother tongue out of the closet and give it a more prominent role in my students’ academic literacy development. At the same time, my familiarity with language ideology debates, combined with my own life experience as a second language English speaker, made me well aware of the workings of normative English monolingualism and of the fact that if I wanted to see this program come to life, I had to start small and tread very carefully.

## BRINGING SPANISH INTO A WRITING PROGRAM THROUGH A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Given such a strong presence of native, heritage, and second language Spanish speakers on campus, and given BCC's commitment to improve its success metrics, I would have loved to see the administration taking steps towards a bilingualization process among its successful high-impact initiatives that have gained national attention. As an untenured assistant professor whose work up to that point had focused primarily on teaching and research, I knew there was no way I would be able to convince movers and shakers to implement a formal Spanish-English bilingual program that would involve a significant investment on their part. I simply did not have the necessary political capital within the institution to mobilize financial and human resources of great magnitude. What seemed feasible instead was to take advantage of the existing learning community program and the fact that the Department of Modern Languages already offered Spanish courses for native speakers.

Learning communities, as defined by Hanson and Heller (2009), can be described as a "small group of students who take a cluster of courses together with both the faculty and students learning and teaching together" (1). These types of programs "vary from minimal arrangements of linked or clustered classes, to team-taught interdisciplinary programs, to more elaborate models with designated residence halls, in-house advising, and the ambience of a small college on a large research campus" (Shapiro and Levine xi). To be successful, they require a high level of curricular integration, which can take the form of common themes, learning activities, projects, and assessment criteria whose goal is to "provide greater coherence, develop a deeper understanding . . . and encourage student-student, student-faculty and faculty-faculty interactions" (Hanson and Heller 1).

Learning communities are an ideal pedagogical space for designing mother-tongue based pedagogical solutions that can help mitigate the dire consequences of structural inequality: studies have shown that "students' socio-economic status had less effect on their achievement gains in schools with collaborative teacher communities" (McLaughlin and Talbert 9). In addition, Rebecca Mlynarczyk and Marcia Babbit have found that creating a learning community program built around the specific learning needs of speakers of English as an additional language had a positive impact on "retention and graduation rates of ESL students," and "created a special classroom chemistry, enabling students to be more active and efficient learners" (73).

Learning communities had been offered at Bronx Community College for a long time, but there were no clusters linking English college writing to Spanish composition courses for native speakers. This type of link was easy to create, as long as I found a way to engage constructively with monolingual orientations within my department, the institution, and among prospective students too. Not only did BCC have a substantial cohort of students who share the same mother tongue but Spanish classes for native speakers were already being offered. These classes, though, were taught as stand-alone courses, which did not help students capitalize on an academic literacy skills transfer between their first and second language, like the translanguaging approach I envisioned. Also, most BCC students need to fulfill a foreign language requirement in order to graduate; given that Spanish speaking students are doing the entirety of their course work in a language that is not their mother

tongue, it made sense for them to use the foreign language requirement to create a learning situation that was likely to promote academic success in their second language. An additional advantage was that these students were able to receive college credits for the Spanish class at a point in their career where their course options were severely limited by prerequisite requirements they did not meet. Last but not least, this link would not cost the college anything, other than the course reassignment time that is normally given to instructors who participate in a learning community.

## ENGAGING CONSTRUCTIVELY WITH MONONLINGUAL ORIENTATIONS

Although setting up a translingual writing program essentially entailed combining resources that were already available, establishing a link between the ESL writing courses that I taught and a Spanish course required building several levels of consensus among stakeholders. The department chairs of each of the faculties involved had to approve the proposal for the new cluster link, as did the learning community coordinator. Finding a faculty member as a learning community partner willing to embrace a certain pedagogical vision, work hard to implement it, and negotiate curricular choices with a member of a different department is a fundamental requirement for the establishment of a successful learning community. No less important is the support of colleagues and student advisors, whose conversations with students during registration determine whether a certain cluster reaches the minimum level of student enrollment to run. Last but not least, this type of initiative needs to be appealing to the students themselves, who need to be convinced that the big investment they are making in signing up for these classes is going to pay off in terms of their personal socio-economic aspirations.

As I went around campus knocking on doors and building consensus for this program, my strategy for dealing with monolingual orientation was very different from what Katherine Flowers, or Horner and Trimbur recommend. First of all, I did not approach stakeholders, who could potentially raise eyebrows at the thought of encouraging ESL students to take a class in their mother tongue, as “opponents,” but rather as interlocutors who felt differently about an important pedagogical issue. I assumed that these differences of opinions, at least on our campus, were more likely due to misinformation than a conscious intention to harm our students. The most important piece of misinformation to address, to pave the way for the translingual intervention I envisioned, was the idea that bringing Spanish into a writing program would somehow detract from English acquisition. Because of my research on bilingual education, my role as an ESL specialist within an English department, and the fact that I am an ESL speaker myself, I was in a good position to make a convincing argument when faced with comments such as “oh, but our students already spend too much time speaking Spanish,” or “I already know Spanish, and how is a Spanish class going to help me get ahead in the US anyway?” Frankly, I don’t think I would have gotten very far had I tried to address those concerns by professing my faith in “policies that directly counter the monolingual orientation” (Flowers 50), by challenging “the notion that English is a necessary component of composition” (51), or by claiming that given that “there is no way to draw clear-cut boundaries”

around language (35), nor that it doesn't make sense to talk about English and Spanish as "whole bounded systems" (Heller 11) in the first place.

It is true that by centering English in attempts to build consensus for bringing a LOTE into a writing program I might have missed an opportunity to question the notion that English acquisition should "form the guiding assumption of US writing instruction" (Horner and Trimbur 616). What is

***"The "actively" bilingual and bidirectional policy that shaped the writing program I shall now briefly describe was implemented because I chose a rhetoric that was conciliatory, rather than confrontational, and because it was built on the one principle language rights and monolingual orientations should agree on: the importance of giving students access to the language of power."***

not true is that my failure to question this guiding assumption or its "sense of inevitability" (595) fed into "a tacit language policy of unidirectional monolingualism" or that my alleged "accommodationist rhetoric" stood in the way of an "actively multilingual language policy" (597). The "actively" bilingual and bidirectional policy that shaped the writing program I shall now briefly describe was implemented *because* I chose a rhetoric that was conciliatory, rather

than confrontational, and because it was built on the one principle language rights and monolingual orientations should agree on: the importance of giving students access to the language of power.

## A BILINGUAL AND BIDIRECTIONAL WRITING PROGRAM

The program was the object of a longitudinal study that I carried out with the help of the Office of Institutional Research to assess the impact on English acquisition and retention. This study involved a comparative analysis of academic success metrics combined with ethnographic observations, focus group interviews, and in-depth interviews with individual students. The findings have been discussed fully elsewhere (Parmegiani, *Using*). All the students who enrolled in the program were native Spanish speakers, mostly from the Dominican Republic, and had been placed in the highest level of the ESL writing course sequence.

The Spanish class was scheduled right before my ESL writing course started in order to allow me to sit in. Normally, instructors teaching as partners in learning communities meet on a regular basis to discuss their integrated pedagogical strategies and their students' progress, but they don't audit each other's course. I have discussed more fully elsewhere why I felt it was important for me to participate in the Spanish class as an additional language learner/participant observer (Parmegiani, *Using*), but there were three main reasons. First, I felt that it was important for me to familiarize myself with my students' linguistic and discursive practices if I wanted to build on them and facilitate the transfer of academic literacy skills I envisioned. While I did have some rudiments of Spanish and some knowledge of how English grammatical structures and rhetorical expectations around academic discourse differ from Romance languages, it would have been presumptuous of me to

assume that I knew enough about my students' language practices to bring them into my curriculum without taking the time to observe my students' engagement with those practices. Second, in keeping with the recommendations of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings), I felt that it was essential to make room for pedagogical spaces where students' cultural capital would be validated and they would take on the role of language and literacy experts. To this end, I designed the learning process to be bidirectional: my commitment to teaching my students the dominant language became intertwined with my commitment to learn their primary language from them. Finally, taking on the role of an additional language learner in the Spanish class was also a way to reduce power asymmetries by exposing my linguistic vulnerability and limitations, and by reminding me what it was like to participate in academic discourse in a language that hasn't fully been mastered (Parmegiani, "Inviting" 74-6). Oftentimes, I would be stricken by panic when the Spanish instructor asked me a simple question, and I ended up stammering something, feeling embarrassed and ashamed for making a fool out of myself in front of my students, who were so much more eloquent in their language than I will ever be. Other times I would be the one needing to translanguage, with my students' or the instructor's help, not to drown in a discursive abyss that, without a frame of reference, was beyond my comprehension.

Students were encouraged to practice their English as much as possible in the ESL writing course that followed the Spanish class, but translingual moments were not confined to informal communication among students or group activity. In fact, the ESL class would often begin with me initiating translingual check-ins during which I asked students about words, phrases, pieces of discourse, or cultural references I had jotted down in my notebook in the Spanish class. Sometimes these check-ins led to animated discussions where students took on the roles of cultural-linguistic brokers, asking for my help and other students' help in expressing their thoughts in English. This translingual co-production of knowledge facilitated a bidirectional learning process that helped the students and me to master lexical, mechanical, and discursive structures to allow meaningful academic interaction. In addition, this collaborative approach, which mobilized the linguistic resources of the whole class, helped students understand the workings of their languages and discourses contrastively and critically, for example, by examining how college writing constructs such as "plagiarism" and "critical thinking" are culturally specific and tied to fundamental assumptions about power relations in the classroom. I would argue that rather than leading to unilateral English monolingualism, this process, which did develop English acquisition among students, is more likely to develop the sort of "rhetorical dexterity" (Carter 14) students need as they move across the complex linguistic landscapes that characterize their lives as global citizens.

More generally, I would like to point out that my concern with the appropriation of English, both as a rhetorical strategy for building consensus and a pedagogical imperative, is not incompatible with "creating opportunities for students to learn how to communicate across languages and modes" (Flowers 53) or with imagining "writing instruction in a language other than English" (Horner and Trimbur 595). My centering of English, in articulating "the field's theories about language and literacy education to a broader constituency" (Wible 180), actually *led* to "writing instruction in another language" and to writing instruction based on communication "across languages and modes." By



centering English, I might have “sneaked-in the mother tongue through the back-door” (Parmegiani, *Using*) rather giving it the starring role it arguably deserves, but once it was in, it stepped out of the closet in ways I couldn’t even have imagined.

In the Spanish class, students earned college credit for using their first language to read books from cover to cover, find their own meanings, and support those meanings through textual evidence in animated academic discussions that took place through the medium of their mother tongue. Writing assignments were composed in Spanish, marked in Spanish, reexamined in Spanish, and they played a role when students wrote in English, too. As my student Juana explained to a research assistant during a focus group interview, “The ESL professor said to me ‘your essay is fantastic!’ but that was because I was able to apply what I had learned from the Spanish professor” (Parmegiani, “Bridging” 112).

## CONCLUSION

The bilingual writing program I have briefly discussed was built on a rhetorical stance towards the role of English within writing instruction that some theorists within our field have warned against. While this program aimed to give more prominence to a LOTE within US college writing instruction, it was marketed to students, colleagues, and administration as an initiative that would promote English acquisition and the ability to succeed through the medium of this language. From the point of view of an oppositional language rights discourse that struggles to envision points of contact with monolingual orientations and policies that facilitate access to the language of power *while* promoting marginalized languages, the program in question could be easily criticized. For example, it could be accused of being born of a naive “rhetorical concession” that, by seeking to “identify with the opponents” (Flowers 36) ended up alienating potential allies.

Admittedly, the bilingual program presented the need for mother tongue development “primarily as a means of improving one’s knowledge of English” and did not even attempt to question the idea that facilitating language minority students’ access to English should “form the guiding assumption of US writing instruction” (Horner and Trimbur 615–16). It would not be fair to say, though, that it promoted “unidirectional English monolingualism” (595). First of all, the program ran, and I am not sure this would have been the case had I tried to build consensus with an oppositional rhetoric centered around the argument that “we can abandon the notion that English is a necessary component of composition” (Flowers 51). Because it was able to run, it succeeded at centering Spanish, *together with English*, translingually within a writing program at an English-only US institution of higher learning. In doing so, it actually broke away from the long monolingual tradition of writing studies and “the territorialization of the modern languages as reading courses” that has characterized rhetorical instruction in the US since the demise of the classical curriculum (Horner and Trimbur 596–602). This interdepartmental pedagogical alliance points to the possibility of a whole new role for departments of Modern Languages in US universities. In addition to promoting multilingualism among native English speakers, Modern Languages departments could be vital partners in helping English departments design writing programs that “intentionally work across languages or national

boundaries,” “conduct research with students to understand their backgrounds,” and “conduct archival research on teaching traditions across cultures,” as recommended by the 2019 Statement of Globalization in Writing Studies.

Most importantly, the program made it possible for students from a vulnerable student population attending a community college in the poorest urban county in the US to use their mother tongue to take ownership of the dominant language: increasing GPAs, credit accumulation, retention, and the likelihood of being propelled into the middle class (Parmegiani, *Using*). The learning outcomes of this pedagogical initiative cannot be generalized due to sampling and variable control considerations, but they do confirm the most relevant finding for the language rights debate that emerged from decades of research on bilingual education: first and second language academic literacy development are complementary; promoting more effective access to English and a greater use of LOTE are not mutually exclusive.

Rather than embracing an antagonizing rhetoric that reifies the false dichotomy that lies at the heart of English only discourse (“it’s either English or LOTE”), writing studies should challenge this sort of binary by pushing for mother tongue-based interventions that promote the ownership of the dominant language and dispel the myth that access to English and promoting LOTE are caught up in a zero-sum game. The idea that promoting English acquisition is a fundamental part of our job description as writing instructors in the US and a political and pedagogical imperative for language rights activism in this country will be unpalatable to some of us, but it is a reality that should not be ignored if we want to bring about social change through language policy and practice. Language policies need the support of their stakeholders in order to have an impact on language attitudes and practices. In terms of our students and the general public, denying, or even underplaying, the role English plays as a common language in the United States (Flowers 36) is not only a statement that is very easy to attack, but also one that lends credence to the rhetoric of the opponent: proponents of multilingualism are anti-English, they do not want immigrants to learn English, so ultimately they are hurting the very people they claim to care about, and are undermining the very fabric of the nation in the process.

In terms of building consensus for multilingualism in our departments, we must not forget that the English language has been a fundamental aspect of the professional identity of college writing instructors in the US, most of whom are hired by English departments. Claiming that “there is nothing inherent in terms such as College Composition and Communication, Writing, Rhetoric, Literacy or Discourse that would require scholars to center on the English language” would be much more likely to “alienate potential allies in efforts to cultivate language rights” (Flowers 33) than a commitment “to ensuring continued respect both for English, the common language, and for the many other languages that contribute to our rich cultural and linguistic heritage” (36).

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## Cross-Cultural Perceptions of Literacies in Literacy Narratives

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### KEYWORDS

literacy narratives; translanguaging literacies; borderlands; border crossings;  
contact zones; cross-cultural conversations; little narratives

### INTRODUCTION: LITERACY, LITERACY NARRATIVES, AND COLLEGE WRITING

**T**his article reports the findings of a qualitative case study that analyzes both the process and product of literacy narratives in a first-year writing class. With a rich description of cross-cultural conversations that shape the students' perception of literacy, it uses students' writing samples with a reflective letter, personal interview, one-on-one conference, and the instructor's insider perspective to show how the student writers develop a complex understanding of literacy through a literacy narrative assignment. This article picks up on Nora McCook's 2016 article "Literacy Contact Zones: A Framework for Research," in which she claims that "[f]or composition pedagogy, contact zones have been a productive locus upon which to resituate and rethink multiple student competencies and language differences in the classroom" (59). In fact, compositionists have both built and expanded on Mary Louise Pratt's concept of contact zones to address the growing cultural and linguistic diversity in college writing classrooms. McCook believes that literacy studies can learn from the way compositionists have used a contact zone framework that foregrounds the context, history, orality, and power dynamics of literacy and the way it "focuses on the interaction of elements that have historically been separated by scholarship, including orality/literacy and local/global/translocal components related to literacy" (54). In other words, the contact zone framework resists the binary approach to literacy in favor of a nuanced understanding that embraces the many ways literacy is acquired and represented. Among history, orality, power dynamics, context, and interaction, this article expands on interaction and context as two major components of a contact zone framework that allows both monolingual and bi- and multilingual students to develop a complex understanding of literacy. In fact, the role of context and interaction in students' writing and understanding of literacy is one of the least explored areas in the study of literacy narratives.

As a genre that asks students to write about their own literacy experiences, the literacy narrative has been considered by many American college writing instructors to be motivating, accessible, and authentic for their students. My first encounter with this genre and with first-year writing itself as an

international graduate student placed me in a position simultaneously to reflect on my experiences of learning English as a foreign language in a rural public school in Nepal and to encourage my US college students to probe into their literacy experiences. I recall how the literacy narrative as the first assignment in my first ever college writing course as an instructor gave me a sense of comfort and confidence to begin the semester, a feeling many scholars claim is shared by the students as well. Mary Soliday discusses how literacy narratives provide students with “a way to view their experience with language as unusual or strange” and expand their “sense of personal agency” (511, 512). Similarly, a group of advanced undergraduate students in William Carpenter and Bianca Falbo’s study reported that the reflective nature of literacy narratives “improved awareness of themselves as individuals who think, read, write, and speak in the world” (107). Likewise, Christian Aguiar’s adaptation of the literacy narrative to a work narrative for his low-income students in a two-year college helped reduce the fear of academic writing and write longer prose than usual which, Aguiar believes, is because of the “opportunity to bring authentic experience into an academic setting” (150). This positive change in the students’ motivation to write more shows how broadening the concept of literacy allows students to draw on their diverse and authentic experiences and encourages them to write. One great example of pushing the boundaries of literacy on all sides is Seth E. Davis’s study of shade—wit or verbal acumen—“as a critical literacy in the Black queer community”; Davis uses personal “experiences with family and friends and the video interviews with Black Queer people” to present literacy as “the complicated, rhetorical, and embodied ways people make meaning” (56).

However, despite the literacy narrative’s promise, there are scholars who question the inherent usefulness of the literacy narrative in college writing courses. Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix find the portrayal of the literacy narrative “as a bridge to academic writing” problematic because it creates a hierarchy between the genres by touting the academic writing as superior to personal narratives (58). Similarly, Caleb Corkery acknowledges the empowering nature of literacy narrative but questions the way it “presumes the hegemony of written literacy” at the cost of oral literacies (64). These concerns point to the sedimented practices that treat academic writing as sacrosanct and perpetuate the hegemony of alpha-numeric literacy over other literate practices. What Corkery suggests as an alternative way to “steer students into narratives of lessons learned, moments of communicative mastery—oral and written” is undoubtedly a right move (64), but we should go one step further to reframe the concept of literacy itself for a broader and more nuanced understanding: a shift from literacy as “autonomous and situated to negotiated” that a translingual orientation to literacy requires (Canagarajah, “Negotiating” 40). From a translingual perspective, “reading and writing are understood as actively producing texts—worlds and the very languages employed—and asymmetrical relations of power are understood as both mediated by as well as mediating—transformed by and transforming—individual instances of languaging” (Lu and Horner 28).

Suresh Canagarajah’s latest book, *Transnational Literacy Autobiographies as Translingual Writing*, is the most substantial treatment of literacy narratives in the translingual and transnational context. Canagarajah focuses on the literacy autobiographies written by both US domestic and international students in his first-year ESL composition and second language writing classes alongside his own

teacher literacy autobiography as a multilingual scholar from South Asia working in the US. He treats these classrooms as contact zones that provide “diverse material ecologies and social networks, beyond semiotic resources, to facilitate literacy development” (101). Given the drastic expansion of discourses and pedagogies around multilingual and transnational issues in our field, the literacy narrative deserves further exploration in the classroom as well as in our scholarship. What is yet to be done is to situate notions like “contact zone” and “border crossing” in the spaces of the college writing classroom, studying how we can practically support students to explore literacy learning through the lenses of linguistic, cultural, and national identities particularly in a “regular” first-year writing classroom.

Based on the findings of a qualitative case study, I argue for a translanguaging orientation to literacy to frame the literacy narrative in first-year writing and emphasize the role of cross-cultural conversations and little narratives in resisting the grand narrative of literacy. A translanguaging orientation treats literacy as practices rather than a skill set that ensures an individual’s success and upward

***“Based on the findings of a qualitative case study, I argue for a translanguaging orientation to literacy to frame the literacy narrative in first-year writing and emphasize the role of cross-cultural conversations and little narratives in resisting the grand narrative of literacy.”***

mobility. That means literacy practices are “emergent . . . diverse, fluid, and changing” and therefore “cannot guarantee meaning by [themselves]” (Canagarajah, “Introduction” 4). Instead, “Such meaning has to be constructed and negotiated through strategic practices, as intelligibility and success depend a lot on collaboration” (4). In other words, from a translanguaging

perspective, literacy is “intrinsically rhetorical” and should be understood “in larger contexts of history, culture, and social relations” rather than “the narrow bounds of language norms or textual structures” (5, 6). With cross-cultural conversations through class discussions, group activities, peer review, and readings, the writing classroom becomes borderlands where both English monolingual and bi- and multilingual students encounter different literacy experiences that mutually enrich their understandings of literacy.

Additionally, little narratives of literacy that are local, more specific, and rich in contextual details effectively resist the utilitarian notion of literacy as a toolkit to achieve upward mobility, a notion rooted in the monolingual and monocultural view of literacy that feed into the grand narrative of ‘Literacy’ as singular and transcendental (Alexander, “Successes”; Daniell). Kara Poe Alexander uses Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of meta narratives and small narratives to examine the cultural narratives students perform in their literacy narratives. As Alexander’s findings show, despite the prevalence of the master narrative of literacy as success, students used little narratives to “contextualize their literacy experiences with specific, personal accounts” (“Successes” 625; See Lyotard). Instead of making sweeping generalizations about literacy, such contextualized accounts offer “a more nuanced understanding of the ways students frame and perceive their literacy experiences” (Alexander “Success” 627). With the attention to local context and personalized experiences, little narratives



align with the translingual orientation to literacy that views learners' experiences as resources. Thus, by foregrounding the role of cross-cultural interactions, this article simultaneously builds and expands on concepts like contact zone pedagogy (Canagarajah, *Transnational*) and little narratives (Alexander, "Successes") in the context of a literacy narrative assignment in a first-year writing (English 101) class.

While my take on literacy narrative resembles Canagarajah's contact zone pedagogy and his emphasis on "close attention to the procedures behind the writing and analysis of literacy narratives" (*Transnational* 37), the site of my study is different: Canagarajah's study focuses on a second language learning context whereas my study explores a regular first-year composition class with all US domestic students. Likewise, this study not only acknowledges the potential of little narratives to resist the literacy grand narratives; it also situates them in the contact zones of cross-cultural conversations that turn the writing classroom into borderlands. When both English monolingual and bi- and multilingual students actively participate in cross-cultural exchanges through various collaborative activities such as class discussions, group work, peer review, and readings from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, the classroom becomes borderlands—a space of contest, creativity, and transition—where different literacy practices and literate selves interact and mutually enrich each other's perceptions of literacy. By actively participating in such cross-cultural exchanges, both the students and the instructor become border crossers.

## METHODS

This study falls in the intersection of a qualitative case study and teacher research. As a case study researcher, I was "the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam and Tisdell 37). That I designed the assignment, collected data, and analyzed them using mostly an inductive approach informed by grounded theory puts this study in the ambit of teacher research, which ranges between "instructor-generated surveys of students' experiences with a particular assignment" and "ethnographically informed study" (Nickoson 106). With its focus on the interrelationship between theory and practice, scholarship and pedagogy, teacher research in composition studies helps us develop "a deeper understanding of student writers" with an exploration of "how [students] write and why, how they learn, and what their educational and literate goals are" (Nickoson 111). In this study, I was able to learn the many different ways students define their literacy experiences and literate selves, and how their perceptions change when they cross linguistic, cultural, and experiential borders in the classroom.

I conducted this study in a first-year writing class that I taught in Fall 2018 in an American Indian/Alaska Native Serving public research university in the Southwest. The student demographics of the university at the time of this study show 9.3 percent of international students out of 44,097 total. In the same year, the university was named a Hispanic Serving Institution, a status that requires a minimum of 25 percent Hispanic student population. In the class of 19 students, 15 consented to participate. Among them there were eight English monolingual, six bilingual, and one multilingual students. Two bilingual students identified English as their second language. This class composition

reflects the demographic shifts in US college writing classrooms, where “the myth of linguistic homogeneity” no longer holds water (Matsuda 82). Therefore, despite a small data pool that warrants only a limited generalization, this study prompts composition instructors toward questioning the tendency to associate cross-cultural approaches with dedicated writing courses for English as a second or additional language speakers or for immigrant or refugee students. Even in a supposedly homogeneous writing class with all US domestic students, cross-cultural exchanges, border crossings, and use of little narratives play an important role in mutually enriching and complexifying the students’ perception of literacies.

The students wrote literacy narratives as their first major assignment (See Appendix I for the assignment prompt). As per the university’s IRB protocol, the students signed a voluntary informed consent form in the first week of the class with my faculty adviser to maintain anonymity of the participants. I collected the writing samples of the consenting students only after the final grades had been submitted. I then contacted them by email for a voluntary Zoom interview in the following spring semester. Nine students volunteered for the interview, which I recorded with their consent and later transcribed them. Besides, I had recorded the one-on-one conferences I had with the students in various stages of the literacy narrative assignment and recorded those conversations with their consent. I was able to retrieve and transcribe twelve conversations out of fifteen participants.

My approach to coding the data was a combination of inductive and deductive methods. I first carefully read all fifteen literacy narratives with a reflective letter and the transcripts of nine personal interviews and twelve one-on-one conferences to identify major themes and patterns across the board while maintaining “an inductive stance . . . to drive meaning from the data” (Merriam and Tisdell 31). Yet my search for the themes and patterns was not totally open-ended. With the insights from the interview and one-one conference transcripts, I was able to anchor them to the expressions that indicated some form of change in students’ perception of literacies and the factors that made those changes possible: cross-cultural conversations. I also focused on how a translingual notion of literacy and emphasis on little narratives, in the form of personalized and situated anecdotes with descriptive details, contributed to a nuanced understanding of literacy. Additionally, my coding technique was informed by “literal” or “verbatim coding” where I located a section of the text that reflects the key issues of the study. It is basically useful in the “studies that prioritize and honor participant’s voice” because the codes contain the writers’ words verbatim (Saldana 106).

Throughout this study, I capitalized on my different literacy experience of learning English as a foreign language at a rural public school to encourage students to recall and share their literacy experiences. The fact that I was an international graduate student who had arrived in the US only a year before and was trying hard to navigate the dual role of student and writing instructor at the university put me in a liminal space between an expert and a novice. As a person with the experience of teaching college English, albeit in a different context, I had a sense of confidence and control, but as a person to whom both first-year writing and the literacy narrative genre were new, I was also learning and crossing borders on different levels along with the students. As Henry A. Giroux writes, teachers “become border crossers through their ability to not only make different narratives available to themselves and students but also by legitimating difference as a basic condition for understanding

the limits of one's own knowledge" ("Border Pedagogy" 63). I actively engaged in conversation with the students, sharing my experiences and perspectives in the classroom, during office hours and one-on-one conferences, through email responses, and in feedback on their assignments. My emphasis on conversation came from a belief that "to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries" (hooks 130). In a sense, my interactions with the students were also a part of cross-cultural conversations, and they contributed to students' perception of literacy to some extent. Although the possibility that students might have been motivated to appease me as their instructor cannot be ruled out, the fact that all 15 participants found their one-on-one conferences with me helpful gives credence to this assumption.

The literacy narrative assignment treated literacy in a broad and plural sense and as embedded in social, cultural, and economic structures. It encouraged students to draw on diverse "resources such as family histories, stories, rituals and cultural practices, festivals and celebrations, native language, dialects, colloquialisms" and resist the temptation to "generalize [their] experiences to create a common 'success story'" in favor of "anecdotes situated in the specific contexts" with "lively and compelling details followed by reflection and critical questionings" (See Appendix I). I encouraged interactions in groups and peers during the class activities like brainstorming, discussing readings, and responding to reading responses on the D2L discussion board. Besides, I tried to diversify the student's interactions with the readings by adding two literacy narratives by South Asian writers and some student samples from the previous semester. Peer review and one-on-one conferences with me were also a part of the conversation that continued throughout the assignment.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section offers a discussion of major findings that covers three main areas: changes in the students' perception of literacy; how cross-cultural conversations through collaborative work along with a translingual approach to literacy and use of little narratives contribute to the change; and how in this process the writing classroom becomes borderlands and the students and the instructor become border crossers.

### *Change in the Perception of Literacy*

A major focus of this study was if, how, and to what extent students' perceptions of literacy change after the literacy narrative assignment. Attempts to broaden and diversify the traditional, unitary notion of literacy as a set of alpha-numeric skills that would ensure upward mobility of an individual and society started since the 1980s. Brian Street questioned the dominant view of "Literacy" "with a big L and a single Y" as "a single thing" and advocated for a socially and culturally embedded notion of literacy practices that are "always contested and 'ideological'" (81, 82). James Paul Gee also critiqued the monolithic and utilitarian notion of literacy as a commodity and proposed "different 'literacies'" because "reading and writing are differently and distinctively shaped and transformed inside different sociocultural practices" (356). In short, the concept of literacy as an autonomous, acontextual, and neutral set of skills has long been rejected but they are still "dangerously pervasive" in

our field because “they afford the powerful a pretext for affirming dominant cultural understandings of literate practices while subordinating others” (Byrd, Hayes, and Turnipseed V). Therefore, it is imperative that we as educators enable our students to critically examine the dominant notion of literacy, develop a complex understanding of it, and appreciate the localized, alternative literacy practices in a world where cultural and linguistic boundaries are becoming more porous every day. In this spirit, the assignment prompt encouraged students to use “the term literacy in a broad sense,” allowing them “to draw on other significant moments and experiences of learning, which may not be limited to reading and writing.”

The findings of the study indicate a change in students’ perception of literacy. Twelve out of 15 participants admitted that their perception of literacy changed in some way after the assignment. Among them, nine students participated in a personal interview where they were asked if their understanding of literacy changed after the assignment. Eight of them admitted the change whereas one of them said it remained the same. However, in response to another question—if his understanding of literacy would have been different without the collaborative work he did in the class—he responded positively. Thus, all nine interviewees admitted that there was a change in their perception of literacy after the assignment. It is notable that both English monolingual and bi- and multilingual students admitted that their perception of literacy changed after the assignment. Olivia, an English monolingual student, said in her interview:

Um, I’d say my definition of literacy changed, um, just seeing how everybody took the project in different directions and seeing the different ways people understood literacy. Like for some people it was second language learning; for others like myself, it was learning how to read and write and how to become a stronger writer. For others it was creating, you know, story book, that type of thing. That was something that stood out to me in this project. So I’d say that literacy, I still understood literacy, but it was a different outlook on it and seeing how other people had different outlooks for sure.

Olivia wrote about the experience of learning to read and write, a typical literacy narrative content where she reflects on her struggles and achievements as a reader and writer. Her narrative reflects common literacy experiences of a middle-class U. S. English monolingual child, but she finds her classmates’ different literacy experiences such as second language learning and other literacy practices insightful. This is an indication that cross-cultural conversations in the classroom contribute to the students’ understanding of literacies.

Likewise, Veronica, a bilingual student who learned English as a second language, admits that her understanding of literacy changed after the assignment. She began to view literacy in a broad sense and not necessarily limited to learning a language. In her own words in our interview,

I think it made me realize that, like, a lot more people have different experiences with language, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be about language. It could be about personal struggles with language, even with your first language, or because I remember there were people in the class who . . . who had English as their first language, and they wrote about experiences of writing different type of English or using it in a different manner. And I thought that was just interesting.

Veronica wrote in her literacy narrative about experiencing language barriers and discriminations as an immigrant child at an elementary school in the US and how she not just overcame those challenges but excelled from her classmates who had once looked down at her because of her accented English. A comparison of Veronica's and Olivia's narratives offers some insights into the connection between literacy and its socio-economic contexts. The literacy experiences they bring to the classroom is informed by the differences in their socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds, but both of them find different literacy experiences and practices shared in the classroom useful in broadening their understanding of literacy. When I asked Veronica to confirm if she believes her understanding of literacy did change, she replied: "Yeah, I think it made me more open and educated about language . . . that it comes from all different parts, not necessarily just one part. Everybody has a story and I feel like that's important to realize."

Although the students are unequivocal in their responses, skeptical readers may take them as the goodwill of the students who participated in personal interviews. However, similar responses and opinions have been traced in the writing samples as well as the reflective letters written by most student participants. Moreover, the assignment prompt offers clear guidelines to approach literacy in a broad and contextual sense (see Appendix I). Recent scholarships on literacy narrative such as Mary Helen O'Connor's "Teaching Refugee Students with the DALN" uses multimodal literacy narratives that go "beyond the bounds of the historically print modes of writing instruction" as "a way to acknowledge literacy practices and knowledge historically overlooked by a teaching tradition rooted in western rhetorical concepts of literacy" and show how multimodality can be a powerful intervention to promote student agency by enabling them to share their authentic literacy experiences. Although the intervention in my study was limited to the content and pedagogical approach, the traditional print-based literacy narratives written by the US domestic students strongly indicate that they mutually enriched their perceptions of literacy and developed a complex understanding of it.

Another bilingual student, Francisco, wrote about musical literacy he developed from early childhood and how his literacy experience connects to the discovery of his identity and purpose of life. During the interview, he admitted that his perception of literacy changed after the literacy narrative assignment:

Um, yeah. I think it kind of changed because for my experience, I was talking about basically how music also something that kind of helped me during the time of school and how it improves kind of my literacy of not just writing but of music in that fact. And I guess it kind of changed the way that I think about it as something that makes me who I am basically . . .

Yeah, basically gave me a better sense of what I was doing.

Although Francisco slightly qualifies his claim about how his perception of literacy changed, the way he extends literacy beyond reading and writing and connects it to his sense of being is noteworthy. It reflects the broad concept of literacy that is not limited to alpha-numeric skills and what Caleb Corkery suggests as an alternative way to "steer students into narratives of lessons learned" that encourages them to share authentic literacy experiences and broadens their understanding of literacy (64). It also shows how the literacy narrative is more about giving meanings to one's literacy experiences and identifying the literate selves rather than just recalling and narrating them.

Among nine interviewees, Benjamin, an English monolingual student, writes about the influence of his grandparents who had homeschooled him before he went to kindergarten. He fondly recalls the moments spent with his grandma and realizes how that experience shaped his literate self: “The countless memories that I made during that time in my life helped me get to the point I am at today. The time and commitment my grandma put into me when she was trying to teach me the basics on how to read and write helped me tremendously in my educational career and is something I could not thank her enough for.” However, to the first question about the change in his perception of literacy, Benjamin said that it hadn’t changed: “Um, I don’t think it really changed after, really after the project, uh in my personal opinion.” But when asked if his understanding of literacy would have been different without the collaborative activities in the classroom, he says: “Ah. . . yes because if I were to go by myself, I’d just be having to go off of my . . . my own prior knowledge and the limited research I could do.” Furthermore, he admits that the collaborative activities were helpful in more than one way: “I was able to rely on my fellow classmates as well as the professor to help me in my writing and my understanding.” As a whole, all nine interviewees admitted some kind of change in their perception of literacy after completing the literacy narrative assignment.

As for the six students who did not participate in personal interviews, I had to rely on their reflective letters that accompanied the literacy narratives to trace if and how their perception of literacy changed. The analysis showed that at least three of them experienced some form of change in the understanding of literate selves and activities. Coincidentally, all three students are English monolinguals who reflect on different but interrelated facets of their literacy experiences. For example, William admits: “Overall this assignment has opened my eyes to writing and helped me think about myself as a writer as I have never done before.” While for Sophia the brainstorming process was helpful to find a topic that was relatable to her personal experience as she paired her “home life with [her] interest in psychology.” Isabella finds “writing something so personal to [herself] was good for closure and a great beginning to [the] academic year.” These statements indicate some level of change in their understanding of literacy and their literate selves.

***“It is worth noting that there are significant differences in these students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but they all feel that their understanding of literacy changed, and the majority of them attribute these changes to the collaborative nature of the assignment. The fact that all English monolingual, bi- and multilingual students admit a change in their perception of literacy speaks to the important role of cross-cultural conversations and border-crossings as an integral part of the assignment design and its execution in the classroom.”***

Overall, the findings indicate that a majority of students in this study experienced a change in their perception of literacy after writing the literacy narrative. It is worth noting that there are significant differences in these students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but they all feel that

their understanding of literacy changed, and the majority of them attribute these changes to the collaborative nature of the assignment. The fact that all English monolingual, bi- and multilingual students admit a change in their perception of literacy speaks to the important role of cross-cultural conversations and border-crossings as an integral part of the assignment design and its execution in the classroom. These findings also attest to Ghanashyam Sharma's view that writing literacy narratives "can greatly promote students' development of critical sensibilities, capacity of intellectual judgment, independence as writers and makers of knowledge" (109).

### *Border Crossings: Cross-cultural Conversations through Collaboration*

The concept of the classroom as a heterogeneous space where different language and literacy practices intersect is not new. Pratt's concept of contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" has been widely used to talk about classrooms as a space of contact and contestation (34). Pratt's analogy captures the changing demographic dynamics of US college writing classrooms even though her approach to "understanding cultures through texts alone" is likened to "the methodology of armchair anthropologists" (Cushman and Emmons 204), and the contact zone that doesn't offer any concrete way to deal with the differences as "a multicultural bazaar" (Harris 33). Similarly, Henry A. Giroux uses a border analogy to introduce "transformative and emancipatory" border pedagogy that "points to the need for conditions that allow students to write, speak, and listen in a language in which meaning becomes multiaccultural, dispersed, and resists permanent closure" ("Border Pedagogy" 52). In border pedagogy, students become border crossers by encountering diverse cultural and historical narratives and voices. Despite the limitations of Pratt's contact zone that is premised on the additive notion multiculturalism and Giroux's border pedagogy that is grounded in postmodernism, I find their analogies helpful to discuss different literacy experiences and practices that students bring to first-year writing classrooms. While every classroom is a contact zone in the sense that some level of diversity is inevitable, what is at stake is to utilize those differences as a resource for learning. Canagarajah adopts "pedagogical practices and policies that accentuate the resources in the classroom to facilitate contact, negotiation practices, and language socialization" (*Transnational* 101). His contact zone pedagogy, which is informed by the ethos of translingual literacy that values differences as the norm and resource, is relevant to the context of this study as well even though there were no international students.

What I discuss below as cross-cultural conversations through collaboration and interpret as border crossings envisions first-year writing classrooms as borderlands. It embraces Canagarajah's contact zone pedagogy and the border analogies used by Giroux and Gloria Anzaldúa. Borders are "not only geographic but also political, subjective (e.g., cultural) and epistemic and, contrary to frontiers, the very concept of 'border' implies the existence of people, languages, religions and knowledge on both sides" (Mignolo and Tlostanova 208). In the context of classroom and pedagogy, border is more an intangible concept that "provides a continuing and crucial referent for understanding the comingling—sometimes clash—of multiple cultures, languages, literacies, histories, sexualities, and identities" (Giroux, *Border Crossings* 2). When these differences meet in a classroom space, they not

only coexist but give way to something new. Anzaldúa defines borderlands as a space of “culture in the making” and “a very creative space to be in, one where innovative art and theory on the cutting edge is being constructed” (Hernández 10). A classroom as borderlands is a creative space, a contact zone where multiple viewpoints, experiences, and identities intersect and multiply. Even “though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (Anzaldúa 102). Borderland is therefore rife with tensions and creative potential, and it is imperative that writing instructors tap those potentials to enhance a complex understanding of literacy among students.

The discussion in the previous section shows that 12 out of 15 students experienced a change in their perception of literacy. To understand how those changes became possible, this section focuses on the cross-cultural conversations that undergirded the assignment. Based on the participants’ opinions about class discussions, group work, peer review, and readings, this section discusses how the assignment was scaffolded with numerous collaborative activities that promote cross-cultural conversations and highlight translanguaging approaches to literacy. All nine interviewees admitted that their understanding of literacy would have been different without their participation in the collaborative activities.

#### *Class Discussion: Listening to Different Perspectives*

Class discussion was a major component of the collaboration which all 15 participants found useful. Discussions were basically about the readings most of which I had assigned as homework with a response to be posted on the D2L Discussion Board. We also did a few in-class readings and discussed all the readings in the class focusing on major takeaways and their relevance to the project. I facilitated the discussion with guiding questions and occasional clarifications. When asked if class discussion helped him understand the concept of literacy and the assignment better, Lucas says:

Yeah, it did because umm in having other . . . other voices and opinions, I mean, that just helps you understand pretty much anything better; you know. When . . . whenever you talk to somebody about umm if you see different people, like I said, different people have different experiences so . . . so everyone just kind of pulls on their experiences when they . . . when they formulate an opinion on something. So, if you can talk to more people about one thing, you can get different perspectives like that so.

Although Lucas seems to be talking about interactions in general, he acknowledges how the class discussion helped him understand the concept of literacy and the assignment better.

Like Lucas, Rosa, another bilingual student, also speaks approvingly about the class discussions: “I think that was helpful too just to see, like, what everybody took from the book and what was important to them and then being able to apply that to the writing. It was important.” Rosa’s experience shows that class discussions helped them connect the readings with their experiences and the narrative they wanted to write. Moreover, William, an English monolingual student, also finds class discussions productive and enjoyable: “I have enjoyed and benefited from the class discussions as it is a fantastic way to hear different perspectives from various students. Being able to hear various



thoughts and feelings toward a reading is particularly helpful.” These opinions about class discussion, which was an integral part of cross-cultural conversation, show that students were able to learn from each other’s experiences.

#### *Group Work: Working and Learning Together*

Another important way to foster cross-cultural conversation was group work where students worked in small groups of three and four to brainstorm topics and outline the draft. The purpose of group activities was to provide a less intimidating space for students to interact and learn from different literacy experiences they bring to the classroom. Both linguistic and gender diversity was maintained in each group. Twelve out of 15 students found this activity fruitful whereas three of them did not. Martin, a bilingual student who identifies English as a second language, speaks approvingly of the group work: “I got to see what my other classmates were writing. So, I got an idea. I got an understanding about how to write. Yeah [it] definitely helped.” Although his response seems to focus more on the writing process, it does acknowledge the usefulness of group activities. Likewise, Olivia talks about why she found conversations in groups beneficial: “When I am able to work in a group and talk amongst other students, it’s definitely helpful for me at least just because I can elaborate on what I am thinking and make sure I am headed in the right direction.” She talks about Aisha who, according to her, was using a timeline to develop her narrative as she was planning to “take a story from her past and compare it to her present.” Olivia found it useful for her narrative. Whereas Aisha, a bilingual student, focuses on the exchange of ideas and experiences during the group activities: “I really enjoyed the group work because it helped me, like, to get other people’s perspective on when I am writing.” Yet another English monolingual student Noah finds group activities helpful: “Speaking of my groupmates, working with them has been truly fascinating as I had never worked in groups like this before and while group work was less common than individual work, group is still a major reason I have a halfway decent essay to turn in today.” These representative voices show that students found group activities useful in different ways. For some it helped in the writing process while for others it offered a different perspective on literacy.

However, three students did not find it as helpful. Yen, a multilingual student who wrote about growing up in a bilingual family and developing multilingual skills at high school, did not find the small group activity encouraging. He says, it was “at the class discussions [where] I’d do a lot more than just four people discussing in a group.” He explains why his group didn’t work well: “I feel like with four people, sometimes the others may want to not talk much, and it’s left with dead silence.” This is an indication that all collaborative activities may not always go well. Overall, the findings indicate that a vast majority of students found group work useful.

#### *Peer Review: Complementing Each Other*

Peer review was conducted in the fourth week when the students came with a hard copy of their literacy narrative draft. I had assigned readings that explained the rationale and purpose of peer review with some practical suggestions on giving and receiving feedback. At the beginning of the class, I explained the process and expectations of peer review and why it is more than editing.

I collected the reviewed drafts and offered my feedback which I discussed during the one-on-one conference that followed.

All 15 students found peer review useful and productive. Two English monolingual students Isabella and Emma have similar views on how their writing process benefitted from peer review. Isabella “gained a lot more confidence in the essay” as one of her peers “gave [her] a lot of constructive criticism that [she] needed to hear” and gave her “some advice and also helped [her] understand what needed to be added to the essay in order to get [her] entire story out there.” Although Isabella does not elaborate on what kind of constructive criticism she received and she seems to have conflated “review” and “editing,” it is evident that she found the peer review helpful. As for Emma, who always thought peer reviews as an essential part of writing, not “having another person’s perspective on something” is to be “completely blind to some mistakes.”

While Isabella and Emma mostly focus on how peer review helped them in the writing process, Veronica finds others’ perspectives more important. When asked if peer review helped her understand the assignment and the concept of literacy better, she says: “Um, I think so because that’s where I got other perspectives from reading others’ essays and writing and I think it does help because that just makes you see how other people write, um, how other people put ideas together.” These are a few representative voices of the students who found peer review helpful in different ways.

#### *Readings: Widening the Horizon*

Readings played a crucial role in promoting cross-cultural understanding and border-crossings in the classroom. Besides the topics on rhetorical situations and the writing process, I had assigned literacy narratives from diverse backgrounds from the textbook and outside such as Suresh Canagarajah’s “Fortunate Traveller,” Ghanashyam Sharma’s “Cultural Schemas and Pedagogical Uses of Literacy Narratives,” and student writing samples from the previous semester. The purpose of these readings was to encourage students to be familiar with culturally, linguistically, and geographically different literacy experiences. They wrote responses to some of the readings whereas others were discussed in the class. I made sure that each reading was followed by a class discussion where students shared main takeaways and connected them to their literacy narratives.

Twelve out of 15 students found the readings helpful in making sense of their literacy experiences and transitioning to writing their own narratives, and several of them recalled the specific titles that stood out to them. While one student did not find it useful, two of them did not mention anything about it. Rosa reflects on the usefulness of readings as follows: “The various literacy narratives we read helped because they were about a variety of experiences involving reading and writing. Not one was the same, and that helped give me direction as to what I could write about.” Rosa’s experience shows how readings from diverse backgrounds help students to figure out what they want to write about and broaden their understanding of literacy as well. Likewise, Veronica had a similar experience with the readings: “The readings we did in the class of other literacy narratives were the most helpful. It exposed me to this new genre in a fun and entertaining way. I also liked seeing examples of this writing to shape my own similar to theirs.”

Noah, who wrote about learning the language of computer programming and coding, finds many of the readings “particularly important to [his] ability to write said narrative” and “to better understand what was being asked.” Noah’s take on readings is more concerned about how to write a personal narrative than the actual content that would change his perception of literacy. But still the fact that he finds the readings useful and that his narrative goes beyond the narrow concept of literacy gives credence to his opinion.

Francisco, who wrote about musical literacy, specifies the topics that he found most useful:

Specifically, the one that stood out to me the most had to be “Draw Within the Lines” that helped me see how he turned his problem around and decided to go back to school after dropping out of high school at first. Readings and all assignments that were given helped us all see the big picture for me personally. I really liked reading many of the assignments like “Rebel Music,” due to the fact that I relate so much to it . . . how he would listen to different music than everyone his age.

Yet there was one student who did not find the readings useful. James, an English monolingual student who wrote about his passion for music and learning to write lyrics, describes himself as an independent writer. He says: “I do not think that the readings or the responses helped me that much because I am less of a reading type of learner and more of an interactive learner.” The remaining two participants didn’t say anything explicitly about the role of readings in their writing. All in all, 12 out of 15 participants found readings useful in different ways to write their literacy narratives. Given the variety of readings assigned and the discussions that followed, the participants were involved in a cross-cultural conversation with the texts, the classmates, and the instructor.

Overall, all 15 students found collaborative activities that promote cross-cultural conversations useful to develop a nuanced understanding of literacy and translating that understanding to their narratives on some levels. However, English-only speakers sometimes find it difficult to relate to the readings and cross-cultural experiences. In some cases, readings and activities that focus on cultural and linguistic differences might give a false impression that differences are more valuable and desirable than authentic literacy experiences. While this is something that all writing instructors should be mindful of, the findings of this study do not refute the claim that cross-cultural conversations and translanguaging approach to literacy enhance a more complex understanding of literacy among English monolingual and bi- and multilingual students. Yet we should be careful not to overemphasize the differences to the extent that make English monolingual students feel alienated from the learning process and reproduce another version of orthodoxy.

## LITTLE NARRATIVES

Another major factor that contributed to the change in students’ perception of literacy was the use of little narratives that would counter the totalizing master narrative of literacy as an autonomous set of skills that leads to success. With a focus on local, individual, and contextualized literacy experiences narrated as situated anecdotes with rich descriptive details, these little narratives defy the abstract and generalized literacy myth: “the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and

other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility” (Graff and Duffy 32).

In doing so, what Alexander calls “little cultural narratives” align with translingual literacy that values local and individual literacy practices as an important resource that students bring to the classroom (“Successes”). A translingual approach to literacy “aims to contribute to a necessary shift in literacy studies by treating heterogeneity in contact zones as the norm rather than the exception” (Alvarez 19). The literacy narrative assignment in this study encouraged students to draw on their authentic literacy experiences regardless of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and it is reflected in the diversity of themes and titles covered in the students’ narratives. Thus, both little cultural narratives and translingual approaches to literacy go hand in hand questioning the totalizing ideologies of literacy and monolingualism.

This assignment draws from the work of Kara Poe Alexander, who uses Lyotard’s concept of “grand” and “little” narratives to interpret literacy myth as a master narrative of “literacy-equals-success” which is “orthodox and legitimate” and proposes little cultural narratives that are “unsanctioned, artistic, and imaginative” and “less generalizable and more individualized and situated” as the alternative (“Successes” 611; see Daniell as well). The assignment encouraged students to focus on situated anecdotes, offer rich details and reflect on their meanings rather than produce “common ‘success stories’” (Assignment Prompt). It is important because students’ individualized experiences in the narratives “allow us to glimpse additional ways students frame their literacy experiences and contribute to a more comprehensive view of students’ literacy histories” (Alexander, “Successes” 625). Such alternative ways of representing literacy experiences and defining literate selves have a decolonial potential as well. Alexander reads Malala Yousafzai’s autobiography as an alternative narrative of literacy that “attempts to decolonize the claims the West has on literacy, language, culture, and identity by generating pluriversal understandings of values of these issues” (“Forwarding Literacy” 204).

However, little narratives may not always dismantle the master narrative because “students have varied literate identities” that are intricately “connected to [the master narrative of] success” and the little narratives “both reinforce and challenge it” (Alexander, “Successes” 625; see Daniell 404). The findings of this study also attest to that. 13 out of 15 students used little narratives in the form of anecdotes with descriptive details, while all 15 narratives tell some form of success story. Many of the anecdotes fit into Alexander’s taxonomy of little narratives like hero, victim, child prodigy, warrior, and ambassador (“Successes”; “Forwarding Literacy”). However, my focus here is on how students share the moments of individualized experiences with rich details that weaken the grand narrative of literacy and align with the ethos of translingual literacy as well. Although the following snippets of little narratives used by Francisco, William, and Veronica in their literacy narratives have different contexts and they come from different positionalities, they have one thing in common—they offer a rare insight into their literacy experience and literate selves, which a narrative that perpetuates the master narrative of literacy cannot do.

Francisco talks in his literacy narrative about his school music teacher, who immensely

influenced his attitude toward music:

Years after 5th grade I had 3 teachers one really stood out to me, Mr. Frank. He was different although he was a good math, reading, and writing teacher, he was one of the best music teachers. He was not the school's music teacher, but every Friday he would bring many of his different instruments to class. One that I remember playing was an African tongue drum, a wooden box that made the most beautiful sounds when hitting specific spots. On one of those days, I had a mini performance during recess, while all the kids went to the playground I would stay and play. Mr. Frank heard me playing and immediately he grabbed his piccolo and we began to jam out just for fun, no sheet music just playing what you felt. That feeling I had I will never forget. I felt joy, and immediately a group formed around us in the classroom and I could feel this sense of bliss throughout the room. Music had become a part of my life.

Francisco describes how he was motivated by the music teacher during his formative years and how those experiences contributed to his initiation into music. Although it was an informal activity, an impromptu performance during the recess, the anecdote has a clear context and details of what happened when, where, and who did what. The last two sentences show how important this experience was for the development of his literate self.

Unlike Francisco's childhood experience at school, William's cross-cultural experience of visiting France during a summer holiday offers a different example of acquiring literacy in a foreign language. In his literacy narrative, William describes a dinner in a restaurant in France as follows:

At dinner as we were looking over the menu and when the waiter came over to ask what we wanted to drink I said "je voudrais L'eau" which translates to I would like water please. I didn't even think about using French, it just flowed out of my mouth naturally. Jason and I were both able to order our entire meals in French. Jason's parents looked at us like we were crazy when the meal was over. They were enthusiastic that I would be able to take my learning of the language back home with me.

William's experience of being in a different country and learning a new language is central to the narrative where he discusses how his visit to France changed his attitude to language and culture and his outlook to the world. Instead of using abstract generalizations, William shares a situated event that shows how he learned French as a part of the cross-cultural experience and how proud he was of his newly acquired bilingual skills.

Moreover, Veronica's challenging yet rewarding experience of learning English as a second language in Mexico before she came to the US with her family comes from a different vantage point of a non-native speaker of English learning in a relatively resource constrained place. Veronica vividly recalls her childhood experience in her literacy narratives:

As my journey in English learning continued, I remember vividly the first time the teacher took us to the school library. At the elementary school I attended in Mexico there were no libraries except for the local city library. I had never been in a room full of books, and I thought that I would never be able to choose just one, because there were infinite options. I chose the book titled *Dizzy* by author Cathy Cassidy. It had a red Volkswagen van on the

cover which was decorated with colorful flowers and a bright pink background. I struggled to read the word filled pages but I promised myself I had to finish even if I didn't understand much of it. I understood maybe half of what the book was about. It was about a girl whose parents would travel often in their van. I believe my stride to finish this book inspired my love for reading.

Veronica's early initiation to the world of letters at an elementary school in Mexico looks like a typical story of a child's visit to a library. But this anecdote stands out for at least two reasons. First, unlike a run-of-the-mill success story, it gives a clear sense of time, place, and people with vivid descriptive details. Second, even though Veronica seemed to have a normal initiation to literacy, later she found her English literacy inadequate and her early years at school socially, academically, and emotionally challenging in the US. Her literacy narrative aligns with a success story where she talks about how she was looked down on by her classmates because of her accented English at first and how she worked hard to be able to help them with their assignments after a few years. In this sense, her narrative reproduces the master narrative of literacy to an extent but the presence of the anecdotes where she appears as a victim, an outsider, a warrior, and a hero weakens the master narrative and provides space for her authentic literacy experience.

***“In fact, translingual literacy that informs the literacy narrative assignment in this study encouraged students to draw on their experiences without having to conform to the narrow concept of literacy. Their experiences and ideas were treated as resources and not as aberrations, and they were encouraged to listen to each other’s literacy experiences that mutually enriched their understanding. It was due to the cross-cultural conversations and translingual orientation to literacy along with an emphasis on little narratives of literacy that the students’ perception of literacy changed, and they developed a nuanced understanding of it.”***

In sum, such little narratives based on the individualized experiences and situated anecdotes with concrete details can resist the grand narratives of literacy as success that are “most often told abstractly, without reference to a specific time, place, or instance in the student’s life” (Alexander, “Successes” 616). As the findings show, 13 out of 15 students have used some form of little narratives where they rely on specific events and personalized experiences associated with literacy and their literate selves. In doing so, they also reinforce the translingual notion of literacy that embraces differences in individual literacy experience and defies the literacy grand narrative. In fact, translingual literacy that informs the literacy narrative assignment in this study encouraged students to draw on their experiences without having to conform to the narrow concept of literacy. Their experiences and ideas were treated as resources and not as aberrations, and they were encouraged to listen to each other’s literacy experiences that mutually enriched their understanding. It was due to the cross-cultural conversations and translingual orientation to literacy along with an emphasis on little narratives of literacy that the students’ perception of literacy changed, and they developed a

nuanced understanding of it.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study explored how cross-cultural conversations, little narratives, and a translingual approach to literacy in the literacy narrative assignment in a regular first-year writing (English 101) classroom work together to resist the grand narrative of literacy that is grounded in monolingual and monocultural ideologies and to promote a complex understanding of literacy among students. The findings show that both English monolingual and bi- and multilingual students actively participated in cross-cultural exchanges through collaborative activities such as class discussion, group work, peer review, and readings from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds that turned the classroom into borderlands where different literacy practices and literate selves interacted and informed students' understanding of literacy. The instructor, as an international graduate student from a South Asian cultural background who learned English as a foreign language, both facilitated and participated in these interactions with the students and became a border crosser like them. Although some English monolingual students sometimes found it difficult to relate to the readings and cross-cultural references, the overall response of all eight monolingual students was positive. The usefulness of cross-cultural interaction is best reflected in the response of two students.

Olivia shares her positive experience of interacting with the classmates who had different literacy experiences than hers: "Being able to hear other people's stories also made me appreciate what I did have. So many people were second language learners and others were people who struggled with many different things involving reading and writing." Unlike Veronica, Olivia did not speak other languages, nor did she have any experience of living in a different culture, but she found others' experiences of struggle inspiring. It encouraged her to introspect and identify her strengths. Likewise, Veronica explains how her understanding of literacy changed after the interactions with her classmates. She realized that "everyone struggles or may struggle with learning, and it doesn't necessarily have to be you learning in a second language. It can be your native languages as well, and you're trying to understand it."

Along with the cross-cultural interactions and use of little narratives, the translingual orientation to literacy that values all literacy experiences and practices as a resource for writing played an equally important role. The instructor's commitment to "make those resources for learning salient, avoid suppressing diversity, and encourage students' collaborative work in turning these resources into affordances" encouraged students to draw on their authentic literacy experiences and transcend the narrow definition of literacy (Canagarajah, *Transnational* 101). Future research can and should further explore the decolonial potential of translingual literacy, as foreseen by Ellen Cushman, "to hasten the process of revealing and potentially transforming colonial matrices of power that maintain hierarchies of knowledge and languages" (235). Writing studies as a field should continue to call out the false binaries that project Western culture as rational, superior, and trans-historical whereas "the other cultures are different [only] in the sense that they are unequal, in fact inferior, by nature"

(Quijano 174). This is where the root of subalternization of “other” language and literacy practices lies, and translingual literacy can be a way forward to the liberatory options where “difference does not necessarily imply the unequal nature of the ‘other’... nor the hierarchical inequality nor the social inferiority of the other” (Quijano177). Treating differences as resources paves the way for border thinking “that can help us moving to sustain a vision—a pluri-versal and not a uni-versal vision” (Mignolo 499). This should be the future direction of language and literacy practices in college writing classrooms.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Protocol Number 1808828865.

<sup>2</sup> All participants' names are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Quotations from all participants' written artifacts are presented in their original, unedited form. Transcriptions of interviews and one-on-one conferences privilege individuals' original speech over correctness; wording and structure has not been changed, but punctuation has been added for reader clarity.

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## APPENDIX I

### **Literacy Narrative Assignment Prompt**

Project-I: Literacy Narrative

[100 points/ 25% of Final Course Grade]

A literacy narrative is primarily a personal story about one's experience of learning to read and write. However, the concept of literacy goes beyond reading and writing to encompass other learning experiences that are considered as different types of literacies such as music, dance, painting, sports, technology, etc. Since literacy experience means different things to different people, you are not expected to come up with identical narratives. The primary focus of this assignment is on your reading and writing experiences that have had a profound impact on your 'self' and 'worldview'. However, using the term literacy in a broad sense, this assignment allows you to draw on other significant moments and experiences of learning, which may not be limited to reading and writing. Like any narrative, literacy narrative also revolves around people, places, objects, events, and self. To begin with, you should try to get to the specific context and tease out as much detail as possible using journalistic questions: what, when, where, who, how and why.

Since literacy is embedded in social, cultural, and economic structures, it is not enough to just recall and narrate the experiences. As an effective story, your narrative will more than entertain the readers by revealing insights, beliefs, values you or your family, community hold about various aspects of literacy such as reading, writing, language, class, culture, identity, and so on. You are encouraged to engage in conversations in groups to exchange your literacy experiences with each other and be familiar with the different modes of literacy in diverse social, economic, and cultural contexts. Such conversations allow you to understand the broad and complex nature of literacy which is often reduced to an act of reading and writing.

In exploring the many dimensions of literacy, you are free to use all types of resources such as family histories, stories, ritual/cultural practices, festivals, and celebrations, native language, dialect, colloquialism, and so on. The uniqueness of your experiences is an asset that you should take pride in. While you will use the techniques of both 'showing' and 'telling' throughout the narrative, you will prioritize showing over telling. You will describe scenes, people, places, and actions by using concrete nouns, action words (vivid verbs), sensory details (taste, touch, sound, smell, and sight) to go beyond the use of adjectives and adverbs only. You will use a combination of narration and dialogue along with a meaningful reflection to find what these experiences mean to you. In addition, you will critically analyze, question, and comment on your literacy experiences. You can also quote from other relevant texts you have read as long as they help you make a point or support your claims. Finally, you should resist the temptation to create a common 'success story' where acquiring literacy is projected as a key to a successful life. Instead, focus on the anecdotes situated in specific contexts, offer lively and compelling details followed by reflection and critical questionings.

### **Format Requirements**

- An original and engaging title
- Times New Roman 12-point font with 1-inch margins
- Between 4-6 double-spaced pages
- MLA format
- First draft: A hard copy for peer review
- Final draft: An electronic copy in the assignment folder on D2L

### **Course Objectives**

After completing this project, and its associated course module, you will have made progress towards the following student learning objectives:

- 1D. Read in ways that contribute to their rhetorical knowledge as writers.
- 3B. Produce multiple revisions on global and local levels.
- 3C. Suggest useful global and local revisions to other writers.
- 3E. Evaluate and act on peer and instructor feedback to revise their texts.
- 4A. Follow appropriate conventions for grammar, punctuation, and spelling, through practice in composing and revising.

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From Failure to Inquiry:  
Three Problem-Solving Strategies  
for Community Literacy Researchers

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KEYWORDS

failure; community literacy; adaptive problem-solving; rivaling;  
critical incident interviews

At every meeting where we took the proposal, we got the same answer: the logistics of starting a childcare center were too complicated. To make matters worse, as I was organizing office files one day I found a file folder that contained reports from three previous attempts to “solve” the childcare issue for graduate students at my university in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. It all seemed to follow a fairly predictable pattern: send out a survey, collect responses, write a report, convene a big meeting with key administrative stakeholders, and then . . . nothing.

—Carolyn, describing her work as a leader in her graduate student assembly advocating for the creation of a campus childcare center for graduate students.

I had spent years studying rhetorical theory and teaching college composition, but I had no idea how to lead middle-school girls in a substantive and empowering discussion of the mermaid fantasy novel *Aquamarine*. I was equally perplexed when a girl brought in pictures of her family’s chickens for her digital story that had nothing to do with the animals. Did asking her to take different photos diminish her agency?

—Amanda, describing her work in a digital literacy program with Appalachian girls. Amanda oversaw a group of undergraduate interns who led the girls in reading groups and taught them to create digital stories about their lives.

Just before leaving Lucy’s apartment to do the formal interview with Diane, I remember asking Lucy how she liked living on her own. Her response, while it doesn’t show up in any of my interview transcripts, is among the most memorable moments of my dissertation work. She said: “It’s my dream come true.” Lucy’s response seemed to reinforce my already growing concern that my dissertation, by focusing on the advocacy experiences of parents of children with disabilities rather than disabled people themselves, was excluding the voices of people with disabilities, reinforcing patterns of disempowerment well-worn in the



disability community.

—Mary, reflecting on the interviews she conducted with parents of disabled children<sup>1</sup> for her dissertation research. Here, she is referring to her experience meeting Diane and her daughter Lucy, who has Down syndrome.

**T**he three brief vignettes above capture pivotal moments when we experienced the frustration, guilt, and disappointment that can occur in research and community-engaged work. They come from longer failure narratives that we each wrote to make sense of what went wrong when Carolyn “failed” to write a persuasive proposal to create an affordable childcare center, Amanda “failed” to help a group of Appalachian girls in a rural literacy program produce polished digital stories, and Mary “failed” to transform her dissertation interviews with parents of disabled children into an advocacy resource guide. We shared these experiences with one another at the Conference for College Composition and Communication in Kansas City in 2018, where we reconnected for the first time after completing graduate school. Over a cup of coffee in a crowded hotel lobby, Carolyn asked Amanda, “So how was your summer? How did your work with the literacy program in North Carolina go?” In a hushed tone, Amanda confided, “Actually, it didn’t go so well.”

In graduate school, we had completed coursework together in rhetoric and community literacy and organized community think tanks where we developed first-hand experience with the challenges of community-based research.<sup>1</sup> We had learned how literacy was not just the act of reading and writing but “a rhetorical practice for inquiry and social change” (Flower, *Community Literacy* 16). Using Flower’s Community Think Tank model, we interviewed students and facilitated roundtable discussions to conduct inquiries into meaningful campus issues, asking for example, how do students find support for mental health in a high-stress campus culture? In other words, we worked to put Flower’s definition of community literacy into action as “an intercultural dialogue *with others* on issues that *they* identify as sites of struggle” (Flower, *Community Literacy* 19). We had also read extensively about the field’s early attempts at service learning and community engagement that failed because they prioritized a university agenda over community needs (Cushman; Mathieu). We had studied accounts that failed to acknowledge local context and history in their advocacy efforts (Coogan; Ryder). And we had studied examples that failed to provide the appropriate rhetorical infrastructure for making community change (Grabill). Through such readings we were aware of the common pitfalls of well-intentioned community work that does not achieve the kind of inquiry and social change that is often needed, and we were each determined not to repeat such mistakes.

But reflecting on our own sense of failure and learning from our own experiences posed both conceptual and emotional challenges for us as researchers. As organizational leadership scholar Amy Edmondson argues, “examining our failures in depth is emotionally unpleasant and can chip away at our self-esteem. Left to our own devices, most of us will speed through or avoid failure analysis altogether.” While we knew that failure can be a transformative learning experience (Mezirow), our experiences felt confusing and produced anxiety in a way that made us want to avoid doing

community-engaged research, rather than inspire us to do more. One reason why such failed attempts are difficult to analyze is because they may be characterized by what Paul Feigenbaum calls “stigmatized failure” (14). Stigmatized failure, Feigenbaum contends, is the reigning paradigm in higher education today, reinforcing “ideologies and material conditions that cultivate fear and anxiety” (16). Specifically, because stigmatized failure draws on the pitfalls of “precarious meritocracy” and a deficit model of learning, “academic and professional failures are stigmatized as deficits of personal responsibility” (Feigenbaum 17, 21). This approach to failure does not enhance learning or open up space for analysis or inquiry. Helping students or novice community researchers to approach experiences of failure as part of a process of inquiry, or as “generative failure,” requires more than just encouragement to embrace challenges—it requires challenging the stigma of failure in the first place and providing supportive ways for students to consider failures within the constraints of the material and social conditions that we experience them.

Not surprisingly, in our first attempts to understand our experiences, we attributed our disappointments to deficits of personal responsibility or systemic problems far beyond our control. Carolyn wondered whether it was her limited authority as a graduate student that could explain her failure to make the childcare center proposal more persuasive to other community stakeholders. Had Amanda simply been more charismatic and adaptable, she wondered, perhaps she could have negotiated better the questions that arose about how to best compose the digital stories. Mary voiced the concern that she had felt too emotionally invested in her research process given her personal connection to her disabled brother, and she believed that a better researcher would have had the critical distance needed to produce a useful document for the community.

One problem with our initial interpretations is that they seemed to leave little room for rhetorical agency: they left each of us feeling that there was little we could have done differently. We were stuck. Even worse, we all felt hesitant about how to approach our community-based work again. In this article, we define failure broadly as instances when we missed our own goals or missed the goals set out by others and the consequences were significant for the communities with which we worked.

***“While failure is usually stigmatized, and marked by feelings of shame and disappointment, what we seek to better understand is how the experience of failure can become a stimulus for inquiry, for asking questions that lead to more nuanced understandings of the goals of community work.”***

While failure is usually stigmatized, and marked by feelings of shame and disappointment, what we seek to better understand is how the experience of failure can become a stimulus for inquiry, for asking questions that lead to more nuanced understandings of the goals of community work. We also recognize that while the feeling of failure might be represented differently across stakeholders in community-

based projects, interpreting failure is always a situated rhetorical act of representation. By making space for collaborative reflection on failure, researchers can encourage alternative representations of these experiences and a more widely distributed sense of agency to account for the multiple ways

success and failure can be defined in community contexts.

This article contributes to a newly emerging scholarship that attempts to help students and novice scholars learn from failure in a generative way. Specifically, we show how we adapted problem-solving strategies from community literacy and used them to analyze our initial, stigmatizing interpretations of our failed community-based work. Our approach responds to recent work by Rebecca Rickly and Kelli Cargile Cook, who argue that “if we do not begin to value failure—and the growth it can bring—we will continue to see a lack of research in our publications, a faculty who can critique but not produce research, and a discipline that includes fewer participants in the actual making of knowledge” (128). We maintain that learning to value failure in community-based work is fundamental, especially for graduate students and novice scholars who may avoid this work given the increased challenges, risks, and possibilities for failure. However, we also acknowledge that learning from failure may require purposeful, collective reflection, an activity that is itself a literate practice.

In what follows, we first review scholarship that illustrates why defining success and failure can be difficult in the context of community engaged work, especially for novice researchers. Then, we analyze our own experiences with failure. We outline our approach to explain how we first composed narratives about our experiences and then used three problem-solving strategies from community literacy studies to help each other reflect on what went wrong—and what went well—in each case. Through our analysis of these experiences, we show how applying these problem-solving strategies helped transform our initial sense of stigmatized failure (as an end point) into generative failure as a turning point within a longer process of our work as early-career researchers. Such transformations helped us locate “unacknowledged consequences” in our community work that were previously left unseen. We offer our cases, and our problem-solving approach, as a possible model and resource for novice scholars navigating the challenges of community-engaged work, for those seeking to better support and mentor students, and, more generally, for anyone seeking to create more collaborative reflective space within university-community partnerships.

## THE CHALLENGE OF REPRESENTING SUCCESS (AND FAILURE) IN COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

Much of the scholarly literature on community engagement discusses the inevitability of some failure in community-based projects, as well as the key role of these failures in transformative learning experiences (Holmes). For example, in their description of their service learning course where students wrote family histories and engaged with a local history group, Suzanne Kesler Rumsey and Tanja Nihiser describe how students were confronted with a set of troubling realities: “conflicting facts, dead ends, discomfort in not knowing how to ‘do it right’ or ‘what it should look like,’ and uncertainty of [their] place within the writing [they] did” (143). These realities illustrate some of the unique challenges of community-based work, which calls on scholars to respond to a community’s needs and interests (Flower, *Community Literacy*; Long; Cella, Goldblatt, Johnson, Mathieu, Parks, and Restaino). These needs and interests are typically different from those of academic institutions

(Coogan and Ackerman; Cushman), creating more opportunities for misaligned expectations, goals, and timelines. Furthermore, the consequences for failure in a community project are somewhat different. Within traditional academic settings, we often interpret failure in terms of individual disappointments, for instance, publication rejections or low grades. In community settings, however, failure may include more widely experienced difficulties, such as an inability to secure resources or gain support to complete necessary tasks; perceived failures may also damage or end relationships with community partners (Rumsey and Nihiser). These risks may be amplified for graduate students and novice scholars who are in precarious positions themselves (McCool), who are often still defining their scholarly identities, and who might be following strict timelines to degree completion or tenure review.

Community-based work is also risky because its successes and failures are often felt but may be difficult to define (Holmes). For some, a successful community project might yield something tangible, like circulating new texts or media that publicize an issue (Deans; Mathieu and George; Cushman and Green), creating community-university partnerships (Goldblatt), or assembling a protest or community meeting (Giddens). For others, a successful community project may not yield a tangible outcome, but it does something useful for the community. Jeffrey Grabill links the goals of community work to notions of usefulness, which he connects to a “methodology of engagement” focused on helping others assemble: “to be useful as a public rhetorician or engaged researcher is to become one who understands associations and, in understanding them, becomes a creator of associations” (195). In addition to usefulness, expectations for success might be further shaped by aspirations for social transformation, which Steve Parks maintains should be the (admittedly utopian) vision of community-based work.

The difficulty with such diverse representations of success, however, is that novice researchers may be more likely to ascribe “failure” to community work that does not produce outcomes that are easily recognizable.<sup>2</sup> Scholars with less experience doing community work, in particular, may perceive their work as failing if: (1) it cannot be traced to a tangible, planned outcome; (2) it does not appear immediately “useful”; or (3) it does not produce some kind of visible “social transformation.” In our cases, Carolyn felt she had failed to achieve the planned outcome of the childcare center, Amanda was concerned that she had failed to “empower” rural girls (a type of social transformation), and Mary worried that she had failed to create a “useful” guide for parents. Our concern is that the expectations for observable “outcomes” may make community-based work particularly susceptible to logics of stigmatized failure. The anxiety, shame, and feelings of individual shortcoming associated with stigmatized failure may lead novice scholars in particular to avoid community work. Novice scholars may experience failures as roadblocks rather than as often necessary, temporary setbacks that create opportunities for generative and transformative thinking.

## HOW WE GOT UNSTUCK: THREE RHETORICAL PROBLEM-SOLVING STRATEGIES FOR FAILURE ANALYSIS

In what follows, we illustrate how we adapted three problem-solving strategies from a community literacy course to help one another get unstuck from the impasse of a failed community research experience. As Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower explain, these problem-solving strategies are integral to an approach to community literacy that involves cultivating rhetorical capacities for navigating the people, goals, values, and activities that constitute a live community. While these problem-solving strategies—adaptive problem-solving, rivaling, and critical incident interviewing (outlined below in Table 1)—are “literate practices” conventionally used in community literacy to scaffold intercultural inquiry (Higgins, Long, and Flower 10), we argue that they can also be used as strategies for helping community-based scholars create more collaborative “reflective space” (Flower, “Consequences” 64) and transform experiences of failure into opportunities for inquiry.

Table 1. Three Rhetorical Problem-Solving Strategies for Community Literacy

Community Literacy Problem-Solving Strategy	
<b>Adaptive Problem-solving</b>	a strategy for distinguishing “technical problems” that have fairly recognizable solutions from “adaptive challenges” that require learning to discover workable solutions. <sup>3</sup>
<b>Rivaling</b>	a strategy for helping writers to imagine alternative interpretations of a question, conflict, or problem. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Critical Incident Interviewing</b>	a strategy for eliciting the story-behind-the story or contextualized accounts of how people actually experience community problems. <sup>5</sup>

When the three of us gathered at the 2018 Conference on College Composition and Communication, we began talking about our struggles to make sense of our attempts to engage in community-based work, attempts that we each initially interpreted as failures. Inspired by an assignment we had done in our coursework on community leadership where we wrote “failure narratives,” we each composed narratives about our recent failed experiences so that we could analyze them together. We then collaboratively applied these problem-solving strategies, which each of us had learned and practiced during our graduate training in community literacy.

## FAILURE ANALYSIS: THREE CASES OF FAILURE

In what follows, we illustrate how we analyzed each of our cases: *First*, we give excerpts from our failure narratives that describe each of us at an impasse—unsure whether and how to move forward

in our community work. *Second*, we describe how a year after we first shared our failure narratives, we adapted a problem-solving strategy from community literacy theory to help each other analyze and reconsider the reasons we initially attributed to those failures. *Third*, we offer our current analysis of how those problem-solving strategies transformed our perceptions of previous failures, helping us to see those experiences not as end points, but generative turning points leading to new questions in a longer trajectory of community-engaged research.

*The Case of the Failed Childcare Center: Technical Problem or Adaptive Challenge?*

As Higgins, Long, and Flower argue, rhetorical analysis in community literacy goes beyond the elements of Bitzer's rhetorical situation (exigence, audience, and constraints) to "reflecting critically on the process of problem solving itself" (12-3). We found paying attention to the *processes* of how community problems are solved and defined to be key for understanding Carolyn's "failure" to start a childcare center for graduate students at her university. From the outset, the community problem had already been framed as "a lack of childcare for graduate students," which seemed to suggest an obvious solution: create a campus childcare center. Here Carolyn describes how this initial framing of the problem activated the typical university protocols for addressing an institutional problem:

An advisory board of administrators recommended that we write a report and proposal for a childcare center that documented the number of graduate students at the university who had children and provided benchmarking information about childcare support and accommodation policies for graduate students at other peer institutions. Since there was skepticism about the number of graduate students this issue really affected, we began with a survey that asked department representatives to document how many graduate students had children and needed childcare. We collaboratively drafted a proposal and then we presented that proposal at meetings with deans, the provost, and our own general assembly. But at every meeting where we took the proposal, we got tangled in logistical barriers we couldn't overcome: a childcare center was too complicated to consider given the current real estate market in the city, the funding complications, and legal concerns about staffing. It felt like we failed at every turn. (Commer)

As the graduate student assembly president leading the initiative, Carolyn felt she had failed to meet

***"Whereas technical problems can be resolved through authoritative expertise or an organization's current structures, procedures, and tools, an adaptive challenge requires that people confront contradictions and tensions in values that are often more difficult to perceive."***

the needs of her constituents when the childcare center proposal was rejected. While she was in a position of authority to advocate for graduate students with children, she did not have the authority to create a childcare center without securing the support of multiple other institutional stakeholders. Additionally, as the "English major" on the writing team for the proposal, she also felt a

strong sense of guilt that the childcare proposal did not seem to get the traction the graduate students

had hoped for.

A year later, we analyzed Carolyn's case using Ronald Heifetz's work on adaptive leadership to try to understand the nature of the problem that prompted the failure. What we call the adaptive problem-solving strategy distinguishes "technical problems" that have fairly recognizable solutions from "adaptive challenges" that require learning and inquiry to discover workable solutions (Heifetz). Whereas technical problems can be resolved through authoritative expertise or an organization's current structures, procedures, and tools, an adaptive challenge requires that people confront contradictions and tensions in values that are often more difficult to perceive. In Carolyn's case, where she had initially framed the community problem as "lack of a childcare center," her efforts seemed stalled by what she perceived to be her limited *authority* as a graduate student to sway significant university decisions or navigate logistical barriers related to funding; in other words, she assumed that the primary reason for her failure was based in a technical problem related to her *role* in the institution.

Using the adaptive problem-solving framework, however, we challenged this initial assumption about the limitations of her role by analyzing her case in terms of the values, knowledge, habits and behaviors at play, factors which generated a different set of questions for developing deeper understandings of community problems and considering the nature of failure. These questions focus on issues of values, knowledge, and habits and behaviors, as represented in Table 2.

- *Values*: what were the values guiding people in the situation, especially when conflict emerged?
- *Knowledge*: what things were not known that still needed to be discovered or learned?
- *Habits*: what habits and behaviors would need to have changed to make a real difference?

Table 2. Questions Analyzing the Childcare Case from An Adaptive Perspective

Adaptive Problem-Defining Concepts	Inquiry-Driven Questions
<b>Values</b>	What values do graduate students prioritize when it comes to caring for dependents? How do those values manifest in institutional practice?
<b>Knowledge</b>	What knowledge about care work do we still need to address this issue? What do we still need to better understand before taking any action?
<b>Habits</b>	What institutional habits support or contribute to this issue of childcare? How might we do things differently to support the needs of graduate students with children or other dependents?

Once we reframed the problem as an adaptive challenge, we could consider other reasons for the failure to establish the childcare center that were not solely about Carolyn's limited institutional authority or inability to write a persuasive enough proposal. Interviewing Carolyn more about her

experience, it became clear that not all the graduate students working on the proposal were even in agreement about defining the value of “good childcare.” For some graduate students, she explained, the value of “affordability” was most important, while for others it was most important to have “high-quality” educational experiences for their children. Others prioritized “flexibility” and the need for care whenever a research meeting popped up unexpectedly. Some graduate students reported that though they did not have children of their own, they felt unseen and unsupported as the primary caregivers for aging parents or siblings with disabilities. Such testimonials opened up questions that made clear the community needed new knowledge to address these issues, such as knowing the variety of ways that graduate students had taken on responsibility to care for dependents not included in current institutional definitions. Finally, considering the university’s institutional culture highlighted how creating a culture of care would also mean changing some deeply ingrained community habits, such as scheduling important meetings and events after work hours, a practice that often excluded those with high-need dependents.

In reframing the source of Carolyn’s failure from a technical problem to an adaptive challenge, we could locate different factors in the situation from the ones to which Carolyn initially attributed her failure. For example, instead of the key factors being Carolyn’s *lack of authority or individual effort*, we began to locate the adaptive challenge in the university community as one of competing values of stability and flexibility when it comes to care work, lack of knowledge about caregiving responsibilities, and the challenge of changing deeply ingrained institutional habits, such as sponsoring activities and schedules, that created additional strain for those with dependents. Redefining the problem as an adaptive challenge in which a community confronts these issues helped us to transform Carolyn’s initial interpretation of what went wrong, but also went *well*. Her group’s efforts to start the childcare center may not have materialized as a physical space, but they helped convene a networked group in the university that continues to work on issues of support for those with dependents. This reframing was generative in that it cast Carolyn’s role in a new light, not as a leader who could “solve” the childcare problem with one technical solution, but as a convener of a conversation that drew people into a complex community issue.

The “adaptive challenge” reframing has a wide range of potential applications in community-based work. Notably, this type of reframing can help novice researchers define and reconsider situations to recognize the values of different stakeholders. This is important because community leaders or researchers doing community work may feel pressure to produce tangible outcomes, but this pressure may lead to quick or easy solutions that may not be in the best interest of the community longer term or may even create new conflicts. The adaptive problem-solving approach offers a vocabulary for considering situations in terms of the process of problem solving itself, which means that it prioritizes asking questions *before* jumping to solutions. In other words, it prioritizes inquiry and deliberation about a situation, rather than quick or easy solutions. And it focuses on developing and activating relationships with other stakeholders, rather than coming up with top-down solutions. In this way, adaptive problem-solving can help researchers consider their positionality less in terms of individual capabilities and more in terms of activating communal and shared capabilities.



*The Case of Conflicting Stakeholders: Rival Interpretations of Empowerment in a Rural Literacy Initiative*

Amanda left North Carolina feeling she had failed to enact the mission of a rural literacy program to “empower” rural Appalachian middle-school girls. This program was designed to provide an innovative place-based experience where the girls composed digital stories, participated in reading groups to discuss books featuring female protagonists, and learned about Appalachian practices and traditions such as weaving. Amanda’s primary role was to mentor a group of undergraduate interns who helped the girls to compose their stories. At the start of the summer, two digital storytelling facilitators taught the digital composition process to Amanda and the interns so they could teach the process to the girls. A selection of the stories would be showcased in a community exhibition at the end of the summer. In her narrative, Amanda describes how she and the program interns struggled to put empowerment into action:

It became clear that we weren’t entirely sure of what we were supposed to be helping the girls to achieve with their stories. Was it okay if a girl produced a seemingly unfinished story without a linear narrative as long as she had learned to use skills of digital composition? Should we encourage the girls to include Appalachian experiences in their stories? The program was supposed to offer a place-based curriculum, but the interns and I struggled to figure out how to encourage the girls to be place-based without approaching cultural stereotypes. With so little time, these questions were never fully addressed, and the girls ended up with a hodgepodge of stories on topics ranging from experiences in foster care to relationships with best friends. Some were polished, others comically unfinished. While I was not quite sure what the program directors expected, I knew they would not be pleased. (Tennant, “Case of Conflicting Stakeholders”)

In this passage, Amanda negotiates her efforts to help the girls maintain rhetorical agency and to meet a tangible goal by producing a set of polished narratives about girls growing up in the mountains. She realized that her work as a college writing instructor had not prepared her to help these girls understand the audience in the ways she had hoped. In the college writing classroom, Amanda rarely struggled to teach students to identify and respond to audience expectations. This task was more challenging for Amanda in a setting where community stakeholders’ expectations for the stories were unclear and felt beyond her control.

When collaboratively analyzing Amanda’s case, we used the strategy of rivaling to generate some of the “hidden” perspectives of other stakeholders. As defined by Linda Flower, Elenore Long, and Lorraine Higgins, rivaling is “an *attitude* toward inquiry . . . [that] addresses problems as genuinely open questions” and works to build new meaning by actively seeking out alternative interpretations or rival hypotheses of the problem at hand (30). Flower, Long, and Higgins explain how rivaling is appropriate when there are no clear answers to a problem and “when our current standard means of inquiry are not up to the job, when they are too limited, too myopic to anticipate the big world in which our judgments have to survive” (50). In other words, an active search for rivals is necessary when our current problem-solving strategies have failed.

The process of rivaling pushed us to identify unseen stakeholders who were not immediately

apparent to Amanda. Rivaling further led us to realize that stakeholders had different goals for the program, reflecting fundamental differences in how they interpreted the organization's mission of empowerment. Scholars have recognized how empowerment is not an inherently altruistic goal of community-based work but is rather a contested concept characterized by conflicting definitions (Flower, *Community Literacy* 123; Hill; McLaughlin). By considering how rivaling interpretations of empowerment shaped stakeholders' goals, Amanda began to see where some of the conflicts may have emerged. Table 3 names the stakeholders' rival goals and allows us to identify key points of tension that can be linked to different interpretations of empowerment. The interpretations of empowerment in the table below are adapted from Linda Flower's "scripts for empowerment" (*Community Literacy* 125–36).

Table 3. Comparison of Stakeholder Goals and Interpretations of Empowerment

Community Stakeholders	Goals for Rural Literacy Program	Interpretations of Empowerment
Appalachian Middle-School Girls	To write stories that honor relationships with parents, grandparents, and friends, to showcase unique experiences or abilities to overcome struggle, and to share personally meaningful photos or music.	Expressing a <i>Personal Voice</i>
Undergraduate Interns	To help the middle-school girls create personally meaningful stories that they were proud to share with their friends and families.	Expressing a <i>Personal Voice</i>
Program Directors	To create stories that represent unique cultural practices of Appalachia and provide the middle-school girls with opportunities to take part in and recognize the value of their home traditions and places. To publicly circulate stories that showcase the girls' unique cultural perspectives, advertise the program, and even attract potential donors.	Expressing a <i>Cultural Voice</i>

Program Donors	To support a program that helps underserved populations and preserves and honors unique cultural traditions.	Expressing a <i>Cultural Voice</i>
Digital Storytelling Facilitators	To help the girls hone their skills in multimedia composition that would prepare them for employment or college.	Developing Communicative Competence
Amanda, Post-Doctoral Fellow	To help the girls critique the marginalization of Appalachia and engage in meaningful dialogue about Appalachian issues.	Developing Critical Consciousness

One point of tension emerged between the program directors who wanted the girls' stories to showcase Appalachian traditions and the interns who wanted to honor the girls' choices *not* to write quintessential mountain narratives. This dilemma became even more complicated when Amanda realized that the directors wanted place-based stories that would appeal to potential donors who wished to support a program that preserved local culture; though these donors were unseen, their financial contributions were crucial to the program's success. The directors' goals appeared to rely on the assumption that rural girls are empowered through opportunities to craft a sense of cultural identity expressed through dialect, local music, or cultural narratives. The interns, on the other hand, also wanted stories that allowed space for personal expression, but they felt that the expectation for place-based narratives might actually restrict the girls' efforts to express themselves by compelling them to appeal to cultural stereotypes. While the directors sought to empower the girls through the opportunity to express their *cultural* voices, the interns wanted to empower the girls to express their *personal* voices by maintaining the agency to choose their own topics, regardless of whether the topics aligned with dominant narratives of Appalachian identity.

The interns' goal of helping the girls to create personally meaningful stories also conflicted somewhat with the digital storytelling facilitators' goal of helping the girls to learn skills of multimodal composition. From the facilitators' perspective, a girl who created a collaged or disjointed narrative, even if she liked the structure, should be encouraged to revise to gain skills, for example, in ordering images and incorporating narration. The facilitators' perspective reflects the assumption that marginalized rhetors are empowered through communicative competence that will allow them to assimilate to the dominant discourse. Unlike the program directors and the interns, the facilitators were less concerned with the content of the stories and more concerned that the composing process would prepare the girls to participate in an increasingly online world. This goal, and its underlying understanding of empowerment, is particularly relevant to Appalachian girls from rural areas who may have less access to the internet and limited experience with technology.

The process of rivaling also led Amanda to consider her own goals. Having studied Paulo Freire and Ira Shor in graduate school, Amanda had expected that the program might lead the girls to

critique the societal forces that have marginalized Appalachia, for example, by addressing the dwindling economic opportunities within some rural Appalachian communities. Or perhaps the program could have created opportunities for the girls to discuss issues that impact Appalachia with other community stakeholders, to actively engage in discussions from which young people are typically excluded. None of the stakeholders seemed to prioritize these goals; even the program directors who valued place-based stories seemed to do so to honor cultural traditions, not to engage in cultural critique or action-oriented discussion. The fact that Amanda's goal did not align with those of the other community stakeholders contributed to her sense of confusion and failure. However, the rivaling process led Amanda to recognize how her goals were informed by theories of empowerment through developing a level of critical consciousness that allows for resistance and intercultural dialogue.

The strategy of rivaling can lead community initiatives to uncover competing definitions of key concepts in community-based work—including empowerment, advocacy, agency, and literacy—and to consider how these definitions inform stakeholder perspectives. Amanda's case suggests that by keeping the concept of empowerment open for inquiry, community programs can develop a collective understanding of the challenges they face and the importance of considering multiple

***“The strategy of rivaling can lead community initiatives to uncover competing definitions of key concepts in community-based work—including empowerment, advocacy, agency, and literacy—and to consider how these definitions inform stakeholder perspectives.”***

ways to empower. Amanda's case also provides further evidence for Rumsey and Nihiser's assertion that “the more stakeholders there are in a project, the more dynamic the collaboration must be to account for it” (143). In other words, Amanda's case helps us to see how community-based writing projects are accountable to networks

of stakeholders whose complexities challenge notions of audience as they are typically discussed in the composition classroom. Without fully understanding the complexities of community stakeholder perspectives, graduate students and novice scholars may be more likely to “fail” or feel as though they have failed to adequately respond to community needs, when in reality such collaborations may require multiple attempts and revisions to account for the dynamic nature of a community.

#### *The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews: The Hidden Logics of Complex Emotional Connection*

In helping each other analyze our failures using these problem-solving strategies, we began to see a common theme related to personal and emotional connection. For Mary and Amanda, it became clear that having a strong emotional and personal connection to their community work was a strong motivation for the work itself; however, this connection could also engender limiting assumptions about the community's needs, goals, and experiences. Mary's relationship with her disabled brother motivated her to focus her dissertation on disability advocacy. Her connection to her brother and her observations of her family's attempts to advocate on his behalf led her to question whether her research goals—among them, completing her dissertation and creating an advocacy resource guide for

parents—were really supporting disabled people’s autonomy and agency. While Mary was eventually able to name these potentially limiting assumptions, the experience of interviewing parents for her dissertation was emotionally difficult and disorienting to both her scholarly and personal identities. Because she did not use the dissertation interviews in her final dissertation project, nor was she able to create a useful guide for the families she interviewed, Mary felt as if she had failed a community that she was committed to supporting.

The following excerpt from Mary’s narrative shows how her interview with Diane and her adult daughter Lucy (who, like Mary’s brother, has Down syndrome), alongside her recent conversations with her brother, led her to question the goal of the interviews and whether she could see her project as a worthwhile endeavor:

Of course I was happy to see that Lucy had a dream [of having her own apartment] and was living it. But, her response also made me think about my brother and his future; it made me question the way I was envisioning and supporting his dreams (had I been?). These questions were especially difficult because I had recently asked my brother if I could write a book about him (my dissertation), and he had told me no. Did this mean I shouldn’t be writing the dissertation I was writing about disability advocacy? (Glavan, “The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews”)

Here, Mary experienced doubt about her research aims following her interaction with Lucy and a sense of guilt that even the topic of her dissertation (disability advocacy) might upset her brother. Frustrated by multiple interviews that brought up difficult memories or fears for her brother’s future and wellbeing, Mary ended up abandoning her interview transcripts and not using the data in her dissertation project. The dissertation instead became a rhetorical history of disability advocacy and special education law but did not include the perspectives of her interviewees. While disappointing, her choice seemed to make sense at the time, given her timeframe to complete her dissertation. But Mary felt she had failed her community because she had not been able to use the interview data to develop a more “useful” outcome. Initially, Mary attributed her failure to two issues she believed were her deficiencies as a scholar: “I should have been able to get past my emotions to be more objective” and “I should have managed my time better.”

But when we analyzed Mary’s case a year later using critical incident interviewing, a technique for revealing the story-behind-the-story and revealing the “hidden logic” behind what people do (Flower, “Talking Across Difference” 41), new details emerged that troubled these initial interpretations. This technique is a particular type of interview method that was developed to identify “critical incidents” where something went wrong in order to learn from the case. In conducting critical incident interviews, the interviewer prompts interviewees to name particular moments when the problem occurred and locate the complex situational factors at play (Flanagan).<sup>6</sup>

Critical incident interviewing is especially useful for getting interviewees to move beyond generalized impressions of a failed experience to describe particular details about how events unfolded. For example, Mary had initially reported that one source of her failure was that her personal connection to the issue made her feel “really emotional.” But when asked, “Can you name a time when you felt really emotional in the process? Tell us what happened,” she explained: “The interviews

were exhausting and confusing. Most stretched longer than the time I requested, three participants introduced me to their sons/daughters, and during at least half of the interviews, as with Diane, we just sat there and cried for a little while” (Glavan, “The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews”). These previously hidden details suggest that Mary’s initial attribution of failure to feeling “really emotional” did not fully account for the personal and emotional complexity of the interviews—both for the interviewees and for Mary herself. While Mary went into the interviews with the goal of better understanding the rhetorical challenges parents faced as advocates for their children, she had not expected that these challenges would be so distinctively different and emotional, nor that interacting with parents in this way would activate similar emotions related to her role as an advocate for her brother. In other words, an alternative explanation for Mary’s failure began to take shape: the affective dimensions of community-based work are highly complex and personally situated, such that we may not be prepared to negotiate these challenges without support, especially in light of expectations to follow conventional timelines and research pathways (e.g., the dissertation).

Further inquiry with the critical incident interviewing technique also revealed that while time constraints may have been one reason why Mary abandoned the interview data, another reason may have been a misalignment of expectations for what the interviews would reveal, similar to the “faulty expectations” Rumsey and Nihiser describe that they brought to their collaborative family history research projects (142–3). When Mary was prompted to describe a particular incident when she believed she had not “managed her time” well, she began to describe how she had gotten stuck trying to interpret the data she had collected:

I had expected the parents to tell stories more in line with the experiences of my own family: frustration and anger directed at school district officials. But the parents I interviewed articulated a variety of needs, goals, joys, and frustrations: some were also angry and had hired attorneys; but some were grateful for the resources available to them; one was broken-hearted, but not because the school had done anything wrong, but because, after so many years of trying, her son still didn’t have any friends. The data didn’t reveal one single rhetorical challenge they all seemed to be experiencing, nothing I could trace that was generalizable or could be ‘solved’ with a workshop or pamphlet. (Glavan, “The Case of the Failed Dissertation Interviews”)

Mary had expected her interviewees to offer accounts with more similarities because her participants were part of the same “community” of parents of children with disabilities. Mary had also expected that parents would articulate specific rhetorical needs and goals; with this information, Mary assumed she could identify common challenges and best practices, then develop some kind of tool or guide that could support their rhetorical work as advocates for their children. But the parents offered no such information. Instead, what these parents reported to need most—and may have, in fact, found most useful—was simply having Mary listen to their stories and acknowledge their complex yet very individual experiences as parents of children with disabilities.

In short, Mary’s reflective critical incidents suggested an alternative explanation for her sense of failure: interviewees not only had drastically different personal experiences with advocacy, but they also seemed to have different expectations for the interview and Mary’s role as an “expert.”

Representing the failure in this way raised new questions for Mary in her future community work: How do community-engaged scholars account for personal difference in public advocacy? How might we develop an approach to advocacy that better accounts for these personally situated, emotional moments rather than ignoring them? As community-engaged scholars, we often have personal connections to and

emotional investments in the communities with whom we work, connections and investments that may shape our expectations for what we should be able to accomplish as researchers, as well as what the community itself might need or expect from us.

By examining critical incidents within complex community problems, researchers can better understand the diverse needs, goals, and challenges of community members. When we feel a strong personal and emotional connection to a community, we may expect to see our own experiences reflected in other members. Critical incident interviewing offers community researchers a tool for thinking more critically about this expectation without diminishing our emotions or discontinuing our work in the community because it feels too personal. Instead of interpreting misaligned expectations as individual failures, critical incident interviews can support a process of transformation that reveals options for continued work.

***“When we feel a strong personal and emotional connection to a community, we may expect to see our own experiences reflected in other members. Critical incident interviewing offers community researchers a tool for thinking more critically about this expectation without diminishing our emotions or discontinuing our work in the community because it feels too personal.”***

## IDENTIFYING UNACKNOWLEDGED CONSEQUENCES AND OPTIONS FOR INQUIRY

Using adaptive problem solving, rivaling, and critical incident interviewing to analyze our cases, we were able to transform our initial perceptions about the sources of failure and to develop generative questions for future inquiry. In addition, this collaborative analysis helped us to identify other consequences of our work that were previously unseen. For example, after analyzing her case using the adaptive problem-solving strategy, Carolyn was able to see an important outcome in her community: the creation of a vibrant local public of graduate students with children. In community debates about the childcare center, many graduate students with children voiced the concern that what they lacked was *social* support, since they often felt isolated from other graduate students who did not share the same caregiving demands; however, this concern was hard for many other stakeholders to understand when the issue was framed around the specific goal of creating a childcare center. From these debates, a support group for graduate students with children emerged, which organized regular lunches and events to discuss the experiences and needs of graduate students with caregiving responsibilities. This group helped facilitate the creation of a parent advocate position

at the university, a family support group with a more expansive definition of family, and childcare grants that continue today.

In Amanda's case, the strategy of seeking rival hypotheses helped her to recognize a turning point in her work with the literacy program. This point occurred when the intern team of college students proposed a podcast project as an alternative to the digital story for the older girls, many of whom had already created stories in previous summers. While the program directors approved the alternative podcast plan, they specified that the podcast had to incorporate Appalachian, place-based themes. This specification confused and frustrated some interns, who thought the girls should be able to create podcasts on whatever issues mattered to them like bullying and dress codes at school. During a meeting with the interns, Amanda explained how a podcast about typical middle school girl themes would not likely appeal to current and potential donors who might ask, "How are the experiences of these girls different from other girls across the country? Why would I donate money to this organization if it is not helping girls to overcome unique challenges or honor underrepresented cultures and traditions?" The interns responded to Amanda by stating, "Well that makes sense. Why didn't the directors explain it in that way?" While Amanda initially saw this meeting as a somewhat isolated incident in the summer, the strategy of rivaling led her to see the situation differently, as a key point when her role was instrumental in helping the interns see themselves as part of a community of stakeholders who may have goals and motivations different from theirs.

For Mary, the process of reconsidering the source of her failures enabled her to begin developing a "personally situated" approach to advocacy (Glavan, "Toward a Personally Situated Approach"). This process grew out of the difficulties she encountered in her interviews, as well as the intensity of emotions she experienced in her efforts to support and advocate with her brother. Initially, Mary had looked primarily for what she believed would be useful ways to support parents' efforts to advocate for and with their disabled children. But because much of this advocacy work is more private than public (i.e., protected by education privacy laws) and more individual than collective (i.e., parents have legal authority to advocate for/with their own individual child), the models of community-based work she had studied in graduate school were limited and often could not account for the kind of complex emotional needs she was discovering. This led her to question: What might an approach to community-based work look like that accounts for how people's rhetorical goals and needs are shaped by complex affective challenges? Her response was to develop an approach to advocacy more inclusive of individual experience.

Our goal in highlighting these previously unseen consequences is not to imply that we did not fail to meet the expectations we set at the outset, or to argue that we were somehow "really successful" after all; rather, we aim to show how collaborative reflection helped us uncover alternative accounts for our failure and develop new forms of inquiry. This wider view or transformed perception was significant because: (1) it re-shaped our criteria for what may count as a "success" or positive consequence; and (2) it helped us transform the impasse of failure by opening up questions and new options for action. Collective reflection on failure, we believe, is an important literate practice for faculty, students, and community stakeholders working toward personal and public inquiry within and across institutional boundaries. Since research teams, centers, and collectives are not as common



in the field of rhetoric and composition (or in the humanities more broadly), we see it as especially important to help novice scholars develop strategies for support and collective reflection on research failures.

Our efforts at collaborative reflection reveal key characteristics about community-based work that need to be considered in the development of participatory research projects and programs. The communities where we worked engaged a broader range of stakeholders than are typically considered in academic writing. As we have described, our work addressed various audiences with competing goals, values, expectations, and understandings of key concepts. This finding suggests that community literacy programs should prepare students to anticipate and engage with diverse perspectives without perceiving misaligned expectations as a sign of failure. Mary's case, in particular, suggests that because traditional pathways of scholarly production tend to individualize and conceal experiences of failure, graduate programs might explore ways to support a wider range of dissertation processes and provide space for ongoing collaborative reflection on experiences of failure throughout the process. In sum, this article suggests that collaborative reflection of successes and failures is itself a literate practice and, furthermore, that we may need better ways to support this practice at the project and program level.

***“In sum, this article suggests that collaborative reflection of successes and failures is itself a literate practice and, furthermore, that we may need better ways to support this practice at the project and program level.”***

## TRANSFORMING FAILURE INTO INQUIRY

Theories of “transformative learning” often emphasize the importance of failure as a starting point that can lead to personal transformation (Mezirow); however, we found that the experience of failure alone did not automatically lead to transformation in our cases. Instead, we found that a generative sense of inquiry only occurred *after* we collaboratively analyzed our cases using the problem-solving strategies. We believe our cases suggest three contributions to theories of failure and mentoring in community work:

- (1) Given the range of expectations about what constitutes success in community work, learning from failure in community setting may require concepts or problem-solving strategies that can help individuals account for the dynamic nature of ongoing problem definition, the rival perspectives of multiple people or stakeholders in the community, and the situated knowledge and emotions that motivate people's stakes in an issue.
- (2) Given that analyzing failure is usually emotionally difficult and runs the risk of confirming individual bias, learning from failure may best be facilitated in collaboration with others who can help offer alternative perspectives and rival interpretations. Ideally, this process of collaborative reflection should also be extended to include community stakeholders.

(3) Given that failure is often a felt feeling that is hard to describe, recorded reflection—written, spoken, or other<sup>7</sup>—is key to failure analysis. For our part, writing our individual “failure narratives” forced each of us to interpret and represent our experiences. These written narratives also helped initiate a *process of inquiry* by providing “data” that we could examine in light of the alternative interpretations generated by the three problem-solving strategies.

Adapting the problem-solving strategies and using them collaboratively, we were able to transform a stigmatized sense of failure, characterized by feelings of individual frustration, confusion, and disappointment, which could have caused us to simply turn away from community work because failure seemed discouraging. By helping each other develop new rhetorical representations of our initial failures, we were also able to reconsider our roles as community researchers, our guiding values for community-engaged work, and our research moving forward.

Most notably, these transformations have allowed us to identify important questions that remain central to our current work as scholars and teachers today. Now in a faculty position, Carolyn mentors graduate students who are learning to conduct community-engaged research, and who often encounter similar kinds of failures and challenges we have described here; she has found that drawing from these problem-solving strategies has become a key way of collaboratively supporting novice researchers. Amanda teaches and supports new writing instructors at an Appalachian university. As she advises Appalachian students, she considers how her own understandings of empowerment shape her work and how her students may bring different goals for their courses and careers after college. Amanda has also continued to research how Appalachian college students navigate the university and negotiate goals in their academic writing (Tennant, “Rhetorical (In)visibility”). In her work teaching writing, Mary has developed these problem-solving strategies into writing and reflection assignments that ask students to inquire collaboratively into moments of failed self advocacy with the goal of transforming their understanding of these failures. As she continues researching and supporting disability advocates, particularly her brother and other young adults with disabilities, she continues to question how people’s personal and emotional connection to an issue creates unique rhetorical challenges and what the role of a “useful” supporter looks like in these situations.

We hope that by offering our experiences of failure, and our process of adapting these problem-solving strategies to analyze them, we have provided a model to other community researchers—not only those new to community work but also advanced scholars seeking to offer support and mentorship—for how to transform failure into inquiry.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We use the terms “disabled people/children” and “people/children with disabilities” interchangeably because both terms are used by people in the disability community; however, both terms are imperfect and subject to critique. “Disabled person” can emphasize the disability rather than the person, and “person with a disability” can diminish the extent to which disability is a valued sociocultural identity. We employ both terms to recognize that: (1) all representational choices are political choices and (2) identity-based representational choices should be made by people who belong to the represented group.

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about the work of Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tanks, see: <https://www.cmu.edu/dietrich/english/courses/course-webpages/community-think-tank/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See Chris Gallagher’s “The Trouble with Outcomes: Pragmatic Inquiry and Educational Aims.” In light of Gallagher’s argument about the limitations with the rhetoric of outcomes, we choose to use “consequences” to describe what happened in our cases.

<sup>4</sup> The adaptive problem-solving strategy is derived from the work of leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz, who developed the theory of Adaptive Leadership; Sharon Doloz Parks has further operationalized this theory, particularly within the context of examining failure. See *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World*.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of rivaling has been widely developed and operationalized by Linda Flower and many of her students; rivaling is particularly central to work in community literacy studies (e.g., *Community Literacy*). See also *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry* by Flower, Long, and Higgins.

<sup>6</sup> Critical incident interviewing is one among many strategies offered by Linda Flower to elicit situated knowledge. The term “situated knowledge” indexes local, partial, and experiential ways of knowing or sense making, which people can leverage as powerful interpretive resources in public dialogue. For more on the role of situated knowledge in inquiry-based problem solving see Flower, “Talking Across Difference”; and Higgins, Long, and Flower 21–3.

<sup>7</sup> For more on how to conduct critical incident interviews in community literacy studies see Flower (*Community Literacy* p. 238); for a more general approach see Chell.

<sup>8</sup> We acknowledge that different experiences of embodiment make different forms of expression more or less accessible.

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## Book Review *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History* by Mara Holt

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The first class I ever took as an undergrad with Dr. Mara Holt was titled “Women’s Rhetorics.” I barely knew what rhetorics were (testing out of first-year composition via the AP exam was a mixed blessing for someone who became an English major), and I certainly didn’t know what the word “pedagogy” meant. The first readings in Dr. Holt’s course—Nancy Schniedewind’s “Teaching Feminist Process” and Carolyn Shrewsbury’s “What Is Feminist Pedagogy”—left me a little blindsided. Not only did both address concepts that felt above my understanding, but what I could make out focused on teaching—something that seemed, from my inadequate understanding, as distinct from the focus of the class. (The teacher might be interested in articles like these, I thought, but why would the students be?) This reaction is the almost textbook response of a student who had, until then, been inculcated in the traditional power dynamics of a teacher-focused educational system. Only gradually would I come to understand how different, and important, it was that Dr. Holt was making clear her own pedagogical influences and opening these up for discussion.

Reading Dr. Holt’s book, *Collaborative Learning as Democratic Practice: A History* is for me something like a visit with an old friend, the depth of whose knowledge and experience continues to fascinate me. Having the privilege of Dr. Holt’s academic mentorship in my undergrad and graduate studies, I had heard some of these stories, but far more were new and, as I expected, deeply insightful into where the field of composition studies stands and how it came to be there.

Collaborative learning has, as Holt notes, become pedagogically mainstream, and Holt is perfectly positioned to show us how this came to be. Her pedagogical training with Kenneth Bruffee, at the Brooklyn College Institute in Peer Tutor Training and Collaborative Learning in the 1980s, brought her in on the ground floor of the modern wave of collaborative pedagogy alongside figures such as Carol Stanger and John Trimbur. She went on to complete her PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, site of the first networked computer classrooms. However, as Holt notes, this is all fairly recent history. What is missing is a field-wide understanding of collaborative learning’s roots. Because of this, collaborative pedagogy’s “achievements have not built upon one another, but rather have emerged intermittently in the literature with the self-consciousness of repetitive spontaneous innovations” (3). Instructors, when faced with the challenges of shaping democratic learning environments, haven’t been able to build upon past innovations; instead, the “series of parallel innovations” of collaborative pedagogy throughout the field’s history have been treated as “brand-new problems, and they renew the cyclical process of reinventing the wheel” (5). Holt’s history can help us build upon and learn from this past, specifically in how it demonstrates the links between the composition teacher’s intentions, their theories of writing and democracy, and wider historical/ideological situations in the nation at large.

As the book is primarily historical, the organization is largely chronological. While chapter 1 established the book's context and purpose, Chapter 2 roots us in the Depression-era 1930s, which saw collaborative learning's first flowering under John Dewey. Holt argues that Dewey's contributions to collaborative learning, specifically in the correlations between education and participatory democracy, have been too little recognized. However, they present the origin of a pattern that repeats up until the modern day: collaborative practices are continually shaped in response to social, political, and educational dynamics threatening participatory democracy. Dewey argued that educational practices could in fact reform society, an ideology that influenced his perceptions of what collaboration in the classroom should look like and achieve. However, social changes resulting from World War II and the instigation of the Cold War, as well as educational changes following the flood of baby boom students into college classrooms, spurred a rejection of Dewey's methods. While collaborative practice wasn't abandoned, it functioned in ways that were antithetical to Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of democratized, socially integrated classrooms: traditional hierarchies and teacher authority became reinscribed, not challenged, by student group work.

Because Dewey's experiences in the 1930s were largely forgotten or ignored, when the field of rhetoric and composition began to emerge more strongly in the '60s and '70s, it had few precedents on which to build. However, the ensuing resurgence of interest in education as participatory democracy in these decades made collaborative pedagogy an attractive prospect. In Chapter 3, Holt examines the published literature of the era and discerns two forms of collaborative pedagogy that emerged in writing classrooms: antiestablishment pedagogy and writing support pedagogy. Both forms grappled with questions of teacher authority and student roles in a collaborative learning environment, alongside questions about the very teachability of writing. From these debates emerged three major figures that would go on shape the field in significant ways: Peter Elbow, Kenneth Bruffee, and Ira Shor.

Chapter 4 examines how Elbow, Bruffee, and Shor reintegrated Dewey's philosophies into discussions of collaborative learning. Holt considers each figure alongside his contemporary and ensuing critics, a tactic that allows for a fuller sense of how each has influenced our current pedagogical and classroom contexts. This chapter also sees a flowering of my favorite aspect of this book: the glimpses we are given into Holt's own experiences with the people and ideas she's describing. For example, she explores how her experience with Peter Elbow and the Brooklyn Institute inspired her own writing:

[John] Trimbur suggested I look at my own writing process to discover whether I used Elbow's practices. In fact, the only way I finished my dissertation was to start freewriting. . . . Thanks to Elbow's role in the Brooklyn Institute, my own collaborative practices are balanced in a reciprocal interaction between the individual and the group—however their definitions are constantly revised. (61)

These insights into Holt's own experience and thought process bring a personalism to this project that many histories lack. Rather than feeling like name dropping for its own sake, reading these sections feel like we're getting a ground floor view of the field as it evolved, directly from one of the people forming it.

Chapter 5 moves away from a strictly chronological organization and into a focus on collaborative pedagogy's interactions with feminist theory. Within the chapter itself, we move from the influential works of Schniedewind and Shrewsbury in the 1980s up through the current day, in order to understand how feminist methodologies have shaped—and called into question—accepted tenets of collaborative learning. For example, collaborative pedagogy's desire to decenter teach authority reads very differently when those teachers are already marginalized, an argument broached by feminists of color such as Allison Dorsey. Alongside these necessary interventions, however, Holt argues that these scholars share Dewey's interest in collaborative education as a methodology by which to reform society in progressive ways. This shared interest makes seeing their linked pedagogical history even more potentially valuable.

Chapters 6 and 7 likewise each move from collaborative pedagogy's past and into its present to consider its wider influences in the field—influences that are not always recognized or acknowledged. Specifically, Holt shows that collaborative pedagogy has been essential in the development of writing center theory (chapter 6) and computer-mediated writing (chapter 7). As before, Holt unearths a pattern in which collaborative pedagogy shapes these aspects of the field but is likewise shaped by them in significant ways. However, a lacking sense of this shared history has inhibited each from fully benefiting from collaborative pedagogy's affordances. As Holt notes in her conclusion, "Collaborative learning in the past ninety years has been 'discovered' at least six times, twice since I started the research that culminated in this book" (126).

Knowing our history is always important. But knowing the historical linkages between collaboration, education, writing, and democracy are becoming increasingly necessary to rhetoric and composition as a field. It is these linkages that put us on the frontlines of social change, especially now as we see increasing attacks on our democracy and ever-increasing threats to the survival of the humanities and writing classrooms within our own institutions. Throughout her book, Holt shows what is at stake in the success or failure of collaborative classrooms as agents of participatory democracy. It is an argument, and a history, that has rarely mattered more.



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