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Finding Focus: Authentic Inquiry and Composition in the Third Space

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Dedication

"A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain

play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and utopian points of reference."

–Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

"What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most

daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be

cured."

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*

To my students. To Beth, Will, Daniel, and Elise. And once again, to Carl the Fish.

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Abstract

This research seeks to better understand the attitudes and dispositions of advanced-level English Language Arts students toward the activities of academic research and writing, and to explore the ways that critical pedagogies focused on authentic inquiry and composition interact with these attitudes. The project draws upon research in student motivation, sociocultural definitions of literacy, and theories of hybrid identity in order to discover the potential impact of engaging students in critical reflection on their own meaning-making practices, and of curricular and pedagogical choices aimed at making the lessons of the classroom more relevant to the demands of real-world literacy practices and communities. Through the development of a case study of a high school English classroom engaged in a semester-long personal inquiry project, this research offers insights into effective methods for developing classroom communities and student identities that engage in productive academic and social risks, value inquiry and the ambiguity of knowledge, and undertake acts of composition for authentic audiences.

Keywords: Third Space Theory, multiliteracies, self determination theory, Case Study, AP Language, English Language Arts, critical pedagogy, research, inquiry, composition studies, communities of practice

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Everyday linguistic practices…are excluded from the laboratory, not only because the scientific method requires a delimitation and simplification of its objects, but also because there corresponds to the constitution of a scientific space, as the precondition of any analysis, the necessity of being able to transfer *the objects of study into it. Only what can be transported can be treated…[I]n contrast, the speech* act *cannot be parted from its circumstances.*
–Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Dominant theories of literacy development are grounded in a sociocultural understanding of literacy learning as culturally embedded, contextual, and informed by social and historical experiences of the learner (Perry, 2012; Prior, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). These theories suggest that literacy learning is enhanced when students are invited to engage in reading and writing practices that combine out-of-school interests with authentic textual modalities developed for authentic audiences (Alvermann, 2008; Gee, 2004). Despite this research, much writing instruction in high schools continues to be narrowly centered on teacher-driven, assessment-oriented writing assignments which give little thought to student autonomy and identity (Aughey, 2017; Fulkerson, 1990) even as they fail to develop the thinking and writing skills necessary for success in college and beyond (Addison & McGee, 2010).

If it is true, as proponents of situated cognition insist, that "knowledge and intelligence" ought to be understood as "distributed across social practices," and that "learning is a matter of changing patterns of participation," then it follows that effective teaching must work to engage students in naming, investigating, and practicing real patterns of social participation both within and beyond the classroom, and to address the ensuing issues of identity formation in a complex, pluralistic global society (Gee, 2000, p. 181; see also Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This study seeks to understand how students' perceptions and experiences of literacy manifest when they are invited to engage in an interest-driven inquiry project culminating in the development of

authentic multimodal texts for authentic audiences.

Statement of Problem

Secondary English teachers today are tasked with balancing the often-narrow demands of the academic curriculum with the task of preparing students for a quickly changing social, economic, and technological world (Mihailidis & Cohen, 2013). At the same time, students are engaged in a number of richly meaningful out-of-school literacy practices of their own (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Street, 2003). In the course of their daily lives, students engage with and compose diverse texts in any number of multimodal forms. While some students have discovered the power of what Gee (2004) has called "affinity spaces" for supplementing their understanding of and engagement with these self-selected texts, topics, and issues, many students continue to see in-school and out-of-school literacies as distinct in both content and motive (p. 77). These students are victim to a double blindspot on the part of literacy educators: on the one hand, academic literacies continue to seem a bounded system for which they can find little meaning or purpose beyond the confines of the classroom (Russell, 1997), while on the other hand, their everyday literacy practices–that rich realm of personal interests, texts, and ideas around which they are engaged in well-developed communities of practice–remains beyond the scope of classroom interests and thus untouched by the critical and reflective lenses offered by the academy (The New London Group, 1996). The present study aims at addressing this problem, in the interest of engaging students in critical reflection on both their own meaning-making practices and the relationship between these practices and the systems of education in which they are involved, thereby making the lessons of the classroom more relevant to the demands of real-world literacy.

Purpose of Study

The goal of this qualitative case study was to better understand the attitudes and dispositions of advanced level English Language Arts students toward the activities of academic research and writing, and to explore the ways that Third Space pedagogies focused on authentic inquiry and composition interact with these attitudes. The decision to focus on advanced level students was motivated partly by the particular experiences of the researcher: for better or worse, I've taught almost exclusively in advanced level classrooms for most of the last ten years. Nearly all of my own authentic research interests necessarily grow out of this experience. It is a central assertion of the framework under which this research has developed that meaningful learning most often grows out of authentic investment and immersive experience, and as such it felt most appropriate that the questions themselves were grounded in such a way for me.

But further, advanced level students represent a compelling population about which to ask questions regarding academic dispositions. Students in AP Language and Composition courses tend to perform better academically overall (Finn & Scanlon, 2019). They are students who tend to enroll in multiple advanced level classes across the curriculum. At my school, where the majority of AP Language students are in 10th or 11th grade, students from this class are also bound for at least 1 and sometimes 2 *further* years of advanced-level English *prior* to graduating from high school. Furthermore, AP course populations are composed almost exclusively of students who self-identify as preparing for study at a four-year university. Whatever the "goals"–explicit or implied–of college preparatory education are, these are the students who are most likely to be meeting those goals.

Sociocultural theory suggests that literacy is best understood as an ability to adopt the perspectives and dispositions of a particular discourse community (Barton & Hamilton, 2000;

The New London Group, 1996). It follows that if advanced level students have been more successful in school, it is at least in part for their ability and/or willingness to adopt the dispositions of the academy that have enabled this success. The current study is partially aimed at interrogating the construction of students' conceptions of what constitutes this academic literacy. Do students adopt an academic identity enthusiastically or do they resist it, and to what ends? What tensions exist between their out-of-school identities and those that they must inhabit in the classroom?

Freirian critique sees traditional schooling primarily as a colonizing act (Chavez, 2021; Freire, 2000). From this perspective, students in advanced level classes have often learned deeply a definition of success that requires them to subordinate their own intellectual and emotional interests to those of the academy. All of them have learned to "play the game," and many of them, I fear, have become convinced that it's the only game worth playing. Schools forestall students' academic and intellectual agency–practical action toward autonomous goals–in the interest of "readiness" as measured by content standards, grades, and high-stakes tests (Kohn, 1999). In short, it's been a hell of a long time since anyone, in the academy or otherwise, has asked these students, "Hey, what interests *you*? What problems, questions, or topics do *you* see as worth addressing? What is and ought to be *your* relationship with learning and with your learning community?"

And so this study was also interested in exploring what happens when we do ask these questions of students. I was interested in understanding what happens when students are given the opportunity to decide for themselves what learning is most important, and to reflect on the shape that learning takes and ought to take in their own evolving understanding of themselves and the world. What happens when we invite students to put academic literacies in conversation

with their broader curiosities, concerns, and goals, and to leverage the one in the service of the other? How might such an approach transform student attitudes regarding academic literacies, and what potential does such an approach have for decolonizing the classroom space?

Third Space theory provides a useful vocabulary for investigating these sites of tension (Alvermann, 2008; Bhaba, 1994; Gutierrez, Banquendano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999). Third Space theory itself grows out of a postcolonial tradition interested in understanding the construction of hybrid identities "in-between" local languages and cultures and those that are officially sanctioned by systems of power (Bhaba, 1994, p 38), and it has found broad applicability for researchers in New Literacies, who have posited similar tensions between students' everyday literacy practices and those of the educational systems that they inhabit (Alvermann, 2008; Gutierrez, Baquendano-López, and Tejada, 1999).

This study examined student dispositions toward literacy, in particular inquiry and composition, as they exist and develop in these hybrid spaces. Conducting this research in the context of the secondary writing classroom feels appropriate because the compositional moment may in some ways stand in for the act of learning itself (Emig, 2003). In attempting to write, a student works to bring her developing understanding of the world into focus for herself and others. Furthermore, composition pedagogy, with its focus on subjectivity, process, complexity, and open-endedness, may suffer more than any other area of learning when subjected to the narrow lens of the traditional curriculum models and stands to benefit the most from a new vision for engagement, built on models of authentic learning processes and practices (Elbow, 1993; Murray, 2003). At the center of the study is a curricular and pedagogical model, the Focus Project, that sought to center students' attention on the interactions between their developing sense of intellectual maturity and the activities of the secondary English Language Arts

classroom.

Research Questions

The goal of this qualitative case study was to better understand the attitudes and dispositions of advanced level English Language Arts students toward the activities of academic research and writing, and to explore the ways that Third Space pedagogies focused on authentic inquiry and composition interact with these attitudes. This qualitative study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the classroom act as a hybrid space for negotiating academic identities?

2. How do advanced-level English students respond to classroom pedagogies that focus on authentic inquiry and composition?

Significance of Study

What passes for common sense in public education seems ever more embedded in a paradigm of standardized quantification of learning, characterized not only by the well-documented focus on mandated standardized tests at the school-, system-, and state-levels of education, but also by a movement toward Haussmannized curriculum models that seek to replace the barricades and blind alleys, the arcades and tenements and wandering journeys of authentic thinking and learning with broad avenues of highly scaffolded lessons and predigested bits of understanding to "grasp" on each successive day (Elbow, 1993; Kohn, 1999, 2012). For at least the past thirty years, educational policy has been characterized by an ever-increasing atomization, driven in large part by a market-oriented ideology that sees students, teachers, classrooms, schools, and curriculum as quantized units to be measured, compared, and optimized (Kohn, 1999; The New London Group, 1996). The effects of such a program can be seen in students' dropout & college completion rates, in teacher burn out, and in the crisis in mental

health among young people. Insofar as these programs have diminished the role of relational

dialogue and careful critical thought in shaping identity, community, and politics, the effects can

also be seen in the dissolution of critical discourse in the public sphere and the crisis of

confidence that looms for our democratic ideals.

In some ways, I hope that this study might stand as an act of defiance to this order. The

study aimed to explore the implications of a composition pedagogy that sets aside standard

notions of learning measurement, reimagines what it can mean to implement an English

Language Arts curriculum, and pays heed to the complexity of a developing sense of agency and

purpose in the world. In so doing, it contributes a meaningful alternative paradigm by which

students and teachers can understand their practices in the secondary English classroom. By

turning a critical lens on the practice of classroom composing, I build on the work of previous

researchers, educators, and activists in calling for a broad reevaluation of what learning is for and

how it might best be promoted.

I hope that the most immediate benefactors of this new understanding might be the

participants themselves, as well as my future students and the students of teachers who take up

the call implied by this work. Through the focused and facilitated reflection on their own

practices of inquiry and composition, I hope that these students grow in their view of inquiry and

composition as a rich and powerful field within which to navigate their social worlds. To the

extent that the findings of this study suggest meaningful ways to pursue such ends, I hope that it

can act as a model for other teachers who are frustrated by educational business-as-usual and feel

called to engage students in more authentic forms of meaning-making.

Local Context

The high school in which this study was conducted is a public high school in Georgia

serving 1,823 students in grades 9-12, according to the most recent public data (Georgia

Department of Education, 2023). The school, the sole high school in a small city district, is

demographically diverse, as reflected by reported demographics breakdown. Of the total student

population, 38.2% are White, 31.7% Black, 22.5% Hispanic, 5.3% Multi-racial, and 2.2%

Asian/Pacific Islander (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). Though the school does not

qualify for Title I funds, both the elementary school and the middle school that feed into it are

designated Title I schools, and 46% of students at the high school qualify as economically

disadvantaged (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). 7.3% of the population are English

language learners, and 11.7% are students with disabilities.

Many courses at the school, including courses in the English Language Arts department,

are offered at a number of different academic levels. Students can complete various courses in

small-group, self-contained special education environments, as special-education inclusion

courses, or at the college-preparatory (so-called "on level"), honors, or advanced (AP, IB, or

college dual-enrollment) level.

This research study was undertaken over the course of one semester in my AP Language

& Composition/American Literature course. The course combines the College Board's AP

Language & Composition course curriculum with the American Literature & Composition

curriculum as designed by the Georgia Department of Education. There are two other iterations

of the American Literature course (offered at the "college preparatory" and "honors" levels)

which makes the AP Language/American Literature course one of the few courses in the high

school that is offered at three distinct levels. Though the high school does not impose formal

practices of tracking students, students tend to take many of their academic courses at one of

these levels. Thus students who are enrolled in AP Language/American Literature are often

enrolled, or have taken, a number of other advanced-level courses across the curriculum.

Because most students take American Literature in their Junior year, the course's population is mostly comprised of 11th grade students. The several 10th graders who are in the class are those that have been identified, or have self-identified, as being interested in pursuing the IB Diploma during their 11th and 12th grade years. The course often also includes one or more senior students who, for one reason or another, have not yet completed the graduation-required American Literature course. Each of the pathways into the course is more or less selective in nature. This selection process in my school has effects on student populations that mirror the effects found elsewhere: Students in the AP Combo course tend to be whiter and more affluent than the overall student body. They also are almost exclusively students for whom continuing their education at a four-year undergraduate education is a foregone conclusion. My courses tend to be more female than male, a trend which mirrors that being experienced by universities (citation). One area that the course population has historically resisted broader selectivity trends is in the rather large populations of hispanic students, primarily hispanic women, in the course.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework (see figure 1 below) for this investigation centers around a case study of students in a secondary AP Language & Composition course as they navigate a semester-long independent inquiry and composition project designed to put out-of-school interests and literacy practices in conversation with the tools and dispositions of academic research and writing.

Thus is the case study designed to approach the central research questions from a number of angles and through a diversity of data sources, including whole-class, small-group, and

individual micro-cases as well as a teacher-researcher journal intended to illuminate the research itself as reflexive practice.

Definitions

Authentic Inquiry and composition

To develop a working definition of authentic inquiry and composition, I draw upon Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory in combination with sociocultural conceptions of literacy developed by Multiliteracies Theory (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; Gee, 2004). In their work on motivation, Ryan and Deci (2000) propose that individual thriving is facilitated by environments and behaviors that promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In other words, their research suggests that students are most likely to internalize learning when they feel empowered to make decisions about this learning for themselves, capable of performing the relevant tasks, and when those tasks are linked to their intrinsic desire for belongingness and relatedness with others, especially those whose values align with their own. In their work on Multiliteracies Theory, Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams (2017) argue for a conception of literacy that moves beyond a focus on "communication," or "making meanings for others" to include a deeper consideration of the role of literacy practices in "making meanings for oneself, or literacies as tools for thinking" (p. 37). Gee (2004) insists that "people learn best when their learning is part of highly motivated engagement with social practices they value" (p. 77). Thus authentic inquiry and composition will be understood as those activities in which academic inquiry and composition is practiced toward ends that students select themselves based on their own self-identified interests, questions, and concerns and producing texts in genres and in media designed for audiences beyond the classroom whom the student has an interest in engaging.

Third Space

Central to the design of the study is the concept of a "third space," introduced by Gutierrez and colleagues (1999) to describe a literal and pedagogical space wherein tensions between academic discourses and everyday literacies might be meaningfully negotiated. Of third spaces in learning environments, the researchers say:

> [L]earning contexts are immanently hybrid, that is, polycontextual, multivoiced, and multiscripted. Thus, conflict, tension, and diversity are intrinsic to learning spaces. We have examined these tensions by studying the competing discourses and practices, the official scripts and counterscripts, of the various social spaces of learning communities. By attending to the social, political, material, cognitive, and linguistic conflict, we also have documented these tensions as potential sites of rupture, innovation, and change that lead to learning (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999, p. 287).

Third space, then, presupposes the tensions that exist within classrooms–between student backgrounds and classroom expectations, between teacher and student perspectives, and between competing forms of and priorities regarding literate practice–and sees these tensions not as obstacles to be overcome by institutionalization but as potent sites of hybridity and cross-cultural meaning-making. Moreover, the language of Third Space theory gives this study a vocabulary for confronting the many further tensions for which the classroom acts as a negotiation space, including the tensions between curricular and pedagogical interests, between teacher authority and student autonomy, between classroom learning and the demands of high stakes testing, between analog and digital texts, and between the goals of the classroom and the student and those of the larger educational systems.

Figure 1

Evolving Conceptual Framework
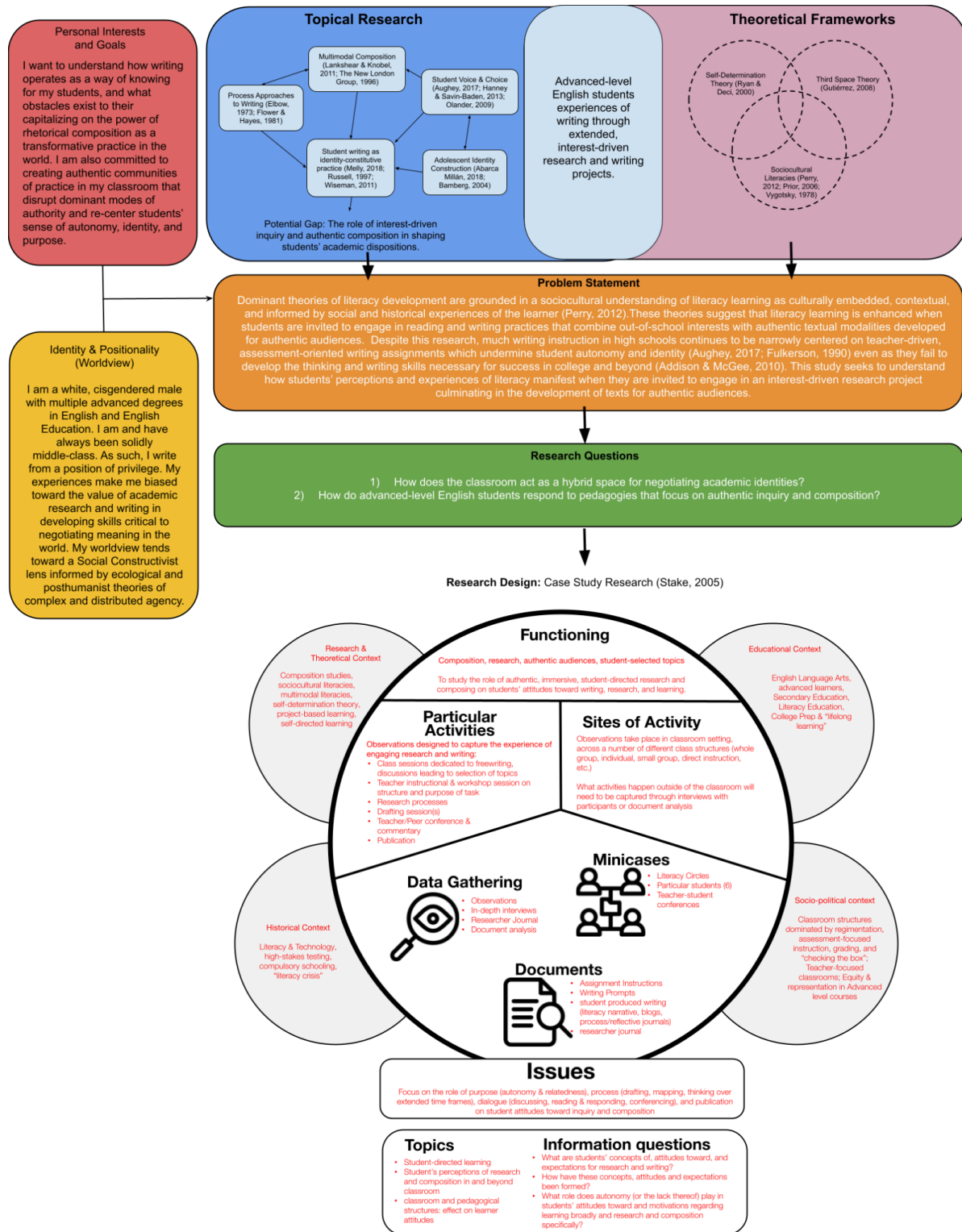
Communities of Practice

Throughout this study, I make reference to the development of and engagement with authentic communities of practice. To understand what is meant by this, I draw on Barton and Hamilton's (2000) concept of literacy practices, which "straddle the distinction between individual and social worlds" shaping and being shaped by the "social rules which regulate the use and distribution of texts, prescribing who may produce and have access to them" (p. 8). Barton and Hamilton distinguish practices from both texts and discrete literacy events, though they insist that the operations of literacy practices are most easily observable in the latter. According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), "communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something that they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Communities of practice, then, are the loosely defined communities within which particular literacy practices are shared and mutually understood.

While Gee (2004), in his analysis of affinity spaces, highlights the analytical problems that can arise from the notion of "communities"--namely, defining the community, who is inside vs. outside of it, and to what extent engagement constitutes membership–his notion of a space minimizes, to some degree, the role of other people (and the relationships that form within and between people) in constituting such a space. According to Gee, "what people have an affinity with (or for) in an affinity space is not first and foremost the other people using the space, but the endeavor or interest around which the space is organized" (p. 84). In this study, I want to push back against this characterization, at least to some extent: the endeavors that students undertake, within and beyond the classroom, are always situated within particular social contexts that include other people, and as such the meanings of these endeavors are always constituted socially, in relation to particular social relations that exist between people (Perry, 2012). To

understand how students take up new identities of practice within newly formed or unfamiliar

communities of practice, I draw on Lave & Wenger's (1991) notion of "legitimate peripheral

participation," which acknowledges that "learners inevitably participate in communities of

practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward

full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (p. 29). Less important than

whether an individual is *in or out* of a community is her relative centrality or peripherality to the

shared practices of the community.

Organization of Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study,

its purposes, and its theoretical and pedagogical grounding. Chapter 2 provides a review of

academic literature relevant to the study. In Chapter 3, I explain the case study methodology by

which this study was conducted, and describe the process of data collection and analysis. Chapter

4 includes a description of the process by which the particular curricular and pedagogical model

was implemented, interpolating data and discussion along the way. In Chapter 5, I discuss the

implications of this data analysis for our understanding of the research questions, including

recommendations for educators and for future researchers.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

"The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk–an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it…The paths that correspond in these intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility."
                                        –Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Sociocultural Theories of Literacy

Prior to the 1990s, educational and pedagogical conversations about literacy tended to base definitions of that term primarily if not exclusively on notions of standard language practice that assumed the primacy of academic literacy grounded in print (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Yancey, 2009). Despite growing calls for a re-evaluation of our assumptions about how systems of language learning and use ought to be understood (Bakhtin, 1981, Emig, 1971; Heath, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978) and the problematic role of educational systems in reproducing (often radically unequal) social relations (Committee on CCCC Language Statement, 1975; Foucault, 1977; Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000), much educational research on literacy continued to uphold the primacy of the book as a text for study, the essay as a medium for production, and the primer as a guide to correctness (Applebee & Langer, 2009).

Social approaches to literacy (The New London Group, 1996; Gee, 2004; Perry, 2012; Serafini & Gee, 2017) have rejected the restricted definitions of literacy as traditionally understood, and have instead sought to broaden our understanding of literacy as it functions in the daily lives of individuals and communities, even as the theories push us to rethink what it means to be literate in any particular setting. Grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981), sociocultural theories of literacy examine the ways that readers and writers make use of texts for social ends. That is, social theorists see meaning as being created in specific

contexts through a dialogue between producers, texts and readers (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Freebody & Luke, 2003; Lewis, 2016).

The development and ascendance of sociocultural theory opened the floor for diverse new approaches to understanding the nature of human communication, with concomitant implications for how literacy is learned and best taught (Prior, 2006). Some scholars focused on a transforming understanding of everyday practices and texts (Street, 2003, 2005), while others tended to study literacy's transforming role in academic settings (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; The New London Group, 1996), and still others developed methods and concepts related specifically to the effects of new digital and networked media on our social realities (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Gee, 2004; Jenkins, 2006b). Indeed, attempts to effectively summarize the research in sociocultural literacy theory are frustrated by not only the range of approaches and foci, but also the proliferation of nomenclature that this abundance has bred. Sociocultural approaches have variously been studied under the umbrellas of Multiliteracies (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; The New London Group, 1996), New Literacy Studies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Street, 2003, 2005), Multimodality (Kress, 2003), Situated Literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000), and Digital & New Media Literacy (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Jenkins, 2006b; Hagood, 2003; Hobbs, 2016)

Despite the subtle differences inherent in these diverse frameworks for understanding, discussing, and cultivating literacy practices, there are certain assumptions about literacy that most, if not all, of these theoretical approaches share. The following summary attempts to lay out these shared assumptions, with special attention paid to their implications for academic inquiry and composition in general, and this study in particular.

Literacies are constituted socially and situated contextually

That literacy is essentially a social activity is a defining assumption of sociocultural

theories (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Prior, 2006; Street, 2003; The New London Group, 1996).

Social theorists of literacy insist that we must abandon static notions of textuality, reading,

writing, language, and communication generally in favor of an understanding of literacy as a

flexible and complex set of tools for navigating the social world (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic,

2000; The New London Group, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Street (2003) rejected what he called

"autonomous" models of literacy–those that conceive of reading, writing, and other linguistic

and communicative skills as stable, universal, and politically neutral–and advocated instead for

an "ideological" model that understands literate acts as always shaped and motivated by complex

and dynamic social and cultural traditions (p. 77). The New London Group (1996) called

language and other modes of communication and meaning-making "dynamic representational

resources" that are "constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve various

cultural purposes" (p. 63). Gee (1996) observed that language is not a static system or body of

knowledge upon which individuals might neutrally rely, but rather "always comes fully attached

to 'other stuff': to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on

experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world" (p. vii, quoted in

Perry, 2012, p. 52). Even when a person writes alone, or for themselves only, Prior (2006) points

out, they are still always "using an array of socio-historically provided resources[…]that extend

beyond the moment of transcription and that cross modes and media (reading, writing, talk,

visual representation, material object-ification)" (p. 58). By expanding and refining the definition

of literacy to account for the skills, competencies, and resources that humans bring to bear on

diverse acts of meaning-making, sociocultural theorists call us to refocus our attention on the historical, material, and cultural forces that work to shape these practices.

If literacy is always socially constituted, then it is necessarily bound up in the fluidity, particularity, and complexity of the local context within which it is put into practice. Much theory and research in sociocultural literacy has been dedicated to enunciating the various roles that context plays in shaping acts of communication and meaning-making. Barton & Hamilton (2000) developed the notion of "literacy practices" as a "way of conceptualizing the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help to shape" (p. 7). Insisting that literacy practices are most "usefully understood as existing in relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals," the researchers suggested that such practices are manifest in "literacy events" that make use of a range of texts and textual practices (p. 8). Embedded in this theoretical approach is an implicit decentering of the (written) text–long the primary focus of literacy research and pedagogy–in favor of research that focuses on understanding what happens when particular (groups of) people make particular uses of texts in particular situations. Though Barton and Hamilton still invite us to see texts as important markers of literate events and practices, they insist that "practice remains central and we are led to examine how texts fit into the practices of people's lives, rather than the other way round" (p. 9). The concept of literacy practices offers a language and a framework by which to investigate as well as cultivate these practices as they develop within and across the boundaries between students' classroom and everyday literacies.

Such a move to decenter or destabilize notions of textuality is a central component of much sociocultural theory, and it has important implications for our practices in the classroom.

Shifting the focus away from (print) textuality as the primary object of study means expanding

the concerns of classroom instruction beyond the teaching of discrete skills and conventions

toward a pedagogy that guides students through an examination of literacy itself, how and by

what it has been shaped, how it is deployed in various social realities, and the roles that reading

and writing–in their various forms–play in structuring those realities (Ávila & Zacher Pandya,

2013; Brauer & Clark, 2008; Mills, 2010; The New London Group, 1996). Furthermore,

sociocultural theory calls us to critically examine the role that schooling and classroom structures

themselves play in shaping notions of what counts as literacy, and how these structures may lead

or fail to lead to just outcomes for students and society (Freire, 2000; The New London Group,

1996).

Literacies are multiple and diverse

At least since the Committee on CCCC published "A Student's right to their own

language" in 1975 have educators faced the question of paradigms of standardized literacy

practice in educational spaces. With the rise of sociocultural approaches to literacy, this question

was taken up in earnest by theorists and practitioners alike. These theories suggested that, rather

than conceive of literacy as a set of universal skills that students might apply in all reading

situations, we should instead engage in developing the multiple literacies that our students must

deploy to successfully navigate the complex social and economic worlds that they will encounter

(Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; Perry, 2012; Street, 2003; The New

London Group, 1996). Such an approach invites us to understand literacy as being a diverse set

of practices that are rooted in the many communities and backgrounds from which our students

come.

One important thread of this research, pursued largely under the banner of the New

Literacy Studies, sought explicitly to turn the attention of researchers away from dominant

literacies as reflected by academic discourse and canonical textuality and toward the "everyday

literacy practices" of people in diverse lived social realities (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 9; see

also Street, 2003, 2005). Working toward an understanding of literacy grounded in "detailed,

in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings," research in multiple literacies

has tended to follow ethnographic methodologies that seek to illuminate the living literacies of

particular, often marginalized populations (Street, 2001, quoted in Perry, 2012, p. 53). Studies in

New Literacies have included research involving the particular literacy practices of urban youth

(Hungerford-Kresser & Amaro-Jiménez, 2012; Majors, Kim, & Ansari, 2008; Moje, 2000), race

and ethnicity (Martinez-Roldán & Fránquiz, 2008; Power Carter, 2006), gender (Guzzetti, 2008;

Smith & Wilhelm, 2008), and sexuality (Halverson, 2005; Martino, 2008). As New Literacy

Studies took a digital turn with the rise of networked social spaces, researchers turned their

attention also to the ways that digital technologies work to enable new forms of literate practice.

Though they differ widely in their focus, all of these studies are interested in understanding how

particular social contexts within and beyond the classroom shape and are shaped by students'

everyday meaning-making practices.

A second thread in the research on the diversity of literacy practices attended to the

problem of developing a theory and vocabulary for understanding the ways that humans make

meaning through non-linguistic texts. This research sought a definition of literacy that reached

beyond traditional educational materials, largely textual and linguistic in nature, to account for

the variety of media–including visual art, film, video, architecture, music, voice, and

gesture–through which individuals and institutions work to communicate with the world (The

New London Group, 1996). Noting "the increasing invasion of private spaces by mass media culture, global commodity culture, and communications and information networks," The New London Group (1996) argued for the necessity of a theory and pedagogy that attended to the ways that meaning, social position, and power move through diverse media (p. 70). Kress (2003) went on to develop a theory of multimodality that aimed to trace the "grammar and syntax" of these diverse modes of expression, each of which, he argued, carries "the stamp of regularities and organizations" and that mirror those of linguistic texts (p. 45). In his work, Kress not only emphasized the richness and complexity of the meanings we make through everyday texts, but also pointed to the ways that our understanding of any singular mode or text is always bound up with other modes and texts and experiences. Noting the important role that multimodal experiences play in our ability to make and interpret meaning in the world, Kress (2003) insisted that "we can no longer treat literacy (or 'language') as the sole, the main, let alone the major means for representation and communication" (p. 35). Like Russell's (1997) reconception of genre as a contextually particular but semi-stable patterning across texts, Kress (2003) reappropriated the term "grammar" from its roots in linguistics, using it as an "overarching term that can describe the regularities of a particular mode which a culture has produced" (p. 66). Further research aimed to deduce specific grammars for visual, spatial, and other modes of design (e.g., Jewitt, 2006; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2000; Pahl, 2003; Stein, 2006).

Beyond a laudable desire to grow appreciation for and understanding of diverse traditions and modes of literacy, sociocultural research has worked politically to problematize traditions of literacy theory and research that take for granted the hegemony of dominant (academic) literacy practices. Sociocultural approaches call us to recognize the systems of power at play when academic literacies are uncritically promoted as a standard measure for competence in

classrooms (Abarca Millan, 2018; Street, 2003; Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Street (2001) notes that by assuming a single literacy, teachers run the risk of "imposing assumptions derived from our own cultural practice onto other people" (quoted in Perry, 2012, p. 53). Such a line of reasoning, which recontextualizes the classroom as a space where larger systems of power and dominance might be negotiated, reinforced, or resisted, has important implications for teachers and policymakers alike. No longer can educators abide in a notion of teaching and learning as politically neutral acts, nor can they take for granted that their efforts within educational contexts are unequivocally just, good, or equitable (Street, 2003; Freire, 2000). Accordingly, a number of sociocultural theorists, taking their cue from Freire (2000), have called for a move toward critical literacy pedagogy that makes these negotiations of power relations, and their relation to literacy practices, an explicit component of the classroom content (Avila & Zacher Pandya, 2013; Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020).

Within the New Literacy Studies, this critique has centered on the ways that academic institutions present academic literacies as "neutral and transparent," a move that "naturalizes the subjectivity and agency that the academic community has over what constitutes…literacy" (Abarca Millan, 2018, n.p.). According to Street (2003), these "autonomous" models of literacy reify the practices of those in positions of power as "neutral and universal" while positioning those whose practices do not match these dominant forms as "illiterate" (p. 77). Barton and Hamilton (2000) acknowledge that "socially powerful institutions, such as education, tend to support dominant literacy practices" that "can be seen as part of whole discourse formations, institutionalized configurations of power and knowledge which are embodied in social relationships" (p. 12).

Multiliteracies theory and the concept of multimodality have also had important implications for our understanding of traditional print literacy, which has been, since at least the dawn of modern educational systems, broadly and uncritically accepted as a natural standard by which social standing and academic competence should be judged (Luke, 1993). A number of researchers have observed the historic and material relationships between print media and both "hierarchical structures of authority" and "romantic ideas about individual originality" that run counter to social conceptions of collaborative, embedded, and contextual meaning-making (Hobbs, 2016, p. 11, see also de Certeau, 1984; McLuhan, 1964; Perry, 2012). In this view, academic literacy and its association with print and linguistic textuality are understood not as a standard by which we might measure objective success, but rather as just one of any number of literacies, whose dominance has little to do with its objective qualities and everything to do with the social relations and power dynamics by which it has been constituted and reified in modern society. Trimbur and Press (2015) went so far as to reject the idea that society had moved historically from a literacy of single-modality to a multimodal one, calling our associating literacy with "monomodal" conception of print-based textuality "a language ideology, not a historical benchmark, to which multimodality can…be conveniently compared" (p. 21).

Proponents of the New Literacy Studies critique the dominant "skills-driven model of functional literacy" which "ignores or denies the multiplicity of ways in which people meaningfully engage" in textual and literate practices, and argue convincingly for the important role that "recognizing and incorporating students out-of-school ways of practicing literacy" can play in "decreasing achievement gaps" for historically marginalized communities (Perry, 2012, p. 51-63). Working from Bordieu's concept of cultural gatekeepers, Brandt (2001) uses the term "sponsors" to describe the various ways that particular people, practices, and/or

systems–especially those that are associated with formal institutions of learning–act to reinforce and reward certain literacy practices, and to discourage or marginalize others (p. 556). We teachers, Brandt suggests, must consider ourselves as playing an important role in shaping political attitudes toward literacy. Teaching is never a politically neutral act: our decisions about what forms of literacy to recognize and how these literacies might enter into our curricular and pedagogical choices give shape to the possibilities that we see for our students' social futures. Moll and Greenberg (1990), for example, studied the ways that households and communities share knowledge socially, identifying the power of socially distributed "funds of knowledge" that young people can draw on in social learning (p. 345). Extending Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the "zone of proximal development," the researchers usefully compare the structures of these everyday social learning environments to those of educational institutions, which tend toward formalization, repetition, and rote learning (p. 335). Through a case study analysis of Spanish-speaking students of Mexican descent in American primary classrooms, Moll and Greenberg provide evidence for the possibilities of classroom instructional choices that incorporate, rather than dismiss, ignore, or denigrate, informal everyday learning and literacy.

Research in multimodality complicates the assumed primacy of print by encouraging educators not only to incorporate diverse modes and media into our discussions of what it means to be literate, but also to look anew at the ways that we use traditional linguistic texts in the classroom, and how these choices affect and are affected by assumptions about authorship; positionality; intellect; and social, cultural, and economic capital. By confirming that all texts are already always multimodal, multimodality as a critical lens invites us to re-embed linguistic textualities more fully in the social and material contexts within which they move. Just as the social and historical contexts of the classroom, the setting in which we most often make focused

study of traditional texts, play an essential role in the *ways* we make meaning from these texts, so

to do discussions of a book take a meaningful critical turn when we start attending to the various

material and rhetorical aspects of its non-linguistic, "paratextual" elements: its existence and

circulation as a bound codex, its cover design and designer, its deckled edge, and its typeface all

play an important, if largely neglected, role in the ways we making meaning of a text (Genette,

1997, p. 1). When we prompt our students to consider not just *what* a text means, but *how* it

means and the relationships between that meaning and its total social and material existence, we

create opportunities for conversations about literacy that have real meaning for our students'

lived experience and important implications for the autonomy with which they are able to

negotiate various social contexts (Brauer & Clark, 2008).

By calling our attention to the variety of modes through which we interact, multiliteracies

theories invite–even demand–new curricula and new pedagogical models. Investigating the ways

that old (linguistic) and new (digital) media might be combined in new and powerful ways,

Leander (2009) argues for a "parallel pedagogy" that makes the affordances and constraints of

different media a central component of classroom discussion and practice (p. 147). Leander

highlights the important role that analogy plays in learning, and suggests practical ways that

investigating the modalities of new media can cast new light on the nature of print literacy.

Similarly, Brauer and Clark (2008), drawing heavily on the work of Bourdieu, suggest that

English educators ought primarily to treat texts as cultural objects, inviting our students to take

on the role of ethnographers, investigating both linguistic texts and other media as "contested

sites[s] of meanings and identities" embedded in "networks of social, political, and economic

power" (p. 304). In their attempt to bridge the gap between the diverse literacy communities that

student's inhabit in their daily lives and the critical literacy practices required for academic

success and effective social, political, and economic praxis, The New London Group (1996) set

out a pedagogical framework for teaching multiliteracies that includes four main components,

including situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice. Fearing

that concepts of 'reading' and 'writing' may be too saddled with traditional, linguistically

dominated notions of literacy, The New London Group (1996) offered the concept of design as a

central metaphor for the study of literate activity in the modern world. The resultant pedagogical

framework couples immersive literacy practice with more direct forms of teaching to empower

students to become "designers of [their] social futures" (p. 89).

Literacies constitute the structuring of identity

Though sociocultural literacy research often works to decenter the role of individual

subjectivities, focusing instead on socially situated literacy events (Barton & Hamilton, 2000;

Street, 2003), activity systems (Bazerman & Russell, 2003; Russell, 1997), or acts of mediation

(Kress, 2003, Prior, 2006, The New London Group, 1996), for social theories to account for the

complexity of human meaning making, they must develop (or at least assume) some concept of

individual identity as it operates in social relations to literacy. Moje, Luke, Davies, and Street

(2009) argue for the important role that formulations of identity must play in sociocultural

theories of literacy:

>"[A]ccepting the idea that literacy is more than a set of autonomous skills demands the
>
>acceptance of the idea that learning literacy is more than simply practicing skills or
>
>transferring processes from one head to another. Learning, from a social and cultural
>
>perspective, involves people in participation, interaction, relationships, and contexts, all
>
>of which have implications for how people make sense of themselves and others, identify,
>
>and are identified" (Moje et al., 2009, p. 416).

Consistent with their broader ideas about literacy, social theorists have variously seen identity as a force that shapes, is shaped by, and motivates literate behavior in its numerous forms and contexts.

Questions of social identity are also essential to this study. By asking students to undertake inquiry and composition practices that are built out of their own interests, the study implicitly engages with questions of what constitutes a student's personal interests, as well as how these interests are identified, developed, and incorporated into his or her sense of identity. Students' choices about what to study are necessarily bound up with choices about what topics, ideas, or problems are *important* to them. Thus by naming topics and pursuing a developing expertise in them, students are also engaged in a kind of naming of their own nascent and aspirational identities, at least within the confines of the classroom and, as far as the project succeeds in linking academic and everyday interests and inviting students to draw on classroom resources to compose and publish to broader audiences, within larger communities of practice as well. The study seeks to understand how these value choices are made, how they shape and are shaped by literacy practices, and the role of the secondary English classroom in nurturing or frustrating them.

Noting that conceptions of identity in sociocultural research have often been slippery, implicit, and ill-defined, Moje and colleagues' (2009) review of what they call "literacy-and-identity studies" outlines five metaphors for identity that are dominant in this research: "identity as (1) difference, (2) sense of self/subjectivity, (3) mind or consciousness, (4) narrative, and (5) position" (Moje et al., 2009, p. 416). While the researchers acknowledge that these metaphors are not mutually exclusive, and that all of them share an assumption that

identities are "social, fluid, and recognized," they point to important distinctions in the implications for adopting each metaphor (p. 419).

Those adopting an identity-as-difference stance, for example, tend to see identity as tied to sustained group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality) and to see literate practice as dependent on and arising out of particular identity groups (Lewis & del Valle, 2009; Moje et al., 2009). This metaphor gives rise to studies of language use as a marker of cultural difference (e.g., Heath, 1983), as well as to a move toward a culturally responsive pedagogy which seeks to acknowledge culturally diverse language practices in the classroom setting (Chavez, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2001; Love, 2019). Literacy studies that adopt an identity-as-self metaphor, on other hand, draw on conceptions of identity offered by Mead (1934) and Althusser (1971) as being a product of a person's capacity to take reflexive attitude toward themselves and their social surroundings, and to choose identity classifications that fit with their evolving understanding of their own identities (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; Hall, 2007; Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams (2017), for example, argue for a conception of literacy that moves beyond a focus on "communication," or "making meanings for others" and interpretations "according to the experiences and interests of the interpreter," to include a deeper consideration of the role of literacy practices in "making meanings for oneself, or literacies as tools for thinking" (p. 37). The identity-as-consciousness metaphor is grounded in a materialist (Marx & Engels, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978) understanding of human consciousness as growing out of the interaction of individuals and tools, including literacy tools, to shape reality. For Vygotsky, "[embodied] activity and consciousness exist in dialectical relationship," with new tools enabling new forms of consciousness and identity relations, which in turn suggest the uptake or development of new tools to create new material forms (Moje et al., 2009, p. 425). An

identity-as-consciousness metaphor is especially useful for those who are interested in

understanding the ways that textual and other media shape and are shaped by people (Bolter &

Grusin, 2000; Jones & Hafner, 2012; Ong, 1982; McLuhan, 1964; Prior, 2006).

Conceiving of identity as narrative allows for investigations of identity formation as a

product of the stories that we tell about ourselves and that others tell about us (Moje et al., 2009).

Researchers who view identity through the lens of narrative often distinguish and investigate the

relationships between storied identities as told (that is, the narratives we tell about our past

experiences and future orientations as they relate to conceptions of ourselves in the present) and

storied identities in the telling (enacted narrativization as it relates to specific social contexts and

situations) (Moje et al., 2009; Thorne, 2004; Wortham, 2001). Narrative undoubtedly offers a

compelling frame for studying social identity, not only because it seems to cohere with a

common-sense notion of how we experience social subjectivity (that is, as protagonists, subjects,

heroes of our own stories), but also because narrative forms so often coincide with the methods

by which qualitative researchers do their work (e.g., through extended interviews). However,

Moje and colleagues (2009) point to the troubling implications that narrativized identity holds

for data collection, as a narrated identity enacted in an interview is inevitably shaped by the

particular social context of the interview (including the specific framing, interview questions,

relationship between interviewer and interviewee, expected outcomes, etc.), and the authors cite

Bamberg's (2004) suspicion of the suitability of narrative theories for capturing the subtle, fluid,

embodied elements of identity that remain below the level of discourse, observing that the

"recognitions and actions of others are not always fully visible in people's accounts of

themselves or their experiences" (Moje et al., 2009, p. 429).

Moje and colleagues' final metaphor, identity-as-position, draw on the theories of

Foucault (1977) and Bourdieu (1993) in order to develop an understanding of identities as

manifesting "in and through not only activity and movement across spaces but also in the ways

people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time, and spaces and how they

take up or resist those positions" (Moje et al., 2009, p. 430). Literacy researchers who take an

identity-as-position view see identity as coming into being as subjects are called to take up

particular social positions in the world, and either confirm, refuse, or enter into some more

complex relationship with these positions (Bourdieu, 1993; Brandt, 2001, 2009; Curwood &

Gibbons, 2009). Such a perspective also sees an important role for institutions and other systems

of power, as possible positions are constituted by a field of social relations in constant

negotiation for priority, supremacy, and hegemony (Foucault, 1977).

Moje and colleagues argue for the power of the identity-as-position metaphor to bring

together the previous metaphors. Identity-as-position can incorporate group identities, as well as

the particular tensions that people may feel between their sense of self and their identification

with and between groups, and moreover offers a language of power and discourse that serves to

illuminate broader tensions between groups (Bourdieu, 1993; Gee, 2000; Foucault, 1977). The

metaphor can incorporate narrative, allowing "for people to tell stories about themselves, to

represent themselves in narrative, but also to shift positions and tell new stories" (p. 431). And

identity-as-position can also account for non-discursive aspects of identity, for the doing of

things, identity as enacted and distributed across artifacts (Bartlett & Holland, 2002), space and

time (Holland & Leander, 2004, Latour, 1993) and digital networks (Leander & Burriss, 2020).

Finally, with particular regard for questions of literacy, identity-as-position is uniquely amenable

to rhetorical and multimodal approaches which see acts of composition (including perhaps, the

composition of selves and identities) in terms of positioning texts, audiences, and authors (Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996).

The current study operates under just such a rhetorical framework. The Focus Project at the center of the study asks students–explicitly and through a number of processes, products, and modes–to identify, imagine, and compose for authentic audiences beyond the classroom. Thus are students asked not just to learn and write *about* some particular topic, but rather to enter into the ongoing disciplinary and para-disciplinary conversation about the topic happening in a social world beyond the scope of the classroom. To do so with any success demands that students consider their own positionality as speakers with regards to the topic, the potential audiences, and the various media through which such conversations take place.

Neither is a theory of identity-as-position out of line with a process orientation that understands writing-in-process as constituting an important dialogical tool for coming to know the self and the world (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; Elbow, 1998). When Anzaldúa (1987) conceives of the "art of composition" as the "putting…together" of "fragmented pieces…into a whole that makes sense," she presupposes an (imagined) audience for whom such a composition is meaningful and an imagined context within which power can be negotiated (p. 237-238). Even writing for the self, as in journaling, freewriting, or reflective self-assessment, is rhetorical at least insofar as one must voice one's ideas and experiences and insodoing externalize them in a language that can mean something to someone, even if that someone is an imagined future version of oneself (Prior, 2006). Van Dijck (2004), exploring the transformation of personal writing as it moves from handwritten diaries and journals to online weblogs and lifelogs, suggests that writing "even as a form of self-expression, signals the need to connect" (n.p.). He cites evidence from the history of these personal forms that suggests the incorporation of a

nascent sense of audience, concluding that journaling is "to a large extent, a cultural form firmly rooted in rhetorical conventions: intimacy and privacy are effects rather than intrinsic features of the genre" (van Dijck, 2004, n.p.) Further, personal writing retains a rhetorical character for the simple fact that, as a writer, one might at any time draw (explicitly or otherwise) on ideas, expressions and language composed originally for the self in an attempt to compose for broader audiences (Elbow, 1998). That freewriting should be "for yourself only" at early stages of the writing process, as Elbow (1998) suggests, does not preclude its usefulness at other stages or in other modes or contexts.

Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981) have demonstrated that writers take up questions of audience and voice even at the level of cognitive process as they compose, and that more successful writers are often distinguishable by the nuance with which they attempt to answer such questions through their writing process. These observations speak to the role of rhetorical position taking even in cognitive constructions of identity: as writers negotiate the process of developing their writing, they also negotiate how they will be perceived and by whom. Latour (1988) has called such constructions the "inscribed" author and audience of a text, respectively, and noted that while the nature of an inscribed author need not mirror that of the author-in-the-flesh, such constructions are nonetheless constitutive of identity insofar as they carry social weight and work to position authors in relation to text and audience (p. 307). The negotiations of audience and voice that Flower and Hayes (1981) observed in their writers-in-process also attest to the power and importance of the text as a contested space for negotiating identity.

Third Space Pedagogy

In the study of sociocultural literacies, much has been made of the role that diverse communities of practice play in the way we live, interact, and make meaning in the world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Street, 2003, 2005). Those involved in the New Literacy Studies have made it a key focus of their research to understand how literacies and literacy learning operate in everyday contexts beyond the classroom, and have suggested the power of drawing on these everyday "funds of knowledge" to augment our understanding of and ability to teach literacy in the classroom setting (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 344). In identifying, studying, and suggesting the celebration of these diverse literacies, however, such theories also introduce the tensions and conflicts that arise as different forms of literacy come into contact with one another. Further, acknowledging the multiplicity of literacies that are inherent in any learning event has meant coming to terms with the fact that no single literacy ever exists in a pure form, but always exists in hybrid combination with others. Though Barton and Hamilton (2000) identify a certain stability within and across communities when they examine "coherent configurations of literacy practices" that are often "identifiable and named, as in academic literacy or work-place literacy," for example, they also acknowledge that these communities of practice are "not clear-cut": "there are questions of the permeability of boundaries, of leakages and movement between boundaries, and of overlap between domains" (pp. 10-11).

Literacies exist at the nexus between the individual experience of consciousness and the broader social and material world. Thus are we as researchers of literacy left not just to sort out which elements of identity, textuality, and community are at play in any given situation, but, more importantly, to examine the ways that these elements mix, combine, conflict, and resolve. It is this tension, this "in betweenness" that is at the heart of literacy learning in practice, and it is

this tension which must be the object of analysis. Third Space theory, as developed by Gutierrez (2008; Gutierrez, Banquendano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999), provides a powerful lens for both examining these tensions and for reimagining them as opportunities for meaningful negotiations of learning.

Third Space Theory

Third Space theory grows out of a postcolonial tradition interested in understanding the construction of hybrid identities "in-between" local languages and cultures and those that are officially sanctioned by systems of power (Bhaba, 1994, p. 38). Bhaba (1988) rejected the "rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures" and "the Utopianism…of a unique collective identity" that he saw as characteristic of much theory dedicated to understanding colonial and post-colonial experience (p.18). He saw such characterizations, no matter their attempts at neutrality or cultural respect, as reproducing through discourse a set of essentializing boundaries that did not do justice to the contentious hybrid realities of colonial experience. Rather, Bhaba insisted, cultural identity at the liberatory boundaries of systems of power are characterized by a "representational undecidability" and a "productive instability" that is capable of bringing about revolutionary cultural change (p. 19-21). For Bhaba (1994), third space represented this space of productive instability: it was a space owned neither by indigenous nor colonial culture, but that offered the possibility for hybrid identities to flourish, and wherein "the articulation of cultural difference" could be meaningfully played out (p. 38).

Expanding on its use in postcolonial studies, Gutiérrez and colleagues (1999) suggested that the concept of hybridity usefully captures what "occurs when people attempt to make sense of [their] own identity in relation to prevailing notions of self and cultural practices," and saw these identity negotiations as a central component of the formal learning environment (p. 288).

Thus does Third Space theory imply an understanding of identity in accordance with Moje and colleagues' (2009) identity-as-position metaphor that is especially attentive to the tensions that exist at the boundaries of these positions. Third Space theory in the educational context is grounded in the understanding that "people live their lives and learn across multiple settings" that vary not just across their lifespans but also "across and within the institutions and communities they inhabit," including the home, social settings, and the classroom (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 150). Within this framework, Gutiérrez imagines a first space of literacy practice, represented by at-home and everyday cultures and communities, that in the classroom is brought into contact with a second space of sanctioned literacy practices, enforced and empowered not only by the teacher and the structures of the classroom itself, but by the entire system of social power which works to construct the formal learning environment and to reify academic ways of thinking, speaking and being in the world.

Traditional systemic binaries between home and school, Gutiérrez (2008) insist, "reinscribe deficit portraits of home that compel educators to 'fix' communities and their members so that they match normative views and practices without regard to students' existing repertoires of practices" (p. 151). In doing so, educational institutions perpetuate inequity and injustice with regards to non-academic cultures and discourses even as they alienate students from academic learning that might otherwise serve to empower them. Third space, then, describes a literal and pedagogical space wherein tensions between academic discourses and everyday literacies might be meaningfully negotiated. Of third spaces in learning environments, the researchers say:

> [L]earning contexts are immanently hybrid, that is, polycontextual, multivoiced, and multiscripted. Thus, conflict, tension, and diversity are intrinsic to learning spaces. We

have examined these tensions by studying the competing discourses and practices, the

official scripts and counterscripts, of the various social spaces of learning communities.

By attending to the social, political, material, cognitive, and linguistic conflict, we also

have documented these tensions as potential sites of rupture, innovation, and change that

lead to learning (Gutiérrez, Banquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999, p. 287).

One of the powers of Third Space theory is the way that it reimagines the tensions inherent in

literacy learning contexts not as representing obstacles but as providing powerful opportunities

for learning that enable both students and teachers in the realignment of problematic power

structures that have long plagued institutional learning environments.

A pedagogy built on Third Space theory looks for ways to harness the potentials for

student learning implicit in this hybrid space. Third Space pedagogy seeks to account for "the

inherent continuities and discontinuities among individual and environment and the larger

system," calling us to reimagine the classroom as a space of "multiple, layered, and conflicting

activity systems with various interconnections" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152-153). Gutiérrez (2008)

conceives of third space as a particularly powerful form of Vygotsky's (1978) notion of zones of

proximal development (ZPD). For Vygotsky, the ZPD was a space of learning just beyond a

student's ability to complete the task independently, where support and guidance from a more

capable mentor can best move learning forward (Eun, 2017; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this view,

the ZPD represents a space where students' learning potential is optimized in the presence of

appropriate cultural, social, and systemic supports. In their treatment of the ZPD, Guiteirrez and

colleagues (1999) draw on Griffin and Cole's (1984) reconceptualization of the ZPD as an

important site of contestation between the student's knowledge and identity as formed by their

community and home life and the kinds of knowledge and identities that they are being asked to

take up in the academy. Such sites of learning are not "benign nor unproblematic," but are rather "points of tension" that can lead to deep transformations in identity through mutual participation. (Gutiérrez, Banquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999, p. 286).

Such a conception reintroduces the tension that exists at sites of learning, and reconceptualizes the act of learning not simply as a unidirectional uptake by the student of otherwise neutral knowledge, information, or understanding, but rather as an ongoing negotiation of meaning by an active student within the multiple broader social contexts that they are involved. Gutiérrez (2008) suggests that in a classroom informed by Third Space pedagogy, the traditional role of the teacher as sole authority is replaced by an ethos of collaboration and co-creation. In such environments, students and teachers are engaged in "the process of building a new shared vision of education," a "movement toward a collectively imagined, more just world" that is "facilitated, nurtured, and re-mediated by a grammar of collective hope and possibility and a critical social imagination that sparks cognitive work and sets the ground for persistent engagement" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 154). With its focus on the potential of educational spaces to empower students to make decisions about their own social engagements, the approach resonates with other conceptions of a liberatory, consciousness-raising role for education (Freire, 2000; hooks, 2000).

This study will examine student dispositions toward literacy, in particular inquiry and composition, as they exist and develop in these hybrid spaces. Third space theory is especially powerful in the context of this study because of the way that it focuses our attention on the particular messy in-between spaces in which literacy practices occur. Third Space pedagogies offer "an approach that resists the binaries of home and school, of formal and informal learning" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 150). By presupposing the tensions that exist within classrooms–between

student backgrounds and classroom expectations, between teacher and student perspectives, and between competing forms of and priorities regarding literate practice–and by recasting these tensions not as obstacles to be overcome by institutionalization but as potent sites of hybridity and cross-cultural meaning-making, Third Space theory invites us to look for ways to incorporate and empower students' outside literacies and interests rather than ignoring them or treating them as obstacles to the purposes of the classroom (Gutiérrez, Banquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999). Moreover, the language of Third Space theory gives this study a vocabulary for negotiating the many further tensions for which the classroom acts as a negotiation space, including the tensions between curricular and pedagogical interests, between teacher authority and student autonomy, between classroom learning and the demands of high stakes testing, between analog and digital texts, and between the goals of the classroom and the student and those of the larger educational systems. If literacy learning must always take place in contested spaces of identities, communities, and systems of power, then understanding such learning can only benefit from a theory that makes these sites of contestation its unit of study.

Activity Theory

By inviting us to understand literacy learning as a negotiation of important psychological, social, and political tensions, Third Space theory illuminates sites of learning not as neutral settings for knowledge distribution but rather as transformational spaces where new agreements about meaning are brought into being. It is by a similar logic that Activity Theory (Bazerman & Russell, 2003; Russell, 1997) works to expand and redefine traditional static notions of genre as they operate in academic settings. Russell (1997) argues that genre should not be understood as "merely texts that share some formal features" but rather as "shared expectations among some group(s) of people" (p. 513). The meaning expectations that our students have for, say, an

advertisement or song, are radically different depending on whether they are encountering it in the course of their daily lives or as a part of a lesson in an English Language Arts class. By shifting the unit of study away from the text qua text, a social conception of genre opens the field for the examination of texts as they act as "forms of life, ways of being, frames for social action" in context (Bazerman, 1994, quoted in Russell, 1997, p. 513). Furthermore, social conceptions of genre offer a broader opportunity to interrogate the processes by which these patterns of communication come into being and interact with one another, including the role that identity, power, and textuality play in stabilizing and perpetuating certain literacies while marginalizing or destabilizing others (Bazerman & Russell, 2003). Brauer and Clark (2008), for example, outline the radically different approaches that English classrooms generally take toward texts based on assumptions about their genre positioning, treating literary texts as "sacred" purveyors of "universal human truths" while casting many new media texts as "predators" that students must "arm themselves against" (p. 299).

Russell's (1997) theory of genre systems suggests that we recognize schooling as a context of its own, operating by a set of assumptions that seem natural or intuitive to us only because we are familiar with them. Russell (1997) cites Christie's (1993; Christie & Martin, 1997) concept of "classroom genres" to discuss the ways that educational institutions have "commodified genres of professional practice" in their attempt to mediate the boundary between education and professionalization. (p. 531). According to Russell, far from acting as meaningful apprenticeships into disciplinary practice, the introductory and survey courses offered in secondary education transform the messy, multivocal, contentious environment of real-world professional knowledge into linear progressions of information to be ingested and regurgitated. The outcome is a system of learning which often fails at its own stated goals of preparing

students to enter into professional disciplinary conversations. Brown and colleagues (1989) echo this perspective when they observe that teaching methods that treat "abstracted concepts as fixed, well-defined, independent entities that can be explored in prototypical examples and textbook exercises" fail to provide "the important insights into either the culture or the authentic activities of members of that culture that learners need" (p. 33). Rather than positioning students as novices in a field of knowledge that extends beyond the classroom, academic systems of knowledge organization often create insular environments which fail to clearly indicate their significance beyond the local context of the classroom. Students ingest a great deal of information without any real concept of how that information relates either to their own lives or to the actual practices of the academic discipline that they are supposedly studying (Brown & Adler, 2008).

Importantly for educators interested in the value of inquiry and composition beyond the classroom, Russell observes that many students may struggle in school in part because they fail to see beyond this immediate context as they attempt to accomplish assigned learning tasks. Responding to Haas's (1994) suggestion that introductory students "approach academic tasks as if they believe that texts are autonomous and context free," (p. 46, quoted in Russell, 1997, p. 539), Russell points out rather that, for many students "schooling is the context—the activity system—that [academic] genres primarily mediate" (p. 539). So long as students see their involvement in writing not primarily in terms of disciplinary concerns, intellectual growth, civic relevance, or identity, but rather "in terms of the object/motive of schooling, the grade or certification," we will likely continue to struggle to engage them meaningfully in the skills and dispositions we hope to teach (p. 539, see also Kohn, 1999). As an illustration of this problem, Russell discusses a professor's dismay that his intermediate Biology students, bound ostensibly

for careers in Biology or related fields, write in the genre of the popular nonfiction press rather than the disciplinary language of the subject that they are studying. Russell posits that students write in this way because, despite their exposure to Biology concepts in textbooks and formalized laboratory practice, they have little to no experience with the activity systems which give rise to the genre of academic research in Biology. When it comes time to write, popular nonfiction is the genre that they can access with regards to the discipline, and so it is the genre that they choose.

Russell (1997) calls classroom work "*boundary work*" that occurs at the intersection of multiple competing activity systems, including those associated with individual identities and cultures, those of particular disciplines or professions, and those associated with the educational institution itself (p. 530, emphasis in original). This conception offers a compelling lens for understanding the various ways that student identities interact with academic literacies in the classroom, taking up or resisting disciplinary, para-disciplinary, and public discourses. Russell (1997) suggests that students in formal educational settings are faced frequently with the decision of how and to what extent to engage their identities with the broader systems of academic activity and discourse at play, and identifies such decisions as important points of tension for student identity construction as it relates to academic literacies. In academic learning environments, structured and reinforced as they are by dominant modes of economic and intellectual discourse, the stakes for academic engagement extend beyond "right and wrong task representations" to include students' entire "future involvements with powerful social practices and their identities and potential identities" (Russell, 1997, p. 519). To make matters more confusing, these decision points are rarely clearly enunciated or explicated, either by the students themselves, nor by the teacher, the curriculum, the texts, or educational activity or policy on any

of its ever-broadening scales. Indeed, those who advocate for a critical literacy pedagogy (Freire, 2000) would argue that we should expect the nature of such decision points for students to be actively obfuscated by any number of these levels, as those with power seek to maintain it (Bourdieu, 1993). Nonetheless, student's decisions to take up or reject particular identity positions is central also to their relationships with and attitudes about academics in general and composition in particular (Moje et al., 2009; Russell, 1997).

Part of Russell's point in this analysis is to suggest a deeper integration of disciplinary activity into classrooms, in the form of problem-oriented learning more akin to that taken up by actual practitioners. Such a recommendation adds to the chorus of research insisting that the composition classroom should be focused on problems of composition faced by real authors writing for real audiences (e.g., Ede & Lunsford, 1984; Kittle, 2008; Kroll, 1984; Montgomery & Montgomery, 2021). But it also suggests that one way to invite students to engage themselves with a disciplinary system is along genre and activity lines that they can connect to the literacy communities in which they are already experts. Perhaps a part of the *problem* of academic structures is that they insist that students frontload the context-free content of the discipline before understanding how and why this content ought to be deemed important. An alternative structure, one taken up in the research presented here, would embrace classroom work as "boundary work," encouraging students to gain confidence in entering into new knowledge communities from the margins, through research and inquiry practices that dispense, at least in the short term, with traditional notions of authority, mastery, and endorsement characteristic of academic classrooms, textbooks, journals, and genres.

In being invited to engage in authentic inquiry, students can see themselves as novices in apprenticeship, laymen invited to join a more or less academic conversation on their own terms,

considering disciplinary and interdisciplinary problems and contradictions at the boundary as an entrée into the problems of the discipline itself (Gee, 2004; Russell, 1997). In practice, while this approach might leave students with "gaps" in their basic knowledge (at least according to the general curriculums currently employed), it would also lead to students who understood the knowledge that they had mastered in terms of its relationship to other content, to disciplinary concerns, and to the broader world. Such a move represents what Luke (2003) has called a shift from "collection code curriculum to connection code curriculum" (p. 400). Luke's collection code might be usefully likened to Freire's (2000) "banking concept" of education, in which students are seen as "receptacles" to be filled by the "gift" of knowledge "bestowed" by teachers and professors (p. 69). In such scenarios, students remain passive and disempowered, and their learning remains disconnected from the broader concerns of their own lives, cultures, interests, or values. Luke's connection code curriculum, on the other hand, encourages "critical understandings of the relations among ideas, their sources and histories, intertextual referents and consequences" which are "as important if not more so than mastery, reproduction, and recombination of discrete facts or units of information" (p. 400). This form of learning, where students are invited to find connections between diverse ideas and perspectives, and to form connections between material and their own lived experiences, is much more akin to the "problem-posing" pedagogy that Freire (2000) associates with the development of critical consciousness (p. 71).

Third Space Pedagogies in Practice

Given the roots of Third Space theory in the histories and cultures of colonized peoples, it is unsurprising that many educators and researchers studying Third Space pedagogies have done so in the interest of centering and empowering marginalized voices. These studies seek to

understand the potential of Third Spaces for cultivating culturally relevant and sustaining

pedagogies that reimagine traditional deficit viewpoints as sites of celebration and engagement

(Ladson-Billings, 1995; Muhammad, 2020). Jones and Curwood (2020), for example, conducted

a case study exploring the potential of Third Space spoken word poetry workshops for enhancing

and empowering the voices of traditionally marginalized students in Western Australia.

Analyzing data from a 6-week poetry slam workshop that facilitated interactions between

experienced spoken word poets and secondary students at three high schools, the researchers

found that the program created "empowerment realized through the celebration of [students']

unique voices and experiences" that translated into a newfound confidence in a critical literacy

perspective with regards to broader world issues (Jones & Curwood, 2020). In a similar study

conducted in the midwestern U.S., Grey (2020) analyzed the effects of a school-university

partnership program connecting Black ninth-grade students with Black poets. Studying an

initiative called the Scholar Collaborative as a physical third space that sits "outside traditional

framings of primary and secondary spaces of school and home," Grey found that centering texts

and language practices that draw on students' cultural backgrounds "validate student identities"

(p. 7). Grey's participants noted the radical difference between the curriculum of their formal

English classrooms and the texts and voices studied in the workshop, and credited the program

with helping them develop a sense of possibility for their academic and social identities. Both of

these studies took place as a part of supplementary programs, outside of the normal school day, a

fact that lends them an enhanced aspect of Third Space–being a physical and temporal space

away from the traditional classroom–while also limiting their potential accessibility and

applicability to the everyday activities of secondary English classes. Indeed, both researchers

found themselves frustrated by systemic obstacles to developing a sustained adoption of the

programs under study, a frustration that reflects the very entrenched power structures that the programs themselves were designed to and successful at addressing in marginalized student populations.

Other studies have examined the potential for incorporating Third Space pedagogies into the normal classroom structures. In an early exploration of Third Space in classroom environments, Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) studied the discourse patterns of a 9th grade English classroom and identified two salient categories of discourse, which they named official (including curricular and school related speech) and unofficial (including social, personal, or private speech). Maniotes (2005) carried these conceptions of official and unofficial discourse forward in her ethnographic analysis of the emergence of Third Space in literature discussion groups in a literacy-focused classroom. Maniotes found literature discussion groups to have powerful potential as third spaces, where official and unofficial scripts merge such that students can negotiate meaningful relationships between the sanctioned materials of the academic space and their own lived experiences. Maniotes cautioned, however, that the construction of such spaces requires pedagogical models that are sensitive to, and receptive of, lines of inquiry, modes of assessment, and types of talk that may seem to diverge widely from traditional forms of academic discourse. Coleman (2020), interested in understanding how teachers from dominant demographic groups can effectively "teach resistance and initiate critical dialogue," conducted a self-study to explore the potential for using *testimonio* as curriculum and pedagogy with a predominantly Mexican-American student population (p. 3). Coleman, a young, White woman from a middle-class background, found that the incorporation of *testimonios* – first-person narratives of marginalized and oppressed peoples (Cruz, 2012) – opened up a critical space of dialogue for traditionally marginalized students to claim the validity of their own

experiences in the context of broader systems of social injustice, including the systems of

education itself, even as she found herself repositioned from the role of authority to that of

listener and learner, as her students drew expertise from their own experiential "funds of

knowledge" (Coleman, 2020).

Still other studies have centered on the potential for digital technologies and

multiliteracies frameworks for engaging students in virtual Third Spaces. Benson (2010)

explored the use of Third Space pedagogy to engage reluctant readers and writers through the

use of multimodal assignments that employed digital tools and platforms. Through the analysis

of a series of ethnographic vignettes of a resistant 11th-grade student, Benson found that the

incorporation of digital technologies allowed the student "to create a small space of expertise" in

a classroom space that otherwise "offered few opportunities for him to demonstrate his

competence" (p. 560). However, Benson observed that these multimodal opportunities were not

the focal point in a classroom and curriculum space that was still committed to the primacy of

print. In this space, many of her subject's attempts to reclaim an autonomous learning space for

himself were ultimately frustrated, as those literacy practices wherein he felt a degree of

expertise were largely seen as tangential to the main learning goals of the classroom. Benson

concludes her study by suggesting not only that multimodal and other non-print literacies should

be given more legitimacy in ELA classrooms and wondering what shape third spaces might take

if students were empowered to use them for their own ends, rather than only in service of

mandated curriculums. Matson (2013) explored the use of digital storytelling tools and

autoethnography for encouraging her reluctant high school students to engage in critical literacy

practices. Matson guided her students through the co-construction of an expanded definition of

literacy before inviting them to document their family and community literacy practices for

incorporation into a digital multimodal project. She found the implementation of Third Space

pedagogy for celebrating out-of-school literacies not only empowering to her students, but

transformative of her own approaches to teaching and assumptions about her students' diverse

perspectives (Matson, 2013).

A final theme in research on Third Space pedagogy focuses on the important role that

place, as a physical third space for inquiry, can play in generating meaningful transformations in

learning and learner perspectives. Burns (2009), for example, drew on concepts of Third Space

and authentic inquiry in his development of public writing projects for his composition students.

Burns's public writing projects are meant to "propel students outside the boundaries of academic

discourse into public spaces, relationships, and discussions that students are invested in and

committed to" (p. 29). In a series of activities, Burns's students were asked to investigate

problems in communities of which they were a part, and to locate and analyze the rhetoric of

spaces on campus which acted as liminal spaces between the public space external to the school

and the private space of the school itself. Burns found that these authentic inquiry projects gave

students a new embodied understanding of rhetorical concepts of audience and purpose as they

came to see how "both insider and outsider status is constructed through material conditions,

social identities and relationships, and discourses" (p. 41). Similarly, though they do not position

their work explicitly in terms of Third Space pedagogies, Montgomery and Montgomery (2021)

argue compellingly for the power of place-based writing for positioning students to do

"authentic, meaningful work in a way other writing often struggles to achieve" (xiii). Through a

series of personal anecdotes and practical applications, the authors develop a program for the

transformation of traditional curriculums through immersing students in the critical and creative

examination of the places they inhabit and the places they visit. By engaging students in

authentic environments beyond the classroom, the authors posit, teachers can help students more fully realize the power of writing practices for claiming identities, developing voice, and engaging authentic audiences (Montgomery & Montgomery, 2021).

In sum, the research into the implementation of sociocultural literacies in Third Space points to the potential of such pedagogies for engaging students in authentic and empowering learning experiences. Especially promising is the suggestion across these numerous studies that Third Space pedagogies offer the possibility of reimagining power structures within and beyond the classroom, such that teachers and students take on new collaborative roles in constructing meaning from texts both read and generated. These experiences are perhaps most important and most salient for students who have found their racial, linguistic, or cultural "funds of knowledge" ignored, marginalized or denigrated by traditional educational structures, though they offer the potential for incorporating student's out-of-school ways of knowing more generally. The challenges and limitations to developing sustainable Third Space pedagogical models arise primarily from a resistance to overturning the status quo. While Third Space pedagogies seem to thrive in supplementary programs that extend beyond the normal school day, they have been less successfully integrated into the everyday work of the English Language Arts classroom. A part of this resistance invariably grows out of anxieties surrounding student success on mandated curriculums as measured by high stakes standardized tests, though it may equally be attributed to a staunch and little-questioned commitment, on the part of educators at all levels, to the primacy of academic literacies over and above those developed in local, cultural, and familial contexts.

Pedagogies of Authentic Inquiry

My belief in the importance of authentic inquiry to meaningful learning grows out of a conviction, grounded in social-cognitive theory, that students are most likely to internalize

learning when they feel empowered to make decisions about this learning for themselves, capable of performing the relevant tasks, and when those tasks are linked to their values, goals, or intrinsic desire for connection within the broader world (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such a conviction is of a piece with much work in sociocultural literacies, which emphasizes the important role of identity and social practice in literacy learning (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; Gee, 2004). Authentic inquiry can be understood as those activities in which academic inquiry is practiced toward ends that students select themselves based on their own self-identified interests, questions, and concerns and producing texts in genres and in media designed for audiences beyond the classroom whom the students have an interest in engaging. Authentic inquiry takes for granted a hybridity of discourse, space, and practice, as students' own outside interests are drawn upon to provide content to the classroom, even as those interests are offered shape, vocabulary, and direction by the structural, conceptual, and rhetorical tools of academic research and composition (Gutierrez, 2008).

Social-Cognitive Theories of Motivation

Traditional classroom assessment practices that rely on tests and grades to measure student learning of classroom-centered, externally determined curriculum goals are grounded in a behaviorist understanding of motivation as driven by the threat of punishment or the promise of reward (Anderman & Dawson, 2011; Kohn, 1999, 2012; Percell, 2019). Social cognitive theories, on the other hand, see motivation as influenced by beliefs about the self, cognitions, and social contexts (Bandura, 1997). According to these social cognitive theories, students' motivation to learn is rooted not in the desire for external validation by grades or teacher praise, nor even in abstract life goals as represented by the concept of "college and career readiness" (Mishkind, 2014, p. 1) or the possibility of university acceptance, but rather in "beliefs about

their ability to learn, develop skills, or master materials" (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Patall, 2015, p. 91).

Self-determination theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), identifies three components of motivation that find support in learning-conducive contexts–intrinsic desires for competence, relatedness, and autonomy–as "essential for facilitating optimal functioning for the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Deci and Ryan distinguish between extrinsic motivation, wherein behaviors are driven by the promise of reward or the threat of punishment, and intrinsic motivation, which is driven by factors internal to the person, and which the authors call "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). Deci and Ryan cite research demonstrating that the expectation of tangible rewards (such as grades) reliably diminishes students' intrinsic motivations. Contexts which promote and encourage intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, have been shown to lead to better outcomes for student engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), performance (Miserandino, 1996), and quality of learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987).

Similarly, research exploring the role of classroom goal structures on student learning outcomes distinguish between a mastery goal orientation and a performance goal orientation (Anderman & Dawson, 2011; Archer, 1994; Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996; Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002). Mastery goals, related to Deci and Ryan's (1985) concept of intrinsic motivation, are dispositions that lead students to complete particular tasks or undertake certain behaviors in order to master skills that are seen as desirable in themselves; performance goal orientations, on the other hand, are those wherein student behaviors are motivated by a desire to

demonstrate performance, or avoid failure, according to an external measure of proficiency, often related to grade comparisons, teacher judgment, and the performance of their peers (Anderman & Dawson, 2011). Research by Archer (1994) demonstrated that mastery goal orientations are related to adaptive educational outcomes, including enjoyment of learning and choosing challenging academic tasks. Performance goal orientation, on the other hand, and especially performance-avoidance behavior, wherein students orient themselves around the task of avoiding failure, have been found to be especially maladaptive (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). These findings point to the importance of creating cultures of learning that prioritize student interests, celebrate the learning process, and minimize the social and academic risks of productive failure.

Research has demonstrated that teacher attitudes and approaches play an important role in shaping the motivational dispositions of students in the classroom. Kaplan and colleagues (2002) showed that "goal-related messages that are made salient" in the classroom "are related to, and most likely influence, the personal goals" that students pursue (p. 24). Especially important to student learning engagement are classroom goal orientations built to support student autonomy in setting and achieving learning goals (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). In a study of 2,523 students from nine public high schools measuring the effects on student engagement of teacher behavior that supported autonomy, Jang and colleagues (2010) found a strong correlation between autonomy-supportive classrooms, student engagement, and intrinsic motivation. According to the authors:

> Autonomy-supportive teachers facilitate students' personal autonomy by taking the students' perspective; identifying and nurturing the students' needs, interests, and preferences; providing optimal challenges; highlighting meaningful learning goals; and presenting interesting, relevant, and enriched activities…they create opportunities for

students to take the initiative during learning activities by building instruction around

students' interests, preferences, personal goals, choice making, and sense of challenge

and curiosity, rather than relying on external sources of motivation such as incentives,

consequences, directives, and deadlines. (p. 589)

Thus, not only does social cognitive research on student motivation support the notion that

learning, in order to be meaningful and lasting, ought to be driven by a student's own sense of

identity and purpose, it also makes clear the important role that pedagogies of empowerment

play in creating classroom cultures that enable such learning.

Affinity Spaces

The concept of authentic inquiry and composition mirrors in many ways the strategies for

learning that people employ in the course of their everyday lives. In an attempt to understand this

everyday learning, Gee (2004) proposed the concept of "affinity spaces" as hybrid spaces for

authentic learning that grow out of personal interests, passions, and dispositions (p. 77). Affinity

spaces are communal spaces for learning in which "newbies and masters and everyone else"

come together electively in pursuit of a "common endeavor" (p. 85). Affinity spaces offer

multiple portals for entry and multiple routes to participation, relying on systems of informal

mentorship and apprenticeship to develop new knowledge and encourage collaborative

contribution. As examples of affinity spaces, Gee (2004) offers those sites of cultural exchange

frequented by people interested in cooking, hunting, or video games. To these, Jenkins (2006a)

adds examples of students developing fan-based online newspapers, coding Web browsers, and

creating original claymation videos. And we might add to this list any number of additional

hobbyist and fan communities, including amateur roboticists, herbalists, soccer players,

musicians, enthusiastic fans of auteur cinema, aspiring Dungeon Masters, and kpop stans.

Affinity spaces are distinct from everyday literacies as characterized by New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003, 2005) in that they are elective in nature and focused on attaining particular knowledge or skills for particular ends. Unlike the "funds of knowledge" discussed by Moll and Greenberg (1990), which are attained more or less passively in the course of everyday life within a culture or community, learning in affinity spaces is taken up intentionally by participants with the goal of gaining expertise and contributing creatively to the ongoing development of social knowledge, often out of a sense of enjoyment or pleasure in the endeavor itself. In this sense, affinity spaces share a number of important qualities with learning as it takes place within a formal academic setting, especially insofar as that setting is informed by a pedagogy of multiliteracies: learning in affinity spaces is more or less disciplinary in focus, it draws on formal and informal systems of knowledge, and it aims toward construction of new knowledge that both enhances the life experience of the individual and contributes to the broader goals of a community (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; The New London Group, 1996). Moreover, the concept of affinity space maps well onto our conceptions of what it means to be a lifelong learner outside of the domain of formal educational settings: when people continue to learn throughout their lives, they do so not solely (or even primarily) in the interest of academic achievement or career advancement, but because they find pleasure in the act of learning, growing, sharing their knowledge, and expanding their repertoires of practice (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).

In affinity spaces, according to Gee, people learn most authentically in part because the object of their learning is already bound up in their own conceptions of their identities. Furthermore, engagement in affinity spaces embodies the idea of learning "as a cultural process," where learning occurs "through action and talk with others" rather than "by memorizing words outside their contexts of application" (Gee, 2004, p. 39). Affinity spaces engage us in learning in

and through (social) practice. Though Gee emphasizes that the focus of affinity spaces is not "first and foremost the other people using the space" but rather "the endeavor or interest around which the space is organized," (p. 84) the social nature of such spaces makes possible a pedagogy of apprenticeship, in which expertise is shared and distributed, and learners gain expertise "through joint action with more advanced peers" toward common goals and interests (Gee, 2004, p.77, see also Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

As Alvermann (2008) noted, participatory culture in online affinity spaces provides a flexibility for learning and engagement that is "difficult, if not impossible, to duplicate offline" (p. 10). Gee (2004) also expresses skepticism about the ability of academic environments to create such spaces, contrasting the qualities of affinity spaces with traditional classrooms in which participation is mandated and outcomes are unclear in terms of personal and social relevance. Rather than being organized around self-selected common endeavors, classrooms sort students by age, grade, and perceived ability level. Furthermore, learning in traditional classroom settings is organized according to rigid, content-focused, externally defined curricular goals. Not only is it likely that these goals have little or nothing in common with students' own interests or proclivities, they also offer little in the way of opportunities for contribution on the part of the learner: the point of much classroom instruction is that the learner incorporate knowledge, a unidirectional conception of learning that ignores the desire to "modify, transform, and add to" the conversation that is central to experiences of authentic learning as characterized by affinity spaces (Gee, 2004, p. 88). Relatedly, traditional classroom structures often reify notions of hierarchical authority, with the teacher and curriculum acting as the arbiters of worthwhile knowledge and the students understood as receptacles of this knowledge (Freire, 2000). As Alvermann (2008) warns, traditional academic environments, which "locate expertise in

individuals…and institutions," find it challenging to incorporate the notions of "expertise and authority [as] collectively distributed" that are hallmarks of affinity spaces and participatory culture (p. 14).

The current study proposes, however, that the composition classroom, when informed by a Third Space pedagogy, offers a singular opportunity to incorporate many of the lessons offered by online participatory culture. By embracing the hybridity of discourse and expertise that exists within the classroom, we can move toward pedagogical structures that offer students opportunities to engage in authentic learning while at the same time leveraging the structures of formal educational setting to enhance the quality of this learning. Pedagogies of authentic inquiry offer possibilities for learning about self-selected topics, learning across multiple platforms, and generation of meaningful real-world texts that may capitalize on the authentic learning practices characteristic of affinity spaces to teach important academic content and literacy skills (Jacobs, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011).

Furthermore, by organizing students within the composition classroom along lines that, though individual in content and focus, share the "common endeavor" of effectively entering into authentic conversation with real audiences for real purposes, pedagogies of authentic inquiry offer the opportunity to more fully align the mandated curriculum of the Language Arts classroom with the purpose-driven possibilities of authentic learning (Gee, 2004, p. 185). In a classroom where students are invited to engage in learning for their own purposes, the teacher can step out of the role of absolute authority and into a role of mentor, peer, and co-learner. Rather than being unquestioned and unidirectional, the expertise of a composition teacher in a learning environment oriented around student engagement in self-selected learning becomes tactical and opportunistic. Like an amateur programmer who works at problems independently,

but relies on the collective expertise in online forums when their efforts are frustrated by particular obstacles, students can come to rely on the teacher for expert knowledge on demand, when, for example, they are struggling to find or understand a piece of research, when they are working to effectively communicate some idea, or when they are struggling to identify the best tool with which to solve a rhetorical problem. In this way, the traditional top-down model of reading and writing instruction can be effectively replaced by a form of what Wells (1993) has called "semiotic apprenticeship," in which academic literacies and language practices are taken up by students not primarily to fulfill the arbitrary goals represented by curriculum standards or grades but as a means of mastering skills that are seen as important in their own right and that are aligned with identities they have an interest in developing (p. 4).

Moreover, to the extent that each student, engaged in independent inquiry, might be developing authority on a topic or issue unfamiliar to the teacher and their peers, the students are offered the opportunity to take on the role of expert as well. Classroom conversation in such a space can more fully embrace the concepts of polyvocality and heteroglossia emphasized by researchers in sociocultural literacy (Bahktin, 1981; Gutiérrez, Banquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999; Maniotes, 2005; Russell, 1997). Likewise, as students develop solutions to research and composition problems particular to their own areas of study, the stability of the classroom community offers them the collaborative opportunity to act as mentors to one another: the "common endeavor" of rhetorical practice provides that students working on radically different topics will inevitably find themselves confronted with similar problems of research, engagement, and communication. Thus does shifting the content-focus of the composition classroom to students' own interests create the opportunity for a skills and curriculum focus that more closely resembles the "pedagogy of collegiality" that Chavez and Soep (2005, p. 409) suggest is

characteristic of adult-youth collaboration around new media practices. Pedagogies built on a

framework of authentic inquiry embrace the Freirian (2000) concept of "problem-posing"

education, in which the teacher comes to see herself as "a partner to the student," and students in

turn become "critical coinvestigators in dialogue with the teacher" (pp. 71-74).

Pedagogies of Authentic Inquiry in Practice

Much of the research dedicated to investigating the relationships between student

autonomy and engagement in authentic inquiry has been conducted under the banner of

project-based learning. Project-based learning has been defined as "a time-bound activity which

is directed by the project participants or team, who determine the course of the project and the

final output in response to a brief of some description…related to a concrete or real world issue

which the project participants are required to address" (Hanney & Savin-Baden, 2013).

Project-based learning seeks to reorient the dynamic of the classroom away from a

teacher-focused delivery of content to a student-focused model which promotes in-depth

investigation leading to the production of one or more products, which are often collaborative

and multimodal in nature (Grant, 2011).

Project-based learning's utility for teaching in Science, Technology, Engineering, and

Math (STEM) courses has inspired a number of research studies (Capraro, R. M., Capraro, M.

M., & Morgan, J. R., 2013; Han, S., Capraro, R. & Capraro, M.M., 2015; Tseng, K., Chang, C.,

Lou, S., & Chen, W., 2013). Results from these studies suggested that, overall, project-based

learning offers a meaningful and effective alternative to traditional teacher-led instruction,

leading to deeper student learning and satisfaction (Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). However,

despite the promises that project-based learning has held out for improving student engagement,

motivation, and performance, far less research has been conducted on the implementation of

project-based learning practices in the secondary English Language Arts environment (Armstrong-Grodzicki, 2013; Aughey, 2017; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). To explain this, Aughey (2017) suggested that English Language Arts teachers often feel nervous about handing over control of their classrooms to student interests and passions, especially in the current high-stakes testing environment that holds teachers accountable for teaching an often overwhelming amount of material.

What research does exist for the use of projects in English Language Arts classrooms suggests them as potent drivers of student engagement and authentic meaning-making. Aughey's (2017) own phenomenological study sought to address the problem of academic research, which students tend to perceive as "tedious and disconnected from the real world," with opportunities to incorporate critical literacies in practice (p. 16). Aughey engaged students in secondary English classrooms in critical literacy activities that put student-selected artifacts drawn from their engagement in out-of-school literacies into conversation with disciplinary texts and academic lenses. The findings from Aughey's study, which culminated in a public exhibition of work for fellow students and community members, suggests the power of learning through projects for encouraging student's critical literacy, as well as for engaging in learning in a way that motivates shifting conceptions of students' academic identities. Similarly, Maloney (2010) provides a description of the use of independent projects that involve deep reading and engagement to compose arguments about real-world issues. Undertaking what Maloney calls "a meaningful remake of the traditional term paper, students in his AP Literature and Composition course engaged in purpose-led projects that ranged in theme from human impacts on the environment to understanding conflict in the Middle East (p. 55). The project culminates with students undertaking real-world action in their communities in the interest of promoting the

changes they see as important in the world. In reflecting on the project, Maloney suggests that

"schools can offer students meaningful learning experiences by having them play a role in

solving the world's problems" (p. 58). Both of these studies suggest the power for inviting

students to bring out-of-school texts, literacy practices, and ways of knowing into conversation

with the official curriculum of the English Language Arts Classroom. Furthermore, they both

point to the importance of composing authentic texts for real audiences and purposes for

increasing student motivation and autonomy.

A number of studies exploring the use of authentic inquiry and composition have focused

on the use of particular digital tools to promote student autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

In her review of the digital turn in New Literacy Studies, Mills (2010) cites educational research

on the use of microblogging platforms (Yi, 2008), blogging (Davies & Merchant, 2007),

threaded discussions (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006), and wikis (Wheeler & Wheeler, 2009). Other

researchers have focused on the sociocultural affordances of digital media production (Brass,

2008; Mills, 2008; Ranker, 2008), interactive digital art (Peppler & Kafai, 2007), programming

video games (Sanford & Maddil, 2006), and authoring and performing spoken word poetry

(McGuinnis, 2007).

In the English Language Arts classroom, much attention has been given to the potential

of blogs for encouraging students to write for authentic audiences and purposes. Some of this

research has focused on the potential for blogs as authentic writing spaces for encouraging

engagement in and uptake of writing practices. Undertaking a descriptive study of 35 teachers

using blogs in 50 courses that encompassed a range of secondary English Language Arts

environments, Olander (2009) found that blogs were being used for a variety of purposes and in

a variety of writing contexts. Results from surveys and interviews indicated that blog-based

assignments were successful in encouraging students to write more often and at greater length

than traditional writing assignments (Olander, 2009). Olander concluded that blogs effectively

shifted writing instruction from a teacher-student to a writer-reader paradigm that engendered

meaningful and authentic feedback ecologies for students. Similarly, Novakovich (2016)

conducted a quasi-experimental study comparing a group receiving traditional writing instruction

and one receiving blog-based instruction. The research found that writing instruction through

blogs produced a higher quality of writing as reflected by grades, as well as higher-quality peer

comments in peer-review workshops (Novakovich, 2016).

Other research on blogging platforms as an avenue to authentic engagement have focused

on the power that blogs have for encouraging new productive dispositions toward learning.

Lankshear and Knobel (2011) suggest the power of the public space of blogs for building and

incorporating developing disciplinary and para-disciplinary identities for students, as when a

student blogs about a topic they must also perform some aspect of their identity in relation to

their subject matter. Using an in-depth case study of the in- and out-of-school writing habits of

an 11th grade student, Godfrey (2008) observed that writing on digital platforms, which frees

students from received notions of academic formality, often allow students the ability to develop

a more authentic authorial voice and a more nuanced analytical lens. Melly (2018), in an

informal study of her own incorporation of blogging in a Pre-Advanced Placement 9th grade

Literature course, found that classroom blogging was effective in developing authentic

approaches to writing as a way of knowing. Blogging, she found, "reframed writing as a method

for seeking understanding, rather than a recording of already-refined ideas" (Melly, 2018, p. 12).

Several researchers have highlighted challenges associated with attempting to incorporate

affinity space methodologies of authentic inquiry into the classroom. Beyond the concerns

expressed by Alvermann (2008) and Gee (2004) regarding the compatibility of flexible models of learning within traditional curriculum-focused classrooms, there is also a question as to the extent that meaningful participation in such spaces will be taken up by a majority of students. Gee (2004) himself noted that affinity spaces take their form from offering many routes to participation, and so we should assume that, in authentic affinity spaces, participation will range from consistent to occasional, and from immersive to peripheral. Magnifico, Lammers, and Fields (2018), for example, point out that much research on participatory culture assumes an ideal participant who represents a core member of an online community. Magnifico and colleagues (2018) present data demonstrating that participation in online spaces is inconsistent both in quality and quantity over time, and tends to center around a very small group of heavy users. Thus the subjects of Jenkins (2006a) study, whose practices within affinity spaces are robust, consistent, and productive, may be exceptions to a broader pattern of non- or quasi-participation by the majority of youth. By focusing on ideal subjects, the authors assert, research tends to misrepresent both the real patterns of participation in online participatory spaces, and to ignore the patterns of peripheral participation that make up the ongoing use patterns of larger groups of people as well as the reasons people have for their resistance or hesitancy to enter into such spaces. Magnifico and colleagues highlight tensions that arise for students who are not familiar nor comfortable with participation in authentic communities of learning.

Similarly, Marsh and Hoff (2019) explore the important and often neglected element of trust in constituting meaningful engagement within affinity spaces. Much research in participatory culture, and in sociocultural literacy more generally, the authors argue, assumes a willingness on the part of students to engage their identities in the spaces of social learning. In a

retrospective cross-case analysis comparing participation in in-class creative writing workshops with participation on Youtube and Facebook on mobile devices, the researchers discovered students to be much more apprehensive about the vulnerability with which they engaged in these spaces. Trust relationships that manifested in these participatory spaces, ranged from "guarded participation" (in which students took up roles of reader and commenter but resisted contributing original work to the space) to "Engaging while managing privacy" (in which students contributed meaningfully to the production of original works, but whose participation is still overridden by an interest in maintaining privacy) (Marsh & Hoff, 2019). The findings of Marsh and Hoff echo Russell's (1997) assertion that important tensions between student identities and academic discourses are at play in disciplinary learning, a finding that is supported by much research in the social construction of adolescent identities (Moje et al., 2009).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

"It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what passed by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by…These fixations constitute procedures of forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice."
                                                            –Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the literature related to the central concepts and concerns of this study. In this chapter, I will outline the methodology by which the research was conducted.

Research Approach and Rationale

This study took a qualitative approach to research guided by an instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995, 2005). Qualitative research focuses its attention on the particular, often idiosyncratic, nature of social phenomena. The decision to adopt a qualitative paradigm grows out of a conviction that our social lives are always complex, nuanced, situated, and subject to a distributed causality, as well as a suspicion regarding the ability of quantitative approaches to do justice to this complexity. Rather than aiming to test hypotheses or develop generalizations, qualitative research aims to understand human meaning-making in context, to "make sense" of social phenomena in systematic ways such that their embedded meanings can be read more clearly (Glesne, 2016).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest a number of specific shared qualities of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research, they say, is "naturalistic, occurring in the context of lived social relations" (p. 181). Thus are qualitative researchers, who are often embedded in the research context, tasked with teasing out meaning from the complex realities of actual human experiences. To overcome the biases and blindspots of their own perspectives, qualitative

researchers work inductively, gathering and recursively analyzing "multiple sources of narrative, observational, documentary, and audiovisual data," allowing the research design itself to emerge from the contextual data as it is collected, and interpreting this data in a way that "illuminates the meanings that participants attribute to their experience through a holistic account that does justice to the complexity of lived social relations" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 182).

Case Study Research Design

Case study research has a long history of use in the social sciences, finding its roots in the anthropological work of Malinowski and the sociology of the Chicago school in the early part of the twentieth century (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that case study approaches are especially appropriate when researchers hope to "develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration" (p. 96). Stake (2005) and Thomas (2015) argue that case study research is best defined not by its methods, but rather by the boundedness of the object under investigation, which is limited to a specific, more or less clearly delineated case or cases.

A case study approach is particularly well suited to classroom research, as the classroom provides a nearly ideal bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Classes meet at regularly scheduled times over long periods of time (my class met for 90 minutes each weekday for 18 weeks). Their reasons for existing are relatively well-enunciated at least at a systemic level (i.e., a Language Arts classroom is a place for learning to read and write, as defined by such things as graduation requirements, state curricula, and standardized testing). Classroom populations are highly stable and often include enough individual diversity to identify and/or construct meaningful micro-cases (e.g., small groups or individual students) to ensure multiple perspectives, aid in triangulation, and enable negative case analysis (Stake, 2010).

Because it is the questions and problems regarding students' attitudes toward inquiry and composition that motivated this research, rather than a general curiosity about the classroom itself, this study took the form of what Stake (1995) calls "instrumental case study," wherein "a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding" is matched with "a feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case" (p. 3). A case study approach is also in accord with the broader socio-cultural theories of literacy upon which the research questions rely. Socio-cultural theories suggest that literacy practices are situated, context-bound, and socially constructed (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Prior, 2006; Schultz & Fecho, 2000). Using a case study approach allowed the questions to be studied within the context of a well-defined socio-cultural environment, and multiple methods of data collection made it more likely that complex, nuanced social meanings of student literacy practices might be gleaned through qualitative analysis.

School Setting and Context

The high school in which this study was conducted is a public high school in Georgia serving 1,823 students in grades 9-12, according to the most recent public data (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). The school, the sole high school in a small city district, is demographically diverse, as reflected by reported demographics breakdown. Of the total student population, 38.2% are White, 31.7% Black, 22.5% Hispanic, 5.3% Multi-racial, and 2.2% Asian/Pacific Islander (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). Though the school does not qualify for Title I funds, both the elementary school and the middle school that feed into it are designated Title I schools, and 46% of students at the high school qualify as economically disadvantaged (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). 7.3% of the population are English language learners, and 11.7% are students with disabilities.

Many courses at the school, including courses in the English Language Arts department, are offered at a number of different academic levels. Students can complete various courses in small-group, self-contained special education environments, as special-education inclusion courses, or at the college-preparatory (so-called "on level"), honors, or advanced (AP, IB, or college dual-enrollment) level.

I undertook this research study over the course of the Fall 2023 semester in my AP Language & Composition/American Literature course. The participant population, then, has been determined in part by convenience: I teach the class, and thus have unfettered access to the population as well as a large measure of control over the content and curriculum of the course. However, conducting this research in my own classroom also offers many benefits in terms of qualitative research practices. Effective qualitative research demands prolonged, in-depth study of the research environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Furthermore, meaningful data collection in complex social situations is promoted by developing relations of trust and authenticity with participants (Glesne, 2016). By defining my own AP Language classroom as the case under study, I can ensure both my immersion in the study environment, the opportunity to participate in the community under study, and the opportunity to develop meaningful rapport with the participants.

The AP Language & Composition/American Literature course combines the College Board's AP Language & Composition course curriculum with the American Literature & Composition curriculum as designed by the Georgia Department of Education. There are two other iterations of the American Literature course (offered at the "college preparatory" and "honors" levels) which makes the AP Language/American Literature course one of the few courses in the high school that is offered at three distinct levels. Though the high school does not

impose formal practices of tracking students, students tend to take many of their academic

courses at one of these levels. Thus students who are enrolled in AP Language/American

Literature are often enrolled, or have taken, a number of other advanced-level courses across the

curriculum.

Because most students take American Literature in their Junior year, the course's

population (n=34) was almost evenly divided between 10th (n=13) and 11th grade students

(n=19). The several 10th graders in the class are those that have been identified, or have

self-identified, as being interested in pursuing the IB Diploma during their 11th and 12th grade

years. The course also included one senior student who had dual enrolled at the local university

during his 11th grade year and so had not yet completed the graduation-required American

Literature course. Each of the pathways into the course is more or less selective in nature. This

selection process in my school has effects on student populations that generally mirror the effects

found elsewhere: Students in the AP courses tend to be whiter and more affluent than the overall

student body. In the class selected for this study, 54% of students were white, 21% Black, 12%

Hispanic, and 9% were Asian/Pacific Islander. The course was overwhelmingly female (n=24), a

trend which mirrors that being experienced by universities (citation).

Participants

The broad case under investigation in this study was defined by the boundaries of a

single, semester-long course of AP Language and composition. Participants for this study were

gleaned from the population of students enrolled in this course. In the first week of class, I

distributed parent consent forms to all students and broadly explained my research project.

Because my research is centered on the processes and outcomes of the Focus Project, this also

provided an early opportunity to explain in general terms the intentions and outcomes of that

long-term project as well. All students in the course were invited to participate in the study via an explanatory letter and relevant consent forms. Of the 34 students in the class, 33 returned the relevant parent consent form and signed the subsequent minor assent form. Table 1 contains a demographic breakdown of this particular student population.

Table 1

Case Study Population Demographics

	Gender		Grade		
	Male	Female	10th	11th	12th
Total	8	24	12	19	1
Racial Demographics					
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	3	2	1	0
Black	0	7	3	4	0
Hispanic	1	3	0	4	0
Mixed Race	1	0	1	0	0
White	6	11	6	10	1
Gender					
Male			5	3	1
Female			8	16	0

From the total class population, I also selected six individuals to serve as micro-cases for further data collection and analysis. My process for selecting individual micro-cases involved a combination of preliminary analysis of early data, a desire to sample a diverse and representative subset of the class, and a heavy dose of teacherly intuition with regards to the Preliminary data analysis drew on students' literacy narrative drafts as well as the topic selection and initial research workshops related to their focus projects. Dependent on patterns in the initial data, these individual micro-cases were selected based on a principle of "maximum variation sampling," such that the broadest possible range of experiences might be investigated and compared

(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 158). Variations in the sampled population included divergent

intellectual interests, nascent attitudes toward or abilities with academic literacies, and varying

degrees of comfort with the social dynamics of the classroom. Further, though the question of

cultural relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) is not a central concern of this study, which

is more interested in the effects of a broader conception of academic colonization in advanced

level students, the roots of Third Space theory in the scholarship of oppressed peoples, and

prevalence of research into the potential for Third Space pedagogies to center the voices of

marginalized students, led me to a conviction to include a variety of demographic backgrounds in

the sample of individuals to be interviewed.

The decision to identify six individual students on which to focus a more intensive

analytical lens was made as much for practical as for theoretical reasons: the intent of a case

study is to develop in-depth understanding of the particulars of the case, and as such, the research

process demands the cultivation and collection of thorough and diverse data (Creswell & Poth,

2018, p. 98). Attempting to collect data on too many cases and micro-cases risks losing the trees

to the forest, so to speak. That said, the intent of the participant identification and data collection

process was to come to as complete an understanding as possible of the total case under

investigation.

The six individuals selected for further in-depth interviewing were:

1. Akio (10th grade white male): Akio was actively engaged in the curriculum of the

   classroom from the start. In the first week of class, after I introduced the ongoing practice

   of sustained silent reading of self-selected texts that the course would include, Akio

   stayed after class to talk to me about his own favorite books, and his more recent return to

   reading as a practice that he enjoyed. Akio contributed regularly to class discussions, and

would often linger after class to take up with me ideas from class time that were still resonating in his mind. A tall and sturdily built young man with long brown hair and thick-rimmed glasses, Akio had a number of outside interests. He was passionate about fantasy literature, model building, and video games, and his interest in Japanese media had recently led him to begin teaching himself to speak and write Japanese. Akio used his literacy narrative as an opportunity to interrogate the tensions that he saw as existing between his many outside literacy practices and the demands of the education system. He developed his Focus Project around an exploration of the cultural practices and perceptions of fandom.

2. Odu (11th grade Black female): Odu and I knew each other prior to her entering the course, as she was strongly considering pursuing the IB Diploma Program, for which I act as Program Coordinator in addition to my teaching duties. Odu's parents are from Ghana, and her mother is a small business owner of a boutique dedicated to African-inspired fashion housed in the mall located in the next-closest city to our own. Odu is also a dedicated member of the high school Band, and it was in fact the opportunities for leadership in the band, and the concomitant scheduling requirements, that ultimately led her to forego pursuit of the IB Diploma Program (itself a highly demanding program with rather strict scheduling requirements). Despite taking a different path, it was for her dedication to high achievement, her intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness about the world, and her interest in exploring and developing her relationship with her own cultural heritage that Odu had been recommended for the IB Program, and she carried all of these aspects of her identity with her instead into the AP Language course. In her Literacy Narrative, Odu told the story of her childhood interest

in film-making, and the many short films that she had created with her brother and sister. For her Focus Project, Odu decided to conduct an in-depth cultural analysis of her favorite album, *Your City Gave Me Asthma*, by the musical artist and YouTube personality Wilbur Soot, paying particular attention to the way that the album portrays the problem of toxic relationships

3. Carrie (11th grade white female): Carrie moved to the high school at the beginning of the year from a small local private school, so her entrance into my AP Language class at the start of the semester also marked her entrance into the high school community as a whole. The decision to change schools was motivated in part by a desire for involvement in a larger and more diverse student body, in part by a desire to compete with a more robust and competitive volleyball team. Carrie's father is a former History teacher who now acts as an assistant principal in a nearby school district. In her literacy narrative, Carrie chose to explore the role of volleyball in her identity, and challenges of entering and becoming an integral part of the volleyball community. Carrie's Focus Project was dedicated to understanding the role of mental health services in competitive athletics.

4. Herschel (11th grade white male): Herschel carried himself with an optimistic ease and a bright eyed enthusiasm. A core member of the varsity cross country and track teams, Herschel was homeschooled until age 12. He wrote in his literacy narrative about his experiences entering public school for the first time as an overweight and blissfully optimistic 7th grader, and the transformation in his priorities and personality that came from a resolution to better himself. Despite his athleticism and dedication to physical fitness, Herschel displayed a sensitivity and openness uncharacteristic of many males his

age. His Focus Project, inspired by a film he had recently seen, was centered on understanding the problem of human trafficking.

5. Camilla (11th grade Hispanic female): Camilla's extreme introversion made it difficult at first for her to adapt to a classroom centered on collaborative meaning making. She shrunk from opportunities to speak, and entered warily into conversation with her table mates. That said, Camilla came eventually to trust me as a teacher, and through her trust in me to begin involving herself more frequently in classroom conversations. Her shyness belied a strong sense of principles and a nascent critique of her own experiences, as an Hispanic woman, in her past classroom experiences. She stayed after class on several occasions to share with me the various microaggressions that she had experienced across her daily schedule. Camilla wrote her literacy narrative about the important role that music had played in helping her come to terms with her own internal emotional life. For her Focus Project, Camilla decided to make a class project of better understanding her own experiences with anxiety and the phenomenon of adolescent anxiety more broadly.

6. Claire (10th grade white female): Claire, also a band student, was a highly engaged student who arrived at class with a high level of ability in both academic speaking and writing. Early in the semester, Claire demonstrated a dedication to careful consideration of the texts under investigation and a willingness to contribute to classwide discussions. Claire had been selected as a section leader in the band, and her attitude in class was concomitant with the qualities of good leadership: she took initiative, asked questions for clarification, treated others with respect, and took an active role in inviting less confident students into conversation. Claire wrote her literacy narrative about her early experiences with reading, and dedicated her Focus Project work to an exploration of fashion as a text.

Importantly, while no specific data was collected on students who elected not to participate in the study, these students were engaged in the same curricular and pedagogical practices as those involved in the study.

Events

The case study investigated the research questions through analysis of the processes and products related to the class's completion of a semester-long independent inquiry and composition assignment. Called the Focus Project, this assignment was designed as an invitation for students to choose a focus--a topic, issue, problem or question of personal relevance; to investigate that focus through the lens of multiple textual perspectives; and to compose original argumentative texts in response to the focus. This long-term project contained a number of opportunities for students to engage in reading, research, and other learning; to reflect on what they have learned as well as how they have learned it; to collaborate and coordinate learning with their peers; and to generate texts for authentic audiences in a number of modes.

Though it has been my experience that students have often had little opportunity for self-guided learning before entering the AP Language class, such activities are not new or anomalous to me or my curriculum. I have been teaching this course for several years, and over that time the course has steadily transformed to include an increasing number of authentic inquiry and composition experiences. Students do read and discuss shared texts, they do take and reflect on a number of timed mock examinations, and they do work systematically through the types of writing demanded of the AP Language exam, but they also spend a good amount of time in writing workshop, writing literacy narratives, composing blogs on topics and in response to texts of their choosing, and developing in-depth knowledge on a particular self-selected issue through the Focus Project. Thus while for many students the experience of self-guided learning

may be relatively new, it is not anomalous to the course as a whole. Indeed, part of what the study sought to discover is how students who are used to business as usual respond to a curriculum that invites them to establish some measure of autonomy.

Data Sources & Data Collection

Creswell and Creswell (2018) identify the gathering of multiple, open-ended sources of data as a hallmark of qualitative research. Furthermore, it is a part of the working theory out of which this study grows that learning is complex, relational, contingent, and contextually embedded. For these reasons, data for the study was collected from a number of sources, in the hopes that such a diversity of methods would lead to a nuanced understanding of the situations within which composition practices occur, as well as provide opportunities for triangulation and validation by which to improve the validity and trustworthiness of the study.

In their work on situated literacies, Barton and Hamilton (2000) usefully distinguish between literacy practices, events, and texts. While they identify literacy practices – "the general cultural ways of utilizing written language" which "straddle the distinction between individual and social worlds" – as "the basic unit of a social theory of literacy," they also insist that such practices are "not observable units of behavior since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7-8). Such practices, which can be more or less stable or dynamic, more or less contested or conventionally agreed upon in a given social contexts, must be inferred by way of the various manifestations of literacy within particular literacy events – "events in which literacy has a role" – and the (oral, written, and performative) texts that generate and are generated by such literacy events. Data Collection protocols for this study were aimed at illuminating student inquiry and composition practices through all three aspects of situated literacies identified by Barton and Hamilton (2000). Through participant

observation and ethnographic description, I hoped to identify and examine the specific literacy events that constitute student involvement in inquiry and composition. Through the cultivation and collection of participant-generated documents, I hoped to illuminate students' understanding of and investment in textual literacy as it relates to in-school and out-of-school intellectual pursuits. Finally, through individual and small-group interviews, I hoped to gain insight, as far as possible, into students' own understandings of what constitutes their "literacy practices."

I collected two forms observational data:

1. Field observation: As I worked to understand student inquiry and composition practices in my classroom, I generated observational notes regarding student attitudes and behaviors with regards to reading, writing, and social learning practices. These notes are focused around the broad classroom case as well as the individual micro-cases. Ethnographic field observation was also an ongoing focus of data collection across the timeframe of the study.

2. Researcher journal: Because I acted as both the teacher and researcher in this study, it was extremely important to me to track and consider my own positionality with regards to the impact of teacher attitudes and approaches on student dispositions, as well as the relationship between my own dual identity as teacher and researcher. As such, I supplemented field observations with ongoing memos documenting my own experiences, questions, reflections, and auto-observations. The observations collected in this researcher journal were important not only for understanding the role of the teacher in shaping student dispositions, but also for establishing the validity of the study.

Artifactual data collection was also deployed strategically, such that earlier data collection could serve both to identify broad trends and patterns within the larger case of the

classroom as a whole as well as to provide meaningful guidance in the selection and construction

of individual micro-cases. Artifactual data collected within the context of the classroom case

included:

1. Participant-generated document collection: At a number of moments within the study it

   was appropriate for participants to reflect in writing on their relationship to academic

   literacies and their transforming understanding of inquiry and composition. Classroom

   conversations resulted in a number of collaboratively created visual and written

   documents, and students also engaged in ongoing reflection on learning in individual

   writers notebooks. Additionally, near the beginning of the semester, students were guided

   through the development of a personal, multimodal literacy narrative, in which they were

   tasked with investigating their own literacy practices and how these have been shaped by

   their past experiences with literacy inside and outside of school. These literacy narratives

   served as an important data source when working to construct individual micro-cases, as

   they provided insight into the variety of and patterns across student literacy experiences,

   allowing for the meaningful selection and construction of micro-cases that reflected the

   diversity of learning experiences in the broader case.

2. Text-Focused Critical Inquiry Discussions: In introducing students to the Focus Project, I

   guided them through a series of text-focused discussions designed to engage them in

   questions about the purposes of education, and the tension that arises from a mismatch

   between students' sense of purpose and their experiences in educational settings thus far.

   In addition to the observational notes I made during these discussions, students

   culminated the inquiry with the writing of individual argumentative blog posts taking

   positions on their developing understanding of the purposes of education.

After individual micro-cases have been constructed, data collection will shift toward

developing a more intensive understanding of student attitudes and dispositions in these contexts.

As a step toward data reduction, focused coding of the various formal and informal texts

constructed across the rest of the semester was at times limited to those six (6) students who

formed the micro-case for individual interviews. However, the data set was enlarged strategically

when responses from the micro-cases provided insufficient data for analysis, or (more often)

when the smaller data set pointed toward important tensions or emergent meanings that remained

ambiguous. Data collection at the level of individual micro-case included:

1. In-depth interviews: I conducted two (2) in-depth interviews with six (6) students drawn

   from the student participant population. These students were purposefully selected based

   on initial data collected (from, e.g., analysis of literacy narratives, text-focused critical

   inquiry discussion, early writing toward Focus Project topics) to represent a cross-section

   of student experience. Interviews were conducted (1) near the beginning of the study and

   (2) after the case-semester had ended in the hopes of gathering insights regarding initial

   and transformational attitudes toward inquiry, composition, and the role of the classroom

   in student learning.

2. Authentic argumentative texts: The Focus Project semester was punctuated by students'

   composition of a number authentic, multimodal argumentative texts based on the topic

   they had chosen to study for the semester. These products were important for assessing

   student learning and investment in the enquiry processes under investigation, and careful

   analysis of these "published" social texts provided insight into students' understanding of

   their positioning both within the classroom and in the communities of inquiry with which

they have chosen to engage. They also acted as important points of reflection and discussion in final in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

Experts in qualitative research consistently recommend that qualitative research design be allowed to emerge from the data, and that, as such, data analysis should be conducted simultaneously with its collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glesne, 2019). Stake (2010) says of observational data, "Interpretation is a part of observation and continues to reshape the study along the way" (p. 91). And Coffey and Atkinson (1996) insisted that "We should never collect data without substantial analysis going on simultaneously (p. 2, quoted in Maxwell, 2005, p. 95). In order to make ample room for the data itself to shape the ongoing direction of the study, informal data analysis was undertaken concurrently with the process of data collection, and continued with a more systematic analysis at the conclusion of the research period. Maxwell (2005) points to the importance of considering data analysis as a part of the design of the research study. Pursuant to this goal, the study was designed such that data collection and analysis could occur concurrently and recursively, with early data informing decisions about later data collection.

Sociocultural concepts of literacy suggest that literacy is dialogical, happening *between* individuals and communities rather than living within any particular mind or text (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Prior, 2006). Similarly, Third Space Theory's focus on hybridity and liminality sees meaning-making as an affair fraught with tensions and contradictions (Gutierrez et al., 1999). The convergence of these two theoretical perspectives, as well as the questions which motivate the study, suggest that data analysis should be especially sensitive to issues of tension, boundaries, borders, and leakage across discourse communities.

Data collection began with engaging students in a discussion of in-school and out-of-school literacy practices that culminated in the construction of individual literacy narratives. These narratives, as well as the process-writing through which they are generated, were coded inductively and coupled with ongoing field notes and memos to identify emergent themes in students' attitudes toward and histories with the interaction between everyday and academic literacies. I made observational field notes during a text-focused critical inquiry unit, in which students were invited first to investigate, then to discuss, and finally to compose an argumentative essay aimed at taking a position with regards to the purposes of education.

These early data were considered in the process of purposeful sampling, wherein six (6) individual students were selected as micro-cases for continued focus across the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Though these micro-cases were determined at least to some extent by convenience, my intention was to select students who reflect a diverse cross-section of both classroom demographics and initial attitudes toward the emergent themes of the research. Micro-cases became the subject of in-depth interviewing, further observation, and document analysis.

All relevant data was digitized and imported into Atlas.ti on an ongoing basis. Digital text documents were imported directly, visual documents were scanned, and handwritten participant-generated documents were scanned and/or transcribed. Observational field notes and my own researcher's reflexive journals were not coded, but used instead to inform the reconstruction and context of the data under analysis. All in-depth interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and imported into the Atlas.ti software.

Pursuant to Creswell and Creswell's (2018) recommendation that qualitative research should develop inductively, all data was initially open-coded, and initial codes were reduced

recursively based on emerging patterns and themes. The initial process of open-coding was

largely impressionistic and radically open-ended: I tried to approach data not so much with an

idea of what I might find there, but rather with a sensitivity to the various topics, motifs, and

thematic patterns that were being generated by students in their responses to classroom activities

and interview questions. This process resulted in an overwhelming number of initial codes, many

of which appeared only once in the data set. Though this set of open codes was less than useful

for identifying dominant themes in the data, it did provide some initial understanding of the

diversity of student experiences represented by the data, and thus by the classroom experiences

that produced them.

Further, in attempting to reduce these copious codes through a strategic combination of

similar codes and a concomitant realignment of the definitions of and relationships between

particular codes, it became clear to me that understanding the data effectively would require me

to approach it along two separate axes. On the one hand, particular groups of codes began to

cluster around particular moments in the unfolding narrative of the Focus Project Semester. Thus

did, for example, the role of grading in the classroom loom large as students developed their

Purpose in Education arguments, but become less prevalent as students acclimated to the

ungraded assessment structures of the classroom. Likewise, questions of audience as an

important element of composition and rhetorical positioning were most relevant at those

moments in the data that were concurrent with classroom opportunities designed to give students

the chance to address these audiences. On the other hand, many of these micro-patterns were

aligned with the broader issues of Self-Determination and authentic inquiry represented by the

theoretical framework in which the research questions were embedded.

Thus, because the questions of the study were aimed at understanding both the *processes*

involved in student engagement in Third Space inquiry projects as well as the transformative *effects* of implementing particular practices and discourses within the classroom, further data analysis proceeded in two major phases. Phase one treated the data synchronically and inductively, seeking to illuminate the tentative conclusions and tensions that manifested themselves at each phase of the process. In this phase, code reduction was aimed at crystallization of important take-aways from the particular activities, discussions, and compositional products of the classroom. Phase two, on the other hand, was undertaken diachronically and more deductively, working from the key ideas of Self-Determination Theory, Third Space Theory, and sociocultural literacies to arrive at conclusions regarding the overall process, its effects on student attitudes and dispositions, the challenges that the pedagogical model presented for students and the varying strategies that they found for overcoming these challenges. In this report, results from phase one are reported largely in Chapter 4, alongside a narrative of the unfolding semester as it was undertaken by me and the students. Conclusions from phase two are presented in Chapter 5, as a set of broad thematic patterns organized around the theoretical principles of the research.

Trustworthiness & Transferability

Triangulation

Glesne (2016) suggests that triangulation in an interpretivist qualitative research paradigm has a very different connotation than it might have in quantitative, positivist tradition. Where the latter is interested in "describing things as they *really* are," and thus can use confirming evidence from multiple sources as a check on the *truth* of any given statement, qualitative researchers are much more interested in double checking their own interpretations and allowing for the complexity of multiple perspectives to enter into the interpretive frame (pp.

44-45). Richardson (1994) suggests the use of the term *crystallization* instead of *triangulation*, in an effort to "recognize that there are far more than 'three sides' from which to approach the world" (p. 522).

A central component of effective triangulation in qualitative research is the gathering of data from multiple sources and multiple directions (Glesne, 2016; Maxwell, 2005; Stake, 2010). Such diverse data collection methods make it possible to avoid biases implicit in any single data source, and to read data from multiple sources against and in the context of one another. As Glesne (2016) suggests, "The larger the number of data-gathering methods, the richer the data and the more multidimensional the findings" (p. 45). "Well triangulated" qualitative research, according to Stake (2010), is that which has achieved redundancy in key evidence, assertions, and interpretations; which gives enough information for readers to make their own conclusions; and in which the researcher has been transparent about their own positionality and has worked deliberately to disconfirm their own interpretations (p. 16).

In qualitative research, the aim of such data comparison goes beyond the confirmation of hypotheses across sources and aims instead to allow the strengths of individual sources to enrich the possibilities for meaningful interpretation. Maxwell (2005), points out, for example, that what people say in interviews and what they do while under observation may at times conflict, and that these conflicting data, rather than undermining the ability of the researcher to draw conclusions, instead offer insight into the complexity of human behavior. As Gibbs (2007), observes, when what people say and do differ, "forms of data triangulation (e.g., observing actions as well as interviewing respondents) are useful…, not to show that informants are lying or wrong, but to reveal new dimensions of social reality where people do not always act consistently" (p. 94).

This study was designed with the aim of achieving such redundancy through the collection of multiple forms of data, from multiple sources, and across a period of time sufficient to provide a sensitivity to both tensions across and transformations within the perspectives of participants (Stake, 2010). The study combined observational data of participants engaged in individual and collaborative inquiry and composition with selective in-depth interviewing aimed at drawing out participants' perspectives on the activities with which they are engaged. Furthermore, the study also provided for the collection of data in the form of documents that participants generated for a number of purposes, not only as products designed to demonstrate their learning, but products designed to illuminate the process of this learning and their reflection upon it. By putting these documents in conversation with one another, and by using these documents selectively as prompts for discussion within the context of in-depth interviews, I was able to gain insight into the complexity of student perspectives on the processes of inquiry and composition as they occur in the classroom and interact with out-of-school literacies. As an ongoing record of my own attitudes and behaviors over the course of the study, careful analysis of my researchers journal acted as a check on my own biases and preconceptions, and provided insight into how my own positionality as a teacher-researcher interacted with the developing perspectives of student participants.

Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) identifies four key components that should be considered when addressing the trustworthiness of a qualitative research report. These components include credibility (that the study presents a true picture of reality), transferability (that the study might have relevance in other, more or less equivalent situations), dependability (that the study might be repeatable by others), and confirmability (that the findings of the study grow reasonably out

of the data, rather than out of the predispositions of the study's authors). The following section

attempts to speak to the trustworthiness of this study with reference to these four key

components.

With regards to credibility, this project–as a case study–grounds itself within a

longstanding tradition of observational research. Further, as a teacher myself in the community

within which the study takes place, I have a longstanding and nuanced understanding of the

"culture of the participating organization," and I have a well-established relationship of trust with

the educators at the school, as well as with the school and system leadership (Shenton, 2004, p.

65). Such a relationship has helped to ensure that I had access to the research population, and it

also helped ensure that the data I collected in interviews with these stakeholders was candid and

relatively unaffected by my presence within the research site. Creswell and Creswell (2018)

recommend "*prolonged time* in the field" to ensure an in-depth understanding of the

phenomenon under investigation (p. 201, emphasis in original). To this end, not only was this

study designed to collect data over the course of a longer period of time, but it also capitalized on

the tacit and explicit knowledge that I have already developed in my own extended and ongoing

experience in the field within which the research will take place. The decision to undertake the

research in my own classroom gave me the opportunity to make a study of a learning

environment undisturbed by the intrusion of an outside observer, and helped to ensure that

student participants were also informing from a standpoint of trust and good faith (Glesne, 2016).

Additionally, the study collected data from multiple perspectives and multiple avenues

(observation, document analysis, researchers reflective journaling, in-depth interviewing).

Comparisons across this variety of sources of data helped ensure that the findings of the study

were sound. Where data from multiple sources confirmed some tentative conclusion, a higher

degree of trustworthiness is available. Contradictions across data sources provided opportunities

for further probing, and a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Furthermore, the study presupposes that student attitudes toward composition are ever-changing,

and that they may never change more rapidly or more profoundly than when the student is

involved in an intensive, writing-focused course of study. Thus, the data collection methods,

which spread collection over the course of the study period, with iterative data analysis along the

way, made room for emergent and transformative meaning-making across time. In this way, later

data collection acted as an important check on the validity of earlier data and vice versa, as the

two interacted as part of the emerging story of the research.

Regarding transferability: Case studies are not primarily concerned with generalizability,

as the most immediate concerns of the research are with understanding the case under

investigation (Stake, 2005). This study was undertaken in a single classroom composed of a

selective group of advanced-level students, and in accordance with the tenets of case study

research, it took as its goal a nuanced understanding of the particularities of the specific case

under investigation. It is highly unlikely that the study's findings are transferable to every

student, nor even to every advanced-level student. That said, the study treats of matters that are

relevant to all secondary English teachers, and perhaps to teachers more generally. Further, I am

confident that some of the compositional attitudes adopted by this population give hints about

productive or unproductive habits of mind for learning more broadly. In these cases, I expect that

the diversity of data collection methods, and the rich descriptions that have grown out of their

analysis, will be enough to suggest such transferability. If nothing else, I hope that the study

suggests productive avenues for further research with other, larger and/or more diverse,

populations. Shenton (2004) suggests that, after reading the report, "readers must determine how

far they can be confident in transferring to other situations the results and conclusions presented"
(p. 70). It was my goal to present the research in enough detail to allow the reader to reasonably
make this determination.

Shenton (2004) cites Lincoln and Guba (1985) in suggesting that the dependability of a
research study goes hand-in-hand with its credibility. I have made it a goal within the study itself
to make transparent the methods by which I gathered data, analyzed it, and the reasoning and
inference by which I have arrived at my findings. I have done so not only in the interest of
suggesting the dependability of the study, but also in the hopes that the study might act as a
model for further similar studies of student composition practice in other places and contexts.
Even if such studies arrive at very different conclusions than my own, these contrasts and
contradictions cannot but move the conversation about adolescent literate meaning-making
forward and deeper.

The issue of confirmability is perhaps the most contentious within the context of this
study, growing as it does out of my own deep intuitions regarding what comprises authentic
learning in a literacy classroom and taking place in my own classroom. A pretense of neutrality
or objectivity on my part within this study would not only be dishonest, but would undermine the
intent of the research by tending to reinscribe in the role of observer-researcher the very
dynamics of authority and control in classrooms that the study itself sought, at least on some
level, to interrogate (Glesne, 2016). As such, understanding my own embeddedness as a worker
in the classroom, and the way that my own approaches shape the possibilities for students is of
paramount importance. I have worked within the study to lay bare my own predispositions with
regards to the questions under investigation. Indeed, in a study that positions me both as
researcher and object of research, it should be clear that the nature, origin, and effect of these

predispositions lies directly in the line of the larger inquiry. By keeping and drawing on an ongoing researchers' reflective journal alongside data drawn from other sources, I hope that my own predispositions, and their effects within the research environment, have been made clear, and that these attitudes might act as a matter of meaningful analysis within the study rather than a hindrance to it.

To forestall both the danger of and the perception of bias, I also incorporated a number of validity checks recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018). At various moments in the process of data collection, data analysis, and report production, I conducted purposeful member checks, giving student participants the opportunity to review both the data that they had produced and my interpretations of this data. In both the selection of micro-cases and in the development of themes, I worked to incorporate negative case analysis, such that my data included and was attentive to perspectives that run counter to my own intuitions as well as to dominant themes that emerged within the study. Finally, I relied heavily on the expertise of peer teachers as well as fellow researchers to provide feedback on data analysis in process as well as the final reports. Through these efforts, I worked to ensure that the conclusions I have reached grow reasonably out of the data, and that they avoid falling prey to my own predispositions.

Ethics

In consideration of ethical practices in educational research, and in addition to or furtherance of those ethical standards mandated by the Institutional Review Board at Kennesaw State University, the Georgia Department of Education, and the school system within which this study will be conducted, I pledge to have upheld the following tenets of ethical practice in conducting this research:

1. <u>Informed consent</u>: participants have a right to know what I am asking of them, how it may affect them during the study and afterwards, and how the study may be used in the long run. Consent should be acquired before beginning the study, but it should also be returned to in an ongoing manner, as the study transforms in situ. I made ongoing consent an integrated part of the research, with participants invited to decide at moments throughout the study which of their words, documents, and products would become a part of the record of the study, and which should be left out.

2. <u>Confidentiality and anonymity</u>: efforts to maintain privacy and anonymity must extend from data collection through data analysis to the final report.

3. <u>A commitment to do no harm</u>: avoiding physical harm and duress is a foregone conclusion, but I also worked to ensure that I did not place subjects under undue emotional harm. This was a tightrope, as new and sensitive information revealed in the course of in-depth interviewing was at times emotionally charged, and participants' own retellings at times brought up in them negative or distressing realizations about or crystallizations of their own past experiences. In such instances, I made it my practice of offering the participant the opportunity to change course, or to make such emotional work cathartic and meaningful through my active and compassionate listening.

4. <u>Respect</u>: though I may not have agreed with the views of some of my participants, I owed them and the cultures within which they operate respect. This does not have to mean that I adopted a relativist moral standpoint, but it does mean that I approached my task with enough distance from my own predispositions, biases, and cultural lenses that I could honor the humanity in my participants.

5. Truthfulness: this meant telling the truth to participants, but it also meant telling the truth as I analyzed and reported my data. Truthfulness is especially important in qualitative research, where the checks on validity tend to rely so heavily on it. Suffice to say that I attempted to maintain at all times a willingness to be wrong in my initial assumptions, and that when I found new knowledge, I reported it, even when it seemed to undermine what I might have liked to be true. It also means that I have been truthful in reporting the data, even that (perhaps especially that) which seemed to contradict my assumptions or preliminary findings.

6. A movement toward social justice that works to use research to empower participants even as it engages them in constructing new knowledge about the questions under study. This means I have constructed this research with an eye toward giving back to the participants, and considering how to avoid colonial research practices that extract knowledge from communities without also working to contribute knowledge to the community as well.

1. A mindfulness of the duality of the teacher-researcher identity: There is an essential tension in the dual role of teacher-researcher. In this study, I was both the conductor of research and a part of its participant population. In this situation, it was essential that I carefully navigate the distinctions between these roles, and I took pains to acknowledge and safeguard against the risk that one of these roles negatively impacts the other.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts its multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors). Within them it is itself the effect of successive encounters that constantly alter it and make it the other's blazon…

–Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Introduction

This study centered on a case study of my AP Language class as they pursued a semester-long independent research and composition project that I've called the Focus Project. Seen one way, the Focus Project can be understood as a particular kind of learning and assessment model, which differs from traditional models only insofar as it opens the content and direction of learning to the interests of individual students. In some sense, then, the Focus Project is more or less an "independent studies" project.

Looked at another way, however, the Focus Project itself is only the curricular backbone of a model for student learning that extends outward to encompass the entire experience of the course, as its success as a curricular model relies on a broader willingness by students to reimagine relationships between themselves, their worlds, and the part that classroom learning might play in their lives.

It is this second way of considering the project that aligns most closely with the theoretical framework under which this research has been conducted. The Focus Project is an end in itself, of course: students worked through a number of process stages which culminated in the production of meaningful assessment artifacts. That said, the opportunities for shifting the culture of the classroom, for reconceiving of the classroom space as a Third Space, began when students first walked through the classroom door and continued (ideally) after the semester was over and done with.

In this chapter, I describe the case as it unfolded in the classroom. The chapter is divided into two parts. Part 1 explains the stages by which I attempted to establish the classroom as a community, as a rhetorical context in itself, and as a space for authentic learning. Part 2 explains the process of the Focus Project proper, with special attention paid to students' developing sense of themselves as inquirers, researchers, and experts. Accompanying these descriptions are brief discussions, drawn from data gathered contemporaneously with the activities described, which attempt to further contextualize the activities as they influenced the direction of the course, the learning, and the research. In chapter 5, I return to these moments in an effort to identify broad themes that run through the case as a whole.

Part 1. Establishing the Classroom as a Third Space

Learning is an implicitly risky undertaking. Any act of learning must be accompanied by a realization of prior ignorance, and *being wrong* is dangerous to the identities with which students enter our classrooms (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009; Marsh & Hoff, 2019). Kress (2003) elaborates the ways that new knowledge, in the act of its integration into existing mental frameworks, "produces a rearrangement of all the elements there" (p. 39). In our minds as in the world, everything connects to everything else. The web of relationships that exists at any given moment is held in sensitive tension dependent on the particular positions of elements both within and outside of our control. Adding any new element, no matter how small, creates an imbalance that shifts, if only slightly, the totality of our perspective. In order to accommodate a new fact, a new set of skills, a new practice, a new concept or theory, students must willingly undertake a critical reevaluation of their own place in the world. To ask students to learn is always to ask them to undertake a restructuring of the self.

For this reason, learning is a supremely vulnerable act, one that is understandably accompanied by deep anxieties and reservations, fears of being exposed as mistaken, flawed, incomplete. Rather than gloss over the risks, or take them for granted, a meaningful learning community must be one that works to create a safe space for these dialectical crises to play out. Acknowledging the hybridity of this Third Space, where students might "attempt to make sense of [their] own identity in relation to prevailing notions of self and cultural practices" represented by the educational institution, requires the cultivation of a community of trust, care, and openness, such that students might feel comfortable leaning into the risks required for authentic learning and growth (Gutiérrez, Baquendano-López, and Tejada, 1999, p. 288, see also Marsh & Hoff, 2019).

Establishing the Classroom as a Community of Practice

Classrooms are artificial communities. Where authentic communities beyond the family group are elective in nature and generally develop out of shared affinities (Gee, 2004; Marsh & Hoff, 2019), the composition of the classroom is determined largely by state graduation requirements, scheduling constraints, enrollment numbers, and teacher availability. The AP Language classroom might differ in some ways from other classes, being as it is an advanced studies course that students or their parents must elect, but even here it tends to be the case that "AP students" take AP courses, and for most students their enrollment in the course is just a matter of course. Thus was it my primary concern, during the first weeks of class, to invite students to see themselves not only as individuals responsible for completing a required course credit, but as members of a meaningful community of learners.

For the first two weeks of class, I assigned students to random seats within the classroom. Each day upon arrival, I greeted students at the door with a numbered card which matched the

seat number of a random seat in the classroom. Since my classroom seating is arranged into a number of learning "pods" (some 4-desk pods, along with two larger tables seating 6 and 8 students), this meant that, throughout the introductory unit of the course, students were sitting with a different combination of classmates on each consecutive day. I made my reasoning for this choice explicit to students: I wanted them to know each other.

I further contextualized this practice by differentiating it from traditional practices in classrooms, practices that I had previously adhered to. Often, I pointed out, teachers will create their start-of-semester seating charts by assigning students in alphabetical order. I, too, did this for many years, and in no small part because it simplified administrative tasks such as taking roll, and it was helpful for me in learning students' names. By beginning the semester with this practice of randomization, I explained, I was prioritizing their familiarity and comfort with each other as a learning community over and above my own convenience or the demands of the educational institution. It might take me a little longer to learn all their names, I admitted, but the sacrifice would be well worth it if they all knew *each other's* names and felt comfortable speaking and working in each other's presence.

To this end, I also made sure, during these first two weeks, that each day's lesson included occasions for students to speak to those at their table about some element of the material. Providing opportunities to work with fellow classmates is a regular part of my classroom practice, and is well established as a best practice in the literature on sociocultural learning and literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Prior, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978). In these first two weeks, however, prior to releasing them to a collaborative or discussion-oriented task, I added the explicit caveat that they should spend the first two or three minutes of the activity "off task." Before they began talking about the lesson-specific question, issue, or text, I insisted that they

take a few minutes to be sure they knew each other's names, share a bit about themselves, and generally build community. After a few minutes had passed, I gave them a signal to move into the work.

At the end of the first two weeks, students arriving at the classroom door expecting to receive a numbered card were surprised when I instructed them to choose whatever seat they wanted. After the second day of this, students had found and settled into a stable seating arrangement, a set of "literacy circles," where they mostly remained for the rest of the semester. It's important to note that I did not tell students they had to remain in their chosen seat for the remainder of the semester. On the contrary, I made it clear, after the two-week random assignment period, that where they sat would always be their decision, and there were numerous occasions throughout the semester, especially during class periods dedicated to loosely structured writing workshops, that students chose to move to other places in the classroom, either temporarily joining a different literacy circle, or creating ad-hoc arrangements in other areas of the classroom or in the hallway. That said, as we moved out of our introductory unit and into the process of developing and drafting the literacy narrative, I did make clear my belief in the value of trust when it came time to share nascent ideas and solicit feedback on early draft writing. I encouraged students to see their literacy circles as a group of trusted first audiences with whom they could grow comfortable sharing their initial attempts at making meaning, both in conversation and in conversation, and for whom they could grow a capacity for honest critical feedback and encouragement.

In the midst of the two-week random seat assignment period, I also engaged students explicitly in the development of a set of classroom norms that they felt would promote a culture of openness, vulnerability, and productive risk-taking. This activity began with an anecdotal

freewrite (Elbow, 1998) in response to the prompt "What shuts you down?" After writing,

students engaged in a small-group discussion in which they were invited to share their

experiences of exclusion, rejection, and distrust, and to identify patterns between their own

stories and those of their classmates. On the following day (and working with a different random

group), students returned to these stories, using them as inspiration for the development of

classroom norms, which they then shared in an informal share-out activity. These norms I then

added to our developing Course Agreement before inviting a final round of commentary,

response, and revision using the Google Docs "comment" feature (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Detail from Course Agreement with student commentary

Key Take-Aways & Discussion

  Classroom environments gain power by recontextualizing existing relationships. It

seems to me that teachers tend to fall into a few different categories when it comes to student

seating arrangements. Those who assign seating randomly or arbitrarily (as I did for many years)

see the existing relationships within the classroom as secondary or inconsequential to the

business of learning. Some teachers go one step further, creating seating arrangements explicitly

to separate students who are too friendly with one another. These teachers see social

relationships primarily as a distraction from what they consider the important business of the classroom. Still other teachers take the opposite tack, allowing students to choose seats near their friends from the very beginning. While this strategy seems to acknowledge the role of meaningful social interaction in the classroom, it misses the chance to guide students toward a recontextualization of their outside-of-class friendships for the purposes of social learning in the classroom community. This recontextualization process is key to developing the classroom as a Third Space, not entirely contiguous with the broader world nor fully subsumed by the demands of the educational system, but rather drawing these two spaces of discourse into tension and conversation with one another.

After the random-seat assignment period was finished in my class, students still tended to sit near classmates with whom they had a prior relationship before entering the class. There were at least a few "best friends" in the class, who chose to sit with each other. Similarly, athletic teammates and fellow band members tended to gravitate to one another. This shouldn't be surprising, nor should it be resisted; rather, under a Third Space pedagogical model that seeks to conceive the classroom as contiguous with the world beyond, students should be empowered to use the classroom as a space to maintain and strengthen already-existing relationships. Furthermore, if our intentions are to encourage in students the vulnerability required to write authentically about personal and possibly sensitive topics, it only feels appropriate that we should respect the pre-existing trust relationships with which students have entered our classrooms.

The random-assignment period, however, coupled as it was by daily curriculum-focused small group discussions and activities, served to disrupt students' tendency to see the classroom as socially undifferentiated from the space beyond the classroom. The two-weeks of random

grouping established a pattern of social interactions predicated primarily on the work of the English Language Arts classroom. Thus, even when students did choose to sit near their friends, they did so with a more complete awareness of what such a seating choice would mean in terms of their participation in classroom-related activities.

Classroom environments gain power by building new relationships. On the other hand, there were numerous instances wherein students chose to sit with others who they did not know, or did not know well, prior to beginning the semester. The AP Language/American Literature course is one of only a handful of academic courses containing a mixture of grade levels, so many of the 10th and 11th grade students had not shared courses together before. And there were other students who had none of their close friends in the course with them. The first two weeks of class provided an opportunity for many "first meetings" between students who had had no prior interactions, and many of these first meetings translated comfortably into meaningful collaborative groups.

As the semester progressed, I was impressed by the frequency with which these ad-hoc conglomerations of newly formed acquaintances became strong social units in their own right. One group, for example, was comprised of a spiritually centered but academically adrift 11th-grade cross country runner (Elizabiff), a quiet and self-assured but world-wise 11th-grade art student (Phoebe), a sophomore whose social confidence belied an intellectual self-doubt (Marie), and a highly academically aggressive if socially uncertain 10th grader (Kate). Over the course of the semester, this group came to rely heavily on each other both for academic support and for social guidance, and the semester saw each student's strengths influencing the others in the group. Kate, for example, gained more confidence in herself as a social being, finding that it was possible to be both "smart" and "cool." Marie, taking a cue from Kate, discovered a

newfound commitment to academic rigor. Phoebe found in the others both a listening ear and an optimistic counter-narrative for her tendency toward misanthropic skepticism. And Elizabiff found in Kate an inspiration for academic interest while contributing to the group a deep sense of groundedness in their stressful academic and social lives. What's more, these relationships quickly translated from the classroom into the world beyond the classroom, as I'd often see these young women walking together between classes or eating together at lunch.

Classroom environments gain power by catering to the diverse social needs of students. Introverts have it rough in our education system, and in modern American society more generally. Many of the qualities that are celebrated as being characteristic of a "good student"--willingness to ask questions, contributing actively to classroom discussion, enthusiastic engagement in group work–are behaviors that come far more easily to extroverts (McCroskey, 1980). Likewise, the qualities of excellent leadership that are prioritized in business practices of hiring and promotion are more or less descriptions of a candidate with an extroverted personality profile (Cain, 2013). In my classroom, I've long been concerned that my own tendency toward extroversion, coupled with my highly interactive and collaborative teaching style, might be participating in the ongoing exclusion or disenfranchisement of introverted students.

Through the social learning activities of the two-week random seat period, introverted students had the chance not only to practice classroom social interaction in low-stakes small-group settings, but they also had the opportunity to feel out the social intensity of their classmates, and, when the time came to select seats, to locate themselves near students with whom they felt most comfortable interacting with. In many cases, this resulted in groups of primarily quiet-natured kids sitting together. This natural pattern made it possible for these introverted students to feel comfortable in each other's presence, and for me to meaningfully

modify my teaching approach and expectations with regards to how such groups were expected to interact with the larger classroom.

Classroom environments gain power by naming tensions and anxieties. Students seemed to really appreciate the opportunity to use the private freewrite space of their writers notebooks to name those moments of embarrassment or exclusion that they had experienced in their social and academic lives (Figure 3). Students wrote about social experiences of being bullied or of seeing bullying; of sexist, homophobic, and racist micro-aggressions; of classroom environments where "everyone already had their own clique;" and of the anxieties of finding a table in the cafeteria. They also wrote about academic experiences of being diminished by a teacher's careless words or actions, of feeling dumb in a room full of smart people, and of ostracization for showing authentic interest in classroom content.

The small-group conversations that grew out of these freewrites were at once an opportunity for students to name insecurities and an enactment of a social space attendant to those insecurities. From my perspective as a teacher, it was quite moving to listen to these students, bravely sharing their personal experiences of exclusion with a group of listeners that they had often just met. The movement from these negative experiences to a set of classroom norms, and the continued engagement with these norms through the course agreement, avoided the pitfalls of a one-off list of platitudes that so often comprise classroom social contracts, making salient to students the connections between adhering to these norms and the real pain that can come from unwelcoming environments. Furthermore, the classwide commentary on and subsequent adoption of the course agreement established, if even in a small way, students real power in shaping the educational spaces of which they are a part.

Figure 3

Student freewrite response: "What shuts you down?"
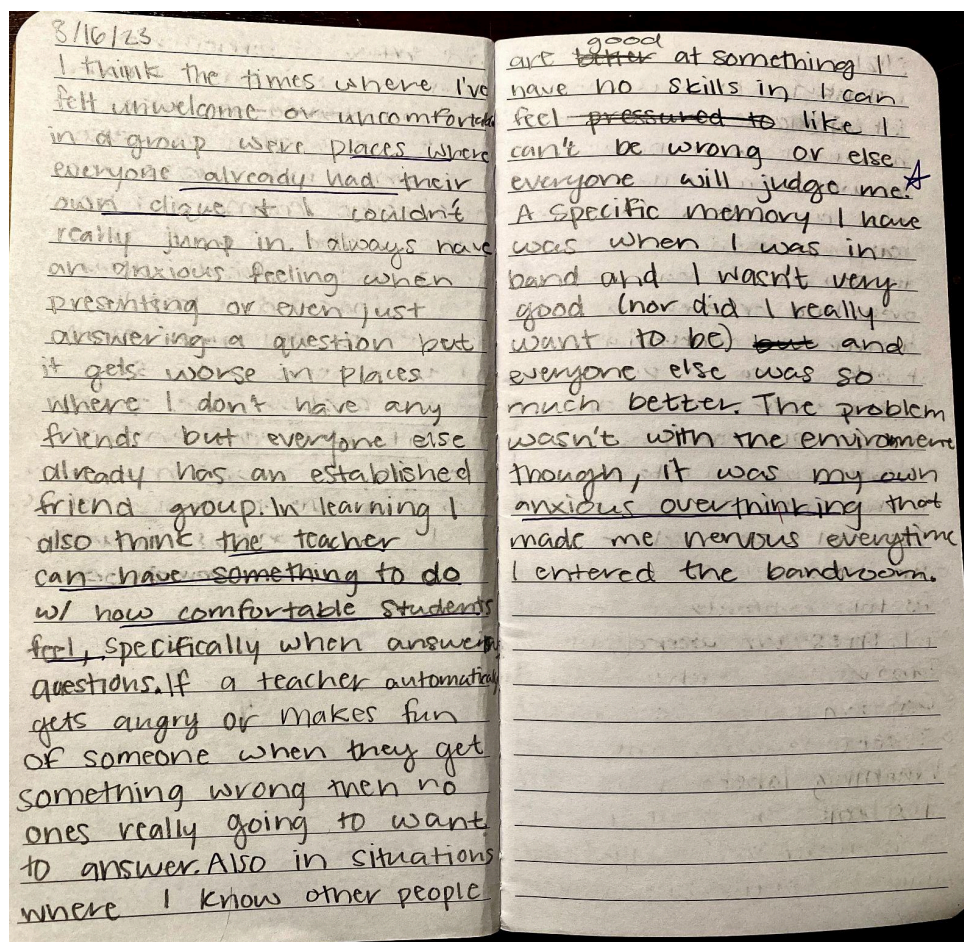
Establishing the Classroom as a Rhetorical Context

According to the College Board's recommended course outline for the AP Language & Composition Course, a primary goal of the AP Language classroom is for students to "deepen and expand their understanding of how written language functions rhetorically: to communicate writers' intentions and elicit readers' responses in particular situations" (AP English Language and Composition, 2020). To this end, the first unit of study within the course is dedicated to developing students' understanding of rhetorical situations as contexts within which acts of communication occur.

This study is undertaken from a perspective that takes for granted students' social identities as central to their development as learners, and adopts, in accordance with sociocultural theories of literacy, an understanding of identity as socially situated (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017). More specifically, I follow Moje, Luke, Davies, and Street (2009) in locating identity construction "in the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time, and spaces and how they take up or resist those positions" (Moje et al., 2009, p. 430). The identity-as-position metaphor understands identity performances as acts of position taking within particular contexts, and can incorporate the particular tensions that we might expect students to feel between their sense of self and their identification with other groups and systems of power, including especially those associated with the classroom, educational system, and with academic learning more generally (Bourdieu, 1993; Foucault, 1977; Gee, 2000; Russell, 1997).

Moreover, identity-as-position is uniquely amenable to the curricular demands of a course focused on the rhetorical construction of texts. In any given social context (that is, in any particular rhetorical situation), individuals are invited to take up positions in relation to other individuals and to texts–those of speakers or audiences with particular beliefs, values, attitudes, and dispositions. It is in part this link between the construction of identities and the construction of rhetorical spaces that, I believe, gives the English Language Arts classroom so potent a potential for developing critical pedagogical perspectives (Freire, 2000, New London Group, 1996; Stommel, 2012).

Conceiving of identity as rhetorically constructed is an act of empowerment, as it points students toward a developing framework for understanding their place in the world even as, in the context of the classroom, it offers them the tools with which to shape it. Not only can

students choose what aspects of their personalities to *write into* any context, they might also begin to see the hybrid space of the classroom as an opportunity to safely *try on* new identities, both social and academic (Russell, 1997; Stommel, 2012). Students might begin to abandon notions of their identities as received and immutable and come to see themselves as "designers of their own futures" (New London Group, 1996).

In the interest of developing students' consideration of their own identities as rhetorically situated, then, I built the first unit of the course with the aim of drawing explicit connections between students' lived experiences and traditional literate notions of texts, speakers, audiences, and purposes. Because I was also interested in inviting students toward a critical re-examination of the potential of the classroom space as an authentic space for developing real-world literacies, each of these activities uses, in one way or another, the classroom space itself, or elements of the educational system more broadly, as central working examples of the concepts under investigation.

Reimagining Texts: "My Textual Life"

According to research in multiliteracies, literacy instruction in formal educational settings have tended to alienate students from the texts under study (Brauer & Clark, 2008; Street, 2005). Street (2005), for example, differentiates his "ideological" model of literacy instruction from the broadly prevalent "autonomous" model in which teachers and the educational institutions within which they work wittingly or unwittingly prioritize particular ways of reading as legitimate, thereby reifying dominant forms of literacy practice and positioning other forms of practice as "illiterate" (p. 77) and thus unworthy of address within formal educational settings. Similarly, Brauer and Clark (2008) identify in English classrooms "multiple and shifting frameworks" (p. 303) with regards to how particular kinds of texts are treated. These frameworks, they point out,

not only remain largely enunciated and so unexamined, but also themselves constitute "a political move, marking textual distinctions embedded in networks of social, political, and economic power" (p. 298). In particular, Brauer and Clark suggest that in many classrooms, canonical print texts are treated as opportunities for deep insight and analysis, while popular and new-media texts, those with which students interact daily, are treated only as opportunities for passive entertainment, or with suspicion, if not downright scorn. In our own classrooms, we might see in ourselves this same ideological frame at play each time we battle with students to put away their phones (and the entire textual ecosystem contained therein) and continue annotating their copies of *The Great Gatsby.* These unacknowledged assumptions about what is worth our time in the classroom reinforce a limited, text-oriented object for English Language Arts study even as they foreclose opportunities for the classroom curriculum to make itself relevant to the everyday activities of our students.

It is not surprising, then, that students often come to the twin conclusions that only certain kinds of texts are considered worthy of study through the application of academic lenses, and that it is the teacher (or the educational establishment more broadly) who has been given the authority to decide which texts fall into this category. Historically, this sanctioned category of texts has been dominated by books over and above visual, auditory, or multimodal texts, or even linguistic texts published electronically (Luke, 1993). Moreover, sanctioned literacies continue to neglect marginalized voices in favor of those which advance a white, male, European worldview, often one that is considerably out of date and out of step both with contemporary sensibilities and with the primary concerns and priorities of adolescents (Applebee, 1993). Consequently, students have largely accepted that they should expect very little connection between these sanctioned texts and their lived experience, and often this expectation has been translated into an active

resistance to assigned reading. The frames of reference that English classrooms ask them to take up with assigned readings, according to Brauer and Clark (2008), are rooted in a New Critical sensibility, attentive largely to aesthetic purity, "universal human truths," and the "elevated discourse of great literature" (p. 299-300). They are, in other words, curricular and pedagogical representations of the literary expert–the literate identity–that students in large part find either inaccessible or undesirable.

In my classroom, this disjunction manifested itself in students' attitudes and approaches to assigned texts. In a conference with me early in the semester, John said that being required to read a book "flipped a switch" in his brain, such that, even if he might otherwise enjoy the book, he now found it to be "a chore." Similarly, many students expressed frustration, boredom, and exasperation with the assigned readings in prior English courses.

Chris: One thing I have always struggled with, especially in English courses, are books. I feel that a lot of the time, I am forced to read uninteresting and boring nonfiction books…

Akio: I find a lot of times that people quit reading mostly from forced reading and Lexile level forced by school districts. This causes kids to associate reading with a form of "forced labor". Something they don't enjoy doing and especially because the books they read aren't interesting to them…It just really makes me hate reading when I have to pick up a book, read to this chapter, and blah blah blah.. Boring as hell. Reading those kinds of books is like taking nails and dragging them down a chalkboard. I mean I've found myself loving reading a book and then out of nowhere I'm forced to read something else "academic" and then find myself just throwing my other book down cause I lost the will to want to read anything after that.

Hunter: These new additions have broken me out of the stupor that required readings

have had me in for almost 6 years. It feels good to read, and I'm legitimately interested in

the book in front of me. I finally tracked down the 5-7 year old who could knock out 2

books in an afternoon.

Lily: I remember books being shoved down my throat. I absolutely hated reading. It was

the worst. They pushed us to read 30 books every year. I tried to be an overachiever in 1st

grade but It didn't get me anything. From then on I just read 30 books and stopped

reading every year. I hated being told what to do.

Such a disconnect was also on display, I suspect, in students' tendency to treat classroom

readings as one-and-done affairs, even when explicitly reminded that the texts under examination

would continue to be relevant to their learning. During the lead up to the construction of their

first text-based argument ("Purpose in Education," outlined below), I guided students through a

structured examination and discussion of a number of short texts examining educational systems

from different perspectives. During the unit, I frequently reminded students that they should

consider their own responses to the texts in light of the upcoming writing assignment, for which

they would need to draw on textual evidence. Despite these reminders, when students began

drafting in earnest, many expressed an almost complete ignorance of the texts we had studied

just days before. That these were multimodal texts about the experiences of high school students,

chosen explicitly for their relevance both to student's lived experiences and their contemporary

media ecologies, suggests that the problem extends beyond simply the choice of texts. Rather it

is a manifestation in students' automatic, unreflective responses to the implicit disconnection between school experiences and everyday life.

This same disconnection was reflected, both in terms of pedagogy and perception, in students' tendency to see much of education as comprised of "busy work" and rote learning for short-term ends:

Emma: In my personal experience, I was told the day of the test, and I would go home and "study" the study guide. I put "study" in quotation marks because I don't believe what I was doing was truly studying. I would read over the study guide and memorize every question and every answer…I would stuff my brain the day before, and find ways to remember vocabulary and how to solve a math problem. But, more than likely, the day after the test I would not be able to tell you anything that I learned in the past few weeks.

Claire: I would copy the step-by-step instructions my teachers provided and respond how I knew they'd want me to. I had no clue what I was doing, only that I was doing it "correctly."

Kate: In the past, English was my favorite subject. However, as I entered high school, they became less fun because past classes have been just about memorizing vocab words and grammar rules. Grades in past classes were based on if you followed the essay structure rule they provided, giving me no creativity.

John: While being guided by teachers may be nice at some points, when it approaches the point of oversimplifying, it becomes a bit (for lack of a better term) insulting.
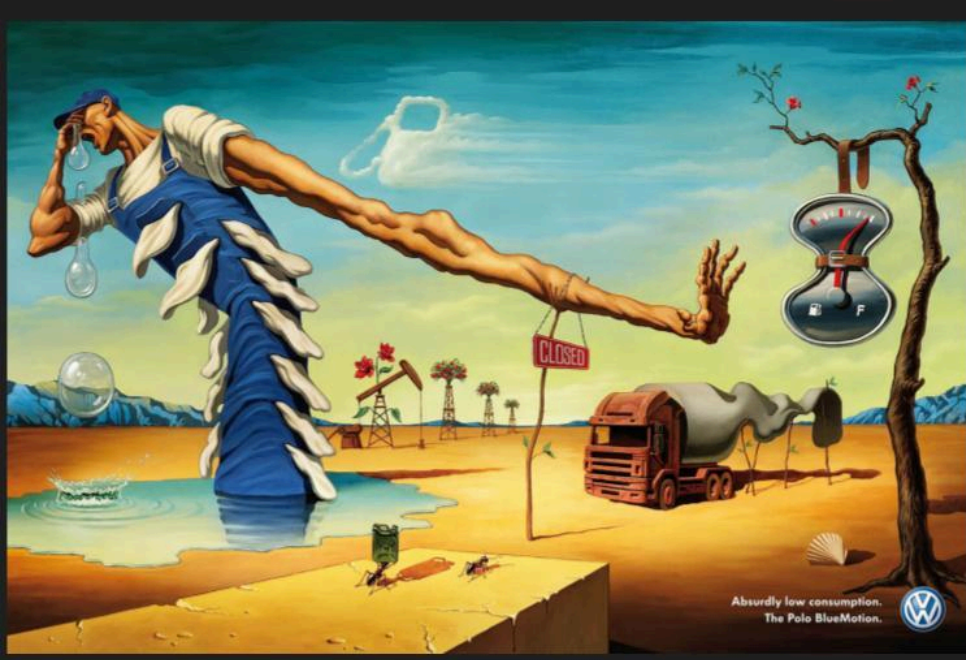
In order to disrupt these automatic responses, and to emphasize the hybrid nature of the course that the students were undertaking with me, I introduced the concept of *text* by explicitly drawing on the research in sociocultural literacies and encouraging students to expand their received notions of what is and can be understood as a text, as well as the roles that these diverse texts might play in the English classroom. Taking my cue from the work of The New London Group's (1996) "Pedagogy of Multiliteracies," I sought to carry the students through a critical reevaluation of both the meaning and value of textual literacies in the classroom and in our lives.

I began the lesson on the first day of class by using Rosenwasser and Stephen's (2011) "Notice & Focus" to guide students through a collaborative extrapolation of the rhetorical meanings of a Volkswagon Ad (Figure 4). The activity was at once low-stakes and high-risk. Intellectually, the lesson was low-stakes because it demanded no prior knowledge or expertise. "Notice and Focus" is one of the first structured activities introduced by Rosenwasser and Stephen because it requires no prior analytical experience from the student. In fact, the authors explicitly present the "Noticing" activity as an opportunity to "counteract the tendency to generalize too rapidly" and "[delay] the pressure to come up with answers" (p. 24). The point of the activity is simply to notice, and the more concrete your noticings, the better your performance on the task. Socially, however, the activity represented a higher risk, insofar as it involved students speaking both individually to the class as a whole and collaborating with their randomly assigned tablemates. As a first-day activity, it was filling the slot of traditional "ice breakers," and I used the initial share-aloud as an opportunity to take roll, say each student's name, and give each student an opportunity to speak. This individual and collective "noticing" was followed by a period of time for students to work in their table groups to "focus" their attention in a move toward analytical ways of reading the text. In this sense, within the first 15

minutes of the course, students were faced with staking some claim in the classroom as a whole, and with contributing perspective to a collaborative effort.

Figure 4

Slide 1 from a first-day rhetorical analysis lesson.

I followed this introductory analysis by offering students an expansive definition of a text as "meaning encoded in a medium" and then invited them to brainstorm, first individually, and then as a class, the variety of texts that one might encounter in any given day. Armed with only two teacher-generated examples, a novel and a grocery list (Russell, 1997), students were able to generate an expansive list of different texts and text genres. Students collectively came to an agreement that videos, films, short stories, gradebooks, lesson plans, unit tests, architectural structures, furniture styles, fashion choices, video games, product packaging, advertisements, social media posts, digital technologies, news programs, speeches, images, essays, paintings, and

songs and albums and podcasts might all be understood as varieties of text that shape their interactions with the world around them (Figure 5).

Furthermore, the classwide discussion that developed from students' individual freewrites also opened up initial conversations around how these texts interact at different levels and in different contexts, and the ways that a single medium might comprise a number of different texts. When one student offered "smart phone" and another "TikTok," for example, I took the opportunity to suggest further nuance: A smartphone as a designed object might be a text encoding an argument about how we ought to use it (considering, for example the differences between iPhones and Android phones), as a social object it has encoded arguments about how we ought to live our lives (considering social media addiction alongside the contemporary anxiety surrounding the idea of losing or being without one's phone). Further, TikTok as a platform (as opposed to Instagram or Reddit or the Email app) seems to encode certain assumptions about what kinds of things we want to see and share, and how we might like to spend our time, while any individual TikTok post (or thread) creates opportunities for individuals to make specific kinds of arguments for specific kinds of audiences. Taking up her cue from my analysis, Lily, who was heavily involved in the theater program, considered aloud how a script, a play, a given actor's performance, and even set and costume design might act individually as different sorts of texts for different sorts of purposes even as they inform and are informed by each other.

Figure 5

Student-generated freewrites responding to the prompt "What is a text?"
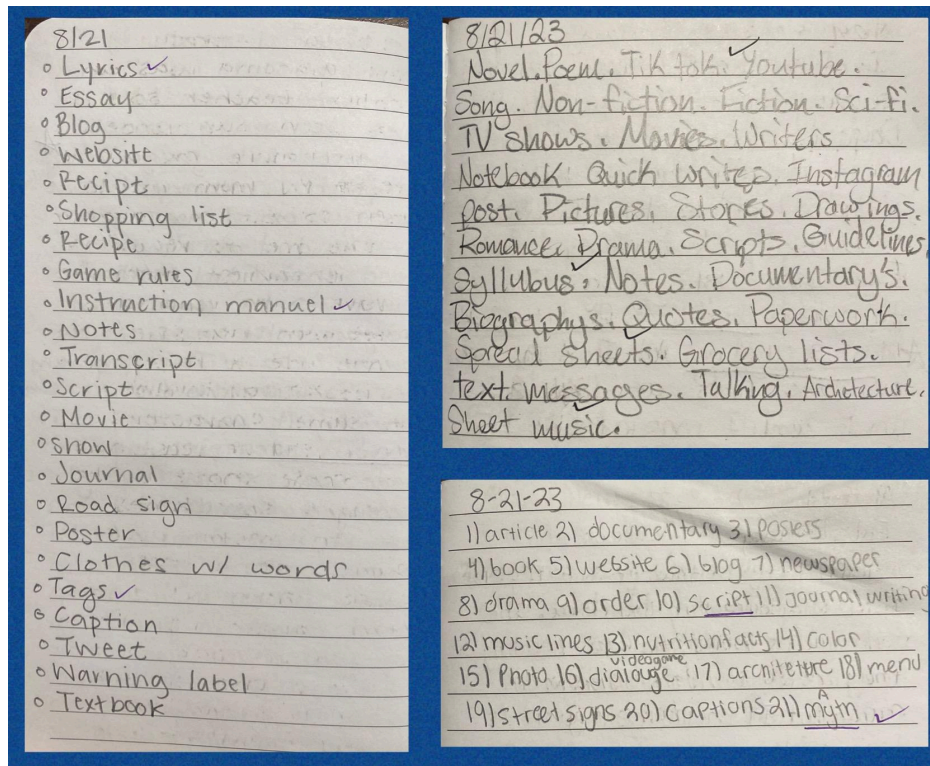
Armed with this initial thinking, students then undertook to gather evidence of the various texts out of which their lived experiences are composed. Briefly explaining the concept of ethnographic research, I charged students with the task of being ethnographers of their own lives. I asked them to spend a weekend noticing (and documenting through images) the variety of texts they encounter, and to compile these images as a digital collage on a single slide in a collaboratively edited Google Slides Document (Figure 6). I offered as an example a slide composed of my own textual life from the weekend prior to the assignment, crowded with images of texts as significant as my current independent reading book and as incidental as an ice cream wrapper.

On the Monday following the weekend, we began class by experiencing this variety together: I put on some instrumental music and set the collaborative slideshow to auto-advance, instructing students only to notice creative or thought-provoking examples of texts in the curations of their classmates.

Figure 6

Students' Textual Lives
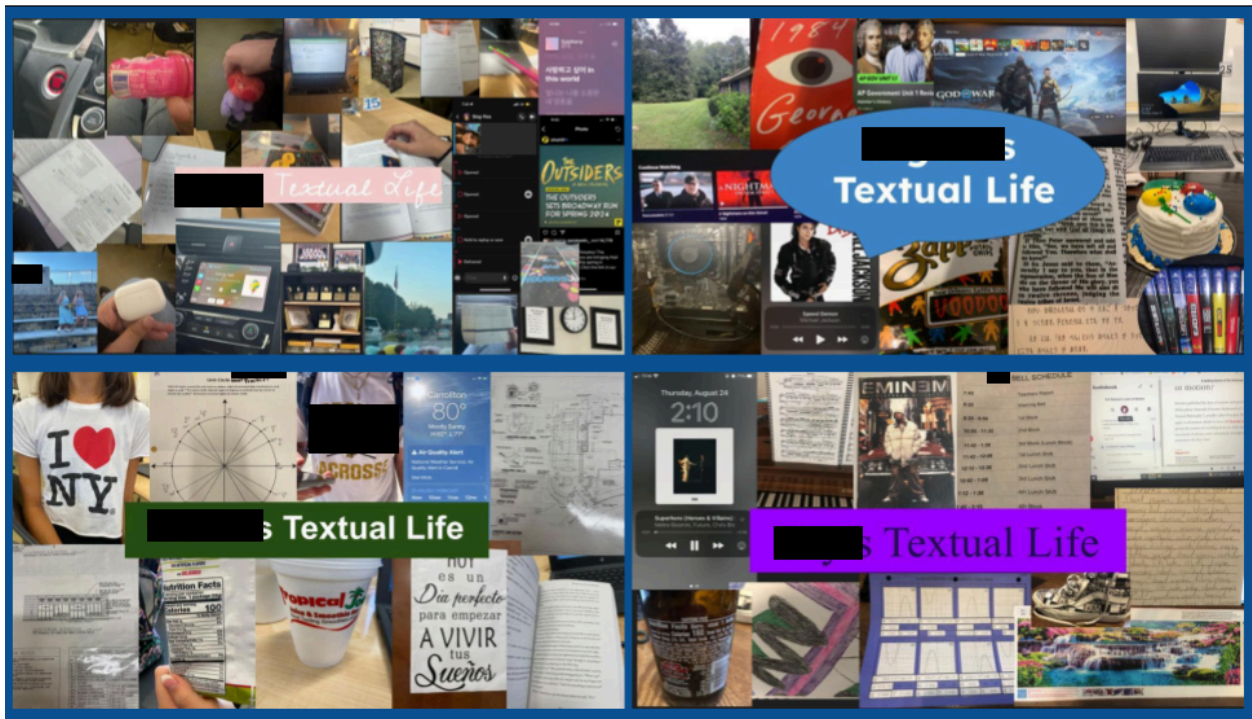
Reimagining Speakers and Audiences: "Identities Web"

It has been my experience that the rhetorical concepts of speaker and audience are difficult for students to understand as they relate to analyzing published texts. In general, students have a tendency to reduce the concept of a text's speaker to some knowable aspects of the author's professional identity, without considering the nuances by which that identity is variously brought into play in the context of the particular text. Given a speech by John F. Kennedy, for example, students might fall back on the observation that Kennedy was a president,

or, if they've a bit more history under their belts, a Democrat president, but find themselves

unable to translate that information into an analytical understanding of how the text draws on

those and other identities to construct its argument. Likewise, when asked to identify an

audience, students tend to respond with some version of "anyone who is listening," or "all

Americans," or "anybody interested in knowing more about X." Generally, they struggle to

understand audience as an embedded construct within the text itself, something the author

invents as she writes, even as she invents herself as a particular kind of speaker (Flower &

Hayes, 1980; Latour, 1988).

In lived experience, however, speakers and audiences are no more and no less than us.

People. Consciousnesses. Thinking beings enmeshed in complex relationships with other beings,

things, ideas, and systems of thought. It is this conception of themselves as developing

individuals with identities and perspectives worthy of sharing, and a notion of textuality as a

powerful means of communicating these identities, that I hoped to encourage in my students. It

is, after all, in the contentious realm of identity construction that researchers have located a great

many of the challenges faced by literacy educators, especially insofar as students' decisions

about what literacy practices to engage in are often bound up with decisions about what kinds of

identities they can conceive of for themselves (Bartlett & Holland, 2002; Moje et al., 2009;

Russell, 1997). Thus are acts of literacy reconceived as potent moments of personal

empowerment, whereby a student lays claim to a particular perspective and in so doing solidifies

aspects of her social identity.

By drawing students' attention to the relationship between the rhetorical positions of

speaker and audience and the qualities of individual identities, I hoped to combat their tendency

toward reductive thinking, and to invite students to begin to see rhetorical context not as an

abstract idea characteristic primarily of "dead" texts assigned to them in classroom situations but

of all encounters between people, however they are mediated. I followed the "My Textual Life"

activity with another, aimed at reframing the rhetorical concepts of speaker and audience as

opportunities for selective identity construction and performance (Moje et al., 2009). I suggested

to students that when we come to a rhetorical situation as a speaker, we have the opportunity to

choose which elements of our identity to foreground in that particular (con)text, and we can then

speak from these selective positions. Likewise, we can construct audiences in our ways of

speaking, writing, and being that either match or are different from our own positions, but we are

also speaking to *real* audiences who themselves have particular identity dispositions with which

we must contend in order to effectively convey our message. Thus, I explained, might particular

identities as they exist in our self-conception and our social existence be selectively deployed for

rhetorical ends.

To illustrate the point, I made a list of aspects of my own identity that are particularly

relevant to the context of teaching AP Language (Figure 7). Some of these identities are those

that I have chosen to develop: I am a teacher by qualification and by employment; I am an

"expert" with an extensive background–and multiple college degrees–related to studying

literature and argumentation; I am a lover of books and language; I have a deep appreciation for

science and scientific thinking, which I draw on not only in selecting material for class but also

in my approach to rhetorical problems; I am currently a student myself, engaged in an ongoing

research process; I am curious about the world and my place within it; I was an actor in high

school and college and still enjoy performance. Each of these elements of my identity play a

crucial role in how I go about "delivering" my message to students. Other aspects of my identity

in the rhetorical space of the classroom are things I have little or no control over, but which

nonetheless affect how I am perceived and the roles I have to play: for example, I am a male, and I am white, both of which, I pointed out to the students, feel natural to me but inevitably color the way that my student audience receives my message. Indeed, I suggest, even though I can't do anything *about* being white and male, I had better consider these elements carefully when I construct my arguments.

After addressing the elements of my identity that are most essential to my teaching, I went on to list a number of other elements that are perhaps just important to understanding *who I am*, but which play a far smaller role in my classroom life: I have lived in Georgia all my life, I am a father and a husband, I often cook dinner, I love music and am an avid concert-goer, I am a leader in my church, I own three dogs, I play disc golf, I've been watching the Braves this season. None of these characteristics are necessarily less essential to my identity, I reminded students; they are only less relevant to the particular rhetorical situation of the classroom. In other situations (at home with my family, for example, or in conversation with my colleagues) different identities become essential components of how I convey my message. I also pointed out that some of these identities are more peripheral and others more central. Though I've been watching the Braves this season, for example, I am not generally a sports fan, and I know little about the history of the team and even less about other teams. This novice status does not preclude me from conversations about the Braves, but it does shape the way that I interact with others who are more passionate and more knowledgeable than myself. In those situations, I take on the role of learner or apprentice.

Figure 7

My Multiple Identities
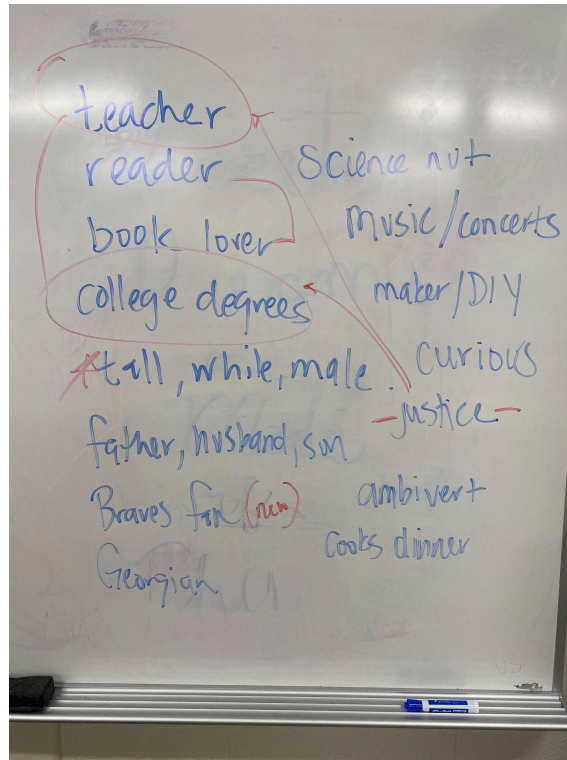
After sharing my own identities, I asked students to undertake a freewrite to generate a

list of their own various identities. I had students generate this list on a notecard, and at the end

of the freewrite I invited any that were comfortable with sharing to contribute their notecard to a

classwide activity later in the week. Their responses, I assured them, would be anonymized, but

by giving them the option to withhold their notecard I hoped to reinforce a principle of autonomy

and empowerment with regards to students' own identities.

The final part of this activity, the construction of a classwide "Identity Web," took place

at the end of the week. Using the identity descriptors that students had generated in the freewrite,

I constructed a large pegboard, using a 4x8 piece of plywood, screws, and notecards, such that

each identity descriptor was attached to the board alongside a protruding screw. Using a length of

colored yarn, I demonstrated the activity, beginning at a selected element (learner), and then

moving about the board, wrapping my yarn around any descriptors that seemed to describe

aspects of my identity. Then, releasing the students to a loosely structured writers workshop

related to their developing literacy narratives (see below), I invited small groups to add their own

threads to the pegboard. The resultant structure, a web of colored thread, served as a visual

snapshot of the interwoven identities of the classroom community as a whole, and a reminder

that our own status as speakers and audiences overlap in myriad ways with the speakers and

audiences we encounter in the world around us (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Our Class Identity Web

Reimagining Communities of Practice: Literacy Narratives

The students' first extended process writing assignment, the literacy narrative, served as

an opportunity to consolidate these lessons on Rhetorical Situations by developing their own

narrative exploring the ways that a variety of literacies has played a role in their lives. In

introducing the assignment, I drew on the conceptions of literacy as developed in sociocultural

literacy research, inviting students to understand their literacies as more than just a measurable

ability to read and write in more-or-less academic settings, but rather as the flexible and complex

set of tools for navigating the social world that we all are ever developing (Barton, Hamilton, &

Ivanic, 2000; The New London Group, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). I suggested that students might

focus their literacy narratives on any number of activities, language ways, texts, or groups which

have given them a sense of developing mastery in understanding and engaging in the world

around them.

      The assignment was developed through a number of process stages, including various

freewrites, small-group discussions, and two class periods dedicated to loosely structured writers

workshop, in which students worked individually to compose their narratives, conferencing with

me strategically to address challenges or obstacles that they faced in their attempt to write. After

submitting their drafts, students participated in a structured peer review process, in which they

invited the members of their literacy circle to read and provide feedback on the narrative prior to

its final revision.

Key Take-aways and Discussion

      Texts are artifacts of our lived experiences. The "My Textual Life" activity was aimed

at breaking down students' preconceived notions of what might be worthy of study in the ELA

classroom and bridging the divide between students' at-school understanding of the role of texts

and their everyday experiences of texts. In this, it reinforced the hybridity of the classroom

informed by a Third Space pedagogy. By suggesting that the texts assigned or explored in the

classroom held no inherent superiority to those encountered in the grocery store, I implicitly

abandoned my own assumption of authority with regards to what should "count" as literate

practice while at the same time empowering students to begin making those decisions for

themselves (Street, 2003; New London Group, 1996).

The "My Textual Life" activity also invited students to document their own lives as data for the classroom and empowered them to make decisions about what to share and what to withhold, reinforcing the notion that the classroom might be used as a lab for the investigation of things they care about. This kind of primary source research (drawing on one's own experiences) became increasingly relevant as students first developed their literacy narratives and then began the Focus Project in earnest, mining their own lives and experiences for possible topics and drawing on their personal resources (lived experiences, as well as interviews with parents, friends, classmates, coaches and other education professionals) as a source of research for their project.

Finally, the collaboratively curated showcase experience that culminated the activity furthered the development of a learning community where students see each other and their teacher as whole people with rich and varied lives beyond the walls of the classroom, giving students the chance to share with their classmates the variety of their lived experiences over a single weekend. The brief discussion following the showcase drew attention to students' new ways of thinking about texts even as it drew attention to their diverse individual tastes, media ecologies, extra-curricular activities, and pastimes.

Identities are central to the classroom experience. The Identities Web activity offered the opportunity to position the classroom as a rhetorical space, to "denaturalize and make strange again" assumptions about what is and ought to be the role of classroom spaces in the development of literacies and learning (New London Group, 1996, p. 86). In using myself and my classroom as an example for students, I was also able to make an explicit statement of my own positionality as a teacher, as a researcher, and as a person, thereby inviting students to see

me as both more and less than an arbitrary authority figure, and acknowledging and naming the

possible tensions that they may experience as speakers and audiences in dialogue with me.

The activity was also an invitation for students to see their own identities as essential to

their activities in the classroom and beyond. Students had the opportunity to "claim" these

identities, first privately and then publicly, as areas of personal expertise and apprenticeship from

which they could draw in their own thinking and writing. The collaborative construction of an

Identity Web made visible for students how the similarities and differences between themselves

and their classmates might act as assets to their collective learning capacity. The activity also

gave students the opportunity to claim identities that had been generated by others in the

classroom. In this way, students could begin to "see themselves" in the identities of other

students, to expand their previous notions of themselves as people in the world, and to publicly,

though discreetly, declare their association with new and nascent positionalities. Though these

opportunities to claim identities were undoubtedly numerous, they took on special significance in

instances where claiming a particular identity was associated with a potential vulnerability on the

student's part. For example, only one student in the class included their identification as

LGBTQIA+ in their initial freewrite. On the final Identity Web, however, the peg associated with

this identity was wrapped by three different colors of thread. Likewise, few students offered up

their anxiety as important parts of their identity in the freewrite, while this peg was extremely

popular in the Identity Web activity.

Students who wound their yarn around otherwise empty pegs could begin to see this

outlier status as an asset rather than a deficit. As an introduction to the Focus Project, wherein

students will have the opportunity to study topics of intense interest to them, the Identity Web

served as a reminder that, when it comes to those topics, they will inevitably have or develop

more expertise than I and others in the classroom. Thus could students begin to see themselves as "experts" in a variety of areas that they might otherwise have accepted as more-or-less passive elements of their personalities, and they could begin to consider how this expert knowledge ought to shape the ways they talk, write, and otherwise share about these elements in a variety of contexts.

Student identities are grounded primarily in out-of-school literacy practices. The literacy narrative provided students with an opportunity to narrate the various meaning-making practices that they are engaged with and the often fraught processes by which these literacies were developed. Overwhelmingly, students did *not* choose to explore literacies primarily located within the school context, and even more rarely were their most meaningful literacy practices grounded in the work of the English Language Arts classroom. Rather, when students mentioned educational experiences with literacy, they generally did so in order to express frustration, disdain, or boredom. In-school literacy practices that students did celebrate were associated with elective courses, extracurricular opportunities, or the reading sponsorship of particular teachers.

Despite the open mandate with regards to the variety and multiplicities of literate practice, many students chose to focus literacy narratives on more conventional forms of literacy associated with reading and writing. This may be attributable to a continuing hesitancy on the part of students to see non-linguistic literacies as equally valid to these traditional modes, or it may be that the context within which the narratives were developed–as a linguistic text written for an English Language Arts class–biased students toward narratives that focused on their relationships with written words and stories. On the other hand, given the openness of the invitation that students were provided with in the lead-up to the assignment, such a prevalence of linguistic literacies in student responses may also be understood as evidence of an ongoing

importance of reading and writing in students' conceptions of their own identities as learners and people. Within this subset of narratives existed a variety of different attitudes toward and experiences with linguistic literacies. Narratives which celebrated reading centered on the love of particular books or the students' remembered accomplishments of learning to read. Unsurprisingly, for many students, their parents' own attitudes toward reading served as important acts of sponsorship that led them to develop rich identities as readers (Brandt, 2001). Students wrote positively of the "immersion" in "other worlds" and "new points of view" that reading made possible.

Writing appeared in student compositions as acts of personal empowerment, both privately and publicly. Kara, who began her narrative essay with a pronouncement–"I used to never write"--went on to tell the story of how her practice of journaling has helped her cope with significant family trauma and has provided her a record of her growth as a person:

> For the first time once I started writing, I couldn't stop. I felt better. I felt weightless.
> Since then, I kept writing, I wrote about everything. The only thing I ever wrote about
> was all the bad things that were happening, or had already happened…Looking back on
> what I used to write and what I write now is vastly different. You know if I'm being
> honest, I don't think the difference in my writing had to do with a certain thing or a
> certain person. I think it had to do with me.

Vivienne wrote about her long practice of creative writing, and her more recent engagement as an editor for the schools literary magazine:

> The effect that it has on me has already taken its toll. The passion and adoration I feel for
> editing brings me an entirely different level of excitement than any other occupation I've

written on my mother's chalkboard. I wake up everyday more grateful for having found

my purpose for being alive. I know what I can do to positively impact others.

Other students chose to write about their relationships with other textual practices beyond

the written word. Often, these narratives interacted in meaningful ways with the traditional

modes of literacy that are associated with academic environments. For example, several students

wrote about their relationship with music and performance, making explicit a relationship

between musical literacy and their developing abilities within the English Language Arts

classroom. Lily, who admitted to struggling in school through her younger years, credited her

investment in the theater program with her developing self-confidence in the academic setting:

> Theater was my first motivation. I believe it sparked my motivation to do well in things I
>
> found important. It taught me to not give half energy to anything because that may be
>
> someone's only impression of you.

Similarly, of her experiences learning to play piano, Kate said:

> Piano has helped me in more ways than I could ever imagine. It helped me learn to read
>
> so fast, and is one of the main reasons I'm as good of a reader as I am today.

Camilla confessed to experiencing anxiety in a household where "no one would actually express

how they felt" and "emotions were always pushed to the side." Her narrative went on to focused

on her appreciation for music's lyrical meaning, it's ability to give language to her experiences of

anxiety, and its relationship with her developing sense of meaning in other texts:

> My love for literature grows more and more everyday because of music. I'm glad I was
>
> introduced to music first. I have learned how to add different meanings to text and
>
> discover more beyond them thanks to music. I have a new sense of experience. Music has
>
> definitely been a guide for me through my literacy journey.

Drake, on the other hand, who grew up in a Spanish speaking household, expressed frustration that "the practices at school were not developing [his] English far enough," and wrote movingly about how his immersion in the online world of video games and YouTube became not merely an entertaining pastime but a personal mission to master the English Language:

> My initial encounter with spoken English was similar to solving intricate puzzles. The rhythm and pronunciation were unfamiliar, but my determination remained unwavering. I began by using video game dialogues, associating visuals with English words. Different characters' interactions and narratives became like teachers. They guided me in engaging and comprehensible ways through the labyrinth of language.

These examples serve as evidence of the important role that outside-of-school and everyday literacies do and ought to play in the way that we aim to incorporate students into the academic environment. Drake, for example, began school in an intensive ELL program and began this semester as one of the most capable writers in my class, but his experiences of mastering English raises the question of how many other Drakes we are failing by ignoring the power of these everyday literacy practices.

Other students focused on the role of digital videos, video games, and podcasts in giving shape to their adolescent struggles to connect with others. Writing about her discovery of the world of podcasts during the COVID-19 lockdown, for example, Jasmine suggested:

> I started to experience a lot of depressive episodes that would drag on, I first started to have my episodes of anxiety too. I would feel so down and so hopeless all the time, I felt like I had no escape…These podcast episodes made me feel like I was in the conversation. They were so engaging to a point where I really felt like I was sitting there in the room with the hosts in real time.

Serra wrote about her struggle to accept her love of video games in a social culture that diminished or negated them as valid forms of literacy:

> [B]ecause of their colorful, child-friendly shells, these games can often be dismissed by other gamers. In my experience, if you tell someone that you like to play video games, their first thought will be online multiplayer shooter games (for example, Fortnite, Valorant, Overwatch, etc). Non-competitive, single-player, story-based games aren't what they are used to seeing or hearing about. Bringing up these genres can be alienating, even in a room full of people who play video games.

> Still others took their literacy narratives as an opportunity to explore the tensions

associated with entering new communities of practice, and the anxiety and exhilaration that grows out of finding an audience for one's personality and one's talent. Herschel, for example, who was homeschooled until the seventh grade, wrote about his struggle with self-confidence and feelings of isolation upon entering the public school:

> I went to class after class not speaking and having a heavy weight on my chest. I even had some people try and make conversation but I would feel so uncomfortable it would instantly fizzle out. I got through the school day feeling severely shaken and as soon as I got in my parents car I broke down and told them to take me out. I wasn't used to being uncomfortable and never wanted to feel what I felt again.

Similarly, Aldina wrote about the role of soccer not only in her own life, but in the lives of her parents as they immigrated from Guatemala to provide her with further opportunities:

> Growing up in a developing country, such as Guatemala, they suffered immense pain and they came to recognize what true poverty felt like. In those rough times when my family fell short of money and of a reason to continue living, they found soccer. For both my

parents, this was a safe haven and was the light in the darkness…Then, in eighth grade I

made a spontaneous decision to try out for my school's soccer team. To my surprise, I

made the team. I had a great time meeting new people that grew to be some close friends.

Of her years-long study of piano and its effect on her otherwise introverted personality, Elise

wrote:

> Listening and playing classical music has become a part of my everyday life. I have used
>
> what I have learned to play at my church and have been hired to play the piano at a
>
> diamond gala. Mr. Freeman has also invited me to play a few songs at [the local] Medical
>
> Center a few different times. Playing in these public places has increased my confidence
>
> and encouraged me to do similar things in the future, whether being paid or not. I have
>
> even had a stranger come up to me after playing and tell me how much my playing
>
> inspired her. When others feel moved by my music it makes me feel empowered.

A final pattern within these narratives was the recontextualization of struggle, failure, and

defeat not as ends in themselves but as meaningful moments in a journey toward confidence and

competence. Drake drew a comparison between the necessity to "strategize in games" and the

strategies that he employed in his pursuit of English language mastery. Of Kate's experience

learning piano, she said:

> Piano also taught me that it's okay to have bumps in the road. If you keep going, it will
>
> all work out. Most importantly, piano has taught me perseverance. I had trouble reading
>
> notes, but I kept on going. I had trouble learning how to play an actual song on the piano,
>
> but I kept going. I had trouble memorizing my song, but I kept on going. And in the end,
>
> I succeeded.

Herschel finished his literacy narrative about entering public school with a new understanding of the potential for social critique to effect positive personal change:

> People always say don't let other people's negative comments about your insecurities bother you, but after my experience maybe the negative can bring light. If you tap into those comments about something you're in control of changing, you can use it as fuel to create a better life for yourself.

Emma's essay about the long road to developing her identity as a reader ended with an affirmation to herself and advice to others like her:

> As you continue on your path of life you will make mistakes, mess up, and be beaten down. Without messing up you would not be able to see your improvements as well. So, put yourself in uncomfortable situations, push yourself to your limits, ask questions, find the joy and happiness in life. You never know what lessons you will learn.

The diversity of literacies that students chose to explore in their writing, and the powerful meanings that they have located in these experiences, serves as further evidence for proponents of a sociocultural understanding of diverse literacy practices. Furthermore, it should serve as a warning to teachers (and English teachers specifically) of the failure of traditional educational practices in inspiring vibrant literate identities in our students, and as a strong invitation to incorporate–nay, prioritize–students' everyday literacies in our curriculum and our pedagogical practices.

Establishing the Classroom as a Space for Authentic Learning

The issue of grading and assessment looms large in secondary education. Systems of educational assessment--at the level of the classroom, the school, the state, and the nation as a whole--are dominated by attempts to grade, rank, or otherwise quantify student learning.

Arguments in favor of these systems cite the need for standardized measures by which to compare students and assess school and teacher success. At the level of the classroom, grades are used as a dominant mode of communication about assessment successes and failures between teachers, students, and parents. However, as Kohn (1999, 2012) has pointed out, these systems generally fail at their stated communicative task. Surveys conducted by Guskey (2006) demonstrated that teachers in English classes can't even agree on the purpose of grades or how we should calculate them.

Furthermore, the use of grades to motivate behavior in the classroom is grounded in a behaviorist understanding of motivation as driven by the threat of punishment or the promise of reward (Anderman & Dawson, 2011) that has been largely superseded by social cognitive theories that see motivation as influenced by beliefs about the self, cognitions, and social contexts (Bandura, 2006). According to these social cognitive theories, students' motivation to learn is rooted in "beliefs about their ability to learn, develop skills, or master materials" (Lennenbrink-Garcia & Patall, 2015, p. 91). Deci & Ryan (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) have demonstrated that motivating behavior through extrinsic motivators such as grades diminishes student self-efficacy, as well as diminishing motivation when rewards are absent (Anderman & Dawson, 2011; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Contexts which promote and encourage intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, have been shown to lead to better outcomes for student engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), performance (Miserandino, 1996), and quality of learning (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987).

I entered this class and this research process with a strong conviction that the objects of the research and of education more generally were ill-served by traditional models of assessment, relying as they do on the extrinsic motivations, comparisons, competitions, and thin feedback of

grades-based assessment. For these reasons, I chose to introduce students, as a part of the construction of our course agreement, to a model of self-reflective assessment that diminishes the role of numeric grades and teacher judgment in favor of a recursive process of feedback and student self-assessment that prioritizes and rewards growth and engagement over and above so-called objective measures of "success" (Zerwin, 2020).

The practice of alternative assessment models introduced into the conversation of the classroom a further tension–existing between the standardizing demands of schooling in the status quo and the experiences of authentic learning. As students entered their first AP Language & Composition unit focused on the methods of argumentation, I determined to couple the curricular skills related to argumentation with an opportunity for students to develop their own positions, individually and collaboratively, on the purposes of education and the extent to which these purposes were served or obstructed by educational systems in the status quo. To that end, I guided the class through a structured analysis of a number of multimodal texts related to issues of autonomy, motivation, creativity, the history of the American education system, and the effects of traditional grading practices. The guided analysis culminated in a formal classwide Spider-web discussion and the development of individual arguments related to the broad topic of "Purpose in Education."

This structured analysis began with a freewrite in response to a quote from Samuel Beckett's (1983) *Worstward Ho!*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." The rest of the text analysis unit, extending over several class periods, centered on the examination of three texts, accompanied by guiding questions designed to inspire meaningful thought and conversation (Table 2).

Table 2

Text-focused critical inquiry and argumentation outline

Text	Details	Prompting Questions for Discussion
A quote from Samuel Beckett's (1983) *Worstward Ho!*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."	Students were offered this quote as a warm-up freewriting prompt.	What connotations does 'failure' have in our modern educational context? What about 'success'? Are these connotations useful, or do they hinder students willingness to think critically and creatively? Despite its negative connotations, what important roles does failure play in learning? What would it be like to inhabit a learning environment that celebrated 'failing better' instead of 'succeeding'?
Sir Ken Robinson's (2010) TEDTalk "Changing Education Paradigms"	Animated into a sketchnote by RSA Animate, this text details a bit of the history of public education, especially its structural links to the Industrial Revolution, and suggests the need for a shift toward creative problem solving.	What points does Robinson make about the way that we organize education? How does Robinson define creativity? How does it relate to divergent thinking? To what extent have your experiences in school encouraged divergent thinking?
Daniel Pink's (2009) TEDTalk "The Puzzle of Motivation"	This talk from the author of *Drive: The Surprising Evidence About What Motivates Us* (2011) discusses the research on motivation that demonstrates that external rewards diminish our capacity to think critically and creatively to solve problems. Pink's TEDTalk focuses on the need for institutions that promote Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose.	What are the problems with a model of motivation based on external rewards (like grades or recognition)? How well do schools traditionally do at encouraging autonomy, mastery, and purpose? What would a classroom look like that was built on these principles?

Alfie Kohn's (2012) article "The Case Against Grades"	In this seminal text in the literature on alternatives to traditional grading, Kohn outlines in clear terms many of the central concerns about grading that I had been feeling, and which form the subject of this action research project.	What are the effects of traditional grading systems on student learning & motivation? To what extent does his analysis of teaching and grading practices ring true to your experience as a student? What alternatives to these traditional systems does Kohn suggest?

As a part of the AP unit outcomes related to understanding rhetorical modes and identifying claims and evidence, I employed the texts as models using a Gradual Release of Responsibility method aimed primarily at understanding the structures of argumentation (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Pink's talk prompted a collaborative analysis of the SPACECAT model of rhetorical analysis. After viewing Robinson's talk, students used the text and their developing understanding of the concepts of argumentation in order to collaboratively construct AP-style multiple choice questions regarding rhetorical modes, claims and evidence. Finally, Alfie Kohn's article was assigned as independent reading, with a mandate to "note what matters" and identify rhetorical modes, claims and evidence. Thus, during our initial study of the texts, deeper questions of what this all means and why it matters had been at once broadly discussed and also set aside in favor of curricular concerns regarding the development of the particular skills of argumentation.

During the roundtable discussion that followed our initial textual engagement, however, students were given the opportunity to engage with and talk back to the ideas presented in the texts. For this discussion, I elected to use the "Spider Web Discussion" model (Wiggins, 2017). Spider Web Discussions are a model of socratic discussion that are intended to center student voice, encourage deliberative discussion, and build student's capacity as leaders and contributors to collaborative conversation. Students move their chairs into a circle, such that nonverbal

communication is facilitated across the classroom. The "guiding principles" of the Spider Web

Discussion include a request that everyone contribute at least twice, and that no one contribute

more than three times; that no one raise their hand to speak, but find or create natural

opportunities to contribute; that students speak to each other rather than to me; that they listen

and respond to each others' contributions, rather than "waiting to speak." In a Spider Web

Discussion, the teacher intervenes as minimally as possible, acting only as facilitator, while also

"mapping" the discussion by creating the web that gives the discussion form its name (Figure 9).

The discussion begins by requiring all students to respond to a single yes or no question,

without qualification and without explanation. This opening question gives every student a

low-risk space to speak and to stake an initial claim in the conversation. The initial question for

the Purpose in Education Spiderweb was, "If you did not have to come to school every day,

would you still come?" In this discussion, only about 30% of the students in this advanced level

class answered in the affirmative. After this initial question, the discussion proceeded for roughly

25 minutes and included 5 further open-ended prompts for discussion:

1) What's the purpose of education? What should the purpose be?

2) How does school get it right? Where does it go wrong?

3) What role does creativity and divergent thinking play in learning?

4) Grades: Good or bad? Why?

5) How could education be transformed to make it more meaningful?

Figure 9

"Purpose in Education" Spider Web Discussion Map
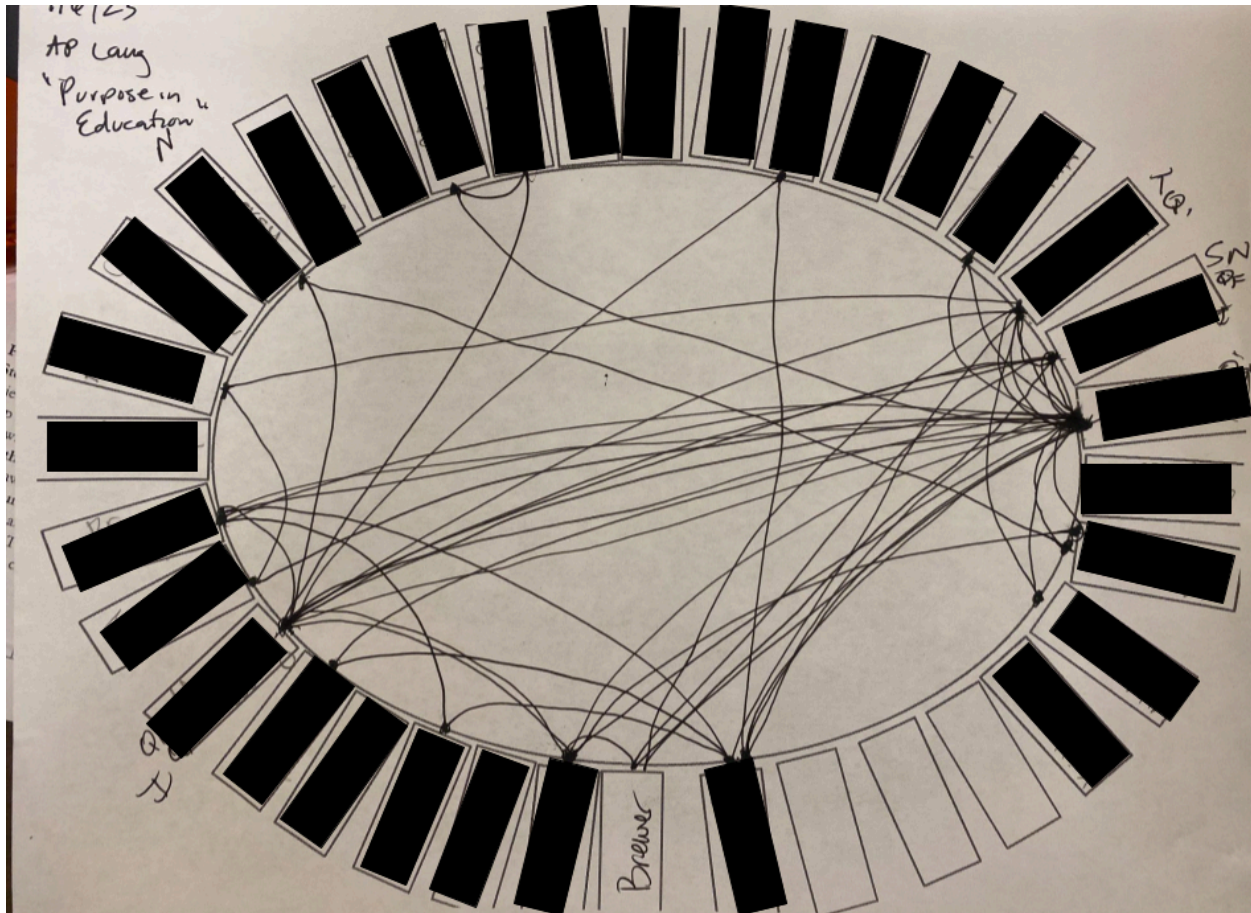
One of the powerful aspects of the Spider Web discussion model is the way that it produces a

visual map of the discussion as it unfolded in the classroom. Here, lines represent the direction of

conversation as it moves from student to student, and informal notations are used to record

particularly salient dimensions of the conversation itself (e.g., Q = "asks a question," I =

"interrupts a classmate"). At the end of the discussion, we spent several minutes as a class

reflecting on our collective and individual successes and failures in sustaining a productive

discussion. The effect, this visual map becomes a final artifact in the discussion itself, and our conversation surrounding it a bonus round in the broader roundtable.

The unit in argumentation culminated with an opportunity for students to develop their own arguments regarding some aspect of the theme of "Purpose in Education" that they felt was especially pressing, particularly compelling, or specifically related to their own experiences. These arguments, composed as posts published to student's individual class blogs, were developed over the next two days of class, dedicated to loosely structured writers' workshop.

Key Take-aways and Discussion

Students are unevenly comfortable in formal discussion environments. While the several opportunities for students to work with and discuss these texts within their small-group "literacy circles" were overwhelmingly lively, engaging, and politely contentious, the class struggled to confidently transfer their developing perspectives into the large group setting. As is clear from the Spider Web Diagram generated from the conversation (Figure 8), nearly half of the class made no vocal contribution to the classwide conversation. When pressed during the follow-up reflection for their reticence, most of these students expressed feelings of anxiety at the risk of public speaking. On the other hand, there were a small number of students whose overwhelming contribution risked "drowning out" the contributions of less confident students. Indeed, during the post-discussion reflection period, at least two students expressed (to themselves but aloud) that they felt unable to contribute due to the excessive contributions of this small group of students.

This double-edge of participation led to meaningful conversations not only about the role of risk and trust in the classroom setting, but also led to observations about how I, as the teacher, was still generally playing an important mediating role in the classroom experience. I encouraged

students to consider their potential eventual success in a Spider Web discussion to be a mark of true classroom autonomy, where the teacher was no longer seen as a necessary component for engagement and learning. The reflection also brought to students' attention the importance of listening, and of silences: students who did not speak were given the chance in an individual reflective freewrite to explain what stood out to them as listeners, and those students who talked "too much," disregarding the 3-times "rule," had an opportunity to consider how their own contributions, while perhaps thoughtful and well-intentioned, may have detracted from the success of the conversation as a whole. Indeed, in our second individual interview, Claire, who was one of these "oversharers" in our first Spider Web, counted this lesson about the role of listening as one of the most important learning experiences she had in the class:

> [O]ur little spider web discussions have helped me realize when to shut up and when to actually talk. Because there were so many points last year where I thought, "Oh, I have to say this. I have to say that." So limiting myself and realizing that everybody in the room has great ideas, not just me, and that it's okay to sit in silence for a minute.…feeling that limit and pressure on myself to listen to what everybody else has to say even if it takes a minute for them to speak has not only allowed me to reflect on myself and realize the things that I have to say may not always be the most important thing.

In our post-discussion reflection, students found the Spider Web Discussion as a pedagogical tool to be helpful in understanding themselves both as individuals and as a group, and they were excited to continue using the structure throughout the semester. In the end, we conducted three more Spider Web discussions over the course of the semester, and each time with noticeably more evenly distributed and meaningful participation from the class.

Students are singularly positioned as critics of their own learning experiences. In the discussion as in the argumentative blogs that grew out of them, students consistently returned to the question of whether the learning they were doing in school was useful to them in any meaningful sense:

> Odu: I'm stuck learning about the Revolutionary War again, and I've learned about the Revolutionary war like seven times already, and I'm watching that History Channel video about the bullet and where it hit his head, and, like, I don't care about where it hit him, or what size the bullet was, or whatever.

> Aldina: I am convinced that busy work hasn't, in the past, helped me to grow my knowledge in school but has ultimately been given to me so that I would stay occupied.

This disconnect was evident also in students' mis-understandings or mis-interpretations of the importance of certain educational practices in the development of meaningful learning. During the discussion, Phidias expressed frustration with the mandate that she "show her work" in math class. She said she didn't see why it matters *how* she does the work as long as she gets the right answer, and added that often her own methods for solving a problem are different from (and unacceptable to) the teacher. What went unexamined by the student, and by the conversation more broadly, are the possible valid reasons why showing work might be important. Such an examination might lead to discussions of learning processes, logical reasoning, and being able to locate oneself within the problem that's being solved. That other students tended to agree with Phidias's condemnation of "showing work" suggests that these cognitive justifications have either been absent or ignored in their prior learning experiences.

During the classroom discussion, perceptions of creativity were marked by a tendency to

conflate "being creative" with classroom activities that, while engaging hands in the construction of artifacts, do not rise to Robinson's (2010) definition of creativity as "the process of having original ideas that have value." Prompted for the role of creativity in her classes, Amara gave an example of a mathematics project that required her to mark, cut, and fold a 3D object using protractor, scissors, and glue. She felt that what are often billed as creative activities frequently acted to overcomplicate an otherwise straightforward learning objective: "I would have probably understood the point better if I had just been given a practice worksheet." In their individual arguments, students expressed a more nuanced understanding of creativity that "is not limited to your typical artistic aspects" but "can be used in problem-solving or even scientific discovery" to "unlock our potential to improve ourselves and society" (Sarah). Akio suggested that "Creativity is characterized by the ability to perceive the world in new ways, to find hidden patterns, to make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena, and to generate solutions."

In general, students found their educational experience wanting in the extent to which it had been generative of, rather than harmful to, their individuality, curiosity, and capacity for innovative thinking. Students tended to agree on the general incompatibility between the standardized learning environment characteristic of schooling and a view of learning that incorporated students' diverse identities, passions, curiosities, and learning needs. In general, students were roundly critical of schools' focus on standard modes of assessment, reliant as they are on grades, rote learning, and (standardized) testing. Hunter captured the sentiment of many of his classmates when he observed that, despite the well-established fact that "People learn differently," the education system is structured such that "we all are doing the same assignments being graded the same way in the same environment…we're taught as a collective, not as individuals."

Sarah: the education system ultimately restricts one's ability to desire knowledge, grow, be curious, and be creative

Drake: Students are often exposed to a limited range of subjects, potentially limiting their exposure to diverse passions. This can lead to a homogenization of interests rather than a celebration of individual passions.

Carrie: Individuality has no room within the grading system. There is always just one right answer. This does not consider different learning styles or challenges. This creates an expectation for each student to reach and it creates bad relationships between the students and teachers

The problematic roles of grading practices and standardized testing dominated the conversation during the discussion, and an overwhelming majority of students also chose to take up some aspect of the question of assessment in their written responses. By and large, their criticisms mirror many of those that have been made by researchers in the past (Kohn, 1999, 2012; Stommel, 2020). Students saw grades as encouraging thin thinking and rote learning:

Claire: I would copy the step-by-step instructions my teachers provided and respond how I knew they'd want me to. I had no clue what I was doing, only that I was doing it "correctly." I did the bare minimum of what was asked of me.

Phoebe: grades only create stressed, unmotivated, and possibly even lazy, students who focus more on a number than what they're actually learning.

They saw grades as diminishing their investment in the learning process:

> Vivienne: Students would much rather do what is needed to get an 'A' than take the time
>
> to learn.

> Kate: grades are the reason why students take the easiest way possible when doing work.
>
> Students choose a shorter book rather than a larger book so they have less of a chance of
>
> doing poorly. Or they will pick a topic they already are an expert at, to guarantee a good
>
> grade. But, by doing this, students aren't learning anything new, defeating the purpose of
>
> education.

They saw grades leading to a culture of fear that inhibits their willingness to take the risks

required of authentic learning:

> Carrie: Grading policies, especially the strict ones, can scare kids from trying challenging
>
> tasks. This fear can impact the kid's creativity and ability to experiment.

> Jasmine: However, many don't realize that enforcing these standards can do a little more
>
> harm than good-they push the narrative that failure is unacceptable, and failure is not a
>
> natural human thing that happens to everyone.

And they saw grades as creating an environment of stress and anxiety that was harmful to student

mental health:

> Vivienne: The stress that comes with achieving the highest grade or passing a test that
>
> you are unprepared for is majorly demoralizing. Rather than looking into what they learn,
>
> students obsess over a set of numbers that society uses to determine their intellectual
>
> abilities.

Carrie: Negative grading processes can also impact students' social and emotional health. Grades can cause anxiety, stress, and even depression. It can also affect their confidence which can make students unwilling to participate in social activities or peer interactions. It can affect their ability to cope with stress as well.

Marie: stressing over letters all day everyday gets so mentally draining.

A number of students reflected on the changes that they had seen in themselves as a result of these systems:

Camilla: School for me used to be enjoyable because I did it for myself.

Lily: When you feel like your intelligence is all you have going for you. That number becomes the most important thing in the whole world. I forget that I am a person with talents, humor, family, friends, flaws, and personality. That number makes me forget about everything else.

Amara: Your spark, that was once so full of imagination, is dull.

Camilla: The first time I ever saw failing in a negative light was when my fourth-grade teacher told my class we would be working at Mcdonald's if we failed in the classroom. She would say that phrase over and over again like she was a broken record. Over the years I heard the same thing from various of my teachers. Now as a junior in High School I believe failure is a bad thing.

Even Serra, who wrote the lone defense of traditional grades, exposed in her argument the

long-term negative effects on intrinsic motivation that such systems engender:

> The sad truth is, I don't want to work. Really, I don't care about the work I do if I don't
>
> get a grade. If there's no grade, then why should I even try? I think that many students
>
> could relate.

It's worth noting that this critique of grading practices has been made by students who, by

objective measures, have achieved "success" within the current system. The average 100-scale

grade point average for students in this class is 94.4. Beyond their own experiences with grades,

a number of students were sensitive to the deleterious effects that this system has had on

historically marginalized and underserved populations. Elizabiff, for example, observed that the

education system as it exists now "only benefits a certain demographic of students." Carrie

attended to the fact that standardization has more dramatic negative effects for "children coming

from lower incomes and violence," and Bruce critiqued testing regimes for their failure to

"account for the various factors ongoing in a student's life." These arguments for social justice

are the more powerful for the fact that, by all accounts, these students are those who have

benefitted the most from the status quo. Their critique, thus, seems to grow not only out of

self-interest, but out of an interest in the betterment of education systems for all students.

Despite their well-developed arguments against the system as it stands, students struggled

to conceive of meaningful practical alternatives to the status quo. Vivienne observed the

likelihood that much of what she and other students experience in the classroom is based

primarily on the experiences that their teachers had as students, and in a private post-discussion

reflection, Amara lamented the seemingly impossible task that teachers face in effectively

differentiating learning for the diversity of learners in their classrooms. Students were more

successful in articulating a vision for more authentic learning. This is a vision of learning that

extends beyond "acquiring information" (Sarah). One that includes "the various challenges, setbacks, and opportunities we experience in our daily lives" (Sarah) and our attempts to learn "how to be social and how to build relationships" (Lily). It is a vision that strengthens, rather than destroying, "the important relationship between the students and the teachers" (Marie) and embraces failure as "one of the most fundamental and essential experiences in our lives" (Darwin).

> Lily: My most favorite things I learned have not been math, science, or ELA; it's acting, singing, drawing, BTS, Disney, or piano. You might say those are hobbies, but they could be subjects. They just don't have a grade. And you see the growth without a grade just by performance. This proves that grades don't measure your learning.

> Akio: If we took a normal school day filled with talking with friends, activities with other people, and personal projects we find a place where many minds can think and create.

> Amara: Education and learning should be about branching out, expanding on what you already know. Not shaping our minds to all think the same.

In the conclusion of her argument, Sarah captured the sense of possibility that students see for education systems built around authentic learning:

> All in all, learning is a lifelong journey that begins the moment we are born and continues until the day we take our last breath. While formal education, such as schools and universities, may have an endpoint, the quest for knowledge, personal growth, and creativity is a path that never truly ends.

Part 2. The Focus Project

Introduction

In the previous section, I explained the process by which I attempted to establish the classroom as a Third Space. The aim of these activities was at once to encourage in students a revised concept of English Language Arts as a discipline that is intimately connected to their lived experiences, and to destabilize students' preconceived notions of the possibilities of the classroom as an authentic space for learning–creating space for students to express and explore their own views, identities, questions and uncertainties. In this section, I introduce The Focus Project, which is the name given to a semester-long, independent, student-directed research and composition project designed to deploy the Third Space in the interest of students' own academic and pseudo-academic areas of interest.

The focus project began in earnest in the third week of class and was completed when students presented their final products on the last day of the semester. It was loosely structured around a series of workshops designed to guide students through the discovery of a promising topic and research question, the process of beginning and sustaining research, the development of a brief formal "Elevator Pitch" to be delivered to the class, and the design and production of an authentic argumentative text aimed at entering into the broader public conversation surrounding their chosen topic. For the most part, class time was given over to students' Focus Project work each Friday (i.e., "Focus Fridays"), though students also worked on the project outside of school, and specific elements of the project were frequently drawn into the ongoing development of skills related to the College Board's stated outcomes for the AP Language & Composition course.

Finding Focus

The first step undertaken by the students was an exploration of topics, issues, or questions. The goal was not only for students to land on a promising topic, but also to reflect on the limitations of prescribed classroom curriculums and to come to a better understanding of the large number of possible passions and questions made available to them by a curriculum that centered their own developing interests.

This workshop was begun in class on Focus Friday, but continued throughout the week to encourage students to draw on their own lived experience of the world for inspiration and to locate connections between their most promising topics and the physical, technological, and social worlds in which they live. The workshop draws on the "Notice & Focus" activity from the first day of class, asking students first to "Notice" their own interests, pressing questions, and curiosities, and then to begin "Focusing" their efforts on a successively narrower set of ideas. The prompts (Figure 10) are designed to be generative of ideas that are not strictly academic, and that perhaps have been neglected in the interest of fulfilling the regular demands of schooling.

After making this list and beginning the process of "reducing" it toward a set of the most promising or compelling ideas, the workshop instructed students to "Take a walk" around their home, their neighborhood, or their community to consider the ways that these environments might inform or be informed by the ideas that they are most interested in pursuing. The point of this "field trip" was at once to encourage students to begin to see their ideas and interests as related to the world around them and to invite them, once again, to think auto-ethnographically in their pursuit of evidence and research for their project. Finally, the workshop encouraged students to begin "Googling around" to see what kinds of texts and perspectives might exist in relation to their most promising ideas.

Figure 10

Detail from Focus Project Workshop #1

Follow these steps to generate ideas for your Focus Project. Follow these steps even if you believe you already know what your project will be about. A successful brainstorm will fill at least the front and back of a sheet of paper. (More is better at this point in the process!)

1. Start with what you care about: **Make lists** of topics, ideas, issues, problems, activities that have
   a. Intrigued you
   b. Made you think you could do this for a living
   c. Made you talk nonstop
   d. Made you lose all sense of time
   e. Morally outraged you
   f. Broke your heart
   g. Disturbed you
   h. Made you feel exceptionally smart
   i. Opened a whole new world to you
   j. Left you unsatisfied--there was so much more to discover
   k. Puzzled you--something just didn't make sense

On the Friday following the introduction of the workshop, I gave the students loosely structured time to interact with their small groups around their emerging ideas before the introduction of the second workshop. This peer talk time was prefaced by a mandate that students should "be interested" in each others' thinking–asking questions, suggesting new evidence or possibilities, introducing alternative perspectives–and that they should "be accountable" for each others contributions, ensuring that all members of their group were encouraged to share their ideas, no matter how tentative.

Key Take-aways and Discussion

Students struggle to name personal interests. It was a part of the hypothesis with which I began this research that students, and perhaps especially advanced-level students, have become so good at "playing the game" of education that they may have confused the game for reality itself. When developing their arguments about the purposes of education, students

themselves acknowledged that much of schooling has trained out of them an inclination to

pursue personal inquiry in conformity to the standardization inherent in a focus on grades and

tests and uniform performance indicators. Thus did it seem had students fallen prey to the

colonizing impulse of the educational apparatus (Freire, 2000). As we began the Focus Project, I

saw this colonization manifest itself in the struggle that some students faced in generating

possible topics for exploration. Now tasked with pursuing a subject of their own curiosity, they

struggled to generate topics that felt genuinely interesting to them.

This struggle was experienced by students in a number of ways. Several students–many

of whom had testified in their argumentative blogs to an unthinking dedication to "just turning

work"–neglected to complete the brainstorming workshop entirely. Given the open-ended task of

exploring their own interests, it seemed, they came up at a loss for how to even begin. For other

students, the challenge became overcoming their own suspicion at the lists they had generated:

were these things they were *really* interested in, they wondered, or just things that they thought

their teacher would be impressed by. Finally, some students struggled to overcome a notion,

received via their institutionalization, that the topics that they were most interested in did not

merit serious consideration within a classroom environment.

Students' individual thinking benefits from social learning environments. The

collaborative workshop that followed students' individual idea generation proved highly

beneficial in helping students solidify and narrow their areas of focus. In their small groups,

students had the opportunity to declare their interests, and thereby establish a goal and an identity

within the community, and also clarify these interests in relation to the knowledge and

perspectives of their peers. Several students who had come in without a clear direction, with too

many directions, or with no direction at all, ended the small-group peer workshop with more

ideas and avenues than they had when they entered, and with a clear idea of how to proceed in

the pursuit of their Focus Project topic.

The record of my participant observation in one group illustrates the way that this

collaboration led to productive discussions that meaningfully extended their initial thinking:

Drake began by sharing that he was interested in studying A.I. and what

possibilities and problems it represented. He said that he had used ChatGPT for some

things and it had made him start thinking about how A.I. will change the way we do

things. He also said he had listened to some podcasts, and mentioned specifically his

interest in what Elon Musk had said about A.I. I asked the group what they thought about

the idea of there being an A.I. consciousness, and whether we would be talking about A.I.

rights soon. Akio added that he'd heard the creator of ChatGPT walks around with a

backpack that contains a kill switch for the A.I., in case anything gets out of hand. Chris

said that he remembered hearing about a robot that killed researchers in a lab after it

reprogrammed itself. This sounded like science fiction to most of the group, and he

couldn't immediately find a source, but the possibility of such a thing is also a

compelling angle from which to view the problem.

Bruce began by explaining that he was interested in understanding "human

behavior." When I prodded him about what that looked like, he explained that he had

been reading *1984* over the summer, and was interested in the way that humans reacted to

things like totalitarianism. We talked about totalitarianism and social control, but he

eventually landed on an interest in surveillance. I pointed out that we can't walk

anywhere on campus without being filmed, and told the group briefly about Cory

Doctorow, and the story from *Little Brother* about groups in the UK who have mapped

the streets of London to make it possible to move without being recorded. The students

played with the idea of how they might make such a map of the high school. I mentioned

seeing a social media post about an infrared technology embedded in hats that blurs faces

on camera, and Akio added something about a shirt with a specific pattern that scrambles

video footage.

Members of other groups within the classroom affirmed the usefulness of the peer workshop, and

its benefit was evident also in the engagement with which students took up the discussion. I had

planned for the peer discussion to last for around 16 minutes, allowing 4 minutes for each

student to share their ideas and receive feedback. However, 30 minutes into the class period,

most groups were still engaged in conversations that had grown out of one or more of their Focus

Project ideas. This level of committed participation reaffirms the power of social learning

environments for driving student motivation, especially when those environments are focused on

the development of and engagement with authentic communities of practice.

Reimagining Research

The definition of authentic inquiry that I've developed in this paper differs markedly

from more formal and academic concepts of research. Academic research is frequently

associated with formal research structures (e.g., hypotheses, methodologies, data collection) and

institutional mandates (e.g., the use of peer reviewed studies). Authentic inquiry, as it is

imagined in this study, is far more closely related to the types of learning behaviors undertaken

by curious and intelligent people in the course of their daily lives.

Certainly, I'm interested in encouraging in students a sense of the beauties of in-depth

research. I love formal research. I love it so much that I keep going back to school in order to be

assigned more formal research. Furthermore, there is no denying the important role that formal

research plays not only in success at the postsecondary level but also in constructing durable knowledge about the world. That said, I am far less certain about the methods by which we introduce (some might say inculcate) students into the processes of formal research. In both everyday life and in the academy, we undertake research in order to address a question or concern that we want to better understand, a curiosity that demands our attention, a problem that wants solving. The conventions of academic research, then, grow out of a shared disciplinary understanding of the methods by which such question-answering might best be undertaken. As Russell (1997) points out in his discussion of the academic writing habits of college-level students, too often are students directed through the process of academic research without ever accessing the purposes for its structures and mandates. Because students have not yet meaningfully positioned themselves as members of a community of practice in the discipline, their attempts at contributing to conversations in that discipline amount to little more than a parroting of the modes of discourse characteristic of a community with whom they share little in common.

Rather than attempting to model their research on disciplinary conventions, then, I aimed to introduce research as an opportunity to begin and then deepen their interactions with an existing community of knowledge and practice. This "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I hoped, would help students position themselves as passionate novices to the well-developed disciplinary, para-disciplinary, and interdisciplinary concerns of experts in the field.

I introduced the process of research in the Focus Project by returning students' attention to the myriad texts that they had identified in the "My Textual Life" activity, and reminding them that all sorts of texts might offer meaningful perspectives for the project that they have

undertaken. I also aimed to help students re-define what we might mean by research, to move the

concept out of its time- and context-delimited connotation and consider the process of research

more-or-less equivalent with the process of learning itself. To this end, I guided students toward

a model of inquiry that would put them in regular conversation with others who were engaged in

studying their topics. I suggested that students consider ways of curating their social media

ecosystem to more regularly direct them to their topic of interest. I also demonstrated the use of

Feedly, a news aggregator program, to search out and gather relevant digital texts for their

review.

Throughout this process, I was also sensitive to the potentially destructive effect that an

overly regimented program of research might have not only on student engagement and interest,

but on the ethos of the project as a whole. Too often had students spoken or written about the

ways that classrooms' task-orientation diminished their capacity to invest in the processes of

learning. For this reason, while I gave students some guidance with regards to locations, types of

texts, and avenues for research, I opted to keep the mandate quite open: "learn about your topic,"

I told them, "and find a way to keep track of what you are learning."

Key Take-Aways & Discussion

Students demonstrated a limited facility with the theories and tools of research.

Students often struggled, both in formulating their research questions and in undertaking their

research methodologies, to move beyond relatively basic, information-oriented approaches to the

topics they are studying. My observations and discussions with students engaging in research

workshops suggests that students tended to treat research as a process of finding and citing

"evidence" for a more-or-less factually correct position that they might through their search

locate and then take up, rather than a process of self-discovery and rhetorical practice to

effectively establish a tentative position in a sea of competing perspectives and ambiguous data. Evidence, in turn, was largely equated in students' minds with facts and statistics, rather than voices, perspectives, and concepts with which they could wrangle and interact.

Upon the submission of their first informal annotated bibliography–a "check-in" designed to help hold them accountable without overdetermining the pathways of their learning–several students were clearly struggling to move beyond surface-level factually oriented research. These bibliographies were dominated by wiki-style websites and listicles that provided information devoid of context and lacked meaningful perspectives on the topics that they explored. This led to an impromptu lesson on research practices aimed at helping students identify not only more productive sources, but also more robust knowledge communities, as well as possible audiences. Using Camilla's topic, adolescent anxiety, as an example, I invited students to brainstorm possible audiences that would be interested in the topic. Students suggested that teens themselves would be interested, but also parents and teachers. Using Google, I searched for "Parenting magazines," a search that led me to a number of top results, including Parents.com. By clicking through to Parents.com, I then used the internal search feature on the website to search for "adolescent anxiety." This search produced a dozen or so articles written for parents about issues related to childhood anxiety, many of which had been reviewed and approved by medical professionals. I then repeated the process, searching Google for "teen magazines," and then clicking through TeenVogue.com and using the internal search feature to search for "anxiety," a search which produced a huge number of results, some of which were related specifically to issues of anxiety in teens, and others of which made connections between issues of anxiety and other topics relevant to teens (pop culture icons and athletes sharing their struggles with anxiety,

for example). I repeated the process with a couple of the other topics under study in the classroom.

In another impromptu lesson a week later, I demonstrated the use of Pi.ai, a web-connected Large Language Model, to locate communities that were discussing the particular topic (in this case, the student was studying the relationship between screen time and eating habits). When prompted, Pi.ai produced a list of podcasts, subReddits, and Instagram accounts with a history of posting content related to the topic. Though the lessons were improvised, they had a triple benefit for student research processes. First, they helped students bypass the surface-level research processes which had become regular classroom practices for them. Second, they invited students to begin thinking of their topic in terms of the audiences and communities for which it might be relevant. And third, they acted as an entrée into the knowledge communities which already existed around their topics. Suddenly, students could begin to conceptualize her own personal experiences as shared or social experiences that were being addressed from a number of different angles.

In some respects, the results of this research suggest that perhaps I erred too far on the side of open-endedness, and that students may have benefited from more direct instruction in tools from the start. On the other hand, leaving students to attempt to figure it out on their own allowed for my further intervention to be deployed tactically, in response to specific student challenges in the context of their research. For instance, few students seem to have taken up my initial advice regarding social media curation and news aggregation, offered, as they were, prior to students entering the research space. The two ad-hoc lessons, on the other hand, resulted in immediate and widespread transformation of student approaches to information retrieval. By then, they had experienced the obstacles to effective research, and so were primed for strategies

to overcome them. Such a strategy, then, is perhaps more in accord with the goal of creating a

Third Space as an ad-hoc affinity space dedicated to the shared endeavor of engaging in research

(Gee, 2004).

The Pitch: Engaging Known Audiences

After giving the students a couple of weeks of workshop dedicated to developing their

understanding of their chosen topics through research, I next directed their attention toward the

task of developing a short speech about their topic to be delivered to their classmates. I modeled

this speech on the concept of the "elevator pitch" commonly employed in business environments

and made popular by shows such as *Shark Tank,* in which participants have a limited amount of

time to convince their audience of investors to invest in their product or service. The term

"elevator pitch" is derived from the idea that the pitch should take no longer than a ride in an

elevator. As I explained it to students:

> Imagine. You've just walked into a very fancy high rise office building in Manhattan.
>
> You are just here to explore, and maybe get a glimpse of the city skyline from above, and
>
> so you enter an elevator and select the highest numbered floor available to you. Just
>
> before the doors close, you hear "Hold the door," and in walks–Oprah Winfrey. Elon
>
> Musk. Taylor Swift. Pick your multi-billionaire. So here's your chance. You've got this
>
> idea, you think it's important, and wouldn't it be nice to get the support–or a big fat
>
> check–from a powerful person interested in helping you develop it. But the elevator is
>
> fast, so you've got to make it quick.

As has been true of many of the activities described in this chapter, the Pitch served a

dual purpose within the context of the classroom. As an activity in argument construction, the

pitch development process provided the class with a meaningful and related avenue for exploring

and practicing the structures and forms of effective argumentation. What's more, the context for

the assignment, and its final goal of an orally presented speech, invited students to more

concretely address issues of rhetorical power in their use of language and style. Many of the

non-fiction texts that we examine as a part of the AP Language curriculum take the form of

speeches, in part because these examples of texts often offer students a more easily accessible

rhetorical situation. But speeches also frequently provide powerful examples of rhetorical

strategies that students can see, explain, and use as models for their own writing. Aristotle may

have focused his *Rhetoric* on speeches mostly because he was writing in an age that hadn't yet

seen the printing press, much less the iPhone, but it remains true that many of the most powerful

and memorable examples of rhetorical technique take the form of the speech. Speeches resonate.

They echo. They are experiential in their performance and their reception, at least in part because

they enact a literal embodiment of the rhetorical act and a ritualization of the social interchange.

As a pedagogical practice, the pitch provided students the opportunity to consolidate their

learning, construct a position of initial expertise, engage their classmates in the development of

their ongoing interests, and "try on" identities associated not only with the topic, but also those

associated with their membership in the classroom and with their capacity as public speakers.

Students developed their pitches over the course of two Focus Friday workshops, with a

third workshop set aside for them to practice, refine, and revise their pitches in collaboration

with their small groups. As an introduction to the goals of the process, I suggested a structural

model that is especially appropriate for a brief pitch, but versatile enough to be applied in any

number of rhetorical situations. An effective speech, I explained, should "Hook them, instruct

them, inspire them, and leave them wanting more" (Table 3). Armed with this model, students

returned to the various texts they had gathered in the course of their research, choosing two to

analyze for the ways that they hook, instruct, inspire, and conclude.

Table 3

A structural model for effective text construction

Hook Them	What strategies does this text use to grab the audience's attention at the very beginning?
Inform Them	What strategies does this text use to inform the audience about the topic**?**
Inspire Them	What strategies does this text use to inspire curiosity, wonder, and interest in the audience?
Leave Them Wanting More	How does this text end in a way that feels meaningful and leaves the audience wanting more?

The small-group discussions that grew out of this individual analysis activity served two

ends. On the one hand, the variety of texts that students had analyzed independently provided

numerous individual models for each of the organizational stages of rhetorical development. By

examining and discussing these texts, students were equipped with mentor texts from which to

draw inspiration for their own speech. Relatedly, some students found that one or more of the

texts they had gathered during their research did *not* follow the structural model. In these cases,

groups engaged in meaningful conversations either about how the text still *worked* to effectively

convey its message, or, more often, discussed the ways that the text's neglect of one or more of

the elements made it less effective.

This small-group conversation also served as another informal opportunity for students to

share the ideas they had encountered while engaging on their independent projects, and to hear

about the ideas of other students. Though they had yet to engage formally in the process of

drafting their speeches, this conversation gave students the chance to "notice" the structures and

forms of argumentation, and to "focus" their attention on the texts and voices that they found

most compelling. The discussion also set the stage for the important role that their feedback would play in giving final shape to the speeches of their classmates. By engaging in this earlier conversation around secondary texts, the students were able to enter the later process of peer review with a working knowledge of their classmates' topic, direction, and purpose.

Two days before the final pitch presentation, I gave the students time in their small groups to practice their delivery, give critical feedback to their peers, and revise and polish their speeches based on this practice and feedback. Students found this practice with a small and trusted audience to be invaluable both to the final form of their speech and to their confidence in delivering it.

Pitch day was a commemorated event. After our peer practice workshop, the class agreed that they wanted to formalize the presentations by dressing professionally. They also circulated a sign up sheet for the organization of a Pitch Day Brunch, to be celebrated at the beginning of the assigned class period. While students delivered their pitches, I asked only that audience members record the name of each performer, their topic, and one or two pieces of specific praise, either of an idea the student presented or a rhetorical choice that they employed. After the presentations, students attended quietly to the task of choosing 3-5 students from the class to email their final feedback. I, too, used email to send my feedback to students. On the following day, students responded privately with a reflection on their own performance.

Key Take-aways and Discussion

Public speaking is a vulnerable act. For many of us, even as adults, this might go without saying, but as classroom teachers we may be inured to the real social risks inherent in the classroom as a public space. Not only has speaking before the class become a natural part of the everyday literacies of even the shyest among us, but our implicit and explicit authority within the

classroom shields us from the risks associated with taking social positions of relative power. Indeed, many teachers themselves have been victim to a teacher or other leader who mistakes his positional power for genuine ethos.

In the lead-up to the pitch, several students expressed to me the anxiety with which they were approaching the event. In these situations, I tried to respond understandingly but encouragingly, suggesting that it was "just for the class" and reminding them of the good rapport they had built with their classmates. The vulnerability demanded of students by the activity was also clearly evident in their post-pitch reflections. Almost to a student, the area of the reflection dedicated to explaining the "hardest/worst part of the experiences were replete with confessions of the trepidation with which students approached the task:

Serra: Having to get up and speak in front of the class was the worst part. I felt like I was forcing every word to come out of my throat, and I felt like I couldn't breathe properly. Even though I wasn't particularly afraid of the class, my irrational fear of giving speeches made this a really humiliating experience for me.

Claire: The hardest part was getting up and explaining my idea. I really love this topic, and it's hard to expose something I care about with the possibility of judgment.

Camilla: The hardest part was actually having to open up the whole classroom. I felt very vulnerable and uncomfortable in front of everyone. I already have a hard time talking in general so talking in front of a bunch of people made everything so much harder.

Sarah: The most challenging aspect of this experience was undoubtedly stepping up in

front of the audience to present my pitch. It was incredibly intimidating, knowing that all

eyes and ears were fixed on me, causing my voice to tremble. I was so overwhelmed by

the experience that I cried afterwards.

In the end only one student chose to avoid the presentation entirely. When it was finally her turn

to present, Elise shook her head and said she "wasn't ready yet." I was not surprised: Elise had

struggled all semester long to settle into the dynamic of the classroom. Instead of reprimanding

her, I encouraged her after class to arrange to deliver the pitch only to me and to one trusted

classmate that she could select. When Elise finally did present (over a month past the deadline)

she invited not one classmate but her entire small group to attend. She performed splendidly, and

her pride at the accomplishment was palpable to all those in attendance.

Authentic Communities build trust. Given the vulnerability and risk involved, what

most impressed me by the students' pitches was the bravery and wit with which they performed.

In past presentation-style assessments, I had grown accustomed to student's reticence to

volunteer to present, and so had made use of a digital "name picker wheel" to randomize the

order. In this class, the wheel went un-spun as student after student placed themselves in an

informal queue. Students helped themselves to an independently organized brunch, and then

settled in to act as audience to each other's speeches.

Not every presentation was perfect, and few students approached the front of the

classroom with an air of absolute confidence. However, what stood out to me in the experience

was the fact that students were not ashamed nor embarrassed by their nervousness. Rather, the

trust that had been developed in the community over the prior nine weeks of the semester made it

possible for them to acknowledge their feelings of trepidation, and so overcome them.

Furthermore, the class was invested as audience members in the success of their classmates.

At one point in the middle of her speech, after introducing the many statistics related to

the epidemic of adolescent anxiety, Camilla stumbled over her words, paused, muttered under

her breath, and looked to be on the edge of shutting down. At that moment, another student in the

class said quietly, "you got this." Camilla smiled, took a deep breath, and continued her speech:

> My anxiety has genuinely crushed me into a million pieces. It has slowly chipped away at
>
> the best parts of myself. I have been broken down and bruised by something I can't
>
> control. I have firsthand seen how terrible anxiety is. I don't want anyone else to feel the
>
> way I do. I want teens to have the help I never did. I want them to have a sense of
>
> security.

Of course her performance received enthusiastic applause and positive feedback from her

classmates. After class, Camilla stuck around to tell me that speaking in front of the class was the

hardest thing she had ever done. The next day, she reflected in writing on the experience:

> I feel like I can actually talk more now. I was so proud of myself for taking such a big
>
> step. Now I think I can actually use my voice a lot more. Socially I talk more or at least
>
> try to. Emotionally I feel like if I could do that I can do anything. I felt so heard and it felt
>
> amazing.

This sort of transformative experience relies for its possibility on deep communities of trust and

authenticity, where students feel comfortable acting as beginners not only in terms of the content

of the course, but in terms of the many social, academic, and professional dispositions that

authentic learning experiences both require of them and foster in them.

Known audiences provide important rhetorical opportunities. In the development stages of the pitch, I reminded students often that their rhetorical task involved addressing their classmates, other students like themselves in many ways. The performance aspect of the pitch, the embodiment of the rhetorical situation in a literal speech, made salient to students the otherwise abstract notion of addressing an audience in compositions. And because the audience was in many ways familiar to them, the mystery of how to address such an audience was significantly reduced. The problem of "how to appeal to my classmates" proved to be a much more manageable one, for which students often found clever, funny, and insightful rhetorical solutions.

Furthermore, the pitch gave students an important chance to begin taking up positions of expertise with regards to their topic. In their pitches, students took on the role of teacher, or mentor, or advocate; they began to see in themselves an authority over the subject area, and saw in this authority an opportunity to instruct or advise their classmates:

Drake (presenting on developments in artificial intelligence): Imagine machines that can understand our emotions, predict our needs, and assist us in ways we never thought possible. AI is more than just a tool; it's a revolution that's changing how we work, live, and connect.

Sarah (presenting on the psychology of anticipating our future happiness): These studies reveal that by embracing the uncertainty of our desires and being open to the unknown, we can unlock the doors to greater flexibility, adaptability, and personal growth. Imagine letting go of the pressure to mold yourself into a specific vision of your future self and instead, focusing on the here and now, allowing yourself to evolve naturally.

> Milky (presenting on immortality as a fantasy trope): I aspire to craft a literary
>
> masterpiece centered around four immortal beings who coexist with us mere mortals,
>
> grappling with the same profound fear of death that plagues our human existence.

In speaking to their classmates, students enacted important new identities and made public declarations of their association with new communities of practice. They had entered the conversation.

At the same time, developing and delivering a pitch to a group provided new challenges that students had often not faced, or avoided facing, in their previous written work. In response to questions about the pitch during our second round of interviews, several students admitted that, when writing for classes, they had made a habit of simply writing for the teacher. As Odu put it:

> one of the things that I've always done which I hate that I do is every single time I have a
>
> literature teacher, I listen to the way they talk on the first day of school, and on the first
>
> week of school, and…from then on every single essay I write is exactly with their diction
>
> and exactly what-- I make it sound like them. Because if I make my essay sound like you
>
> wrote it, then you're going to think it's a great essay.

Other interviewees expressed strikingly similar sentiments:

> Claire: one of the things that I feel like is a priority for me is when I start writing
>
> something, I know who I am writing it for, and like you said, it's usually my teacher…and
>
> having the very specific audience of a very minimalized group of people with one
>
> thought process made it very easy for me to write something that, I think in like my
>
> teacher's case, would get me a good grade…there have been times in the past where I've

written something and I've been like, "I don't really know how I feel about this, but I

know that my teacher…is going to like this."

Akio: When you have a teacher and you know what they like and what they don't like, it's

really simple because it's one person, they're reading it and you can figure out kind of in

between the lines, what they're looking for and what they want.

As students worked to develop and revise their speeches, they realized that their usual

method–holding a mirror up to a very specific and well-understood audience–was untenable. The

audience was too numerous and too diverse. The problem of addressing a real audience pushed

students to consider their role in composing from a different perspective. Odu went on:

If you try and explore the way through your connections… how you captivate people? Or

how can people captivate you, you realize how to write for them…And once you make

connections, it's easier to see how those people would receive a certain set of words. So

like I tried to curate my pitch, with a certain flair that gives off obviously Odu, but also

the Odu who was in Mr. Brewer's AP Language class. Second block. First semester.

In this response, we can see Odu implicitly returning to the important role that developing

community early in the semester had played in her comfort both in the development and the

delivery of her pitch. Her attitude toward addressing the audience is relational as much as it is

tactical. She sees the rhetorical situation not as her task alone, but as a collaborative act that

exists between speaker, audience, and text. In her final statement, that she wrote to convey "the

Odu who was in Mr. Brewer's AP Language class. Second block. First semester," Odu echoes

the sense of rhetorical speaker as an identity position that was embedded in the "Identity Web"

activity. She did not feel called to pretend to be her audience, but rather saw the pitch as an opportunity to invite her audience to see a particular and authentic version of herself.

Multimodal Texts: Engaging Public Audiences

The focus project culminated in the development of multimodal texts designed to enter into public conversations beyond the classroom. In preparation for this exercise in authentic composition, I returned students' attention to the diversity of texts with which they interact on a daily basis, and invited them to consider which of these various forms would be most appropriate for conveying the argument they felt called to make regarding their topics. Students expressed interest in composing podcasts, video essays, video games, original short fiction, posters and pamphlets, infographics, documentaries, magazines, TEDTalks, and social media campaigns. The development process proceeded over the last 4 weeks of the course, and involved the completion of a Product Planning Guide that asked students to identify and consider the links between their product's form, its purpose, and its audience, exigence and context.

Few forms were off limits entirely. My past experiences with open-ended projects led me to virtually foreclose the opportunity to create a "Presentation," by which students generally mean a set of slides dedicated to a topic. While a speech or a lecture has as its object an identifiable audience and purpose, a set of slides, I reminded them, is rarely in any real sense an "authentic argumentative text." When called to investigate a topic, nobody says to themselves, "maybe there's a slideshow about this!" Students who were interested in laying out their ideas through presentation-style speeches were directed for models back to the many TEDTalks we had experienced together throughout the semester: here, the focus was on the speaker and the ideas, and the slides (if they existed) were used only as visual support. Likewise, while students had developed a number of academic essays throughout the semester, in this context, I warned

them against the form: academic essays, I reminded them, had a very specific appropriate context for their reception. Namely, academic essays are written by academics for academic audiences, with an eye toward furthering an academic conversation with regards to the subject matter. Students who were interested in developing their argument primarily through written language were encouraged to seek out forms that provided this opportunity but were aimed at a more authentically accessible positionality and imagined audience: blogs, magazine articles, short fiction, and editorials.

The product development process, and the Focus Project itself, culminated in a two-day symposium in which students presented their projects to the class. Though the length of many student projects made a complete classwide viewing unworkable, students were invited to share with the class their reasoning and thinking behind the product and the challenges that they faced in creating it, and then to share the "best two minutes" of the product with the class. After the symposium, I shared the Google Folder containing student products with the whole class, so that they could experience each other's projects and provide feedback in the weeks following the end of the course.

Key Take-aways and Discussion

Selection of Modalities provides important opportunities for the development of critical literacies. The process by which students selected the form that their final product would take provided students an opportunity to reflect on the different affordances of various media forms (Jones & Hafner, 2012). Indeed, a number of students experienced at least one "false start," as they began to envision a particular form, only to come to the conclusion that it did not provide the opportunities they required to convey their intended purpose. Akio, for example, who was studying fandom, got quite far into the development of a series of Instagram Reels on

various fandoms before coming to the conclusion that the form lacked the depth that he wanted

to bring to the topic:

> When I originally went for Instagram post, I kind of went there because there's a lot of
>
> [fan] communities on social media. So if I wanted to get to a specific kind of audience
>
> through that community, social media would be the perfect place. But…I ended up
>
> switching to podcast [because] I felt as though a good lengthy maybe 25 to 30 minute
>
> podcast could actually get what kind of point I'm trying to get across instead of that of
>
> like, a tiny 30-second Instagram post that someone's just gonna keep scrolling through
>
> and not actually understand what I'm trying to talk about.

Similarly, Marie, who was studying 90s rock, went from planning and developing a video essay

to performing and recording a TEDTalk. Her reasoning had to do with the desire to bring herself

into the product, since she saw her purpose as conveying her own passion for the music and

thereby inspiring passion and interest in others.

The selection of modality also invited students to consider their text as it would exist in

an authentic rhetorical context, which in turn pushed students to carefully consider their intended

audience and where and how their text would reach this audience. The problem of choosing a

form, therefore, became an opportunity for critical reflection that extended beyond what kinds of

things students might find most fun to create, or even beyond a conventional pedagogical

reasoning for "student voice and choice" as an opportunity for students to show their learning in

a way that best fits their learning styles (Larmer and Mergendoller, 2010). Rather, in this context,

the choice of form was an integral part of the development of the argumentative purpose of the

text.

Students arrived at a number of thoughtful solutions to this problem. Students who identified audiences that were fellow participants in communities of practice related to their topic oriented their forms around reaching these audiences. Thus did Hunter, composing for the *Zelda* fan community, develop a video essay that assumed an audience who held prior dispositions with regards to the game. His video also drew powerfully on the allusive reference, irony, and edgy humor characteristic of his identified audience. Likewise, when composing her video exploring the politics of k-pop record labels, Lily declared clearly that the video was *for* k-pop fans, rather than for general audiences who had little knowledge of the genre.

Other students identified an important purpose in introducing their topic to novices or audiences who were otherwise unaware of their subject matter. These students chose forms whose native contexts presuppose anonymous and sometimes disinterested, apathetic, or blissfully ignorant audiences. Emma, for example, aimed her argument regarding the role of team sports in developing healthy childhood habits at the parents of these children, and imagined her product, a poster promoting the benefits of team sports, being hung in grocery stores and church bulletin boards. Likewise, Herschel–who had studied the issue of sex trafficking–imagined his argument raising basic awareness of the problem, and so developed a brochure that might be made available in doctors offices, schools, airports, and hotels. Herschel's imagined context was quite vivid:

> [I thought] a hotel would be perfect because, you know, trafficking goes through hotels all over America. And, like, everybody's got to sit down in the lobby sometimes to wait and I [had] a perfect image in my head, like, just that pamphlet sitting there and just some random person being bored and being like, "Oh, well, this popped my eye. Let me just grab it and read it."

Other students in this category decided to rely on the incidental engagement characteristic of social media. Thus did Grace, studying the cultural practices of various global locations, choose to construct a series of Instagram Reels that coupled information about various cultures with rich visual and auditory supports. Vivienne also chose Instagram Reels for her product related to contemporary reinterpretations of Greek mythology. Rather than being primarily informative, however, her Reels were themselves a contemporary remediation of the myth of Hercules, her purpose a self-reflexive participation in the cultural practice she had spent the semester studying.

Milky's experience of composing was especially inspired and inspiring. Milky was perhaps the weakest writer in the class, and while she had worked hard throughout the semester to improve her writing, her efforts were always clouded by imposter syndrome: a looming sense of academic inferiority to her fellow classmates. However, Milky loved to draw, and would often doodle the most intricate characters and scenes as she listened to lecture or brainstormed for assignments. Having chosen to study the trope of invincibility in fantasy literature–a favorite genre that had often inspired her artistic endeavors–Milky undertook the construction of an original fantasy graphic novel in which she reimagined the invincibility trope in light of the research she had done on the topic. This creative project not only allowed Milky the opportunity to demonstrate her learning in a way that gave her a sense of mastery, but it also gave her the chance to enter into the creative space that she had so often turned to for entertainment and inspiration.

In each of these cases, the students' selection of modality was intimately bound up with not only what topics they had been studying, but also with the new rhetorical and identity positions they were interested in taking up with respect to these topics, and with the problems of both identifying and reaching an audience who would be receptive to these positions. It is

perhaps this activity of positioning, more than the forms of the products themselves, which

qualifies such multimodal texts as "authentic compositions."

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The act of suffering oneself to be written by the group's law is oddly accompanied by a pleasure, that of being recognized (by one does not know by whom), of becoming and identifiable and legible word in a social language, of being changed into a fragment within an anonymous text, of being inscribed in a symbolic order that has neither owner not author.

–Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Introduction

The previous chapter provided a narrative of the case as it unfolded across the semester, along the way discussing findings and observations drawn from the data synchronic with each stage in the development of the Focus Project. This chapter opens with an interpretation of those findings as they manifest longitudinally in a number of themes that run throughout the study timeline. Following this discussion of themes, I conclude the study with recommendations, both for practicing educators and for future research into the core questions that this study has addressed.

Interpretation of Findings

Self Determination In Learning

This study was grounded in a theoretical framework built on Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which proposes that individual thriving is facilitated by environments and behaviors that promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In other words, their research suggests that students are most likely to internalize learning when they feel empowered to make decisions about this learning for themselves, capable of performing the relevant tasks, and when those tasks are linked to their intrinsic desire for belongingness and relatedness with others, especially those whose values align with their own. This theory is reinforced by Flowerday and Schraw's (2000) observation that "Controlling environments reduce a sense of personal autonomy and intrinsic motivation and result in decreased learning and

poorer attitudes about school" (p. 634), and it is further aligned with the research in sociocultural literacies that focus on literacy practices both of "making meaning for others" as well as those involved in "making meaning for oneself, or literacies as tools for thinking" (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017, p. 37). As Gee (2004) insists, "people learn best when their learning is part of highly motivated engagement with social practices they value" (p. 77).

Data drawn from across the study contributes to the conclusion that students' previous experiences of education have rarely drawn either on the promises offered by self-determination nor the broader understanding of literacy practices offered by sociocultural theory. It became clear early in this semester that many students feel isolated both within the educational setting and within the broader social setting of high school and adolescence. Within the educational setting, students expressed the feeling of being intellectually and emotionally stifled by the business-as-usual systems of public education. At the same time, students spoke frequently about the pressures they have felt from their peers to fulfill certain social expectations beyond the classroom. Both of these responses align with the findings of Elliot and Harackiewicz (1996) which speak to the negative effects on learning and learning behaviors which result from classroom environments oriented around performance goals, wherein students are motivated to undertake behaviors in order to demonstrate performance, or avoid failure, based on external measures of proficiency. Responses generated in students' Purpose in Education arguments point to an educational structure that largely confines student production and thinking to narrow curricular demands whose completion is motivated not by intrinsic desires but by external systems of rewards and punishments (Anderman & Dawson, 2011). Likewise, many of the struggles that students faced during the course of the study were those related, more or less, to re-learning a sense of their own self-determination with regards to their educational pursuits, and

final assessment letters for the course were characterized by reflections on students' process and progress in taking up the educational opportunities offered by a pedagogy committed to the development of student autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Autonomy

The development of student autonomy stands at the center of the critical pedagogical work undertaken during this study (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). The early activities in the class were meaningful in inviting students to see themselves as the authors of their own learning. The Purpose in Education argument gave students the chance to explore the ways that schooling had foreshortened their capacity for self-determination in their learning, and the assessment structures of the course deemphasized grades and teacher judgment in favor of reflective self-assessment on self-selected goals, thereby empowering students to practice new ways of making meaning in classroom environments (Kohn, 2012). Finally, The focus project was designed with the express hope of increasing students' autonomy with regards to the topics and directions of their academic study. In the Focus Project, students were put in charge of deciding not only the topics and texts that they would engage with, but also of the processes and forms that this engagement would take (Hanney & Savin-Baden, 2013; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009).

Furthermore, in my position as teacher, I worked hard to make explicit the role that student autonomy should play in the ethics of education, and to have this priority reflected in the patterns of classroom discourse and behavior (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). I spent a lot of words in the classroom, particularly in the opening weeks of class, reinforcing the principle of the students' essential and irrevocable ownership and right to privacy over themselves as people, as learners, and as writers.

I explained my bathroom policy by citing Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* and briefly explaining the concept of biopolitics. "The state," I said to students, "has bestowed upon me an inordinate amount of power over your bodies. If you don't believe me, just consider: this morning when you walked into class, I handed each of you a numbered card, and you all immediately moved to a particular space in the classroom, sat down, and took out your independent reading book. This is a power that I am uncomfortable wielding in general, and I certainly don't believe it should extend to your ability to use the bathroom." Instead, I insisted that students should not "ask" to go to the bathroom, but that they should simply create an appropriate hall pass and hand it to me for my signature.

I also made a point to emphasize students' right to their own words and likenesses (Chavez, 2021; Zerwin, 2020). Each time when I asked students to submit their writers notebooks for my informal review, I first invited them to place a "Do Not Read" sticky note over any entry in their notebooks they'd prefer to keep private. Similarly, as an aside to the "My Textual Life" assignment, I mentioned that, should students choose to include examples of texts that contained words, names or images of their peers–such as text messages or social media interactions–they should consider anonymizing the text or soliciting consent from the other person for their identities to be shared. This caution was aimed at reminding students both that they should remain in control of their own words and that they had responsibilities for the care of the words of others (Committee on CCCC, 1975; hooks, 1994).

These practices, developed through a deep engagement with the theoretical literature on student engagement and learning (e.g., Anderman & Dawson, 2011; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), found a strong grounding in the data drawn from student experiences during the study. Students' progress through the semester embodied a process of accepting autonomy as an

opportunity, taking up the opportunity on offer, and then grappling with the open-endedness of an authentic, intrinsically motivated learning experience.

      Accepting autonomy. Though only one student, in their Purpose in Education argument, wrote a defense of the current system of directive education, it was clear throughout the early part of the semester that students weren't sure how to handle many of the freedoms I seemed to be offering them. Even after a number of weeks under the paradigm of the gradeless assessment structure, I frequently observed performance-related anxiety manifest itself in students' responses to classroom expectations (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). For example, I used informal reading checks frequently throughout the semester. In form, these were basically brief knowledge-centric quizzes that I would give students on days designated as reading deadlines. Before they took the quiz, I reminded them that such tasks should be considered as measures of personal accountability. Regardless of the number of questions they got correct, the number in the gradebook would be the same (4/4, e.g., "You did it! Check out your feedback"). A classwide peer-marking process at the end of the quiz allowed me to use the knowledge questions as jumping off points for initial analytical discussions regarding the text. With marking complete, I'd conduct an informal survey of scores, as well as of adherence to the reading expectation, and then we'd compare the scores students got to what they *should* have gotten based on their commitment to the expectation. I'd point out the likelihood that even some of those who read the text carefully may have missed one or even several questions on the quiz, since the details they may have been attending to probably differed in many ways from my own. After the first of these reading checks, Kate, a highly academically aggressive student, stayed at the end of class to anxiously inquire if "those quizzes were going in the gradebook." She had missed 3 of the 10

questions, couldn't fathom seeing a 70% in her class record. "It's not a 70%," I told her, "It's 7 questions right, which is actually pretty great. In the gradebook it's a 4 out of 4."

Even after students had taken several such assessments, the anxiety caused by previous experiences with high-stakes assessment situations was still evident in many students' responses both to the expectation of the assessment and to its outcomes. I continued to field questions about grades or grading well into the semester. Conversely, I saw students wrestling with the realization that, given the "free 100" represented by the full credit assigned to even the weakest performance, there was nothing *technically* stopping them from skipping the reading entirely, or of more-or-less phoning it in on written assignments. As Elise noted in her final assessment letter:

> When I first started this class, I thought that it was going to be easy. The reason for this assumption was because of how you said assignments were graded. You specifically said that assignments weren't to be "graded" but to be given credit for completion. I honestly thought that I wasn't going to have to try very hard, or really do much work at all. Boy was I wrong.

A similar reticence was evident in student's slow acclamation to the realization that virtually anything they contributed to a conversation would be considered relevant and important to the learning of the classroom. It was visible in their responses to receiving written work back with only narrative feedback, and in being given dedicated time to consider this feedback and write reflectively in response to it. In each of these cases, it was as if students weren't sure what to do with the freedom that the new paradigm was offering them, but also as if they thought at any moment the rug might get pulled out from under them. "What's the trick?" they seemed to ask:

Grace: I also found it a bit ridiculous that you emphasized a more personalized structure of learning for your students. My thoughts were "He's just saying things" or "Of course he doesn't care, he's here to be paid."

Exercising Autonomy. Despite their initial hesitations, students eventually took successfully to the autonomous classroom experience, and soon seemed to experience a new academic thriving because of it: reading check scores trended upward across the semester, and so too did students' willingness to contribute to classwide conversations. Moreover, I was pleased to see students' compositions not only begin to take on effective structures of academic writing, but also to take on a life and a voice that was expressive of their developing identity. The pairing of instruction in rhetorical composition as represented by the AP Language curriculum with an intentional focus on the lived experience of literacy seemed to help students begin to see writing as a way of knowing and of constructing important social knowledge.

As they began to see the promise for their own learning growth represented by autonomy, however, students began to face the new challenge of deciding to what end it would best be put. The difficulty that they faced in identifying their own interests and passions is representative of the colonizing effects of schooling on students' self-conceptions and engagements with intrinsically-identified problems (Friere, 2000; Gutierrez et al., 1999). As Gardner (1991), school is all to often "done to students," who have little or no control over their own learning directions or processes (p. 243). Kohn (2010) identifies the "enforced passivity" that is characteristic of most classrooms, "where students are excluded from any role in shaping the curriculum, where they're on the receiving end of lectures and questions, assignments, and assessments" (p. 18). When, after a decade of experiences in which their learning was largely or entirely directed from the outside, students were finally confronted with the opportunity to make

these determinations for themselves, they struggled to locate (or remember) the processes of

creativity, curiosity, and discovery that sit at the center of authentic learning.

This new challenge was made most salient for students in the initial development of the

Focus Project. Even with the support of the directed exploration represented by the early

"Finding Focus" workshop, they had a great deal of trouble deciding what to study. Some faced

the problem of idea proliferation, the matter of narrowing down, while others experienced a

whole new set of uncertainties and insecurities in the realization that, when finally given the

chance to consider it, they weren't really sure *what* they were passionate about. As one student

who was struggling to "find something [they] want[ed] to study" explained, they'd been being

told what to study for as long as they could remember.

The concept of passion came up quite frequently in the data. Students narrated the

passions that they had discovered for literature, for podcasts, for music and volleyball. They

boldly declared purposes for education grounded in passions and personal interests. They

lamented their previous educational experiences as being largely inattentive to their passion, or

worse, of actively draining them of it. And when given the chance to pursue them in the context

of a composition classroom, many struggled to enunciate their passions. Passion is an important

node in students' frameworks for understanding both their sense of intrinsic motivation and their

sense of a social identity. Passions grow out of a deep sense of personal identity even as in being

declared and pursued they position the individual across personal, cultural, academic, and ethical

dimensions (Aughey, 2017; Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017).

In the development of their focus project topics, students solved these problems in a

number of ways. Some chose to focus on textual affinities, studying elements of culture with

which they felt a deep connection. Others developed projects that sought to contextualize

existing literacy practices in light of academic study. Still others used the autonomy to take up

ethical questions and advocacy positions. And a number of students used the project as an

opportunity to enunciate and thus externalize deep personal feelings of doubt, inadequacy, and

anxiety. Many focus project topics partook in some measure of all of these dimensions at various

points in the process.

Grappling with open-endedness. The open-endedness of the project also proved

challenging for students. In introducing students to the process of research, I had explained to

them my worry that too much structure on my part would risk the authenticity of their

engagement (Kohn, 2010). For this, I erred well on the side of openness. "Go learn about your

topic," I told them, "and find a way to keep track of your learning." In his second interview,

Herschel discussed his struggle to accept the open-endedness of the project. Familiar as he was

with highly regimented classroom assignments with specific, teacher-determined outcomes, he

and his small group spent the first week of the project waiting for me to tell them what to do:

> We'd always be confused. we'd be like, gosh, like, is he not going to tell us what to look
>
> up and, you know, write about or make a diagram about or do whatever? That was a
>
> constant thing. And then, one day, I think I was talking to [Emma]. And she was like, I
>
> guess it really is you just got to do whatever. You know, he wants you to come up with it.
>
> The whole point is that he's not telling you.

Other students expressed similar conflicting sentiments early in the semester:

> Odu: I always thought, oh my gosh, this project is so open ended. How am I supposed to
>
> write down what the teacher wants me to write down.

Camilla: [It] certainly has been confusing, because sometimes I really don't know what you want from the focus project. But then at times, it's, like, also really freeing because I get to, like, research a bunch of stuff, and put a bunch of stuff in the focus project that maybe I couldn't do, like, in my government classes. Like, if I wanted to add extra information I couldn't because we're limited to, like, certain facts.

Phoebe: I really liked the amount of freedom I was given. In the beginning I was actually a little intimidated by the amount of freedom because I never had that much in my earlier classes, but it allowed me to think critically about what I wanted to do and how to execute it without step by step directions.

Faced with these uncertainties, students overwhelmingly found their way into meaningful relation both with the topics that they had selected and with the communities of practice represented by the topic and by the classroom as a community. Students' investment in these opportunities for autonomy were made visible in the shifting social dynamic of the classroom. Questions and anxieties about grades and academic performance fell away, and the new anxieties with which they were replaced were far more likely to be focused on the desire to effectively approach some problem, connect with some audience, or convey some important idea in writing or other media (Anderman & Dawson, 2011). Their relative success in undertaking the challenge could be seen in their outstanding performance, both socially and academically, on the Pitch assignment, and by the relevance, thoughtfulness, and rhetorical effectiveness of their final Focus Project compositions. In their final assessment letters, a number of students took the opportunity to reflect on the important role that autonomy had played in their learning experiences during the semester:

Elise: When I put effort into my work, I usually felt pride and relief because it was done and done with effort.

Camilla: I did exactly this in my focus project: I opened up and put myself in a vulnerable position. I would have never had the courage if it weren't for how free you made this assignment. You gave us zero restrictions and just let us showcase our creativity.

Phoebe: This class has a very comfortable atmosphere that allows you to be wrong. This is something I've never really had the chance to experience in my previous classes. It encourages me, and other students, to want to try again instead of giving up after getting something wrong.

After leaving the class, Herschel offered this advice to a friend who had just begun his semester in AP Language:

I've got some friends in here this semester that have just started, and I just tell them, "don't wait for Mr. Brewer to tell you what to do. Because that's not the point of it. It's for you to find out about your topic, and then you figure out what to do with that information." And, "take accountability on yourself to put in the time and the effort…Go research your topic and make it what you want it to be because that's the whole point. He's not going to tell you. He's not going to limit your creativity."

Relatedness

Often, the concept of relatedness seems to be interpreted by pedagogical theorists as a mandate that students be able to "see themselves" in the works under study. Applied in this

sense, the importance of relatedness has undergirded efforts toward the re-evaluation of the

cannon and the incorporation of young adult literature in the classroom (Applebee, 1993;

Chavez, 2021). It also drives the oft-cited and little-examined mantra that educators should be

sure their instruction includes "real-world connections." While the framework of this study is

aimed explicitly at interrogating the line between the academy and the "real world," between

students academic "selves" and those they inhabit outside the classroom, I too entered this study

with an idea that relatedness would play its role primarily in the personal connections that

students were invited to make with their work. And indeed, relatedness played an important role

in students' investment in the development of their Literacy Narratives and the pursuit of their

self-selected Focus Project topics. Of his experience in writing his narrative, Chris admitted:

> Up until that point I had never been personal about my thoughts and feelings in a school
>
> essay. I got to express myself and my experience in the words and forms that I wanted to.
>
> I didn't have to tell a story off a prompt or speech but a story about my personal life. This
>
> one project introduced me to the semester to come and made me very excited to see
>
> where it would take me.

Grace expressed a new-found investment in traditional modes of academic discourse:

> In retrospect, it turns out that I actually enjoy reading and writing when I understand what
>
> it's about and actually care. This class has really helped light a passion for reading and
>
> writing.

And student's experiences in the researching and composing their Focus Projects were replete

with examples of a refreshing return to the curiosity and connection that they felt had long been

missing from their educational experiences.

However, relatedness manifested itself in the classroom environment in ways that extended beyond personal interest and individual expressivism. Students cared about the topics they were studying, to be sure, but they also came to care about their classmates. Further, they came to trust that their classmates, and their teacher, cared in authentic ways about them. In this sense the relatedness, has links to the concept of a community of care (Noddings, 2005) and movements toward Culturally Relevant Pedagogies (Johnson & Winn, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). In her work on care theory, Noddings (2005) insisted that "We must allow teachers and students to interact as whole persons, and we must develop policies that treat the school as a community" (p. 13). Her work emphasizes communities that value collaboration over competition, and that see their memberships as important resources for learning and identity. Likewise, Ladson-Billings (1995), in her seminal work on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, promoted an ethic of caring that includes ""not merely…the affective connections between and among people but…the articulation of a greater sense of commitment to what scholarship and/or pedagogy can mean in the lives of people" (p. 474). "A theory of culturally relevant pedagogy," she continued, "would necessarily propose to do three things—produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural confidence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 474). Building on the work of Ladson-Billings and others, Johnson and Winn (2015) recommend the construction of "permissive spaces" where students can undertake important personal cultural projects "with the understanding that they will be reading, writing, and thinking for a variety of purposes beyond the classroom walls" (p. 55).

This element of relatedness as growing out of an authentic and vulnerable classroom relationship dynamic became a topic of student conversation and reflection repeatedly

throughout the study. For some students, this sense of relatedness manifested in an newfound

confidence for speaking up in class:

> Serra: In the beginning, it can be hard to work up the courage to contribute, even when
>
> you have something interesting to say. As the semester progressed, I felt more
>
> comfortable with our class group and more confident in my ability to articulate the points
>
> I wanted to make

> Carrie: Being comfortable in a classroom environment was almost impossible before
>
> your class. I thought that being creative was embarrassing in a sense. I've been taught to
>
> color in the lines. To keep everything the same and to not be unique.

Others came to see the classroom as a safe space to set aside the social burdens of adolescent

existence:

> Amara: I just really came to enjoy the environment of your class, like I said I felt like I
>
> could be my true self.

> Phoebe: I don't think I'll ever forget having you as a teacher because of your ability to
>
> treat students like individuals instead of just some people you're the boss of. I think you
>
> can easily connect with any person, which creates a very comfortable environment for
>
> students.

Still others emphasized the important role of their small groups in developing their confidence to

both offer and accept alternative perspectives:

> Emma: Another part of the class I enjoyed this year was the people around me. Our table
>
> was a very random group of people, in my opinion…We did not get along because we

agreed on everything (which we definitely did not), but because we have all grown up in

different lives and used our own experiences to help each other. We all became

comfortable communicating our own opinions, and we were able to give each other ideas

on all of our assignments.

Students also saw relatedness as an opportunity in constructing their compositions for intended

audiences. Students found new meaning in feedback from me and from their peers, finding in

critique important information about how well their ideas were being conveyed, and seeing their

own feedback as integral to the composition processes of others:

Rayna: The feedback you gave me on this assignment was very helpful. You didn't try to

change my narrative, because it was so unique to me so instead the feedback you gave

asked me to add more detail so that it could be even more personal to me.

Phoebe: My elevator pitch was also greatly improved by the peer feedback I received,

and opened my eyes to a lot of questions I had not thought about before.

Darwin: I've tried to make it my goal for my voice and opinion to be valuable when it

came to the small discussions, and that is where I have seen the most growth this

semester. I remember giving extensive feedback to my tablemates on assignments such as

the focus project, or the literacy narrative. When we came back to revisit these

assignments, I noticed that my advice had been implemented into their work. That is what

I am most proud of this semester.

And they took ownership of the responsibility for relating to audiences as they revised and

published their compositions:

Elise: My Literacy Narrative is now well organized and very detailed with some

figurative language. It also has more feelings and emotions in it, instead of just being so

bland. Now it can relate to people more, because it's more personal and well written.

In this sense, relatedness became a motivating factor in effective communication. Across the

data, relatedness manifested not just with the opportunities students were given with regards to

the topics of study, but even more strongly with the opportunities they took with regards to

investing authentically and vulnerably in the meaningful construction of a community of learners

(hooks, 1994).

Competence

One important conceptual schema that was under investigation in this study was the

students' preconceived notions and developing understanding of expertise. With regards to

competence, Ryan and Deci (2000) declared that "people are more likely to adopt activities that

relevant social groups value when they feel efficacious with respect to those activities," and

identified an important relationship between student competencies and the "ambient demands,

obstacles, and affordances of their sociocultural contexts" (p. 73-75). Thus are notions of

competence bound up also in students' developing understanding of their own identities in

relation to their social and academic lives.

A noteworthy pattern that manifested early in the data was the extent to which students'

own concept of expertise is rooted not in academic pursuits but in interpersonal contexts (Barton

& Hamilton, 2000). When prompted during our first interview to consider their own pre-existing

areas of expertise, students overwhelmingly responded with examples drawn from their struggles

to understand their role, position, and purpose in the broader social world:

Camilla: I think I'm really good at, like, communicating my emotions and displaying how I feel like a lot of my friends tell me that, like, I'm a very emotional person.

Carrie: I'm kind of like the mother of my friend group. I'm very, like, caring. And so it's kind of just like, I get asked if I have food all the time, or if I have this or if I have that…I'm the oldest of all the grandchildren in my family…so I guess it's just kind of ingrained to be that type of person for them.

Herschel: I'm religious. I'm a Christian. So I'm pretty--I thought about maybe being like a youth pastor. And guess I've-- throughout my high school years I've seen people come to [me] for questions when it comes to, like, stuff about God, and why do we believe what we believe?

Odu: I think, personally, I'm an expert at reading people…Which is a really bad habit, because it makes me have a preconceived notion [about] what certain interactions are going to be like with certain people, but, like, it's never failed me.

Students were hesitant to attribute to themselves a sense of competence when it came to academic endeavors. Indeed, two students perceptively called into question the notion of expertise in general, noting that, even for experts in their fields, "You can know so much about something but you never know the full thing" (Herschel). As Akio pointed out:

Like, sure, you can know a lot about something like…history. [But] we're always uncovering new things, and always changing things throughout history. Or science: you

can be an expert on knowing, but science is always about finding something new,

changing the variables and doing something [new].

In the course of the research, attention was paid to how these notions of social and personal

expertise interacted both with students' sense of accomplishment and ability in classroom-related

contexts, and their developing sense of competence in the fields of study that that had selected to

research for their Focus Projects.

Classroom Competencies. The classroom context as reimagined in light of Third Space

theory also directed students toward a sense of competence in embracing multiple, hybrid, and

transformative identities that they might inhabit. Students took up new or transformed identities

in two major ways. On the one hand, students relocated in the classroom opportunities to lean

into and explore the possibilities of their own personal and social identities (Moje et al., 2009).

In these cases, students expressed a deep appreciation for a classroom space that allowed them to

"be themselves," to take academic and social risks, to draw upon and thus solidify their own

self-conceptions in space that felt "safe":

> Carrie: Being comfortable in a classroom environment was almost impossible before
>
> your class. I thought that being creative was embarrassing in a sense. I've been taught to
>
> color in the lines. To keep everything the same and to not be unique.

Students' developing sense of mastery over their ability to communicate in writing and other

media was born out often in their final assessment letters:

> Emma: As I revised my Literacy Narrative and my peers read over it, I began to have the
>
> ability to point out grammatical errors and awkward sentences with a snap of a finger

Kara: I learned how to dig deeper within myself when it comes to my writing, which is a big thanks to you because you encouraged me to write what I was thinking instead of just what I thought the people would like.

John: From the short couple of months that I have been in your class, the fact that it has changed my point of view on the world so much, is absolutely astounding. The fact that I can look at something that used to have no importance to my train of thought, and now can spend hours thinking about the history and context of it, is probably one of the things that made me love this class so much.

Hybrid Identities. A second element of competence that was under study in this research was the extent to which pedagogies emphasizing authentic research and composition on student-selected topics would invite students to take up positions of academic expertise with regards to their Focus Project topics (Bazerman & Russell, 2003; Russell, 1997). In the Focus Project, students had the opportunity to practice or try on new outwardly directed social, professional, and intellectual identities. Some of the evidence for the adoption of these new identity positions can be seen in the topics that students chose to explore for the focus project, and the ways that these topics grow out of prior experiences for students..

Some students found themselves drawn to exploring topics related to prior interests and activities, using the focus project to recontextualize these interests in more-or-less academic terms. For example, a number of student athletes used the focus project to research the roots of their interest in sports, or the various challenges they have faced as athletes. Carrie, for example, who is an avid and competitive volleyball player, and who moved to the high school this year in part because of the opportunities our school offered for her to further her athletic career, chose to

study the discipline of sports psychology. Her research began as a proto-career exploration, aimed at identifying and defining the various professional pathways for someone interested in maintaining a connection to athletics beyond their own athletic career. Similarly, Amara, a varsity basketball player, chose to study the mental health struggles of collegiate athletes, settling on an exploration of the epidemic of depression and attempted suicide amongst high-level college and professional athletes. Jayce, a lifelong athlete and varsity volleyball player, chose to focus in the other direction, researching the role that engagement in childhood sports plays in developing physically and emotionally well-rounded children. She chose as her audience parents of children, and ended up making a balanced argument for enrolling children in childhood sports while avoiding undue competitive pressure.

Also in this group were students who chose to focus on a prior interest that they had until then assumed was beneath the attention of the academic setting. Hunter, for example, dedicated his focus project to an in-depth analysis of his favorite video game, *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, developing through his research and the production of a video essay an argument for its recognition as a work of art in its own right. Marie, who differentiated herself from her peers in part by her love for 80s and 90s rock, took the focus project as an opportunity to research more deeply the contexts for her favorite music, and to share that context and her passion through an informational TEDTalk-style speech. And Lily, after beginning a project aimed at grand ethical questions of equality, found herself drawn more and more to an analysis of particular k-pop fandoms as they manifest on social media.

The process by which Lily decided to shift focus partway through the semester is telling of the predispositions with which students enter academic settings. Lily's initial research focus was aimed at understanding the history of inequality, especially insofar as certain groups

(women, people of color) continued to be affected by unequal treatment and outcomes today. A big problem, to be sure, but we had a number of productive conversations about how to go about narrowing the focus. During a mid-semester workshop, Lily expressed a great deal of frustration with her progress on her original topic: not only did the problems she was uncovering feel intractable, she also expressed that she had chosen the topic, in part, because she felt like she should work on something "important." When I prodded her to consider what she truly "wanted" to work on, she admitted that she was really interested in k-pop, and especially in the various internal politics of the world of k-pop fandom. Indeed, once Lily admitted to me and to herself that kpop was driving her most pressing questions and inquiries these days, she couldn't be stopped–outlining for me in a subsequent conference a complex landscape of social relations within the k-pop fandom that she was already familiar with because she was already variously engaged with the community.

Lily's experience manifests the mental divide that students have constructed between academic and non-academic ways of thinking and being in the world. Despite her deep interest in k-pop, and even in the face of an extensive preliminary unit aimed at deconstructing this divide and inviting students to see their own "textual lives" as worthy and important and rich in possible meanings, Lily still struggled to acknowledge her own interest as a worthwhile area of study (Brauer & Clark, 2008). Further, in our mid-semester conference, Lily also expressed that her misgivings were motivated in part by a comparative mindset held over from the competitive learning environments of the traditional classroom. "I was originally thinking about k-pop," she said, "but then everybody else was choosing things that were, like, *important*."

Other students grew their focus out of a desire to recontextualize more personal issues, questions, or interests. For these students, the Focus Project became an act of claiming identities

that students had previously been hesitant to publicly admit to, often because of a persistent

sense of shame, doubt, or fear of rejection. Camilla, who had spent the prior year coming to

terms with her own struggle with anxiety, chose to use the Focus Project to learn more about

anxiety's effects on adolescents more broadly. John, who, as an adolescent male and avid reader,

understood himself as an outlier, chose to focus his project on understanding the psychology of

reading. Sarah, anxious about her future as a student and a person, took up the

social-psychological question of our inability to anticipate what our future selves will want.

Natalie, who wrote her literacy narrative about how music had helped her navigate the

transformation of an important relationship from friendship to romance, found herself, by the

time the Focus Project began in earnest, still tangling with the deep contradictions that arise from

finding oneself falling in love. She decided to use the project to give more intense attention to

these contradictions. As such, the project was for her as much an autoethnographic journey as a

purely intellectual one. As the relationship transformed throughout the semester, so too did her

questions of interest. When, near the end of the semester, the relationship ended, Natalie found

herself trying to understand how to pick up the pieces, to perhaps salvage the friendship that

existed prior to the romance, and to use her experiences to guide other young people who, like

her, find themselves confused by the experience of falling in love.

Especially inspiring was Serra's decision, over the course of the semester, to allow herself

to finally take up an affinity in public that she had long harbored in private, embarrassed by its

potential to make her seem dorky or nerdy or unlike her peers. Serra had written movingly in her

literacy narrative about her long-held feelings of "not fitting in" because of her personal

interests. She confessed a longstanding fascination with narrative video games, Pokemon, and

Japanese Vocaloid music, which she had been convinced by her siblings and peers were "weird"

or "lame" or "embarrassing," and which differentiated her greatly from traditional feminine

gender expectations. For Serra, the challenge to entry into affinity spaces had less to do with the

peripheral relationship to the community identified by Magnifico and colleagues (2018) and far

more to do with the questions of public and private identity construction outlined by Marsh &

Hoff (2019): Serra had remained a quiet "lurker" (Gee, 2004) in her preferred fan communities,

not because of a lack of interest or passion, but due to her concerns about what the decision to

participate more fully would mean for her sense of herself as a social being.

Once Serra had made a declaration of intent–in a concluding paragraph of her literacy

narrative draft that reads like a mission statement–her transition toward being an active member

of the community was rather smooth. Her project was two-pronged. On the one hand, her own

prior hesitancy made her fascinated by the choices that people make and fail to make, and how

these choices shape their identities and their future possibilities. On the other hand, she set out to

construct her own narrative video game, and in so doing adopted a newly critical perspective on

the narrative games she loved while also building a capacity in programming, narrative writing,

and video game design. Her final product–a choice-based narrative game the central theme of

which is the nature of choices in our lives–neatly encapsulates her hybrid identity as a

composition student and an avid video game fan. Moreover, it marks her entry into a number of

communities of practice. In Gee's (2004) terms, she went from "lurker" status to active

engagement in the community.

Still other students chose to use the focus project to declare new social and intellectual

identities entirely by taking up new ethical questions, activist perspectives, or engaging explicitly

in ongoing public conversations. Chris, interested by the possibilities that developing technology

held for creating a better world, was inspired by an article he had read to interrogate the positive

and negative ecological impacts represented by a transition to electric vehicles. Kate, who had

recently learned about the existence of Teen Youth Courts and their role in reducing youth

incarceration and empowering adolescents in civic discourse, spent the semester exploring these

courts, and to take initial steps toward implementing one in our own community.

Expert Positions. Additionally, students' developing sense of expert identities were

made evident in the language and approaches they used in composing for authentic audiences

(Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013). In composing and delivering their Pitches, students

tended to position themselves rhetorically as individuals who are empowered to make changes in

themselves and the world and whose insights might meaningfully contribute to the general

conversation surrounding the topic:

Chris: You may ask why I'm doing this and I have one simple explanation, I care about

our planet and I want to find a good solution to our problem. I don't want to sit around

and watch our precious world turn to smog and dust.

Jessica: By the end of this semester my goal is to make some changes in my life. Starting

with eating without a screen in front of me. I want to see what changes and improvements

I start to develop and how it helps me grow as a person.

Phoebe: there are still beauty standards in place that put pressure on men and women to

look a certain way. Where did they come from though? Why are they the way they are,

and how do they affect us? I've found that capitalism plays a role. Corporations use the

insecurities people develop from the pressure of beauty standards to try and sell them

things that will "fix" them.

Likewise did students take up expert positions in their development of authentic multimodal texts for public audiences. These positions were evident not only in the forms that students chose to give voice to their newly developed competence, but also in the language and design by which these products were constructed (The New London Group, 1996). These opportunities to reconceive of themselves as members of communities who might make worthwhile contributions to the general knowledge and wellbeing of the world had profound effects not just for students' understanding of their topics but for their understanding of their own abilities to make change in the world and their understanding of themselves as students and as people. As Odu remarked in our second interview regarding her struggle to bring her final product together:

> It has to be *me.* That's what the project ultimately had to be: *me*. And that's when I started thinking about more…because it's a focus project. And to me, it seemed like, for you, the focus was *us*.

Authentic Inquiry

I began this study with a definition of authentic inquiry and composition as including those activities in which academic inquiry and composition is practiced toward ends that students select themselves based on their own self-identified interests, questions, and concerns and producing texts in genres and in media designed for audiences beyond the classroom whom the student has an interest in engaging (Cope, Kalantzis, & Abrams, 2017; Gee, 2004).

Early interviews and observations made it clear that this concept differs markedly from students' preconceptions and previous experiences with the processes of research. In my first set of individual interviews, students expressed varying levels of comfort with the concept of research. One student, Herschel, admitted to a concept of research with a telling caricature of the kinds of formal research characteristic of the academy:

Herschel: I guess–the idea–when I think of research, it may sound funny, but I always think of men in white lab coats. Like researching, like, a cure, a cure to, like, cancer or anything like that? Just like really smart, high-up individuals that, like, those are the experts, right? Yeah, like the educated experts who went to school for 12 years. They're just, you know, sitting at a computer typing but it's in a big lab. Very high tech.

Not only did Herschel's early concept of research align with the style of academic research that educational institutions have broadly aimed to make students disciples of, but, in its representation of that ideal, it made clear the utter distance and disconnection from such a position that he felt. Research, for Herschel, was not something that regular people do: it requires extensive credentialing and elaborate institutional backing, and it is appropriate primarily for solving the most profound and intractable problems of society (Russell, 1997).

Other students spoke less about research in abstract terms and instead shared their own prior experiences with academic research. These experiences can be classified into two broad categories: 1) discrete, research-oriented classroom assignments and 2) structured problem-solving scenarios. Discrete research-oriented classroom assignments were associated primarily with History and English Language Arts Classes, and were characterized by assignments requiring inquiry into specific, teacher-determined topics. These assignments frequently had highly delimited, information-oriented outcome expectations that required and invited only shallow use of information resources. Problem-solving scenarios, on the other hand, were far more likely to be assigned in STEM classes and other skills-based "elective" courses. Here, research grew out of specific, teacher-assigned problems that required product- or solution-oriented outcome expectations (Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). Information resources

in these scenarios were targeted primarily at uncovering information specific to the particular

problem and expected outcome.

Only one student, Claire, indicated a prior attitude toward research that seemed to model

those that I had theorized prior to the study:

> One project that comes to mind is we had to create a catapult that would knock down
>
> various different objects. So not only did you have to do all the calculations about like,
>
> what's the heaviest thing and what would be the best object to use, but also just the
>
> different catapults you can use. I didn't realize how many different catapults there were
>
> until I did this research. But then you look back and I realized also the history of catapults
>
> and I ended up diving into that and my STEM class. Like I didn't know this turned into
>
> social studies. But it was very interesting because you can find not only, like I said, your
>
> history, but you find the math aspect and you find, then you find different, like,
>
> argumentative essays about, like, which catapult is the best to use. So I remember reading
>
> through multiple essays like that to determine which catapult my group should build in
>
> order to succeed in our project. And it was very interesting to see how it was very
>
> interdisciplinary.

Here, Claire demonstrates the capacity for curiosity and persistence that are characteristic of an

engaged researcher and a self-motivated learner (Archer, 1994). Her research efforts in the

STEM class extended far beyond those necessary to "successfully" complete the assignment:

digging for multiple perspectives, synthesizing information and understanding from multiple

disciplines, extending her learning from the practical to the conceptual and even historical.

During our second interview, she described a similar experience of investment in pursuing the

research for her Focus Project.

Observations and conversations within the classroom context, however, suggest that these anecdotes might be more closely related to Claire's prior dispositions as a learner than with the particular pedagogical practices in place within her classrooms. These data suggest a marked unevenness in the facility with which students take up the tools and habits of mind that would empower them to make authentic contributions within communities of practice. As Gee (2000) observed in his review of New Literacy Studies, "knowledge and intelligence" ought to be understood as "distributed across social practices," and as such "learning is a matter of changing patterns of participation." (p. 181). In taking on the task of engaging autonomously in learning related to their passions, students at times found it difficult to connect these passions with existing texts and communities through their research.

Variable Engagement in Communities of Practice

When Gee (2004) developed the concept of affinity spaces, he identified a number of characteristics of engagement in authentic learning communities. Of affinity spaces, he suggested that "people learn best when their learning is part of highly motivated engagement with social practices they value" (p. 77). Magnifico and colleagues (2018) complicated this idealized participatory culture when they observed that participation in such communities is not a generalized quality of lived experience for many students. Some students, they suggested, have not been exposed to such communities, while others have remained reticent to enter communities because of the implications such engagement might have for their own sense of identity. The challenges that Magnifico and others identified in engaging students as members of affinity spaces manifested themselves in a number of ways as the students began attempting to learn about their chosen areas of study (Magnifico, Lammers, & Fields, 2018; Marsh & Hoff, 2019; Russell, 1997). For one thing, it became apparent early on that students were variably engaged in

affinity spaces related to their topics prior to beginning the project, an observation with significant implications for their variable success early in the research process.

Some students selected their topics based on a strong pre-existing engagement in the subject matter, engagement that was oftentimes accompanied by membership in one or more affinity spaces. Hunter, for example, who decided to work toward an argument for the aesthetic and narrative superiority of his favorite video game, *The Legend of Zelda*: *Twilight Princess*, was clearly already engaged with fan communities related to this and similar topics. His goal from the beginning was to create a video essay that highlighted what he perceived to be the strengths of this video game, and to counter the many arguments that he had heard about its weaknesses. When, midway through the semester, Nintendo announced plans to produce a live-action *Legend of Zelda* film, Hunter quickly re-aligned his goals. The linear nature of the game, which many Zelda fans saw as a weakness in an otherwise open-world, choice-based game universe, Hunter decided to read as a strength, giving the game a quality of linear narrative that, he felt, made the production of a *Legend of Zelda* film pointless or redundant.

Likewise, Akio often spoke about his engagement with particular in-person and online communities related to his various interests (Gundam, Furries, the video game *Valorant*), and planned early to draw on the contributions from these peers as he developed his project. For Akio, much of the challenge was deciding which of his many affinity spaces should take prime position in his research. Indeed, early in the process, he was most interested in studying the nature of fandom itself. Early iterations of his research questions looked like questions that Gee himself might have posed–he wondered about the organization of communities that can have core and peripheral members; he was concerned about how certain members, who he felt did not represent the ethos of the community at large, were able to identify with the community, and

about how the actions of those members were taken by the broader population as representative of the community as a whole.

For these students and others like them, the movement toward authentic research in conversation with others in the field came easily, as they were already engaged in communities and spaces where various perspectives and diverse texts were plentiful. Clearly, Akio had spent quite a lot of time thinking about his own identity with regards to various dispersed communities of knowledge and practice, and he was regularly engaged on platforms related to these communities. Likewise, Hunter's pre-existing involvement in the fan community affinity space was evident not only in the amount of prior knowledge that he had about the game and its reception, but also in the ease with which he was able to access meaningful perspectives on the game upon beginning his research (Gee, 2004; Magnifico et al., 2018).

Entering New Communities of Practice

For many students, though, who were not previously engaged in communities of practice related to their topic–or, often, seemed not to be heavily engaged in any affinity spaces at all– the process of engaging in research was much more frustrating (Magnifico et al., 2018). Some students faced the challenge of recontextualizing their relationships with the practices and topics under study. This was especially true for many athletes in the class, who chose to study peripheral aspects of athletic practice. Emma, for example, who is a varsity volleyball player and has been engaged in athletics since childhood, chose to study the importance of childhood recreational athletics for children, selecting as her audience the parents of young kids who may not have yet considered rec sports. Amara, a varsity basketball player, found herself interested in understanding the world of mental health as it concerned high-level athletes. In these instances, students faced new challenges as they worked to bridge the conceptual gap between their

experiences and practices as a member of an athletic community and the habits of mind that are characteristic of those who *study* athletes and athletics.

For others, topics tended to be more personal, and so while they had often given a great deal of thought and reflection to the issue as it related to their own personal experiences, they had not begun to see their experiences as reflected by larger patterns of practice in the world. Camilla, for example, spoke powerfully in our early interview regarding her own struggle to acknowledge and then address her almost debilitating anxiety. She had taken the brave step of choosing to study adolescent anxiety for her focus project, in the hopes of helping other students like her who may be suffering silently but without the support systems that she had found to address the problem. As research began, however, she struggled to see the topic in its hybrid complexity. She had her own experiences on the one hand. On the other hand, her attempts at research were limited mostly to Googling various search terms related to her topic, a process that led her to conclude that "there [wasn't] much research on" the topic, because her pursuit of research "just [kept] bringing up the same things." Namely, Camilla searches were producing results dominated by abstracted, "objective," surface-level information, including the various definitions of anxiety, the symptoms and manifestations of the illness, and especially statistical information about the prevalence and patterns of anxiety diagnoses in particular populations. While on the one hand this information gave Camilla some important insights about how her own experiences fit into a broader narrative surrounding the topic, it did little to extend her own understanding through the perspectives available in a yet-undiscovered community.

Camilla's struggle reflects something important about the challenges of authentic research. To wit, it demonstrates the challenge of accessing communities of practice from the outside. Camilla's initial research process–Googling various terms–was underdeveloped, to be

sure, but I think it reflects pretty accurately the depth to which secondary education has invited

students generally to consider information. Indeed, when asked about previous research

experiences in my early interviews, a number of students described similar experiences:

> Carrie: So we did not do a lot of research things at [my previous school]. It wasn't ever
>
> really a big part. We would do, like, PowerPoint presentations on different, like-- we did
>
> one for the Greek gods in my English class last year. And so that was, like, research, but
>
> we didn't do it in class. And it wasn't like a continuous thing. Like you didn't improve on
>
> it. You just had it. And that was it.

> Camilla: for, like, all my government assignments, or like history
>
> assignments…Researching backgrounds to make presentations, Researching, like, what
>
> the person, like, the person's lives, I guess, like their biography.

> Odu: I remember, I used to think research was only from the text provided to me by some
>
> superior person. So like, if the teacher gave me a text and said, use this for your research,
>
> whatever you're doing, I would use that and only that. I didn't think about the idea that I
>
> could go out and find my own research.

Students admitted that the process of fulfilling these research expectations required little more of

them than Googling the topic and then transcribing or summarizing the basic information which

appeared at one or more of the first results in the search. For students who were instructed "not

to use Wikipedia," invariably in the top results for any historical figure or event, some other link

just slightly further along, with a teacher-sanctioned "dot org or dot edu" provided equivalently

surface-level informational content (Baer & Kipnis, 2023; Goering & Thomas, 2018). Students'

engagement with media in their everyday experiences, on the other hand, is viewed largely in terms of its affordances–both positive and negative–in engaging in their teenaged social lives, rather than as tools which might be deployed to enhance their intellectual lives (Alvermann, 2008).

Not only do such school practices often neglect to develop important research practices and digital and critical literacy skills, they also fail to engage students in any meaningful way with the conversations and perspectives attendant to the topic at hand (Goering & Thomas, 2018; Vygotsy, 1978). Murchie and Neyer (2018) have argued that we must move beyond naive conceptions of the truth or falsehood of any particular online media—and the many associated shortcuts to verification that these conceptions have propagated–in order to teach our students how to effectively navigate online resources. They offer instead a model of investigation that invites students to engage with online media in terms of its relationship to a larger ongoing narrative. Milner (2016) metaphorically characterizes this narrative as a tapestry that is woven "through messy…interrelationships [that exist] in the space between individual texts and broader conversations, between individual citizens and broader cultural discourses" (p. 2). Without the ability to use the tools in ways that built meaningful connections, students remained outsiders to the conversations that they sought to enter, and struggled to see the inquiry process as enriching to their lived experiences. Gee (2004) points out this gap in literacy pedagogy when he explores the challenges of creating authentic affinity spaces within the classroom context: "In classrooms portals are rarely strong generators where students both interact with the signs that constitute the content of the classroom instruction and are able to modify, transform, and add to them as well" (p. 88).

Once this struggle became evident, I worked to reorient students' research practices around locating and entering meaningful "portals" to the various affinity spaces wherein conversations regarding their topic were taking place (Gee, 2004, p. 88). This reorientation involved a process of considering who might be talking about these topics and in what digital spaces they might be doing so. Rather than simply "Googling" their key terms, I pushed students instead to use the search engine (and the other algorithmic tools represented by social media and AI Large Language Models) to locate instead the *places* on the web where important information and perspectives are being generated and shared.

Drawing on Funds of Knowledge

Complicating the issue of research further are the many "portals" to everyday literacy communities that don't look like portals at all. These are the objects, environments, and people with whom we interact in the composition of the rich tapestry of our everyday existence. Moll and Greenberg (1990) have called such everyday habits of cultural knowing, shared by households and communities, "funds of knowledge," and have argued for their important and often neglected role in shaping the discourse of the classroom (p. 345). Though the researchers differentiate between funds of knowledge, which are attained more or less passively in the course of everyday life, with the highly regimented, structured, and systematic ways of knowing that are emphasized in classrooms, the Focus Project gave students the opportunity to conceive of this passive cultural learning as a potent source for the development of meaningful academic perspectives.

Given the opportunity to expand their understanding of where knowledge comes from and how it is constructed, students began placing new value on their own perspectives and experiences as well as those of their peers, classmates, teachers, and families. In terms of the

research component of this project, this new understanding was made most evident by the

number of students who turned to personal narrative, conversation, interviews, and survey data in

order to inform their developing understanding of the topics under investigation. Phoebe, for

example, in her study of the concepts of beauty, arranged filmed interviews with several of her

classmates–toward the development of a documentary about the effects of beauty standards–in

which she invited her peers to reflect on their own conceptions of beauty, as well as their feelings

with regards to their own attractiveness. Carrie, studying the issue of mental health in sports,

interviewed her father about his experience with college recruitment:

> He kind of just made me realize [that mental health is] not always about the sports. It's
>
> about, like, the environment that you put yourself in. And he never told me that up until
>
> this project. So I'm glad that I finally got that story.

The move toward drawing on their own previously unrecognized funds of knowledge was further

evidenced by the preponderance of students who chose to incorporate the voices of their peers,

parents, and teachers in their final multimodal compositions.

Recommendations for Educators

Relationships and Social Learning

> Camilla: I am proud of myself for becoming a different version of the girl I used to be.
>
> When I first walked into your class I was the shyest person ever. I didn't even want to
>
> correct you when you said my name wrong. I thought I could spend the whole semester
>
> being invisible. But you didn't allow that to happen. And I am so glad. It is because of
>
> you that I now have confidence in myself and I am not afraid to speak in crowded rooms.

After undertaking this research in my own classroom, I am convinced that the importance

of developing robust communities of trust in the classroom cannot be understated

(Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noddings, 2005). Developing meaningful classroom communities offers students new and meaningful opportunities for investment, engagement, and interest (Kaplan et al., 2002). Furthermore, the research demonstrates that it is the community of the classroom, over and above the content of the curriculum, that acts as a primary driving force for transformative learning opportunities that extend beyond the classroom to shape students' lived experiences in meaningful ways. These findings are in accord with much of the prior research both on the psychology of student motivation (Bandura, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 1985) and on the sociocultural nature of literacy learning (Perry, 2012).

Building authentic relationships with our students means being authentic people. It requires us to model not just the inquisitiveness and determination characteristic of the academic, but also the vulnerability and openness characteristic of the whole human. Further, it demands that we cultivate this vulnerability and openness in our students as well. To do so successfully we must make explicit the important role that dialogue, collaboration, and social learning play in our definitions of academic success (Barton & Hamilton, 2000;Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), we must create in our classrooms a safe space for academic and social risk (Chavez, 2021; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010), and we must encourage in our students a willingness always to be wrong, and a vision of academic success that not only accepts failure, but celebrates it (Kittle, 2008; Kohn, 2012).

Open-endedness and Ambiguity

Darwin: I think through assignments like this it really forced me to rethink what I already know, and come at it with a different approach. To me that really is the essence of this class or at least from what I've experienced. Every assignment has made me question my previous methods, and taught me how to engage in a different way.

Students benefit immensely from learning environments and activities that embrace open-endedness and resist the temptation to telegraph too clearly the final form that their learning should take. It is in the open-endedness of the Focus Project that students found the opportunity to discover new ways of approaching their topics and new ways of understanding themselves in relation to the material.

This advice runs counter to that of dominant models for the structuring of lessons and curriculum. Wiggins and McTigh's (2005) *Understanding by Design* directs us to "begin with the end in mind," first constructing a carefully proscribed assessment based on the standards, and then developing lessons that lead students neatly toward success on this assessment. Likewise, Almarode and Vandas's (2018) *Clarity for Learning* instructs us to develop clearly enunciated learning intentions and success criteria for each lesson of instruction. These models emphasize the careful scaffolding and signposting of content such that students always know precisely where they are in the process of learning what we hope they will learn. In doing so, they create systems of assessment that foreclose important opportunities for discovery, curiosity, and connection in the processes of learning.

Make no mistake, embracing open-endedness and ambiguity is challenging for students and teachers alike. For students, doing so means developing a capacity for being confused, for not understanding, and for seeing confusion as an important element of the movement toward conceptual understanding. Open-endedness can be a stressful proposition for teachers–both veterans and those new to the field–who are familiar with and feel well-grounded in a system where they are positioned as resident experts on the materials under study. Embracing open-endedness means relinquishing control over the direction that learning might take, and adopting a readiness to accept new avenues of inquiry as inherent to the goals of the classroom.

Open-ended conversations, after all, are by their very definition conversations that rarely lead to satisfying conclusions and summation.

To successfully navigate this uncertain terrain, teachers have no choice but to approach their direction of the classroom with a measure of uncertainty and a willingness not just to be wrong, but to be ignorant, and to make their potential wrongness and ignorance an ongoing part of their engagement with the class. Only if we are willing to undertake them ourselves might we hope for transformed practices in our students and our classrooms. Developing an ambiguity-positive classroom environment relies on strong trust relationships between teachers and students, and between students and their classmates (Kaplan et al., 2002). For everyone involved it requires a willingness to experiment with new methods and approaches, a tolerance for loose ends and false starts, and a commitment to ask difficult questions without the hope of clear answers. To my mind, it is only by such a model of leadership that students might accept and even celebrate their own vulnerable positions as learners and beginners. As Darwin came to understand in his final assessment letter, such an approach offers students the opportunity not just to learn the standards, but to learn how to learn, and to see learning as a continual process of rethinking both oneself and one's relationship with the world at large.

Authentic Inquiry and Self-Directed Learning

Authentic inquiry takes for granted a hybridity of discourse, space, and practice, as students' own outside interests are drawn upon to provide content to the classroom, even as those interests are offered shape, vocabulary, and direction by the structural, conceptual, and rhetorical tools of academic research and composition (Gutierrez, 2008). Pedagogies of authentic inquiry empower students to learn about self-selected topics; they engage students in practicing a variety of research methods and tools; they direct students toward goals that they themselves set,

monitor, and assess; and they invite students into new relationships with technologies, media, and texts (Jacobs, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Such pedagogies move students from a "collection code" to a "connection code," giving them opportunities to develop "critical understandings" of concepts, ideas and events of their own choosing, driven by the twin intrinsic drives of passionate curiosity and a desire to reach others with their ideas (Luke, 2003, p. 400).

If we are serious about developing "lifelong learners," then we would do well to develop a meaningful vision for that term. Lifelong learners pursue knowledge and understanding not based on external demands nor for external rewards, but because they have a deep interest in their subject and a well-developed appreciation for the joys of learning itself (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). Meaningful learning experiences must be rooted in students' own beliefs about what is important and capitalize on students' "inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70). In order to make meaningful learning possible, teachers must develop the personal dispositions and classroom spaces and structures that prioritize student autonomy in setting and achieving learning goals. According to Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010):

> Autonomy-supportive teachers facilitate students' personal autonomy by taking the students' perspective; identifying and nurturing the students' needs, interests, and preferences; providing optimal challenges; highlighting meaningful learning goals; and presenting interesting, relevant, and enriched activities…they create opportunities for students to take the initiative during learning activities by building instruction around students' interests, preferences, personal goals, choice making, and sense of challenge and curiosity, rather than relying on external sources of motivation such as incentives, consequences, directives, and deadlines. (p. 589)

One of the challenges for teachers interested in adopting models of authentic inquiry is that of abdicating our default positions of authority within the classroom and setting aside, tentatively, the many systemic concerns and unexamined ideologies that are embedded in these positions. Throughout this research, I found myself continually battling the habit of pointing students the way or foreclosing possibilities. Coupled with the inspiration that I felt in seeing students come to life in new ways in the classroom was the nagging anxieties associated with "content coverage" and "measurable learning outcomes."

Engaging students in learning for their own purposes opens up new roles for teachers. We can move from a position of absolute authority–doling out our expertise as a pre-requisite to meaningful action–into roles which support students in the often messy, digressive, haltingly recursive pursuit of their own learning goals. Here, our expertise becomes tactical, offered to students in response to questions that they themselves have identified, obstacles that they themselves have chosen to overcome. In short, our classrooms can come to embody Wells's (1993) vision of "semiotic apprenticeship," in which our students take up academic literacies not because *we* insist that they are important to master, but because mastering them becomes important to achieving goals that students themselves have set (p. 4).

At least a part of this movement toward self-direction involves loosening our tight-fisted grip on the curriculum, handing the reins to students when it comes to deciding what kinds of things to read and what kinds of things to write. But the mandate in favor of self-directed learning must extend beyond the types of composing we ask students to do to include the methods and practices we employ in our guidance toward and responses to those compositions. Teachers should move away from assignment construction and feedback practices that are overly directive in favor of models which explicitly and implicity validate student autonomy.

The traditional model of schooling identified by Freire and others treats inexperience as a flaw which must be corrected hierarchically and systematically. This negative view toward the beginner can be seen in schooling's self-identity as a custodian of knowledge and its orientation toward information delivery, but it is also evident in its proclivity for models of "correctness" grounded in Enlightenment ideals of logic, efficiency, and mechanical reproducibility. When these models appear in compositional contexts, they lead students to understand language as an obscure system of symbols, definitions, and rules, and they lead to teacherly guidance dictated by adherence to carefully confined parameters. This is evident in the use of grades, of course, but it is also evident in the way we design assignments and assessment instruments.

I have suggested to my students and my colleagues that rubrics are how smart kids do as little as possible. By this I mean to point out that rubrics which are optimized toward clarity of expected outcome are also optimized for cognitive efficiency on the part of the student. A student who can see just how to get a perfect score will do so with as little actual thinking as possible, especially when they are learning in an environment that–despite insistence to the contrary–prioritize the score above all else (Elbow, 1993; Kohn, 2012). Models of feedback that promote self-directed learning must attend to the paradoxes and tensions that manifest when teachers transition their practices and pedagogies away from a "performance" orientation and toward an orientation based on "mastery" (Anderman & Dawson, 2011, p. 223; see also Archer, 1994; Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996). In this new paradigm, the beginner is reimagined as a novice, an amateur, an apprentice, and the teacher a "master" only to the extent that he or she has had more experience in the field (Lave & Wegner, 1991).

On my part, adopting such a model often meant actively resisting the impulse to give advice that was too directive (Hattie & Gan, 2011). When I was reading student writing, I had to

fight against the tendency to give attention to identifying and classifying grammatical

weaknesses and lapses in clarity, and in my feedback, I suppressed my tendency to project my

own authorship onto the composition even as I aimed to offer students useful advice for moving

forward as a writer (Chavez, 2021; Kittle, 2008). Committing to mastery-oriented feedback also

meant actively reorienting students when their questions about writing desired the directive

feedback to which they had grown accustomed. This tendency to seek performance goals is

perhaps due in part to students' inexperience and insecurity as composers, and it is almost

certainly shaped by their experiences within traditional structures of schooling that embrace a

model for feedback predicted on judgment and prioritizing compliance (Anderman & Dawson,

2011).

On the part of the students, self-direction offered opportunities that were at first perceived

as obstacles and obstacles that were first perceived as opportunities. While in their "Purpose in

Education" arguments they denounced the overly-restrictive environments of their educational

past, many struggled in the Focus Project to name authentic interests, to sustain attention to a

self-selected purpose, and to develop productive practices of inquiry related to their project.

These struggles can look and feel a bit like academic flailing, and are subject to the same

frustrations and plateaus characteristic of developing facility in any activity. But as students

persevered through these frustrations, guided by the various tools and structures of the

classroom, including my tactical knowledge and the perspectives of their classmates, they built

capacities for analysis, writing, and engaging in learning that reached well beyond the content of

either their focus project topic or the stated learning outcomes of the course.

Assessment Practices

The evidence is in: Grades are not serving the purposes that we have unreflectively assumed of them, and the ends that they are serving are largely destructive to the authentic purposes which education ought to serve. Grades diminish student thinking and willingness to take risks (Kohn, 2012; Pink, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000); they replace strong intrinsic motivations with weak external "carrots and sticks" (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Miserandino, 1996); and they reorient student and classroom goal structures away from mastery and toward comparison, competition, and avoidance (Anderman & Dawson, 2011; Archer, 1994; Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996; Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002). Furthermore, as critics of traditional grading practice have pointed out, grades, be they numerical or alphabetical, fail consistently at even the most basic task of providing meaningful measurements of student performance (Blum, 2020; Brookhart; 2011; Elbow, 1993; Guskey, 2006).

Though the central focus of *this* research was not dedicated to an interrogation of the traditional methods by which student success is measured and communicated, it is undergirded by a philosophy of assessment–robustly supported by the research–that invites us to question the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the connections between grading and student motivation, growth, and success. I am convinced that the transformations in student understanding and classroom culture that the study records could have only taken place in an ungraded space. Taking grades off the table reoriented the conversations away from external measures of success and recentered them around the important problems of l*earning* that classrooms make possible (Blum, 2020). Once the question of grades was removed from the equation, once students came to trust that they need not concern themselves with point-counting

and grade-grubbing, they were able to reorient their focus around the opportunities for learning that classroom tasks and expectations provided.

This study might also serve as a reminder to educators of the deep and nuanced understanding of student growth that can be provided through qualitative assessment and qualitative feedback. Except for the 12 formal interviews conducted with 6 students during the semester, all of the data gathered for this study was generated by students and assessed through narrative feedback in the regular course of the curriculum. That is, this is data that exists not only in my classroom, but in every classroom. Data that is oftentimes overlooked by students and teachers alike in their pursuit of a quantitative measurement.

I am not unmindful of the systemic barriers to a re-imagining of the current grading regime. On the grandest scale, moving away from grades as a default measure of learning will require a radical transformation of the education system as it currently exists. That said, there are many steps, large and small, that individual teachers, departments, and schools can take to reorient systemic priorities and (more importantly) student attitudes away from attempts to quantify and toward feedback, reflection, and authentic engagement. A laudable first step is reflected in this study: teachers can take actions within the current paradigm to deemphasize grades in their classrooms, and creating conditions where authentic communities of learning can develop.

For teachers interested in rethinking their assessment practices, workable models exist. Susan D. Blum's (2020) edited volume, *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*, contains essays from educators in a variety of fields that address the philosophical, pedagogical, and practical questions of a move away from grading. Sarah M. Zerwin's (2020) book, *Point-less: An English teacher's guide for more meaningful grading,*

provided the roadmap for my own movement toward a gradeless classroom. In it, she explores

the purposes of ungrading and its impact in her own classroom, and she describes in great detail

the practical methods by which she communicated, implemented, and managed the ungraded

classroom. Likewise, Asao Inoue's (2015; 2019) work on labor-based grading contracts provides

both a critique of grading practices grounded in anti-racism and culturally sustaining pedagogy

and a framework for undertaking the challenge of facing the injustices inherent in grade-based

systems of assessment.

Recommendations for Further Research

Classrooms as Third Spaces

In their seminal work on Third Spaces in education, Gutierrez and colleagues (1997)

identified the essential hybridity of the classroom:

> [L]earning contexts are immanently hybrid, that is, polycontextual, multivoiced, and
>
> multiscripted. Thus, conflict, tension, and diversity are intrinsic to learning spaces. We
>
> have examined these tensions by studying the competing discourses and practices, the
>
> official scripts and counterscripts, of the various social spaces of learning communities.
>
> By attending to the social, political, material, cognitive, and linguistic conflict, we also
>
> have documented these tensions as potential sites of rupture, innovation, and change that
>
> lead to learning (p. 287).

Despite the promise for reconceptualizing the classroom as a Third Space offered by this

framework, many studies undertaken within it have been focused on settings outside of the

structures of formal education (Burns, 2010; Grey, 2020; Jones & Curwood, 2020; Moran, 2018).

These studies see the classroom primarily as a limiting extension of the second space of

institutional systems, and seek out in literal third spaces a more flexible opportunity to

interrogate systems of educational discourse and literacy practice. While Third Spaces that are constituted beyond the normal school day are perhaps enhanced in being both a physical and temporal space away from the traditional classroom, they are also limited in their accessibility and applicability to the everyday activities of the schooling. Furthermore, by enacting Third Spaces apart from school, these studies potentially sidestep or diminish many of the tensions that are unavoidable when taking up questions of hybridity in the classroom itself.

This study adds to the literature promoting a conception of the classroom itself as a Third Space within which students might be invited to interrogate the relationships between institutional ways of knowing and being and those that they develop at home and beyond the classroom (Benson, 2010; Coleman, 2020; Guttierez, Rhymes, & Larson, 1995; Maniotes, 2005). The findings here suggest that by positioning the classroom as a Third Space, we might make salient to students and to student learning outcomes the navigation of the very tensions which schooling discourse in the status quo elides. It's findings suggest directions for future research that embraces the work of the classroom as "boundary work" encouraging students to gain confidence in entering into new knowledge communities from the margins, through research and inquiry practices that dispense, at least in the short term, with traditional notions of authority, mastery, and endorsement characteristic of academic classrooms, textbooks, journals, and genres (Russell, 1997, p. 530).

There is further work to be done in establishing best practices for engaging students in what Lave & Wenger (1991) have termed "legitimate peripheral participation." As Russell (1997) and others have suggested, students struggle to find meaning in classrooms in part because the epistemological structures of schooling bear little in common with those adopted by authentic practitioners in communities of practice, be they experts in a field, passionate

enthusiasts, or those–like journalists and authors–who are interested in communicating specialized knowledge to a broader public. This can only happen when students can be brought to see themselves as contributing meaningfully in authentic communities of practice. Such engagement leads students toward intrinsic desires for developing expertise and insinuates them into pre-existing networks of mentorship and engagement. So long as the genre of the classroom itself remains an invisible assumption of educational practice, we should expect students to continue to struggle to see the relevance of their classroom experiences to anything beyond the classroom itself.

Rhetorical Identities in the Composition Classroom

This research brings together findings from sociocultural literacy that establish literacy practices as acts of socio-political position taking (Brandt, 2001, 2009; Moje et al., 2009; Perry 2012) with a high school English Language Arts curriculum dedicated to the development of the skills of rhetorical reading and writing (AP English Language and Composition, 2020). In establishing the classroom as a rhetorical context, this study provides the beginnings of a framework for composition instruction that draws together elements of rhetorical argumentation and concerns over student identity development.

Street (2005) has argued convincingly for the important role that everyday literacies must play in the classroom. At the same time, students should develop the skills and identities necessary to successfully navigate the academic and professional spaces which they will encounter in their life beyond the classroom (Gee & Crawford, 1998; The New London Group, 1996). Gee and Crawford (1998) point out that success in school contexts requires "adopting and affiliating with multiple new ways of talking, listening, acting, feeling, responding, interacting and valuing, as well as with writing and reading" (p. 225). Abarca Milan (2018) emphasizes that

the "negotiated or performed identities" of our students "shape and are shaped by literacy

practices that serve a social function, positioning the individual in relation to peers, family, or

institutional authority" (p. 313).

By making these negotiations of identity an explicit component of a critical pedagogical

approach to composition, this study extends the work of researchers in sociocultural literacy

promoting multimodal approaches that see acts of composition (including perhaps, the

composition of selves and identities) in terms of positioning texts, audiences, and authors

(Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996) even as it suggests new

opportunities for reconceiving of rhetorical analysis and composition in terms of their

relationship to the lived realities and literacies of students' everyday experiences.

Further research into the development of rhetorical identities might open the door to new ways of

conceiving of student identity construction even as it helps develop further practical and

meaningful methods for teaching students about rhetorical composition.

Authentic Inquiry in ELA Classrooms and Beyond

This study was undertaken in an AP Language & Composition course, and as such is

limited in its tentative conclusions to a very narrow population of students. As was made clear in

the framework for this study, advanced-level student populations are unreflective of the broader

population of students both in their demographics and in their predispositions toward academic

learning generally and the practices and pedagogies of the classroom more specifically.

Furthermore, the use of student-directed authentic inquiry projects was made possible in part by

a realization of the open-endedness of English Language Arts standards, which are characterized

less by their particular contents than by a mandate to teach particular skills and dispositions with

regards to reading and writing. As I explained to students in introducing the Focus Project, "the

standards tell me that I need to help you become better readers and writers, but they say very little about *what* I must have you read and write about." This flexibility is, in part, what made possible the reorientation of the classroom practice that was undertaken in this study. While the potentials for student-directed learning models have been well established in STEM classes (Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009), however, research into the use of such models in the English Language Arts classroom remains sparse (Armstrong-Grodzicki, 2013). Even as the results of this study contribute to the body of research on student-directed learning in ELA, I hope they might also act as an inspiration for further research in this area.

Furthermore, in order to more robustly establish the efficacy of the approaches presented in this research, similar research should be also undertaken in classrooms with various student populations and curricular demands. In particular, research should be undertaken into the effects of employing Third Space pedagogies and authentic inquiry projects in historically marginalized and underserved communities of students. The theories out of which these pedagogies have been developed offer them as responses through student empowerment to the colonizing impulses and subjugation of historically unjust systems of education (Bhaba, 1994; Freire, 2000; Gutierrez et al., 1999). However, a majority of the research that has been undertaken in Third Space theory has occurred in contexts outside of the formal education system (Jones & Curwood, 2020; Maniotes, 2005). Undertaking research that invites the critical re-evaluation of education from within the walls of the classroom offers powerful opportunities for historically marginalized students to speak back to the powers under which they have long struggled.

Likewise, it is less clear that the standards and curricular expectations of other core content classes allows for such flexibility, nor is it clear how, precisely, the mandates of a more restrictive curriculum might be met through the empowerment of students in selecting their own

topics, questions, and issues to explore. Undertaking a self-guided project in a History class, for example, might reasonably be expected to have similar outcomes for students in terms of engagement and transformative learning, but if it does so at the expense of "covering" required content, then it is untenable under the current paradigm. Likewise, teachers asking students to undertake a Focus Project in mathematics might face the additional challenge of empowering students to take on mathematical problems without first explaining to them how to do the math. Future research would do well to consider these questions, working to reimagine the Focus Project described herein for use in other settings and to reimagine these other settings as potentially enriched by a dedication to and investment in the possibilities of student-directed learning.

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Appendix A: Early Interview Protocol

The first questions grow out of some of the work you've done in class so far:

1) Something drawn directly from something they've already submitted:

    a) So in your literacy narrative you said ____. Can you tell me more about that and how it relates to _____.

    b) You decided to focus your project on ____. Talk to me about how you made that decision.

    c) In your first blog, you mentioned that school was _____. Does that position grow out of specific experiences you've had?

The next few questions explore learning and writing more generally:

2) What is your most memorable experience of writing, good or bad? What makes this experience stand out in your memory?

3) When have you felt most personally fulfilled by an accomplishment?

4) Can you think of a time when you felt like you "had a million questions?" What prompted this feeling? What did you do about it?

5) We often think of experts as people who have some special credentials related to a subject or a topic. However, we might also develop expertise in any number of areas within our lives. Even if we're not world-renowned, we may be the "resident expert" in our families, friend groups, or school communities.

    a) What is something that you might consider yourself an expert in? Think of something–a skill, concept, or topic–that you have learned a lot about "on your own" (that means outside of a classroom).

    b) How did you develop this expertise?

    c) How do you use this expertise in your daily life? Can you tell me the story of a recent example?

The next few questions focus on the Focus Project more specifically:

6) An important part of the Focus Project is the process of learning about your chosen topic. In this class, we will call this process research.

    a) When you think of research, what sorts of ideas come to mind? Think of a recent assignment that you've had in school that included research.

    b) What was it like to complete this assignment?

7) The Focus Project, which we have begun in class, gives you the chance to learn deeply about any topic that you are most interested in, and to create original published work related to that topic. There's a lot about the project that you get to decide for yourself.

    a) How do you feel about these types of open-ended projects?

    b) What do you expect will be the most challenging part of completing this project for you?

    c) What, if anything, do you most look forward to in this project?

Appendix B: Late Interview Protocol

1. You have worked all semester on a project that you yourself selected, designed, and pursued. If you were to tell someone the story of this process, how might that story go?

2. In the interview we had near the beginning of this project, you said X about [research/writing/learning]. Do you think your ideas about [research/writing/learning] have changed since then? If so, what's different?

3. How have you changed as a person this semester? How do you see this class or this project playing a role in those changes?

4. As a part of the focus project, you developed a number of different texts designed for real audiences beyond the classroom. Talk to me about what it was like to write for someone besides your teacher and your classmates.

5. Tell me about the process of deciding on and developing your final Focus Project product.

6. Can you think of any moments, events, or situations outside of class this semester when you found yourself using the learning you were doing in your normal, everyday life?

7. As we discussed in class, this sort of open-ended, self-selected project is workable in a composition class. Would it work in other classes as well? What lessons from this process do you think teachers in other subject areas might use?

Appendix C: Focus Project Workshops

Workshop #1: Finding Focus
Focus Project Discovery Workshop

Follow these steps to generate ideas for your Focus Project. Follow these steps even if you believe you already know what your project will be about. A successful brainstorm will fill at least the front and back of a sheet of paper. (More is better at this point in the process!)

1. Start with what you care about: **<u>Make lists</u>** of topics, ideas, issues, problems, activities that have
   a. Intrigued you
   b. Made you think you could do this for a living
   c. Made you talk nonstop
   d. Made you lose all sense of time
   e. Morally outraged you
   f. Broke your heart
   g. Disturbed you
   h. Made you feel exceptionally smart
   i. Opened a whole new world to you
   j. Left you unsatisfied--there was so much more to discover
   k. Puzzled you--something just didn't make sense
2. **<u>Fill the page.</u>** When you have exhausted your brain, start crossing out ideas that are less interesting, less promising, less practical, redundant, or unoriginal.
3. **<u>Now, take a walk</u>** or drive around town. Take a slow walk around your home and school. Look in drawers and attics. Consider the ways that the environment reflects or is reflected in the list of topics you generated in step 1. Be on the lookout for connections that are weird, tenuous, or counterintuitive.
4. After your field trip (or during it), make a second list of **<u>objects or materials</u>** that seem central to your experience of the world. This should be a list of concrete nouns.
5. Now, work through your list and look for connections. Draw lines. **<u>Circle your favorite 3-5 ideas.</u>**
6. When your brain is totally empty, pick the most promising of your favorite ideas and begin exploring the topic from a number of directions.
   a. Use Google to search for the words and ideas from your lists to help find interesting articles, videos, songs, images, podcasts, poems, and/or books--what sorts of materials are available on this topic? Keep track of promising information that you locate.
   b. Discuss the issue with friends, teachers, family members and members of your community. Consider people you know who may have some particular experience or expertise: these people may act as assets to you as you undertake

your project. Jot down perspectives and thoughts that these diverse communities have about the topic.

<div align="center">

Focus Project Workshop #2

Formal Project Proposal - Instructions

</div>

Throughlines

➢ *Students should think deeply about the complex meanings of texts and the techniques by which these meanings are brought into being.*

➢ *Student should develop the tools to express complex ideas and make nuanced arguments in writing and other media forms.*

➢ *Students should consider themselves as thinking beings enmeshed in complex relationships with other beings, things, technologies, and systems of thought.*

Use the following guidelines to complete all parts of the form:

General Information:

➢ **Topic:** What your project is about. The more specific the better. Try to state it in 5 words or fewer.

➢ **Research Question(s):** What are the main questions or concerns that you think will drive your exploration of this topic? These can certainly develop over the course of your project, but take some time now to pinpoint the big issues that you are most interested in exploring. Aim for 3-5 questions. Consider beginning with "How," "Why," or "To What Extent," or use one of the following question templates:

○ What are the causes of/contributing factors to _____?

○ How does _____ affect/relate to _____?

○ What are the origins of _____?

Mission Statement:

Write a paragraph that explains your mission in this project. The paragraph should include the problem as you see it and why it's important to you (this is **exigence**). You should also consider what outcomes you hope to achieve (this is the beginning of thinking about **audience** and **purpose**). Be sure to explain your thinking clearly and powerfully.

Keywords:

Develop a set of keywords and concepts that relate to your topic. Good keywords are specific and concrete. They are words that could be used to help generate more interesting and specific search results. After you have generated a good starting list, start plugging them into Google in different combinations. Skim the results and see if you can add any key words you have missed.

Preliminary Project Plan

Answer the questions carefully to indicate your plans for tracking learning and managing time. You should also spend a bit of time reflecting on what will be fun or interesting about the project process.

Preliminary Bibliography with Notes (3-5 sources)
On its own page, begin a bibliography of the texts/voices/ideas that you have begun to engage with. Each bibliographic entry should have two parts.

1. <u>A formally formatted bibliographic entry.</u> This should include all of the relevant information about the text you have read/viewed/listened to. Including at least
   a. Author/Speaker
   b. Title of Work
   c. Publication Date
   d. Link (if digital)

   Format this information according to MLA Citation rules.   You can use a tool like EasyBib, but do not rely on the automation feature to do all of your work for you!

2. <u>A set of notes (in whatever form) that demonstrate your learning/thinking</u> with regards to this text. This can be in prose form, in bullet points, or even a picture of the paper that you have jotted stuff down on. However you are "making your thinking visible," include this for each source.

Focus Project Workshop #2
Project Proposal

Student	

Topic	
Central Questions & Concerns	

Mission Statement

Keywords

Preliminary Project Plan	
Tracking your Learning *How will you keep track of what you have learned? How will you track your progress?*	
Time Management *How will you use the time that you are given in class? What aspects of the project will have to happen outside of class?*	
Anticipation & Reflection *What do you expect to be fun about this project? What will be easy? What challenges do you expect to face?*	

Focus Project Workshop #3
Elevator Pitch

An **elevator pitch** is a short speech that acts as an introduction to you, your passions, and your project. The name "elevator pitch" comes from the following hypothetical situation:

> *You are visiting New York City, and having just arrived in lower Manhattan, you decide to check out the Freedom Tower at One World Trade Center. You enter the elevator and select the highest number you see. Just before the door closes, in walks a well-known multimillionaire. (Choose your favorite: is it Jay-Z? Elon Musk? Oprah?). They select the 25th floor, and then they greet you politely. This is your one shot to get funding, recognition, and support for your Focus Project. What do you say?*

This will be a chance for you to **share your ongoing work** with your classmates, **practice public speaking** in a safe and supportive environment, and **develop a compelling argumentative text** about your chosen subject.

There are four parts to this Workshop:
- Part 1: Pre-writing Text Analysis - This pre-write is designed to give you a chance to look at how real authors develop these important moves in their writing. Use the Pre-writing analysis chart (on Google Classroom) to guide your analysis of two (2) argumentative texts you have read in learning about your topic.
- Part 2: Elevator Pitch Draft - Develop a complete draft of your elevator pitch. Use the exemplars from previous students, as well as the ideas you gained from analyzing your research sources, to write this draft. Remember that you will be *saying* the speech aloud, so work to incorporate strong language choices that will give rhythm and power to your speech.
- Part 3: Peer Review and Revision - On Tuesday, you'll have the opportunity to practice your speech with your table groups. This is a chance for you to gauge how real audiences will respond to your speech, and to get feedback from this trusted group on improvements you can make.
- Part 4: Elevator Pitch - On Friday, you will deliver your pitch to the class as a whole. Remember to dress professionally and be prepared.

Your elevator pitch should be:
- **Short:** Between 1 and 2 minutes long. We're going to the 25th floor. A speech of **300-350 words** will take about 2 minutes to deliver, depending on the speed with which you speak.
- **Well-structured:** You have very little time, so you need to use it wisely!

- **Highly polished and professional:** You need not "memorize" your speech, but you also shouldn't be reading. Work to make the words feel natural.

A Good Elevator pitch will accomplish the following things:
- **Grab our attention.** Open your elevator speech with something captivating and relatable.
- **Spark curiosity.** Tell them you've found a solution to that very problem.
- **Summarize what you're working on.** Then say how you are doing it and your expectations for the outcome.
- **Leave us wanting more.** A good elevator pitch is an invitation to a conversation, not an ad slogan. Finish your pitch by offering us a glimpse of what's to come.

Grab our Attention
Consider one of these strategies for gaining our attention quickly:
- Ask a compelling open ended question
- State a startling fact about the world.
- Make a counterintuitive observation

Spark Curiosity
Develop some ideas about your topic that lead us toward being interested in it. You might try to frame this section of your speech by considering the reasons why YOU were first drawn to the topic. However, rather than structure it as, "what made me interested was…", work to make observations that lead US to be interested

Summarize What You're Working On
Here, state simply and straightforwardly what your project entails. This is the place to use "I" statements. Tell us what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what you think may come of it.

Leave Us Wanting More
Suggest some possible outcomes, a hint of what sort of product you may create, or the change that you hope to make in the world.

On presentation:
- You can stand at your seat, but you must stand.
- Speak to the whole class, not just to me.
- Consider your body language and vocal quality. Remember you want us to like you and be interested in you.
- Dress professionally. When you give a speech, you are the text!
- Be sure you tell us your name, at some appropriate point in your speech. And thank us when you are done!

Focus Project - Elevator Pitch
Text Analysis Pre-writing

Instructions: Look back over **one or two argumentative texts** you have gathered so far for your Focus Project. As you review the texts, consider how the text is structured in order to effectively reach the audience. Complete the chart with specific info from the texts.

*Note: it is possible that some of your sources (especially from earlier in your research) are more "informational" than "argumentative." This is not a **bad** thing, but these wikipedia-style informational sources will be **less interesting** to analyze for this activity. Instead, **choose two texts that seem to have a strong perspective or point of view***.

	Text #1	**Text #2**
Title		
Author/Speaker		
Link (URL)		
Hook What strategies does this text use to grab the audience's attention at the very beginning?		
Inspire What strategies does this text use to inspire curiosity, wonder, and interest in the audience?		
Inform What strategies does this text use to inform the audience about the topic		
Conclude How does this text end in a way that feels meaningful and leaves the audience wanting more?		
Good Words Pick 2 or 3 quotes from the		

text that demonstrate strong uses of language that you think you could "borrow" from. These might be choices of diction, figurative language, or patterns of syntax like repetition or juxtaposition.		

Focus Project Workshop #4
Product Planning Guide

Instructions:
Use this guide to develop a plan for your first major product. It is to be completed by next Friday.

Form What form will this argument take? (Think podcast, video, advertisement, brochure, or any other authentic multimodal form that you might encounter in the world.) Why is this an appropriate medium for this particular argument?	
Exigence Why is this argument necessary? What is the urgency?	
Audience To whom is this argument directed? BE SPECIFIC! Why is this an appropriate audience for the topic?	
Purpose What is the intended outcome of this argument? What do you hope will change (in the world, in your audience) based on this argument?	

Preliminary Plan
Develop a preliminary plan for this product (add rows as necessary). One of your steps should be the Peer Review, and you should be specific about what you want to have ready for this peer review date.

Date	What will you finish by this date?	What will you work on during this class period?	What will you need to do in between Fridays?
11/2	This Form +2 MODELS +2 Voices (added to annotated bibliography below)		

11/10	+2 Voices (added to annotated bibliography below) Draft Script Raw media	Script Peer Review and Reflection	
11/17	Revised Script Raw media		
12/1	Rough-cut Production	Rough Cut Peer Review & Reflection	
12/8	Final Product	Showcase	

Expanded Annotated Bibliography

Use the following charts as a model for developing your bibliography. Simply make copies of the chart to add additional resources

Model Text #1

MLA Citation *Be sure to follow the models on Google Classroom to correctly format your citation.*	
Summary of Text *Write a brief (1-paragraph) summary of the overall contents of the text. Use the model from Exercise #1 in the Introduction of* They Say/I Say *to guide your summary*	
How will you use it? *What, specifically, will you steal from the way this text is put together? What elements of the style, structure, production, or execution do you*	

particularly like?	

Model Text #2

MLA Citation	
Summary of Text	
How will you use it?	

Topical Research #1

MLA Citation	
Summary of Text	
How will you use it? *What ideas, information, or perspectives will be most useful to you in developing your own project? How will you respond to these ideas?*	

Topical Research #2

MLA Citation	
Summary of Text	
How will you use it?	

Topical Research #3

MLA Citation	
Summary of Text	
How will you use it?	

Topical Research #4

MLA Citation	
Summary of Text	
How will you use it?	