

# **JOURNAL OF LITERACY INNOVATION**

**RETHINKING LITERACY INSTRUCTION**



**VOLUME SIX, ISSUE TWO**

**FALL 2021**

**SEAN RUDAY, EDITOR**

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**EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION**  
**SEAN RUDAY, *JLI* FOUNDER AND EDITOR**  
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The *Journal of Literacy Innovation* started, in a way, as an act of subversion. I wanted to create a space that welcomed the blending of research and practice, which I felt was not adequately valued and represented in education scholarship. This journal has continued to provide a place for scholars to challenge existing ways of thinking by sharing innovative, research-based, and classroom-applicable insights. I am grateful for the outstanding submissions this journal now regularly receives and I am honored that so many others share this vision for education. By creating high-quality pieces that share research-based instructional ideas with educators, *JLI*'s authors are shaping the future of education. This issue's manuscripts are exemplary representations of this idea: they are innovative, engaging, and practical, while also rooted in and informed by important research.

The first piece you'll encounter in this issue, "Learning Doesn't Follow a Bell Schedule: Developing 'Authentic' Literacy Practice Through Digital Tools" by Meghan E. Barnes and Mollee Holloman, provides an engaging analysis of the authors' "experiences working with practicing and novice teachers through remote, digitally-mediated professional development literature circles." In this piece, the authors share important thought-provoking insights on topics such as "Selecting a Digital Tool" and "Facilitating Engagement Through the Tool." The insights in this piece will help readers consider meaningful, authentic, and engaging technology integration.

After that, you'll come to "'Compassioned Imagination:' Multicultural Representation in Film as a Text" by Jason D. DeHart. This excellent piece describes how teachers used "film as a text for analysis, including the work of troubling assumptions and asking students to take a larger view of the human story alongside concepts of empathy and social justice." DeHart provides an in-depth and thought-provoking discussion of the ways "teachers worked with students to consider the ways representations were constructed – even addressing students' own constructed representations" and offers important and accessible instructional steps for teachers interested in engaging in similar work with their students.

The next piece in this issue is the excellent "Building Teacher Ensemble One Improvisation at a Time" by Spencer Salas, Beth Murray, Saida Jedidi Sfaxi, and Soufiane Adrane. In this manuscript, "the authors focus on a series of improvisational strategies and games to explore how applied theatre exercises might contribute to the pre/co-requisite of community that language teacher development requires." The authors describe "notions of power and privilege in classrooms and communities and the potential of applied theatre to disrupt instructional and institutional hierarchies," describing specific practices and providing readers with information and insights that help them "generalize these same techniques to their specific classroom contexts and audiences—be they adult, adolescent, or young learners."

The issue concludes with the innovative and thought-provoking piece “Empowering Students to Tell their Stories: Authors Mentor Students on Writing College Admission Essays” by Cynthia Dawn Martelli, Vickie Johnston, and Jaimee Sidisky. In this work, “the authors examined how high school students in author and university writing sessions at a university literacy festival learned how to use their voice to share their social and cultural experiences when constructing a college admission essay.” This empowering, engaging, and informative piece not only conveys important findings from the described study, but also shares key transferrable insights with applicability to writing instruction in general, such as the idea that “teachers and mentors who create opportunities for their students as writers must not only understand how to teach the process of writing but must also understand how to interact with students in ways that reflect understanding and support of their students’ lived experiences and economic and cultural challenges.”

This issue of *JLI* is also noteworthy because it marks the first issue featuring a video abstract. “Learning Doesn’t Follow a Bell Schedule: Developing ‘Authentic’ Literacy Practice Through Digital Tools” by Meghan E. Barnes and Mollee Holloman contains a video abstract in which the authors discuss key ideas and insights related to their piece.

I am thrilled that you are joining these authors and me in the space that the *Journal of Literacy Innovation* provides. It is a digital gathering place for all of us that values the connection between research and practice, a meeting place for innovative educators in all contexts. By privileging this connection and nurturing this space, we can all work together to maximize the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Thank you very much for your continued support of *JLI*!

*Sean*

Sean Ruday, Ph.D.

Editor, *Journal of Literacy Innovation*

# **LEARNING DOESN'T FOLLOW A BELL SCHEDULE: DEVELOPING “AUTHENTIC” LITERACY PRACTICE THROUGH DIGITAL TOOLS**

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## **Abstract**

In this article we, a teacher educator and media specialist, analyze our experiences working with practicing and novice teachers through remote, digitally-mediated professional development literature circles. We draw on these experiences to consider what makes a digital tool an effective means of facilitating authentic engagement with concepts and texts. Because student learning is in part shaped by teachers' literacy practices, we were also interested in the ways that these teacher-based literature circles could inform the literature circles teachers incorporated into their work with K-12 students. We begin by defining what is meant by “authentic” literacy instruction before presenting our respective literature circles and offering implications for K-12 teachers.

*Keywords:* literature circles, authentic literacy, digital tools, professional development

[Click here to access a video abstract for this manuscript](#)

## **Learning Doesn't Follow a Bell Schedule: Developing “Authentic” Literacy Practice Through Digital Tools**

We were frustrated. As we prepared for our respective work with practicing teachers—Meghan with veteran teachers seeking their master's degrees and Mollee with K-12 teachers involved with district-wide professional development (PD)—we wanted and needed to take advantage of digital tools to foster remote learning and interactions. When working face-to-face with teachers, we both regularly used literature circles to model effective teaching strategies and engage teachers in discussions around shared texts—a practice we wanted to continue even in the virtual environment. Our challenge, then, wasn't to *find* a digital tool (the field of education is replete with options), but instead to determine what makes a digital tool an effective means of

facilitating authentic engagement with course concepts and texts. And, to determine what virtual “authentic engagement” might look like.

Because student learning is in part shaped by teachers’ literacy practices (Rasmussen & Eastman, 2018), we were also interested in the ways that these teacher-based literature circles could inform the literature circles teachers incorporated into their work with K-12 students. We begin by defining what is meant by “authentic” literacy instruction before presenting our respective literature circles and offering implications for K-12 teachers.

### **Authentic Literacy Instruction**

In literacy instruction, the term “authentic” is often invoked as an antidote to “traditional” (or form-first) reading and writing instruction (e.g., the five-paragraph theme or whole-class novel). Rather than attempting to tease apart these two approaches, we consider authentic literacy instruction to include traditional elements that help students build connections between what they do and learn in school and the ways they interact with and make sense of the world (Barnes & Coffey, 2021). For instance, when a student develops a podcast episode about an issue in their community (a potential example of authentic writing), they would still need to consider elements of traditional composition (i.e., style, form, conventions) to ensure their message is clear and befitting of the audience and platform. Thus, an authentic approach to literacy “does not dispel with the goals and practices of traditional approaches, but broadens the scope [...] to include attention to the ways that the writing form must flex to audiences, purposes, platforms, and genres” (Barnes & Coffey, 2021).

Zenkov et al. (2011) argue that authentic literacy instruction provides “chances to read and write about subjects about which youth care beyond school” (p. 382). The content of a writing task should address students’ experiences, interests, and identities and allow students to collaborate with peers, communities, and families (Behizadeh, 2018). Similarly, authentic reading instruction includes (and often starts from) student-selected texts based on personal interests, experiences (Atwell, 1988; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015), and identities (Bishop, 1990). Opportunities for student choice in reading material should also be embedded in a student-centered curriculum (Rasmussen & Eastman, 2018) that encourages “students to take ownership of the choices that independent, mature readers make” (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015, p. 267). Ultimately, authentic reading and writing should result in the generation of real-world products that can “legitimize their [students’] roles as worthy in- and out-of-school contributors” (Zenkov et al., 2011, p. 380). Thus, authentic literacy instruction is often cast as replicating real-world reading and writing practices.

Literature circles are one method whereby teachers might embed authentic literacy in their curriculum. Although there are a host of different ways to design literature circles, generally they should allow for cooperative learning and student-led discussions around student-selected texts (Bowers-Campbell, 2011). Literature circles should facilitate “natural and sophisticated discussions of literature” (Daniels, 2001, p. 100) and may contribute to increased student engagement (Almasi, 1995), development of positive social and communication skills (Klages et

al., 2007), critical thinking about the world (Holt & Bell, 2000), and increased reading comprehension (Eeds & Wells, 1989).

Even with these benefits, literature circles as a form of authentic literacy practice face challenges when implemented into classrooms. School structures like standards, testing, resources, and administrative pressure place both real and perceived limitations on what teachers can do. The common practice of assigning cooperative learning roles in literature circles can thwart conversation and collaboration as students privilege the completion of a role over meaningful text-based discussion (Bowers-Campbell, 2011). Finally, classroom management can prove challenging as teachers oversee multiple student groups reading different texts, working at different paces, and needing different academic supports (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). Although attention to students' interests, experiences, and identities is often positioned as the linchpin of effective authentic literacy practices and literature circles, in our work, we were more interested in designing instruction around students' ways of communicating. Specifically, we considered the ways that time and tools could be manipulated to facilitate and replicate more authentic literacy practices, while mitigating challenges often associated with literature circles as a form of authentic literacy instruction.

### **What We Did**

In designing our respective literature circles, we recognized that learning, meaning making, and communication are not relegated to the physical and temporal constraints of the classroom, so we looked to digital tools that could allow us to challenge limitations on when and where learning happens. Although it is certainly not the only tool available, we identified Voxer as a tool that could transcend time and space limitations to facilitate authentic text-based discussions. It is noteworthy that our purpose in this paper is not to recommend Voxer, specifically, but to examine the characteristics that make it an effective means of facilitating authentic literacy practices (like literature circles) virtually. We begin by introducing our respective contexts.

#### **Context 1: University-Based Teacher Education**

Meghan is a secondary English teacher educator in the southeast. Before working in teacher education, Meghan taught middle school ELA and regularly implemented literature circles. Although she experienced many of the challenges outlined previously, she found them to be an effective means of engaging students and differentiating instruction for students' academic, developmental, and personal differences. As a teacher educator working with veteran teachers, Meghan wanted to engage teachers with professional texts that complemented their interests, contexts, and pedagogical goals. Meghan also wanted to engage these veteran teachers with a different approach to the traditional in-class literature circle—one they could replicate in their own 6-12 teaching, particularly in virtual spaces.

At the time of this work, Meghan was teaching an advanced methods course, within which 15 veteran teachers, representing a range of experience levels (from 3-18 years) teaching 6-12th grade ELA, were enrolled. Because the course was taught entirely online, in designing the course and literature circles, Meghan took teachers' varying schedules, teaching commitments, family responsibilities, and school contexts into consideration. The diverse circumstances of her

students shaped both the content and platform of learning. After surveying teachers for the topics they were interested in learning more about (as related to teaching ELA), Meghan provided a list of professional books for the teachers to rank by interest. Teachers were then placed into groups of 3-4 based on their text rankings and given two weeks to read and discuss their text. The expectations for teachers' contributions to the discussions were open-ended (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Voxer discussion directions.

**Format:** Your responses to the book should take the form of an ongoing dialogue with your book club. You will use Voxer to communicate with your group members throughout the 2 weeks of the book club and should aim to contribute to the discussion **at least 8 times across those 2 weeks**. Ideally, though, you will contribute more often than that and will check in on and potentially contribute to the discussion every 24-48 hours throughout the 2 weeks.

**Content:** Your contributions to the Voxer discussions should evince your critical engagement with the text. To evince critical engagement, you might do some of the following:

- Address the substance of the readings. The purpose of your reflections is not to share whether or not you liked a reading OR to merely summarize a text. Instead, you might consider what the text allows you to "see," what arguments are presented, what perspectives are shared, and what challenges are presented or are probable.
- Consider what meanings, understandings, questions, and/or tensions you experienced and derived from the readings. What's troubling you? What's confusing? What makes complete sense?
- Consider why these meanings, understandings, questions, and/or tensions are important? Why are they significant to you, this class, society, education, etc.?
- Consider how the content of the readings aligns and/or conflicts with your work in schools.
- Offer examples from your own practice where you feel you are either embodying or struggling to embody the concepts, strategies, or approaches presented in the text.

## **Context 2: District-Based Professional Development**

Mollee was an elementary school media specialist in the southeast. Mollee worked with the teachers at her school and district, providing PD on technology integration. In collaboration with another teacher, Mollee designed a district-wide literature circle to foster discussions around relevant texts. After voting on the text they were most interested in reading and setting a reading schedule, all 17 participants (including K-12 teachers and media specialists) used Voxer to discuss. Each week, the facilitators (including Mollee) posed questions to guide the discussions and encourage participants to make connections between the text and their individual contexts. Questions included: What is a barrier to using some of the strategies presented in the text? and Which strategies are a definite 'no' for you and which ones are you willing to consider and, perhaps, modify?

At the completion of the first Voxer PD book study, the responsibility of setting up and leading the future literature circles shifted to the participants. Thus, the first literature circle served as a model that could be (and has been) replicated by smaller groups of teachers to lead on their own. Similar to Meghan’s work at the university, Mollee’s PD also served as a model that could be implemented into teachers’ work with K-12 students.

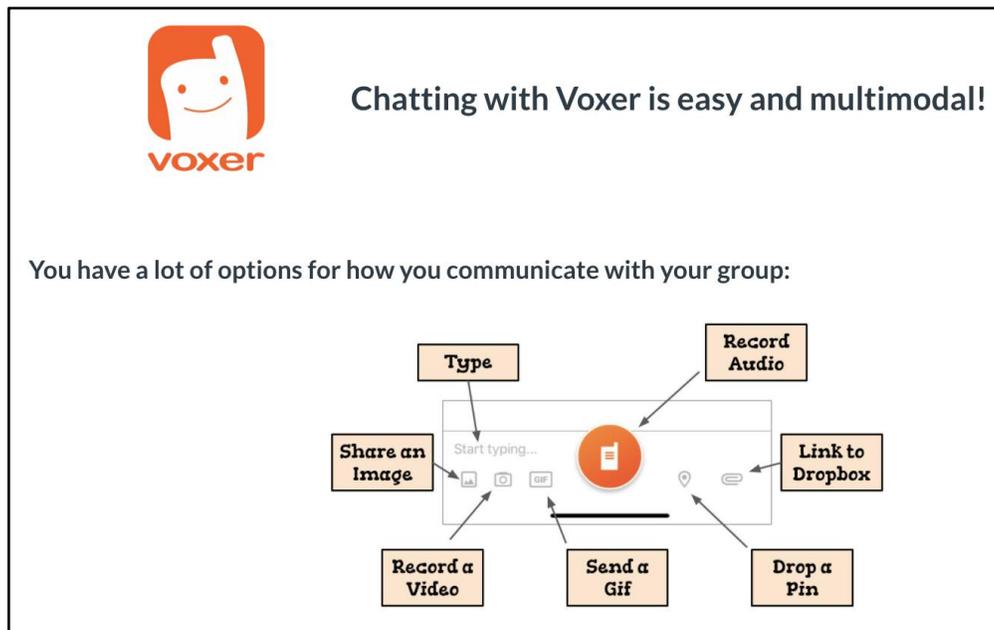
### So, What is Voxer?

Although we do not disregard the powerful role that digital tools can and are playing in education, we also recognize that *digital* tools are but one type of tool that individuals use to mediate learning. Not unlike other mediational tools (e.g., writing, reading, speaking, play, etc.), the selection of a digital tool should be guided by the objectives and contexts of learning. Given our respective goals and contexts, Voxer was selected as the technological tool most likely to foster authentic literacy practices—allowing students to challenge space and time limitations often placed on learning.

Voxer is a free app that allows individuals to communicate with a group using a range of literacies from text, images, Gifs, videos, to audio recordings (see Figure 2). After creating an account, individuals can establish groups and start chatting. The app is easy to use and replicates many of the forms of communication students (and teachers) are already participating in through other platforms (e.g., text, Snapchat, Instagram, Marco Polo, etc.). Thus, Voxer mirrored the types of “real world” reading and writing that individuals were already participating in—supporting our goals for authentic literacy practice.

Figure 2.

Voxer chat options.



## Connection-Building Through Virtual Literature Circles

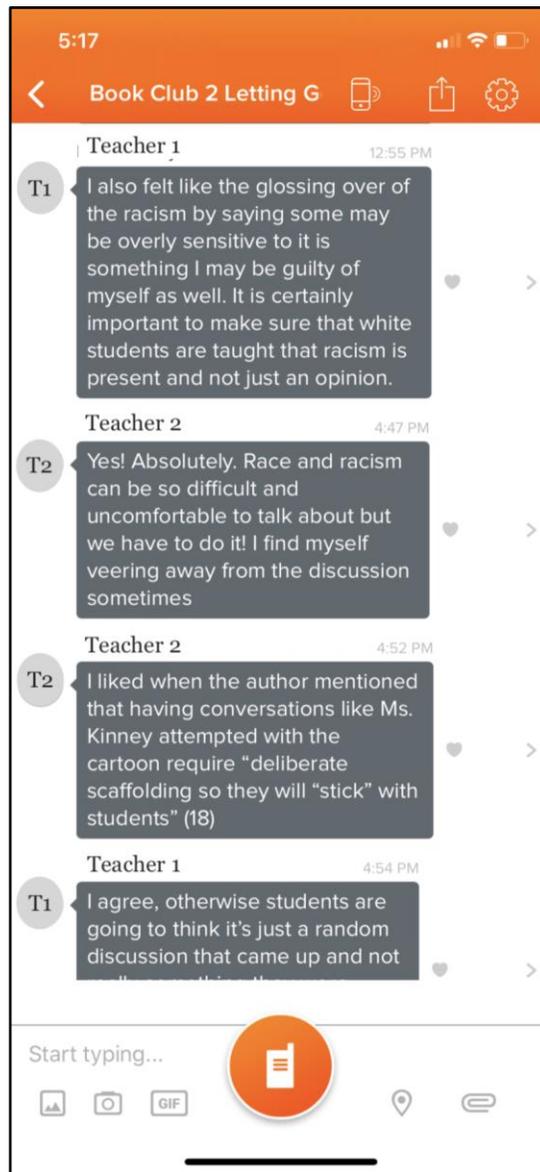
In our respective teacher groups, the Voxer literature circles supported two types of connections: *Connections among Individuals* and *Connections to Lived Realities*. These connections also allowed the literature circles to serve as means of authentic literacy practice among teachers that could be replicated in their own K-12 teaching.

### Connections Among Individuals

To be authentic, literacy practices should allow for collaboration. In this study, teachers were able to make collective meaning of their texts as they shared personal pedagogical fears and questions stimulated by the text. For instance, the teachers in Meghan's class discussed polemical topics presented in their books and considered how they might incorporate this knowledge into their respective contexts. In Figure 3, Teacher 1 referenced the tendency for teachers to gloss over discussions of racism, a topic presented in her group's text (*Letting Go of Literary Whiteness: Antiracist Literature Instruction for White Students* by Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Teacher 1 went on to consider her own role in this practice (i.e., "it is something I may be guilty of myself as well") and was met with shared vulnerability when Teacher 2 responded "I find myself veering away from the discussion sometimes." Having previously shared that she taught in a majority-white high school, Teacher 1 also expressed the importance of discussing racism as a current issue (rather than an opinion or historical issue) with her white students. Teacher 2 extended this thought by referencing the example of Ms. Kinney in the text and the significance of having intentional discussions about race and racism with all students.

Figure 3.

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 discussion.



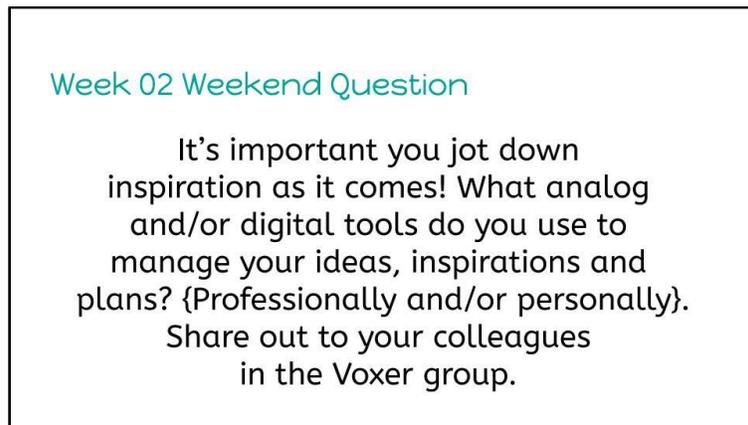
Although neither Meghan's nor Mollee's teachers worked in the same schools or had opportunities for in-person interactions, many were still able to build community as they interacted with one another through the literature circles. The connection-building and collaboration among students engaged in authentic literacy practices need not be purely academic. As educators, we know that social-emotional learning is also a significant aspect of schooling and individual development (Marlatt, 2020). In response to COVID-19, schools across the country incorporated more remote and online learning for students, prompting many

educators to question if opportunities for community-building and social-emotional learning may be stymied (Klein, 2020; Prothero, 2020).

Although we do not ascribe to the belief that online learning can or should replicate in-person learning, we do see evidence of teachers developing connections to and community with one another through their interactions in the Voxer literature circles. In each Voxer group, Mollee provided an optional weekly prompt that encouraged teachers to build rapport on topics such as their families, personal hobbies, and community engagement (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Sample weekly discussion prompt.

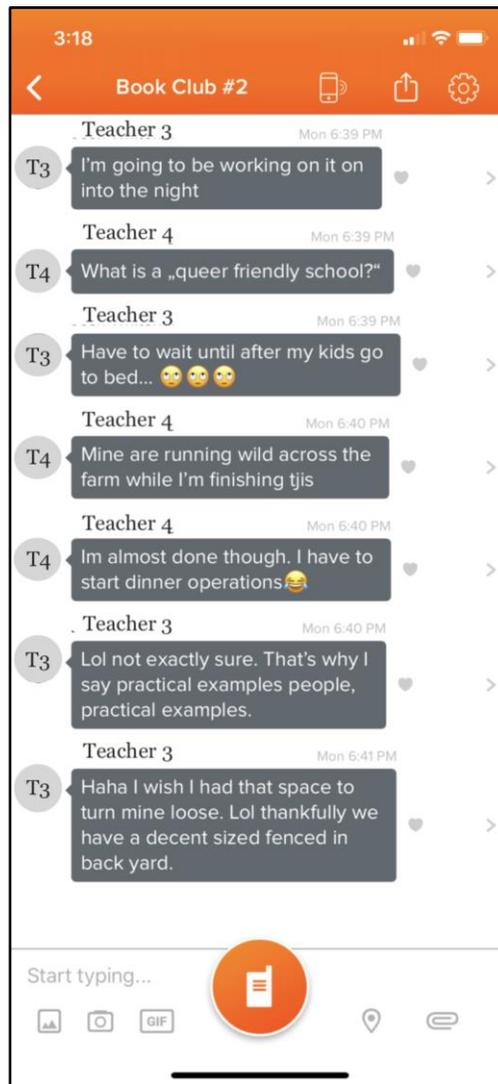


One educator shared how serving as a church music director helps him maintain his emotional well-being. He later reflected on how the content of the literature circle book overlapped with a book he was reading on his own, serving to enrich the impact of the books' messages. These interpersonal insights shared in Voxer groups not only provided dimension to names in the staff directory, but established a space where teachers could discuss the personal connections they were making to the shared text.

Similarly, Figure 5 illustrates two teachers from Meghan's class sharing their personal lives with one another as they try to balance their responsibilities to the literature circle:

Figure 5.

Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 Discussion.



In this interaction, Teachers 3 and 4 wove discussions of their text (i.e., “What is a ‘queer friendly school?’”) with discussions of their personal circumstances (i.e., “Have to wait until after my kids go to bed...”). Not only did these two teachers find that they shared common challenges in regards to balancing parenting with school work, this interaction also sheds light on what goes on behind the scenes of student learning.

Finally, teachers developed connections to one another as they considered how they might adapt Voxer for their own K-12 teaching. For instance, the teachers in Mollee’s PD shared their ideas for building off of their experiences with Voxer to facilitate more effective text-based discussions in their own teaching. One teacher’s experience with Voxer inspired her to incorporate more verbal reflection and dialogue in her teaching by using Google Docs add-ons for feedback and audio prompts in the Seesaw application. Another middle school ELA teacher

was prompted to move from the audio component of Voxer and use the audio-video platform of Flipgrid to give students a virtual space to communicate book recommendations with peers. Voxer also served as a means of developing teachers' critical responses to the shared texts. For instance, one facilitator of a literature circle on *The Deepest Well* (Harris, 2018) brought experts on Adverse Childhood Experiences into the Voxer group chat. By making these experts readily available, teachers had opportunities to engage in conversation that translated the text to personalized, context-specific practices. Thus, as they engaged in the Voxer literature circles, our teachers were learning from one another and building community, as they simultaneously considered how both the content and platform of their discussions could shape future teaching.

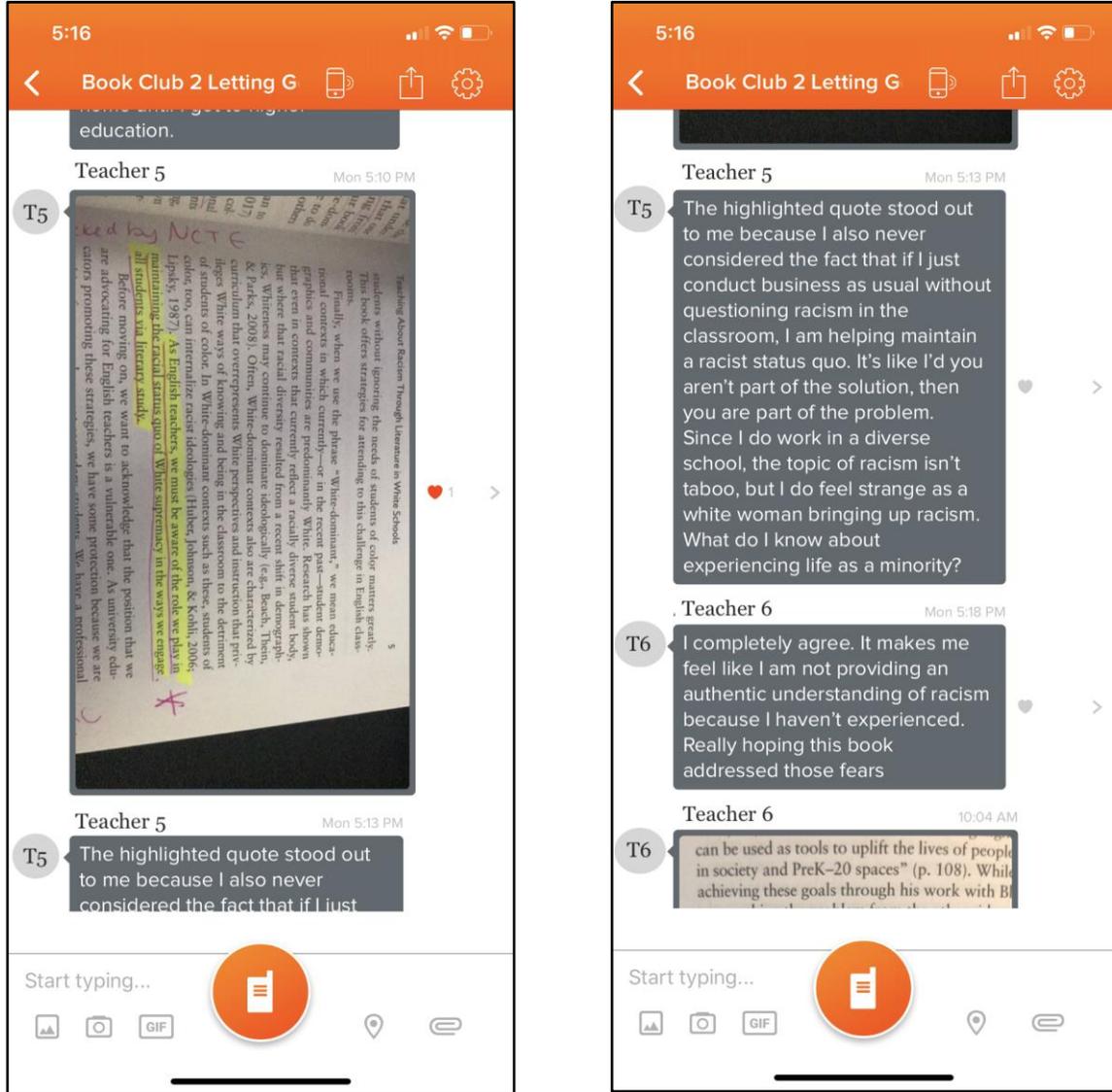
### **Connections to Lived Realities**

Participation in the Voxer literature circles was guided by resources, schedules, and responsibilities (as seen in Figure 4), thus establishing connections to students' lived realities. These literature circles also mitigated challenges related to time and classroom management. For instance, one of the teachers in Mollee's group expressed that in her own teaching she struggled to address required standards and also provide enough time for student dialogue about their reading. However, her participation in the Voxer literature circle suggested that students might be able to engage in rich discussions about their texts when those discussions were removed from the constraints of the class period—thus allowing for more time for synthesis and processing.

The teachers were also able to communicate in ways that mirrored their real-world behaviors and ways of communicating. In Figure 6, Teacher 5 shares a photo of her book, with highlighting, underlining, and notes in the margins.

Figure 6.

Teacher 5 and Teacher 6 Discussion.

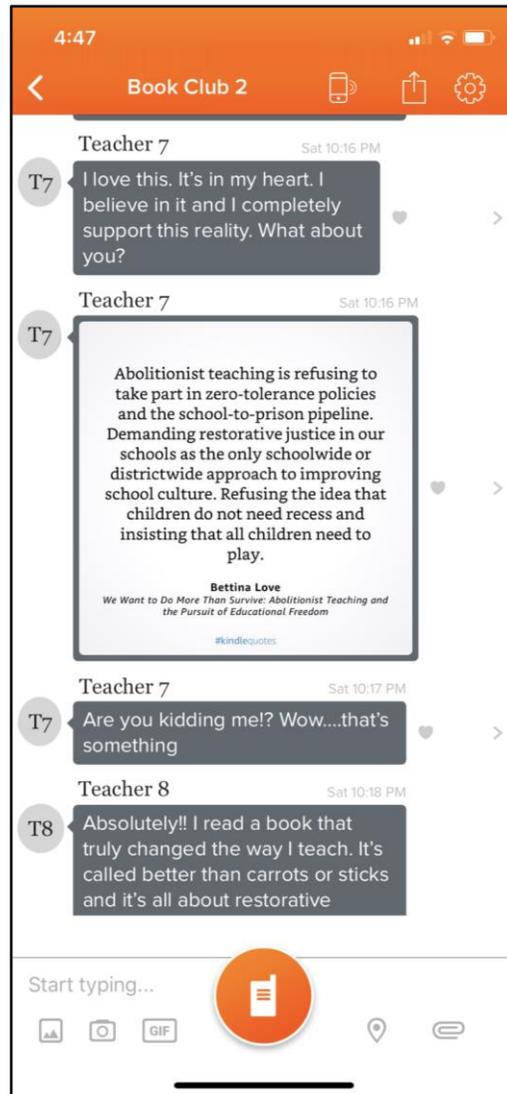


She also chats with her group about why the highlighted quote was meaningful to her. As can be seen in the red heart to the right of the image, one of Teacher 5's group members "liked" the shared image. In this one screenshot, we see examples of real-world literacy practices and evidence of independent and mature reading fostered through the affordances of Voxer. These teachers are using multiple modes (e.g., images, emojis, alpha-numeric text) to make and communicate meaning and are doing so at times that are convenient for them (e.g., Monday evening and Tuesday morning).

Similarly, in Figure 7 two teachers discuss their text (*We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* by Love, 2019) on Saturday evening.

Figure 7.

Teacher 7 and Teacher 8 Discussion.



Because Voxer allowed teachers to discuss their text on their own time, they were able to express immediate and passionate reactions to the text—reactions that are often lost when students must wait until the designated class times to discuss. Both Teachers 7 and 8 expressed excitement about what they were reading (i.e., “Are you kidding me!?” and “Absolutely!!”), with Teacher 7 even highlighting a specific passage from the book through a #kindlequote image. These teachers’ experiences suggest that opportunities for authentic literacy practice must attend to more than just the content of learning and expand to include attention to how and when students learn and communicate.

## Implications for K-12 Teaching

Our experiences working with a range of teachers in the Voxer literature circles have implications for the ways that teachers might select and use digital tools to facilitate authentic literacy practices with K-12 students. As we approached our work with teachers, we shared a common goal: to engage teachers in collaborative discussions of relevant texts. We considered literature circles to be authentic literacy practices wherein teachers could read and discuss topics that were significant to them, think across their individual contexts, and build community with one another. Although foregrounded here, Voxer is merely one tool that teachers might use to meet these pedagogical and interpersonal goals. There is a wealth of digital tools available to teachers that could be effective given diverse contexts and goals. Our work with teachers suggests that there are some qualities that teachers might look for when selecting digital tools and some pedagogical practices they might use to effectively incorporate those tools as a means of facilitating authentic literacy practices.

The qualities that teachers need in digital tools will vary. For our contexts and pedagogical goals, we needed a digital tool that met the following requirements:

- free,
- easy to use,
- allowed for group discussions,
- provided notifications to users,
- allowed for diverse response modes, and
- app-based, allowing users access from their phones.

Although we had access to discussion boards in our respective Learning Management Systems (LMS), they allowed for limited response modes, did not include an app-add-on, and did not provide notifications to users. Thus, the LMS discussion boards replicated many of the limitations of traditional and face-to-face instruction that we aimed to challenge through authentic literacy practice.

Authentic literacy instruction should also begin by meeting students where they are. As teachers, we must recognize that students are reading, writing, thinking, and communicating in myriad spaces and across time. Not only must teachers look for tools that mirror the ways that students are already communicating with one another, they must allow for flexibility in the ways and times that students discuss shared texts. Flexibility is especially important when working with digital tools as they are constantly changing and new tools are currently flooding the educational market. Thus, teachers must continually revisit their digital selections to consider if the tool is still the most effective, given their pedagogical goals and teaching context.

Like the teachers we worked with, students need structure and guidelines for discussion participation and tool use. Not only did all of the teachers need directions for downloading and using the Voxer app, they needed norms for communication. Figure 8, developed by Mollee and

her colleague Holly King, provides an example of the types of discussion norms that were helpful to teachers as they got started with Voxer.

Figure 8.

Discussion norms.

## Voxer Book Chat Etiquette

- **Confidential:** Everyone should feel safe enough to authentically share and ask questions. Forwarding messages without permission is not appropriate.
- **Be Courteous:**
  - Your name always appears, so intros are not necessary
  - Use side-voxes for personal, 2-way messages.
  - If you reference outside resources, please include a link(s) in your message.
  - Tap the Heart Button  to acknowledge messages
  - Think before you speak!
  - Be an efficient and compassionate communicator, and keep messages relevant to the topic.

Both groups of teachers needed guidance regarding how often to contribute to the discussions, the topics to discuss, and even what style of writing to use. Teachers also need to provide guidance and norms for K-12 students, based on their prior experiences with literature circles, technology, resources, and learning profiles.

As facilitators, we also needed to determine our roles in the literature circles. Although we both chose not to contribute actively and regularly to group discussions, we did find that there were instances where we needed to correct misunderstandings, redirect discussion, and/or provide additional resources. As mentioned previously, facilitating in-class literature circles where different groups are working at different paces and on different texts can be overwhelming (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007), as the teacher will be unable to listen to every literature circle during one class period. Rather than running from group to group to manage thirty or more students simultaneously, the virtual literature circle allows the teacher to be in multiple places at once, to pace their observations, to read and think deeply with students, and to provide more effective differentiated instruction.

To those teachers looking to enhance authentic engagement through digital tools, we offer the following questions to guide your decision-making in regards to digital tool selection, discussion facilitation, and continued development and growth.

### Selecting a Digital Tool:

- What does authentic engagement look like to you? Consider both the content of students' talk and the format of their communications (i.e., writing style, timing of contributions, length of contributions, etc.).
- What are your learning objectives? Consider what students need to know and/or be able to do after participating in the lesson or unit you're developing. Use those objectives to guide your selection of a digital tool.
- What limitations will you need to work around? Consider how time, space, resources, curriculum, testing, and administrative expectations may shape what is and is not possible with digital tools.

### Facilitating Engagement Through the Tool:

- How much guidance do your students need to be successful? Allow the development of parameters for their contributions to digital discussion to be guided by your knowledge of their ages, experiences, sense of classroom community, and individual and collective cultures.
- What is the teacher's role? Draw on your knowledge of your teaching context to determine what teacher positioning will foster the most authentic, critical, and engaged collaboration among students.

### Growing Your Practice:

- What went well? What could use improvement? After incorporating the digital tool, ask your students for feedback and recommendations. Use these recommendations to enhance the authentic nature of your work moving forward.

Experienced teachers know that “one-size-fits-all” approaches to teaching often don't fit. Instead, we hope the questions posed here allow teachers to consider their own unique contexts as they determine how best to facilitate authentic engagement with students.

### **Conclusion**

As teachers, we still experience frustration. We see superficial Voxer chats that stray from the topics presented in the texts and we find that some groups need more guidance than others. However, we also see folks having real, in-the-moment reactions to what they read. We see them discussing their personal lives with one another and being vulnerable as they admit to their own fears and struggles. And we see folks sharing their personal connections to the texts and the lived realities that shape how and when they make meaning of the world. Ultimately, we have learned that fostering authentic literacy practices virtually requires teachers to select digital tools and pedagogies that complement and extend the literacy practices students are already engaging in, while simultaneously acknowledging that learning and meaning making happen beyond the bell and beyond the classroom.

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# **“COMPASSIONED IMAGINATION”: MULTICULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN FILM AS A TEXT**

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## **Abstract**

Five teachers were included in a study of how film is used as a text to create connections to literacy when working with adolescents in rural Appalachian schools. Two of these teachers, in particular, revealed an avenue of text-based instruction with film that included representation of the lived experience of oppressed groups of people. This manuscript explores the ways these teachers moved from covering literacy standards to using film as a text for analysis, including the work of troubling assumptions and asking students to take a larger view of the human story alongside concepts of empathy and social justice. Teachers connected these texts to traditional readings at times, as well as to social studies and English/language arts content.

## **“Compassioned Imagination”: Multicultural Representation in Film as a Text**

In the winter of 2018-2019, I worked with five teachers, four at a rural middle school and one at a rural high school, to examine the ways that film could be used when teaching literacy concepts. Teachers taught social studies, English/language arts, or a combination of the two. This manuscript focuses on the educational moves two of these social studies teachers made to use film as a text for exploring the experiences of marginalized and oppressed BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). Teachers arrived at these moves in collaboration with one another in a teaching dyad, based on their desire to explore the human stories present within the curriculum they were required to teach. The educators whose work I have represented engaged in a process of dialogue with one another, centered around content and their mutual love of film, that took place over a decade of working together. One teacher featured in this piece taught middle school social studies, and the other taught social studies at the high school level, as well as an elective journalism course. The purpose of this manuscript is to describe and explore the film-based teaching practices of these three educators, and thereby to offer steps for using film as a text that can open up conversations with students about the experiences of people who have a range of experiences.

While my initial research question was aimed at how these teachers experienced film as a textual resource in terms of the surface of literacy instruction, one matter that arose from the research which I have continued to think about has been how these teachers talked about addressing multiculturalism in their classrooms through film. These teachers, who all were all white, worked in an Appalachian district where approximately 95% of their students were white, and yet used

film and other texts to raise questions of representation and culture both to challenge assumptions from the dominant group, as well as to honor the experiences of less represented groups in their classrooms.

The teachers, who chose the pseudonyms Cedar and Tom, each spoke to the research question in a unique way. I first understand film as text, drawing from Astruc's (1948) use of film as an authored product, including a range of textual tools and literary analyses. For my understanding of the ways that cultures can be represented in texts, I chiefly drew on Banks's (2013) notion that "all students – regardless of their gender; sexual orientation; social class; and ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics – should have equal opportunity to learn in school" (p. 3). Since working on this project, I have also come to more critical consideration of my own positionality and owe much to the work of Kendi (2019) in thinking about the role of my own privilege, as well as my desire to act as an advocate and ally.

In this study, film served as a site for conversations about the experiences of a wide range of people. It was this exploration of a multitude of stories and perspectives that shaped my thinking about how teachers were using film as a complex array of motion picture narratives. I approached this study from the position of a teacher-researcher who works with pre-service and in-service teachers, and who maintains a deep commitment to exploring the potential for social justice and identity work to be addressed through literacy practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the purposes of the study, I defined film as a text, drawing on Astruc's (1948) notion of the camera as a pen. This definition helped me to think through the role of the director as an author, and helped me consider the artistic choices teachers made in how to show films and how to have students respond.

My initial theoretical framework centered on Kress's (2005) definition of multimodality to consider the ways messages were communicated in the films that teachers were using. Kress (2005) discussed media in terms of a method or system for communication, while he used the term mode to signify individual sites for meaning-making with the larger system of a medium. For film, this meant that teachers used visual media, but the modes they utilized for communication included elements that were both visual and auditory. I saw film as a complex assemblage of many elements, sending messages through a variety of modes. Within these modes, I have continued to consider the ways in which film is used as a way of representing lived experience .

I have chiefly drawn on Hall's (2013) concept of constructionist representation, alongside Banks's (2013) definition of multicultural education. While the previous theories were helpful in building an initial understanding, my second round of analysis and writing focused on this notion of representation. According to Hall (2013), "Representation connects meaning and language to culture" (p. 1). The concept of a constructionist representation system exists in opposition to a reflective theory of representation, which reflects an already-existing meaning found externally, and an intentional theory of representation, which draws on what the filmmaker has intended to communicate. In terms of this study, I found that teachers used film as a text for showing

dimensions of experience that were outside of the daily framework of their students' lives. Teachers then used the shared film experience to build dialogue and, in many cases, have students create their own films to share experiences. In effect, the film served as a starting point for constructing conversation that led to considerations of multicultural perspectives.

Hall (2013) went on to describe the process of meaning construction as involving “an active process of interpretation” (p. 17). This constructionist representation system relies on language and, for the particular purposes of this study, revolves around the way language is used to construct meaning both within the grammar of the film being shared, as well as the discourse of the classroom work that takes place around that film. Teachers used the language of the film and the ways experiences were portrayed to lead into discussions about multiculturalism.

### **Review of the Literature**

There has been much written about the classroom use of film to meet a variety of purposes, and it is no secret that films are commonly used in classrooms, though to what degree that use is effective can be debated. In our current media landscape, deeper work must be done with media, including a focus on messages and interpretation. Film, like all media, has the capacity for sharing agenda-based messages with political and social overtones. Hobbs (2007) wrote about this political positioning of film and spoke to the importance of analyzing media so that students can understand and critique embedded messages. Serafini (2014) also identified this potential for analysis with film, moving student experience beyond simply viewing to an active sense of critical engagement. These levels of analysis can focus on the composition of film, but also on the messages that are contained within what Serafini (2014) called ensembles. When it comes to multicultural representation, film can serve as a space for deeper analysis and conversation about how people and groups are depicted, and what messages these depictions carry with them.

In fact, the ways that groups of people are depicted in film has served as a site for work with students in prior studies (Gainer, 2010; Tobin, 2000). Gainer (2010) utilized a critical media literacy approach in an ethnographic study with middle school students, exploring popular films and exposing assumptions that the films created. What Gainer's (2010) study demonstrated is that deeper conversations can be built with students, centering on the ways that directors depict cultural groups. Film can serve as a vehicle for building understanding and literally showing students what life is like for marginalized groups. In this study, eleven students watched film clips and then participated in interviews about the kinds of changes they would make to the ways the films worked when depicting young people and educational settings. This “what if” scenario displays one potential use of film as not just a time-filler, but a place where dialogue can be constructed and decisions can be made. This dialogue can take place among youth, but can also be examined in earlier years of literacy development. Tobin (2000) gathered the impressions of elementary children when viewing popular films. Responses included concepts of gender and race that were reinforced by the media the children were viewing. Messages are clearly carried by film, just like books and other media, and these studies indicate that work must be done around these representations to help students unpack and critique them.

The move from viewer to creator is also nothing new in terms of research. Studies have also looked at how youth depict their own environments in video projects. Jocson (2018) completed ethnographic work, examining the production aspects of student-created video poems. Young filmmakers chose prominent figures like Spike Lee to emulate in terms of camera angles and other creative decisions, and included locations that were significant parts of their geographic landscape in the films. Chisholm and Trent (2014) looked at the digital reflection of an adolescent in a rural setting, noting her use of daily experiences and elements to construct a multimodal response.

Banks (2008) noted that global citizenship requires a sense of multiculturalism to make its way into the classroom, allowing students to work with one another equitably. Lankshear and Knobel (2011) also spoke to the role of a wide range of literacies, including New Literacies, in reshaping and challenging culture. New Literacies include a variety of digital products, such as film, but also extending to websites, video games, and other materials. As Hall (2013) noted, the constructionist approach to language entails the idea that “neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language” (p. 11). As I will soon explore, teachers worked with students to construct meanings around film, building language and prompting prior understanding before ever pressing the play button in their classroom.

Essentially, what literature bears out and what each of the teachers demonstrated in our study is that multicultural experiences of language, even the language of film, are situated within a framework of dialogue and analysis. These discussions inevitably lead to concepts of power. Elsewhere, Hall (1974) examined this sense of power in terms of censorship and media bias, underscoring this notion of power and influence. In this piece, Hall (1974) explored the ways objectivity is abandoned in media representation in favor of interpretations from dominant social groups. As Hobbs (2007) has suggested, these examples of bias and agenda must be analyzed, and teachers must engage in helping students develop skills for critiquing media messages.

### **Methods**

In order to gain an understanding of the teachers’ experiences, I conducted interviews at the beginning and end of the research project. This use of two interviews helped me to seek out the stories teachers wanted to tell on two occasions, as well as providing an opportunity to address any lingering questions that came up throughout the process (Polkinghorne, 2015). Additionally, these two times for conversation helped me to respect teachers’ time by focusing our extended talk in a more limited timeframe.

Throughout the course of the project, teachers kept auditory or written logs for me as a way of capturing what it was like to teach with film in the moment (Rowan & Correnti, 2009). I invited teachers to log as they felt most comfortable. These instructional logs proved to be a tool for teachers’ reflection but also gave me added insight into classroom interactions and uses of film.

Finally, teachers shared documents and handouts with me throughout the project. These documents gave me a visual to keep for the kinds of tools teachers were using to pair paper and traditional print with the moving images they made use of.

Once all of these data were collected, I transcribed all interviews and logs, and then began the process of coding. My first round of codes issued from the words of participants, verbatim. These in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2016) helped me focus on the specific terms and phrases that teachers were using. I then followed this initial coding process with a second round of gerundial codes, focused on the actions and decisions teachers were taking. In this way, I hoped to think about both the ideology and action steps that educators expressed.

All first and second round codes were collected in a table, and were then synthesized into overarching themes from the study. I shared codes and themes on five separate occasions with scholar-peers who provided feedback and suggestions. This group also helped me think through additional questions I might address with the teachers in the study, which were completed through member checks over the course of the two months the study took place.

### **Findings**

In the course of our work together, the experiences of two teachers struck me as particularly notable due to their uses of film for examining and rethinking cultural experiences in environments that were largely homogenous in terms of race and ethnicity. For many of these teachers, simply not having the conversation might have been a more comfortable step. This use of film went beyond traditional approaches, including the pairing of film with prose reading experiences, or the analysis of the elements of film that can be accomplished. Teachers did engage in more traditional uses of film, but there was more to their exploration than these general approaches.

From our conversations, I gathered that a multicultural approach to film requires the teacher to think through the student audience, and then examine the complexities of the ways people, societies, and groups are depicted in motion pictures. This is work that requires time spent on planning, as well as the courage to think through responses that may be less inviting. These processes are often dialogical, and sometimes even reach into teachers' personal time, as teachers consider and reconsider what they want to show in class and build their pedagogical playlists.

#### **Cedar's Classroom Conversations**

There are a number of moves that seventh-grade teacher Cedar (pseudonym) makes to ensure that his World Geography courses come alive and address important questions. First, Cedar begins from a foundation of telling the human story, rather than listing a series of low-level facts. This focus on humanity forms a bedrock in his classroom teaching and informs his practices, and also takes place before any viewing occurs in his classroom. In this way, Cedar shapes a dialogue with his students that begins a multicultural exploration before pairing video and image with the ideas he shares.

In order to engage with the wider community, Cedar asks his seventh-grade social studies students to go home and have conversations with their families about perceptions of countries and places that are part of his state standards. He calls this an "Ask a Human" assignment and begins to prod issues of power and representation. Cedar said, "I get them to go home, share with

an adult in their life, mom, dad, crazy uncle, friendly mailman...Do you see us doing things that would make us lose our, I introduce the word hegemony” (Interview 1, November 2018). By beginning conversations this way, Cedar is not only addressing content area vocabulary and concepts, but is also doing so in a way that engages students in a relevant thought process about the worldviews they encounter each day. Cedar seizes on existing social and family structures as places to begin his work with students.

For Cedar’s class, this conversation takes place before the use of film to set up further dialogue. Once students engage in discussion with family members, they return to class and have what Cedar calls a communal sharing of finds. The teacher plays music, the students walk around the room, and when the teacher pauses the music, the students turn and find someone to share ideas with. From there, Cedar begins to trouble assumptions about cultural groups, and this work often takes place within videos that he makes. Following up on our conversation about what students talk about when they “Ask a Human,” he said, “For example, on our unit on Africa, the main kind of thing I want to do is to get them to have a bomb dropped on their single story of Africa, which is the animals are the beautiful and the people are starving” (Interview 1, November 2018). Cedar created a video of interviews around town, asking members of the community five questions: “Name an Empire or kingdom, what do you think of when you hear the word Africa, what are some geographic features, some things about the people, and the point was that even adults have a single story of Africa. Why is that?” (Cedar, Interview 1, November 2018).

By beginning with what he considers simple questions, this teacher opens a critical lens into the perceptions that dominate students’ social landscapes and then makes instructional decisions about how to correct and extend their thinking. He utilizes Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk as part of this exercise about Africa.

Cedar’s work with making films also includes his students as part of the process. One example he shared was a lesson about the global water crisis that has occurred in many parts of the world. He said, “I got the students to carry a five-gallon bucket of water around the track, like you teamed up. Two people would carry it half way, pass it off to another two. Carry it another half way around the track, and it was 400 meters around” (Interview 1, November 2018). Part of this use of film, for Cedar and his students, includes the notion of seeing themselves, even as they examine what is happening in other parts of the world.

Cedar also uses existing films to trouble cultural assumptions. This teacher recognizes that he is living and working in a ostensibly homogenous community, and yet draws on clips to help students rethink their views of often-villainized and marginalized groups of people: “I’m always bringing things back to our modern times. If we’re talking about Islam, a billion and a half, a little over, have this belief system on the planet you live on. Here’s how it began, here’s what it’s like now. How in your culture, maybe it’s viewed” (Cedar, Interview 1, November 2018). Even though Cedar’s audience predominately holds a different religion and worldview, he asks questions and elicits discussion, ultimately with the hope of changing perspectives. Cedar said, “So, how is your view of Muslims different after you’ve seen [Malala Yousafzai]? How is your view of education different after you’ve seen what she’s gone through?” (Interview 1, November

2018). Film provides a palpable sense of access to these pressing and sometimes emotional experiences.

This use of film helps students to not only think about the value they place on the experience of education, but also rethink their views on Islam. Because Cedar teaches in a conservative area, he recognizes that many of his students have some affiliation to local churches. He attempts to show them concepts of what he calls “loving their neighbor” represented by other religions, including introducing the notion “that this Islamic girl is even being very Jesusish in terms of how she’s wanting to treat her enemies” (Interview 1, November 2018). By drawing on the dominant religion in their community, Cedar positions a belief system and set of cultural experiences as being remarkably aligned with experiences that are too quickly viewed as *different* and *other*.

Cedar acts as viewer as well as maker and invites his students into both processes in a classroom environment that has been saturated with dialogue to help his students consider their own positions and examine voices in their local community. When I asked if Cedar ever experienced push-back from family members, he shared that he is actually often thanked by parents and members of the community for opening up these avenues of conversation. In an environment where the temptation may be to move through controversial topics quickly, Cedar lingers on these questions with intentional pedagogy that elicits dialogue, has his students engage with the community, and uses film to create experiences for his students that allow them to see the fabric of stories that are not like their own, and yet sometimes are similar.

### **Tom’s Use of Immigration Stories**

In order to build connections with his students, Tom (pseudonym) uses a variety of films to speak to multicultural experiences. He has shown *Cinderella Man* (2005) in teaching the time period surrounding The Great Depression, including navigating issues of poverty, and has used *Hidden Figures* (2017) to look at the experience of being female in a male-dominated world, as well as the experiences of people of color.

The place where Tom spent most of our conversation regarding multicultural depiction was his use of a George Lopez film to tackle the topic of deportation and the question of where home is. The film he includes is *Spare Parts* (2016), and he keeps the book that acts as the film’s source material available in his classroom if his students are interested in reading a copy. Tom described his use of the film in our first interview:

“So, [the students are] relating to what school life is like, but can’t relate to this, they’re going home to ICE may knock on the door and they have to run out the back door to get away, so they’re not deported. That’s the part that film gets to teach. So, you take a fantastic actor like George Lopez and these young actors who do a really job of just presenting what, what this life is like, what this day to day is like, but you’re also chasing a dream. Now this, we study legislation and the Dream Act was introduced through this story, so this one kid was brought here and this is DACA in a nutshell. It’s like you’ve got these kids that are brought over as 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9-year-olds illegally by their parents, but this is all they’ve known. This is home. Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, California. Our state becomes home, but yet when they turn 18, they go apply for a job or they try to

go to college and they find out that they're illegal immigrants, they get sent back (Interview 1, November 2018).

First among Tom's many moves is the recognition that his students are about to enter the adult world and have vague notions of what other experiences are like. From there, Tom takes a concept that could be a brief moment in his curriculum and expands on it by reaching out to a film that shows a more human side to the story. This use of film troubles the assumption that "home" is another country for children who are deemed illegal, and Tom speaks to his moral point by using film. He expanded on this notion and said, "home is all these things we've just mentioned, it's not Mexico" (Interview 1, November 2018). Tom went on to say, "Film has done this for me as a teacher. So, within an hour and 45 minutes, my kids just saw this true story and for those who are readers, hey it's a book" (Interview 1, November 2018).

One of the points that Tom emphasized in our interview is that the pause button is an essential feature of film effectively. Like Cedar, he begins to build a story early on before viewing, but then makes pedagogical decisions about where to pause and where to stand back and let film do its work. Tom also speaks to the value of encouraging his students to expand on their interests, when piqued by film, and explore traditional and digital texts:

It's on my bookshelf. So that's the beauty of film and books, and I try to stock my shelves with, if you're a reader go find out more about this. This movie actually came about, the book came about, from an article in *Wired Magazine*, which my kids love *Wired Magazine*. Right? And it's like a four-page article. You know, I don't have that *Wired Magazine* edition but you can get that online and it's like if you want to find out more about this, film, gosh it does such a great job of, you want to find out more? Go online and you will find out more stuff and then we have to teach kids now to navigate through Google searches but I mean, like, okay. I'm willing to do that. If film is the door that opens up the curiosity, I'm going there. You know, if film allows them to broaden and open up, you know, their just compassionate imagination, then I'm willing to go there (Interview 1, November 2018).

Knowing that he is teaching an audience that is predominately white, Tom seeks to represent those who are marginalized in his school population. He also seizes on any opportunity for text exposure, first using the film, but then creating the invitation to read books and articles on the Internet. Tom describes himself as "willing" to go where students need to go in order to engage in reading and consider the world around them. He asks his students a series of questions about their experiences when they watch films, and then facilitates dialogue actively, seeking their voices. Tom calls himself the "spider in the corner" and refers to building classroom dialogue as spinning his web.

At the end of the semester, students in Tom's class share products that reflect a part of their study of history in what Tom calls a panoply. If students speak a language other than English, Tom encourages them to use their language of origin as part of the project and share a piece of their experience with the class. What Tom shares is a progression from building dialogue with films to connecting the films with other texts, and then allowing his students to create their own

texts. Tom created a culminating class panoply as an opportunity to reflect on the course, and a way for students to share their experiences as members of equal and valuable members of the classroom community. This teacher's use of film, along with other strategies, leads from dialogue to representation, and then to enacting experiences in a variety of student-created products, including visual and written products.

### **Discussion**

What seems to ring true of the two teachers I have shared about in this article is that each one takes a curricular opportunity and extends it to engage students in critical discussions of multicultural representation, using film alongside other media as a site for this work. It is through this use of text exposure, questioning, and dialogue that teachers worked with students to consider the ways representations were constructed – even addressing students' own constructed representations. In reviewing the state standards these teachers were addressing, this notion of depiction is not evident. In spite of their busy and hectic planning, Cedar and Tom both use filmic text to develop these conversations about justice and regarding all people positively in classrooms that were largely homogeneous. One could argue that, in the current political climate, these questions might be easier to ignore. It should be noted that this research project occurred prior to the events of the summer of 2020, but were made all the more pressing as a result of these events, including the death of George Floyd and the push-back on Critical Race Theory that occurred in the context of this year. Even in the face of discomfort, these teachers pursue conversations of equity, diversity, and representation in their classrooms because they value the humanity at the center of their content area. I continue to note my positionality as a white cisgender male professor who invites critical friends to consider my work, and has a strong desire to be an upstander, ally, and advocate for scholarship that considers a wide range of cultural experiences.

For Cedar, the use of film means that he prompts the conversation early on, without additional media voices, and then this teacher introduces examples from popular and documentary films that open up a new line of thinking about people and places. Cedar takes the additional step of including his students in video products so that they can see themselves as they think about the world around them. By inviting conversations with families, considerations of the dominant cultures represented in the local community, and counter-narratives presented accessibly in film, Cedar poses questions of identity that students might otherwise not encounter. This teacher invites families as stakeholders and critically adjacent voices who can take part in the community conversation. This educator then guides that dialogue as a facilitator, drawing on students' immediate contexts to help them think about alternative perspectives.

For Tom, a conversation about current legal issues in his history and journalism classes could be breezed by, but instead he emphasizes his use of the pause button. Like Cedar, Tom sets up the conversation early and then leads his students to apply their learning when they depictions of what these issues look like when rendered with very human faces. The intentional choice to pause, question, and facilitate further conversation allows students the opportunity to consider the intersections of their own identities, and discuss possibilities for meaningful change in a society that is increasingly divided.

What these teachers have done, on the surface, may not seem remarkable. Film has been used in classrooms for many decades. Of the many moves that these teachers made which are notable is the ways in which they draw on a media literacy approach of analysis and evaluation to engage their students in a dialogue about social issues. They recognize that films, along with all texts are culturally constructed products, composed by directors, and they use these representations to prod multicultural – and human – questions. Rather than ignoring controversial conversations, these teachers use film as a way to glimpse the experiences of minoritized communities. I note that their work has limitations, and note the need for further conversation from emic BIPOC voices.

By approaching film this way, these teachers not only emphasize experiences and identities which might be missed in the film itself, but in their classroom and school culture, as well. Their work was important in the initial context of data collection, and continues to grow in urgency in the context of racial divide and increasingly evidenced inequity.

### **Further Recommendations for Instructional Steps**

Teachers who wish to engage in the work of considering antiracist and multicultural narratives in film can take a number of steps, based on the work of the two teachers whose instructional steps have been described in this article.

1. View and encounter a wide range of stories. Just as we continue to read widely as literacy-centered teachers of literature and content, so too must we continue to consider the wide range of filmed resources available for use in the classroom.
2. Step to the role of facilitator. Conversations about inequality and inequity are important, and film can provide a meaningful and engaging way of discussing these stories. Consider the power of engaging students in critical dialogue and acting as facilitator, guiding the conversation toward unity and empathy when necessary.
3. Embrace discomfort. Though critically important and transformative, conversations about the intersection of identities can be uncomfortable. Recognizing this discomfort as part of a very necessary process might help more productive conversations to occur.
4. Begin with self. Consider beginning the work of antiracist and multicultural pedagogy personally, and recognize that tensions surround this kind of work. I am still engaged with this work in my own scholarship and teaching, and continue to learn. As Cedar and Tom demonstrate in their teaching, finding a variety of perspectives helps us see beyond ourselves as we simultaneously consider our identities more carefully.

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# **BUILDING TEACHER ENSEMBLE ONE IMPROVISATION AT A TIME**

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## **Abstract**

In the context of teacher supervision, the dynamics of power can elevate trainers or supervisors to positions of authority and teachers to positions of inferiority. Just as teachers might characterize new approaches to curriculum as being too complex, strange, or uncertain contrasted with the familiar routine, teacher supervisors might use the same categories to describe teachers resisting a curricular or pedagogical innovation. In either case, the result is diagnostic blame, rather than critical self-reflection. But we do need to consider what we, collectively, could do differently to fashion environments whereby supervisors and teachers feel more confident or safer about the vulnerability that curricular reform demands. Returning to applied theatre and the potential of its repertoires for forwarding the project of curricular reform, in this article, the authors focus on a series of improvisational strategies and games to explore how applied theatre exercises might contribute to the pre/co-requisite of community that language teacher development requires.

## **Building Teacher Ensemble One Improvisation at a Time**

Curricular reform, whether in the context of Charlotte, North Carolina, Carthage, Tunisia, or Tangier, Morocco, depends, in large part, on teachers' willingness to take risks individually and collectively. However, as Lasky (2005) explained, "Little is understood about the ways in which teacher identity interacts with reform mandates to affect teachers' experiences of professional vulnerability, particularly when policies are accompanied with new tools (e.g., curricula or

accountability practices) and expectations for teaching” (p. 899). What we do know, with Lasky (2005), is that “policy mandates are adapted, adopted, or ignored” (p. 900); and, teachers make these choices actively, passively, or somewhere in between. In traditional institutional settings with solidified bureaucratic hierarchies, curricular reform is, consequently, framed as teacher-policing whereby interactions between supervisors and teachers are scripted on teacher compliance (see Michie, 2019).

In this article, we argue that teacher development for communicative language teaching and learning whether in the form of an interactive teacher seminar or in formal supervisor/teacher observation is contingent largely on participants’ willingness to interact with one another toward a shared goal and to take chances to achieve that goal or goals together. In such pedagogical regions, we collectively become generative “environments” for each other. The meanings that we assign and improvise through our transactions as an ensemble of professionals with the curriculum grow our learning and ourselves. However, initiating collaboration and risk-taking requires intentional and purposeful action. For curricular reform to take hold, teachers need to believe that the chances they take with something new will be supported (see e.g., Comber & Nixon, 2009; Ketelaar, Beijjaard, Boshuizen, & Den Brok, 2012; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

In recent collaborations, we examined the potential of applied theatre strategies for engineering adolescent learners’ multi-modal meaning making with classroom texts and the writing process (Murray, Salas, & Ni Thoghda, 2015; Salas, Garson, Khanna, & Murray, 2016). Even as arts-based instruction has come to be more visible in TESOL as a way of developing communicative language proficiency, emerging efforts have only begun to explore its intersection with teacher development (Cahnmann-Taylor, Bleyle, Hwang, & Zhang, 2017; Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010; Cahnmann-Taylor, Zhang, Bleyle, & Hwang, 2015). Returning to applied theatre and the potential of its repertoires for forwarding the project of curricular reform, in this article, we focus on a series of improvisational strategies and games (Boal, 2002; Neelands & Goode, 2000). This time, our intent is to explore how applied theatre exercises might contribute to the pre/co-requisite of community that language teacher development requires.

We begin with a brief overview of the notions of power and privilege in classrooms and communities and the potential of applied theatre to disrupt instructional and institutional hierarchies. We continue with a series of flexible strategies for ensemble building and their potential for creating brave spaces for professional development. Our imagined reading audience for this article includes both teachers and teacher trainers working to create zones of collaboration. We illustrate our argument practically with strategies leveraged in multiple teacher seminars that include working teacher leaders, as well as one another. However, our hope is that readers will generalize these same techniques to their specific classroom contexts and audiences—be they adult, adolescent, or young learners.

### **Cultures of Learning, Local Ownership, and Thoughtful Curricular Reform**

Thinking about teachers’ challenges with student-centered and communication-performance-based language classrooms, Spicer-Escalante and deJonge-Kannan (2014) argued that

communicative language teaching, at its best, embodies “the values of freedom of expression, individual needs, and egalitarianism” (p. 2441). Indeed, many teachers (and students) support the idea of privileging interactive and meaningful communication over more traditional lecturing and explanation of grammar combined with translation and drill. However, behind closed doors, teacher-centered instruction is a comfortable and comforting default. This is especially true in worldwide contexts where fidelity to and completion of prescribed curricula generally feed into high-stakes pencil and paper gateway assessments that students confront at the end of a year or as the culmination of their studies.

In collective practice, teachers—and as a consequence, their students—have continued struggling to operationalize communicative language teaching for decades. Reasons for that resistance have been linked informally to longstanding local, regional, and national pedagogical traditions simply challenging buy-in. However, considering this entrenchment in the teacher-change and reform literature, Michael Fullan (2016) in synthesizing six case studies from across the globe on systemic education change explained:

The solution for system improvement for me consists of three matters: deep change in the culture of learning, local ownership of the learning agenda, and a system of continuous improvement and innovation that is simultaneously bottom-up, top-down and sideways. (p. 543)

The relationships of teacher supervision become both practical and metaphorical sites of this top-down, bottom-up, and sideways possibilities—and productive problems. In the context of teacher supervision, the dynamics of power can elevate trainers or supervisors to a position of authority and the teachers to a position of subservience. Teachers sometimes characterize new approaches to curriculum as being too complex, strange, or uncertain contrasted with the familiar routine. Likewise, teacher supervisors sometimes employ deficit characterizations to describe teacher resistance to curricular or pedagogical innovation. In either case, the result is diagnostic blame and benign avoidance, rather than critical self-reflection, risk and change.

More than the transmission of disaggregated bits of technical teaching practices or pacing guides, thoughtful curricular reform requires equally thoughtful opportunities to respond to “the myriad forces that shape us by enlarging our capacities to imagine other possibilities for our teaching communities” (Fairbanks et al., 2010, p. 6). Educators learning toward change need environments that activate top-down, bottom-up and sideways dynamics.

### **Applied Theatre and Ensemble**

For us as people working in teacher preparation, applied theatre games and strategies initiate our capacities to reimagine ourselves for brief moments that disrupt traditional power dynamics. The group becomes an egalitarian ensemble. Centering applied theatre strategies in teacher professional development with both teachers and their supervisors carved out a productive space for both demonstrating and exploring pedagogy together. Allow us to explain:

Theatre is about the human experience. Applied theatre strategies particularly foreground interactivity and foster a collaborative, responsive context—a productive ensemble. Augusto

Boal (2002), a Brazilian theatre artist and activist, came to conceive of theatre as a tool for social transformation. Describing collaborative theatre-based work as “a form of knowledge”, Boal (2002) theorized, “It should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, instead of just waiting for it” (p. 16).

In a traditional theatre rehearsal situation such activities would help a group of performers grow together as a unit, making ensemble chemistry legible to the audience be the end game. In an applied theatre setting, ensemble-building strategies are tapped and re-visited to cultivate spect-actors’ willingness to co-create a collaborative space for development. Participants slide back and forth between spectating and acting. Thus, applied theatre springs from and in response to the lived experiences and imagined perspectives of its participants, connected to place and to one another. Sometimes applied theatre culminates in a show. Other times, its process is its product. Ideally, the work lingers. Participants take on the role of spect-actors, free to see and be seen and to hear and be heard throughout the meaning-making experience. All this is not to criticize traditional conceptualizations of theatre education headlining the storytelling festival or the spring musical in a school-wide assembly. The difference is less about venue and more about power and purpose.

With applied theatre and in classroom teaching and learning, robust ensemble leads to naturalistic, motivated, interactive, purposeful engagement whereby power normally reserved for a teacher or supervisor is gradually distributed for collaborative, purposeful, reflective play and authentic communication. Within a play-based activity, power is strategically released to the group within and across the ensemble—with participants sharing agency, not simply looking to an authority for a cue to speak.

Boal and his contemporaries leveraged applied theatre to reimagine social relations and communities, inspired by liberatory and activist pedagogies (Freire, 1973, 2000). Recent teacher education scholarship has advanced applied theatre as a means of interrogating power and privilege in classrooms and learning institutions, among students and between teachers (Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010) and for honoring multi-modality in second language teaching and learning (Winston, 2013).

### **Improvising Ensemble**

To contextualize the sections that follow, we first incorporated these exercises in a five-day training seminar in Carthage, Tunisia with some 55 newly appointed “Pedagogical Supervisors” (curricular liaisons between school administrators and primary K-5 teachers of English). We returned to the games with consecutive cohorts of 125 public school teachers of English during week long-residential camps in Tangiers, Morocco; and, again, with some 100 Secondary Inspectors in Tunis. In all three contexts, the training initiatives were inspired by national Ministries of Education’s calls for curricular reform and pedagogical innovation. Along the way, we worked with these ensemble-building activities as a way of fostering risk and modeling classroom and institutional democracies.

Reflective elements are built into and between these ensemble-building strategies because shared reflection is a vital part of bringing an ensemble together to process and listen to one another. It

is easy to become focused on the game step-by-step procedures, however it is worth remembering that the entire sequence is designed to prompt embodied and authentic communication. Shared talk is part of that communication. Some questions are embedded for use, or inspiration, during games. Generally, the strategies scaffold from simpler to more complex. It is important to help participants build the trajectory of increasing depth, risk, and complexity. Sometimes, it is wise to point out the connection, like between “Name and Gesture” and “Counting to 10” it is simple to explain: “Now that we have learned some names from one another and have our bodies talking, we’re ready to really work together with close observation.” Additionally, some connections can be made by referencing (and building on) participant contributions. For instance, to describe machines and provide an example, it is possible to make one up—or better—“borrow” someone’s gesture from the Name and Gesture game. Guard against letting the session become a series of disconnected activity. Sometimes the best connections come from asking participants to recount and reflect on the activity series at the end.

### 1. Name and Gesture

A common practice when coming together for the first time is for individuals to introduce themselves to the larger group. In a traditional professional development setting, a participant stakes his/her name, place of employment, and so forth. “Name and Gesture” is an opportunity for participants to introduce themselves to each other with a couple of twists.

Form a circle that includes all of the participants, or in the case that the number of participants exceeds 20, form two smaller groups. An individual begins, stating his or her name and accompanying the name with an improvised signature gesture. The entire group repeats the name and gesture and moves on to the next participant who performs the previous participants name and gesture and then his or her own cumulatively. The entire group repeats the two names and gestures in order. A third participant performs the two previous participants’ names and gestures and then his or her own. The entire group performs the three names and gestures in order and so forth until the circle is complete.

For example, National Football League Dallas Cowboy running back, Ezekiel Elliott, is commonly associated with his celebratory “feed Zeke” gesture of furiously spooning soup into his mouth after important plays and touchdowns. Likewise, during the 2019 Women’s World Cup, Team USA’s Megan Rapinoe’s celebratory gesture of her hands outstretched triumphantly to the crowd quickly entered the popular iconography of contemporary sports.

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| Ezekiel: | “Zeke” [he gestures as if he is furiously eating soup with a large spoon]  |
| Class:   | “Zeke” [entire group gestures as if they are furiously spooning soup into their mouths]  |
| Megan:   | “Zeke” [She repeats soup-spooning gesture]. “Me-gan” [Megan stands triumphantly with arms spread high as if she is an orchestra conductor] |
| Class:   | “Zeke” [They repeat soup-spooning gesture]. “Me-gan” [All stand triumphantly with arms spread high as if they were orchestra conductors]   |

Once the entire group has performed the series of names and gestures, an additional challenge is to repeat the sequence using gestures only. Usually by the end of the game, a volunteer is able to recite all participants' names. Should clues be needed, gestures are at the ready.

The game format creates an opportunity for repetition and embodiment. By focusing on one another one at a time, a sense of ensemble is built by inclusion. The game also hastens knowing each other's names. Returning to the game at the end of the session, ask: What or who do you remember? Why? "Name and Gesture," thus, creates reflective space to talk aloud about what is memorable and about first impressions. It also builds a low-stakes habit of looking back on the work, not simply plowing through from one activity to the next.

## **2. Counting to Ten, Together**

One of our earliest experiences in schools, regardless of the language of instruction, is learning to count to ten. For this ensemble-building exercise, assemble the group in a circle and explain that the shared goal is to count to ten or even higher but without a leader orchestrating the counting, without hand or eye signals, without a preconceived or improvised order. Should two or more individuals articulate a number simultaneously the group begins again—starting over, again, with the goal of counting to ten one number at a time. The game sounds easy enough, but, even with a small group of ten participants, it is actually difficult to achieve and entails, among other things, that no single person or persons try to dominate the count. Discourage participants from making a plan or directing one another. Additionally, do not allow for blame or finger-pointing "errors" targeting individuals. One's error is everyone's error. Allow for multiple attempts. Then, stop to help the group reflect as an ensemble. What is working? Without blaming--what is happening that is preventing us from achieving the count of ten? What can we do better or differently as individuals? As a group? What strategies are promoting the count? What choices are preventing it?

Whereas "Name and Gesture" highlights the individuality of each participant, "Counting to Ten" underscores the spaces and energy between ensemble members. The success of the game d on individuals' commitment to a shared goal and responsive attention to other group members. Reaching ten might require that individuals hold back and wait for someone else. Or we learn to embrace moments of silence, of hesitation, and of restraint. Moreover, the game reveals power dynamics and habits within the group. Participants accustomed to looking to the teacher for answers slowly realize the answers come in observing peers. Ask participants to think aloud about the game. How does the game relate or not to the dynamics between teacher/student, supervisor/teacher, and so forth? How is the dynamic forwarding the success of the ensemble or preventing that success?

## **3. Machine Making**

"Machine" is a classic drama exercise to develop close observation and responsive, collaborative communication. Even more, the machine exercise helps an ensemble move toward exploring an idea through play and movement. A group physical improvisation, Machine depends on many individuals coming together as a whole.

To get started, collectively decide on the type of Machine the group hopes to create. For example, in the summer of 2019, we took up Machine during a series of week-long residential professional development coinciding the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Neil Armstrong’s moonwalk. The conference organizers embedded the theme of space exploration across the week’s activities—dividing the 120-member cohort into four groups of thirty—each group named after one of the space shuttles (e.g., Enterprise, Explorer, and so forth). Taking up the conference theme, we challenged the teachers to create their respective space shuttles using repetitive movement and sound.

Next, the facilitator explains and demonstrates how to enter the playing space, and make a sound and movement contribution to the collective “machine”—making sure each new addition builds on a sound and movement preceding, like cogs in a machine. Machine-making now begins with one participant takes the lead—entering the empty space and imagining him/herself as a small but integral part of a larger more complex machine—in our case a spaceship. He/she takes on a repetitive motion and creates a repetitive sound to accompany that motion.

For example, pivoting in a circle on his/her left leg accompanied by the sound, “Wheeeeeee.” The participant repeats the movement with sound as the others watch. A second participant enters the space—positioned in some sort of juxtaposition with the previous colleague but with a different repetitive movement and sound (e.g. nodding head mechanically with a deep grunt at each robotic nod). A third, fourth, fifth participant joins the spacecraft each with sound and movement as do the others—choosing positions, movement, sounds that elaborate the emerging shape and dynamic of sound of the larger machine. The machine is now complete with each participant continuing his/her individual movement and sound. Four minutes since the first participant entered the circle, some thirty individual movements and sounds have come together to emerge as a complex and multifaceted space shuttle. The participant-facilitator can play with making the machine run in slow motion or warp-speed at cue.

Machines can be industrial. They can also take on abstract or organic concepts such as “Hate Machine,” “Family Machine,” “Forest Machine.” We encourage Machine as an activity for building group identity—with an emphasis on how individual parts might make a more robust whole. In our case, we employed the metaphor of the Machine game to illustrate how teachers working individually might come together and create something that honored their individuality while still contributing to a shared goal. Reflecting after or at intervals during the exercise creates an opportunity for spect-actors to discuss the idea at hand (What prompted you to add your sound and movement?) or their own role in the ensemble (What did you notice about yourself as a member of this group and the choices you made? What is a choice another person made that helped or supported you?). There is power in spect-actors hearing and experiencing how their silly sounds and movements were witnessed by and inspired ideas and action in another.

#### **4. Exploring Text Through Enacted Image**

Applied theatre games are an effective strategy for building commerce and rapport in an authentic, democratic communicative environment. The games help build ensemble playfully,

but then the leader needs to shift the ensemble into shared creative inquiry. This is where connecting the sense of ensemble to a piece of literature or an idea being explored, and helps hand over some power to participants. In image work, participants use only their bodies and space to create collaborative pictures or sculptures. Some practitioners call this work “tableau.” Others call it “still image.” Boal (2002) called it “image theatre.” Sometimes we call it “human statues.” Whatever its name, exploring text through enacted image can superficially dissipate into a familiar game of charades. However, there is more to it. First, the group needs a text/story/information-set to prompt ideas and possibilities, yet can be understood, synthesized and invented from. The best texts make readers imagine new and varied perspectives in what O’Neill (1995) called a “pre-text.”

Continuing with the moon exploration example, a “pre-text” can take the form of a poem or short folktale about the moon or a brief non-fiction paragraph or picture book or even a children’s rhyme about the moon. Following are some options. Choose one or use a combination. This list flows from more straightforward to more abstract. Whether a children’s nursery rhyme, a quote from an astronaut or an astronomer, all offer image possibilities.

- Pre-text 1 (A nursery rhyme)

“I see the moon

And the moon sees me

And the moon sees somebody I want to see

God bless the moon

God bless me.

God bless the somebody I want to see” (Craig, 2009).

- Pre-text 2 (An astronaut’s quote): “As we got further and further away, it [the Earth] diminished in size. Finally it shrank to the size of a marble, the most beautiful you can imagine. That beautiful, warm, living object looked so fragile, so delicate, that if you touched it with a finger it would crumble and fall apart. Seeing this has to change a man.” James B. Irwin, Apollo Astronaut
- Pre-text 3 (An astronomer’s musing): “Look again at that dot. That’s here, that’s home, that’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every ‘superstar,’ every ‘supreme leader,’ every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam” (Sagan, 1997, p. 6)

Initially, read a single pre-text or combination of pre-texts aloud with or to the whole group. Next, divide the whole into smaller groups to re-read aloud to one another. Finally, have individuals read silently, identifying vivid or important parts of the text/pre-text. Note that longer texts can be broken into smaller parts and distributed piece-meal across the groups, if desired.

Once groups have explored the text/s and talked about them, challenge them to create two tableau images (or frozen pictures or images or human statues) that highlight two important ideas from the reading. Demonstrate what a tableau is. Be sure to point out that they need to be still, but purposeful—even fingers and eyes. Remind them that every person in the group needs to be included. They are an ensemble.

Allow groups time to discuss and rehearse. Encourage them to get up on their feet and try out their group image. Once each group has an idea on its feet, explain they will get three rehearsals or trial runs, with 30 seconds in between to fix and improve among themselves. Announce: “First picture. 1-2-3, Freeze. (PAUSE) Second picture. 1-2-3, Freeze. (PAUSE) Ok, now talk with your group to figure out what works and what needs to change.” Monitor, listen in and help as need as each group practices. Allow two more ensemble rehearsals before each group shares individually

Assemble the whole ensemble so they can watch and reflect on others’ tableaux. Explain to students that when they are in the image, they are art, so they must be still and let others talk about them. Those watching need to observe closely and share aloud the ideas they have from looking at the images. Prompt observers with questions. What do you see? Who is this person? What is happening here? What title would you give this statue? What questions do you have? Include a question to tie back to the pretext. After this discussion, allow the frozen ensemble to speak, if they have anything to add. Make sure this does not turn into charades where the actors tell the spectators the “right” answer. The important part is the sharing of ideas, and responding to ensemble members’ art.

It is important to note that there are many ways to navigate these ensemble-building strategies to good effect. Ensembles vary just as facilitators do, as well as contexts and priorities and limitations. Work can be broken up over several smaller sessions, or completed all at once. The balance of reflection to action might vary as well. The consistent task is to hold a collaborative, communicative, creative space where risks can be taken, together. Keeping these ideas front of mind helps foster the local ownership teaching, learning, and innovation in a small professional development setting (cf., Fullan 2016), workshop or classroom. Such experiences can be preparation and rehearsal for larger curricular and policy change exploration requiring a sense of ensemble.

### **Conclusion: (Re)Learning to Count to Ten, Together**

In this article, we have argued that participatory professional development very much depends on framing teachers and teacher leaders’ interactions whereby we, collectively, become generative “environments” for the growth we aspire to achieve. In an ensemble of teacher-leaders, brave and exploratory transactions with curricular reform carve out extended moments for risk-taking, failure, success, and (re)vision. With that often-elusive goal in mind, we have drawn from the repertoires of theatre education to examine how notions of power and privilege are disrupted

through improvisational performance. We presented a series of flexible strategies for professional development contexts to argue their potential for creating brave spaces for individual and collective growth.

Just as these and other ensemble-building strategies are initially tapped and re-visited as a group of actors tentatively enter a rehearsal, teacher-leaders can leverage ensemble building techniques to create a shared stance whereby participants find the courageous vulnerability to initiate and enter the contact zones of curricular reform. Although we have grounded the moves described here in the context of teacher development, our hope is that readers might generalize these same techniques to their specific classrooms and participatory structures.

At the conclusion of the Institutes in Carthage and Tangier where we piloted and reworked these ensemble building strategies—taking up one per day and then repeating the previous as we introduced the rest—we asked our teacher colleagues: “What have you taken away from the improvisations? What did you achieve as a group? What potential do you see for teaching and learning with adolescents? What potential do you see for inspiring curricular and pedagogical change?”

In the written feedback and oral debriefs, teachers talked about how the strategies forced them to recognize and affirm each other as individuals—as they articulated their names and performed gestures. They talked about how counting together to ten in a circle without a preconceived order—starting over again when two or more overlapped—underscored the notion that they were committed, for five days, to reaching a goal together. They described their elation when, after a series of false starts, they were able finally, by day five, to reach the number ten. They described the delight they took in the spaceship they created together—how it began more complex and more dynamic with every attempt. We remembered the enacted readings we created together—with each of us coming together bring a text to life. We also thought aloud together about how these simple and fleeting exercises changed something about how we were able to work together as we entered and continued the five-day programs.

For us, applied theatre games and strategies were ways of initiating our capacities to reimagine ourselves for brief but powerful collective moments. We advocate partnerships with like-minded individuals from inside and outside the discipline of TESOL as we seek and take up alternative metaphors and processes for our professional learning. We encourage our colleagues to begin counting to ten all over again—not alone with singular breath or in a preordained order—but with the community and commitment that sustainable curricular reform demands. The playful communicative dynamic established in the games lays the groundwork for reimagining ourselves as professionals and for reimagining what we might achieve an ensemble.

Finally, as we finish this article, the summer of 2019 seems so very long ago. We are uncertain when and how we will return to our classrooms and to what extent the Covid-19 pandemic will change teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language in the short and long term. What we do know is that our individual and collective futures will depend even more on our ability to come together.

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**EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO TELL THEIR STORIES: AUTHORS  
MENTOR STUDENTS ON WRITING COLLEGE ADMISSION  
ESSAYS**

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**Abstract**

The authors examined how high school students in author and university writing sessions at a university literacy festival learned how to use their voice to share their social and cultural experiences when constructing a college admission essay. This qualitative case study examined the essays from 132 high school students from Title I schools who attended interactive author and university writing center sessions at the literacy festival. Analysis using grounded theory and open coding revealed four themes, listed here in order of prominence: overcoming barriers, clubs and programs, cultural and ethnic identity, and supportive role models. Participants gained insight on discovering their unique qualities and meaningful stories throughout the writing process, and findings indicated that author and university writing sessions at the university literacy festival was an effective way to promote writing strategies for college entrance exams for high school students, especially to under-supported students.

*Keywords:* Title I students, college admission essay, young adult authors, literacy festival

**Empowering Students to Tell their Stories: Authors Mentor Students on Writing College Admission Essays**

High school students from Title I schools discovered why their stories matter and the impact they can have after utilizing writing strategies learned during an authors and university writing center session at a university's literacy festival. Young adult authors gathered with high school students

from Title I schools in authors' and university writing sessions, to share how their unique experiences, cultures, languages, and lenses informed their writing.

"My house is not one that I want to bring my friends over for a visit. It is run down, chipping of paint and overgrown with branches reaching up to cover the windows in darkness. Often, the inside enveloped in darkness with no money for light to shine any life. My family is not one I would want to invite friends over for dinner," wrote one student feverishly during a university literacy festival writing session. This student was one out of 132 participants at a young adult author and university writing center session at this university literacy festival. Students' early writing and reading achievement have been found to correlate with their home literacy environment, access to books, and family support; however, families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often lack resources or opportunities to support a positive literacy environment (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Cabrera et al., 2006; Orr, 2003). Researchers agree that early readers tend to become better readers and writers throughout their school years and beyond (Graves, 1994); however, underachieving students from a low socioeconomic status can fall behind their peers in reading and writing, often experiencing an increase in social and behavior problems, and are more likely to be retained (Martella, Martella, & Przychozin, 2009). This achievement gap has been found to continue to grow until the end of their schooling (Dixon, 2010).

Reading and communication skills lay the foundation for academic success. In 2014, it was reported that over 93 million adults lacked basic literacy skills, preventing them from progressing and completing college and being successful in the workforce (Chapa, Galvan-De Leon, Solis, Mundy, 2014). The nation has a necessity to better prepare students for college and/or the workforce; and as a nation, we are failing.

Many students are not provided opportunities to engage in writing tasks that are of any substance or complexity due to high-stakes testing that rely on reading skills and literary analysis (Applebee & Langer, 2009). Under-achieving students from a low socioeconomic status, second language learners, and ethnic minorities are often eliminated from rich writing opportunities or college preparatory courses. Consequently, these students are repeatedly placed into classes that utilize skill and drill learning and scripted curriculums (Warren, 2013). Too many youths are immersed in remediated curriculum that is designed to help them perform well on standardized tests (Oaks & Wells, 1998). These remediated courses cause students to miss out on learning effective writing skills needed to complete a college essay, which, for most college essay prompts, consists of writing a persuasive argument for a rhetorical situation (Warren, 2013). Instead, the students are ill-prepared to approach any type of essay but have the capability of being prepared for a standardized test.

When students are enrolled in a remedial course, self-efficacy or self-confidence levels tend to drop in middle school and remain at a lower level throughout high school (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Writing performance is directly related to a student's self-confidence (Graham & Harris, 2005; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007). Research on self-efficacy or self-confidence has shown that people's beliefs about the world and how they are situated in it allow them to have some control over their actions (Bandura, 1986). English language learners and low-income,

multiethnic youth who attend “underperforming” secondary schools are routinely sorted into remedial English courses where written instruction often centers on test preparation (Applebee & Langer, 2009).

### **The College Admission Essay**

The college admission essay is a place where students can not only showcase their writing skills but also showcase their voice; it is one of the only parts of a college application where a student’s voice and personality can shine through. The essay is also considered to be of great value, being rated “considerably” to “moderately important” by 60% of four-year universities in the United States (Warren, 2013). With such an impact on whether a student is admitted into a secondary education program or not, many students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have a plethora of factors working against them.

The college admission essay is a personal testimony that is connected to a student’s social, cultural, and educational experiences. When students write personal college admission stories, they are communicating their identity in a way they think the audience will engage with or relate to (Newkirk, 1997). They, as writers, must step away and speak directly to the reader to make a case in the story for why they should gain admissions to a college or university.

### **University Literacy Festival**

The concept of a university literacy festival blossomed when authors realized the need for students from Title I schools to interact with young adult multicultural authors to help engage them in reading and to see themselves as writers. For young adults to become readers and writers, they need to relate to the stories they read. Books not only portray windows for young adults to learn about cultures, but they also mirror where they can reflect on their own lives (Persaud, 2013). It is reported that 42% of children, more than 31 million, grow up with limited access to books (Bornstein, 2011). The ration of books per child in low-income families is one age-appropriate book for every 300 children, compared to middle-income families, where the ratio is 13 to 1 (Neuman & Dickinson, 2006). Consequently, the literacy festival provided each student attending the university literacy festival a free book from the featured authors attending the event. Books containing diverse casts of characters that emphasized empathy, fairness, and empowerment were reviewed, and these books were delivered to the students months before the festival to grant time for reading, to enable teacher candidates to visit classrooms to help integrate the books across the disciplines, and to promote the books as mentor texts for writing.

College admission essays are difficult for many low-income, diverse students. Low quality writing in college admission essays may reduce the chances of college admission and may also inhibit students from applying to college (Callahan & Gándara, 2004). Authors’ and university writing sessions were provided for high school students attending the literacy festival. Young adult authors gathered with high school students from Title I schools to share how their unique experiences, cultures, languages, and lenses informed their writing. Students learned how to use

their voice to share their social and cultural experiences when constructing a college admission essay.

It was discovered that most students who attended the literacy festival had parents who had never attended college, and a sufficient number of students had never visited a college campus. The vision of a university literacy festival was to empower students to see themselves mirrored in stories and to explore a university in their own backyard. Consequently, this study sought to examine the effect of the author and university writing sessions on participating high school students' construction of the college admission essay.

### **Method**

This is a study of an examination of student responses to young adult multicultural authors and mentors from the university's writing center on writing. This inquiry was framed as a qualitative case study, examining the efficacy of a university literacy festival in supporting high school students from Title I schools mentored by young adult authors and the university writing center staff in writing college admissions essays. The literacy festival, held on a campus situated in a university in Southwest Florida, involved author writing sessions and university writing sessions from the university's writing center for ethnically and linguistically diverse high school students. Students who took part in the writing sessions received instruction on specific features of college admission essays. The following research questions guided this work:

- 1.) What stories do secondary students from Title I schools share when provided the opportunity for young adult authors to mentor them on writing college admission essays?
- 2.) What benefits and obstacles do secondary students from Title I schools face in participating in author and writing sessions for college admission essays?

### **Participants**

One hundred and thirty-two high school students from three local Title I schools, consisting of 77 girls and 55 boys, participated in writing sessions given by authors and the university's writing center staff. Eighty-seven of the 132 students self-identified as Hispanic (66%); 28 self-identified as African American (21%), 15 as Anglo (11%), and two as Native American (2%). Although the majority of the participants had been previously classified as English Language Learners (ELLs), none of them were taking part in ELL programs at the time of the study, and all were enrolled in remedial or regular English classes. Most of the students spoke Spanish as their first learned language. Fewer than 40% of these students' parents had a high school diploma and the majority of them were the first in their family to pursue higher education. All 132 participants had not received instruction on the college admission essay before attending the writing sessions at the literacy festival.

### **Procedure and Data Collection**

## **Authors' Writing Sessions: Explaining Why Your Story Matters**

In the authors' writing sessions, young adult authors gathered with high school students from Title I schools to share how their unique experiences, cultures, languages, and lenses informed their writing. Authors contributed meaningful topics that honored their lived experience and encouraged the participants to share their stories with others. Authors then asked students to brainstorm topics they knew something about and felt invested in.

Students were placed in small groups to share their topics with peers and to share how their topics mattered and affected them as a person. Although students had experience writing personal narratives in their English classes, many expressed that they did not write about why their stories mattered to others. Some students expressed that it was hard to believe that their stories would have meaning for or make a difference to others. Authors decided to take ample time to conference with each student group in order to guide discussions to help participants reflect on their lived experiences with confidence.

### **Finding Your "So What?"**

The young adult authors explained to these participants that they must step away from their own stories in order to effectively describe the lessons learned or the reason the story resonated in their lives; this is the "So What?" of their stories. This is where the students must connect to an outside audience. Writing the "So What?" for a college admittance essay involves emphasizing the significance of a topic and lesson learned. It shares why the story represents the writer's unique interests and how the student can potentially contribute to a university community. For students to find their "So What?" the authors guided the participants through a three-step writing process.

The first writing activity required students to spend 10 minutes writing observations, experiences, people, and situations that stood out in their minds regarding their essay topic. They were instructed to keep writing the entire 10 minutes. The second writing activity guided students to write a dialogue between themselves and someone else connected to their story. This could be a teacher, a friend, a family member, or someone with an opposing perspective. Students were instructed to write both parts of the dialogue. The third writing activity in the "So What?" writing process asked students to summarize the most important thing they thought people should understand about their topic based on what they've learned, how the experience impacted them, and what they could tell the reader about themselves to understand the person they are. Students were asked to limit their writing to one paragraph.

### **Descriptive Writing**

As students continued to work on their stories, many "told" about significant people or events in their lives, but did not "show" these events using details or vivid examples. The young adult

authors provided students with examples of descriptive writing from their own books as well as their own personal writings and poems to model the effective use of description and the importance of using this strategy in writing. Students explored the books they received from the university's literacy festival to find descriptive writing the author captured in their writing. Use of senses, vivid language, similes, and metaphors were shared with students to help them understand how specific details can allow readers to see scenes in their own minds when they read (Hillocks, 2006).

### **University's Writing Center Sessions: Demystifying the College Entrance Essay**

Following the authors' writing sessions, the university writing center sessions helped participants continue to work on their college admittance essays. The sessions were taught by a group of instructors that worked with each student to gain an understanding of the students' strengths and weaknesses in writing. They were able to provide individual feedback and personalized instruction.

#### **Key Elements**

Students received instruction on the key elements for the college admittance essay. Since the authors' sessions covered such elements as selecting a strong topic, writing for the appropriate audience, the "So What?," and the use of description, the university's writing center sessions focused on effective introductions, outside connections, and effective conclusions. Students were given multiple opportunities to write and revise in order to discover the challenges associated with this type of writing. This enabled instructors a chance to gauge student progress throughout the session. Examples of successful writing strategies, conferences with students, and revision in response to students' questions were continual and helped to mold the lessons around students' unique needs.

#### **Exploring Student Perceptions of the College Admission Essay**

During the university's writing center sessions, invited freshmen students from the university had the opportunity to listen to students' questions and concerns on topics such as author and writing center sessions, writing the college admission essay, general feelings about writing, future plans and goals, and obstacles to attending college. These freshmen university students were available during each session. The sessions concluded with an open-ended quickwrite, asking students to express their feelings associated with applying to college and writing admissions essays.

#### **Respecting and Responding to Students' Fears**

Two freshmen students were assigned a small group of no more than eight students; the freshmen students rotated groups when time allowed. A variety of questions about applying to college, writing the admission essay, living away from home, working and going to college, and

economic and family obligations were asked and shared. The freshmen students were open and honest with the high school students and shared their hardships and successes. Some freshmen students shared their own college admittance essays with their groups, as well. Sessions concluded with an open-ended quickwrite asking students to express their feelings associated with applying to college and writing admissions essays.

### **Data Analysis**

Grounded theory was applied to interpret the stories, experiences, and perspectives revealed in the essays in order to allow for multiple interpretations of students' college admission essays and to develop themes inductively (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Essays were analyzed using the constant comparison method where each step of the data collection and analysis process included a process of revisiting and coding essays (Patton, 1990). Reflective responses from authors and freshmen and university mentors from the writing center were also analyzed. The first stage consisted of organizing the essays by coding and "chunking" (Ealry & Shagoury, 2010). "Chunking" refers to the process of pulling quotes from texts and categorizing based on key themes. The second stage consisted of lists of codes to find if any of the codes from the first stage could be collapsed into a more reasonable number (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The process of collapsing codes culminated in a set of four themes, listed in order of prominence: overcoming barriers, clubs and programs, cultural and ethnic identity, and supportive role models. Several essays overlapped themes and were coded for more than one theme.

### **Overcoming Barriers**

Forty-three percent of students' essays had the common thread of overcoming barriers of challenging and traumatic life events. Students' essays identified three areas in "overcoming barriers": familial challenges, friend difficulties, and barriers caused by illness or death. Some stories share how students are resilient and persevere to better themselves and seek higher education despite difficult family and friend situations. Brian writes about wanting a better life despite the family situation he lives in:

The family room's couch is a permanent bed for my father with liquor bottles strewn about. To enter my house, you cannot open the front door as it is blocked by boxes and bags filled with miscellaneous objects. You would need to enter through the back door where the door creaks open just enough to let you in before it hits another box overflowing with clothes. A crooked path through bags of trash, boxes of useless stuff leads to a kitchen that is no longer used for cooking and eating. Cockroaches are the only ones that dine in this area now. My bedroom, once mine, is now a storage area. I stand in the middle turning around in a galaxy of overwhelming objects, and I realize that this life is not mine. My life will be organized, clean, and welcoming. My life will be mine.

Students shared how death of loved ones impacted theirs lives, as well. Sarah expressed her concern with being on her own after losing her brother. Sarah grew up with her grandmother and

brother, and her parents live in Guatemala. After her grandmother passed away, Sarah and her brother were able to live together in an apartment right next to her school. She wrote:

My older brother passed away one year ago this month. He was my rock, someone I could rely on for anything. If I ran to him crying, he would wipe my tears away and wrap his arms around me. His calm, deep voice would vibrate a rhythm deep in my soul as his soothed words calmed my fears. If I accomplished a goal or succeeded at school, he would be the first to lift me off my feet and make sure everyone knew. I am on my own now. Alone. No one to run to. No one to lift me off my feet. Yet, I keep moving, take baby steps, one day at a time. I know now an angel is above wrapping his wings around me and encouraging me to do great things with my life.

Brian and Sarah's stories represent authentic descriptions of the kinds of challenges many of these students endure. They also shared the strength and resilience that many students from ethnically and linguistically diverse and low-income homes bring into the classroom.

### **Clubs and Programs**

Thirty-eight percent of the essays described how support programs, such as academic clubs, extracurricular programs and volunteer programs, have taught them life lessons and furthered their academic achievement. The majority of the essays focused on athletic programs. Brook wrote about how participating in track not only provided skills she uses in her academic classes but how it opened her dream to attending college as a first-generation student:

In, out. In, out. My thoughts say these two words, in, out, as my feet pump the track and my breath enters my nose and exits my mouth. My head is clear. My mind is focused. I know that if I focus I have a chance to beat my own record. I know that if I keep going and don't give up I can do this. I am competing with myself. Track has proven to me that if I try, work, and keep going I can achieve anything. I do not have any competition except to myself. Running in track has given me the gift of these qualities I take with me to cussed no matter what challenges I face. Track will open doors as I apply for college. I will be the first in my family to attend college. I will be the first with a college degree. My coach yells from the field, 'You got this, Brook!' And I think, 'Yes, I do. I got this.' In, out. In, out.

One of the students, Jorge, expresses how he overcame his shyness volunteering at a botanical gardens center. His story shares his passion:

The dirt moves between my fingers. Roots are placed deep down in the earth. I describe step by step on how to reroot a plant to onlookers engaged with each word I say and each movement I make. I am no longer painfully shy at the center and enjoy talking to visitors and new volunteers. The botanical gardens center has shown me that differences in people do not matter. We are each unique and talented in our own way. I have found my

passion for botany and the desire to share this with others. I thrive to become a botany teaching assistant.

The support programs students were involved in had a powerful impact on the lessons they learned. These experiences nurtured their development as individuals.

### **Cultural and Ethnic Identity**

Twenty-one percent of the essays shared stories related to ethnic identity and immigration. Students wrote how their experiences belonging to a marginalized ethnic group help form their identities and sense of self, and many students identified with multiple cultural groups rather than just one group. Jayme wrote about what it was like to grow up as a light-skinned Hispanic in her school:

‘How did you get this tan during December?’ and ‘You’re the perfect color!’ is often what I heard throughout my school years. I guess I was supposed to feel honored. However, in those moments I just felt like I stopped being me. No longer was I my father’s *melangango* or my *abuelita’s mosca*. No longer was I a musician. I was just a nice skin-color. I am not light enough as my family will tell me to put more sunscreen on. I am not dark enough as others happily tell me that they are finally tanner than me. I speak perfect Spanish. I speak perfect English. I am Jayme. I am a musician.

Alex shared about the impact that moving had on his family and how he endured because it provided him with better opportunities. Alex and his parents learned English and secured employment before moving. Alex wrote:

I moved to the United States with my parents when I was eight years old. My family drove from Coahuila, Mexico to our new apartment in Fort Myers, Florida. We have a restaurant here and a ranch in Mexico. Leaving my ranch was the hardest part about the move. I miss my horses and dogs. They were my responsibility every day. Our apartment does not allow pets. My hardest moment was when I started school. However, my teachers have helped me grow in my English, and I have met new friends. I am now a senior and realize that this move has given me opportunities I may not have had before. I am excited to discover my journey.

Stories like Jayme and Alex’s share the struggles and sacrifices students and their families experienced and how it shaped their perspectives.

### **Supportive Role Models**

Thirteen percent of the essays emphasized the importance of supportive role models. Supportive role models included grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, fathers, siblings, teachers, and friends

and were found to have a significant impact on students' academic and personal successes. Abril shares about being raised by a single mother. She has discovered a new love for her mother:

I grew up not knowing my father. My mother struggled to pay rent and bills. Some nights we did not have much to eat for dinner. I often would come home from school to an empty house and sometimes even went to bed alone. I would go to school and see my friends in new, bright clothes. My clothes were bought from Goodwill. I look at others around me and I ask myself, 'Why me? Why is my life so hard?' My anger stemmed to my mother. I wondered why she could not give me more. She came home from one job to get ready for her next shift at another job. I am mad that she is leaving me. But then I see her leaning over with her hands resting on her aching back. I see her take her shoes off swollen feet. I see her and I realize how lucky I am.

Jose came to the United States without knowing how to speak English. He writes about the challenges he faced in an American school:

My mom is Mexican, and my dad is Puerto Rican. I was born and raised in Puerto Rico where I was like everyone else on the island. The moment my feet landed on American soil, I was different. I did not know how to speak English, and my parents did not know how to speak English. I worked hard and was often called a 'good student' by my teachers. But I did not see many role models who were like me until I met Mr. Lopez, my history teacher. He challenged me to be better at everything I did. A 'good student' was not enough for Mr. Lopez. He told me I had my own story that could impact others. I thought about this long and hard and often wondered how my story could benefit others. Then I realized that Mr. Lopez knew before I did. I discovered that I wanted to be a teacher to share my story with students and to help them like Mr. Lopez supported me.

Most students' essays portrayed a positive influence of female role models. Maternal figures served as primary sources of support and offered support and encouragement as well as sacrifices for their children to have better opportunities.

### **Responses from Authors and Writing Center Staff**

The authors observed students' conversations about encouraging their siblings to follow their own path to higher education and make their parents proud. Most importantly, students noted that students recognized that their own stories mattered and were meant to be told to help others. The university writing sessions found this as well. One student in a group during the university's writing center session stated, "I can actually do this! This seems so foreign to me just a few days ago. I like that the essay is about me and my own experiences instead of just a description of my grades and test scores." Another student responded by saying that this was a chance for a college to really get to know them as individuals. Young adult authors recognized that students gained confidence overall in themselves.

## **Discussion**

Responses confirmed the university literacy festival writing sessions gave high school students from Title I schools an opportunity to understand the importance of powerful writing for the college admissions essay. Supporting the improvement of written communication skills during this crucial time was shown to help students take ownership of not only their own learning but also their future. It signaled to students the importance of learning about academic and professional writing and provided them a look into a world beyond high school.

Both writing sessions gave students the confidence that they could successfully write a college admission essay. Several students shared how learning key elements to writing a college admission essay expanded their thought processes in their own writing for both in and out of school. One student expressed how she was excited to take back what she learned and apply it to her classes. She was currently in the middle of writing a verse poem and already had plans to revise her description to make sure her poem was tailored to her audience. Another student shared that she thought that she had gained the skills to tackle and prepare essays for college.

Even though students recognized the benefits of attending the writing sessions, many students shared possible obstacles toward attending a post-secondary institution. Most students were concerned about the application process, living away from home, and working and going to college. Several students mentioned they would be the first family member to graduate from high school and the majority stated they would be the first family member to pursue higher education. Students' reactions moved beyond writing and were related to questions and concerns about the realities of moving beyond high school to a college or a university. In a group with freshmen students, participants mentioned how they might feel guilty leaving their home responsibilities on the shoulders of their siblings if they were to leave home. One student expressed that his family relied on his work income for groceries and the utility bill. He worried that if he left to attend college and work that he would not make the same money to send back to his family. He also wondered about his own costs. Although one student thought that he might attend if he could attain scholarships to help pay tuition; he also stated that his responsibility went to his family first. If they need him due to an injury or illness, then being the oldest son, he would leave college and return home to help his family in need.

After attending both writing sessions, students acknowledged their increased confidence in writing the college admission essay but mentioned there was much more than the essay to be considered for acceptance to a college or university. Improving SAT and ACT scores were a constant concern.

## **Conclusion**

Students from Title 1 schools are typically students who are low-achieving, come from the communities' highest-poverty schools, are of limited English proficiency, are migratory, and are often in need of reading assistance (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). As students write,

they construct writing identities through the discourses they choose to draw on as they write and discourses that can show their participation (Ivanič, 1994). They also change writing identities as they change their “processes of identification”—how they label themselves as writers—over time (Elf, 2017, p. 185). Consequently, the process involved in helping high school students from Title 1 schools become writers is an organic construction formed and influenced by multiple factors, including interactions with others, students' ability to express their lived experiences, and opportunities to interact with the reading and writing process. Many of the young adult authors in this study noted that sharing their own writing on how students from diverse backgrounds were represented in their books guided these high school students to discover their personal stories for college entrance essays. One young adult author mentioned how the realistic faults and strengths of a main character in one of his books gave participants insight and helped them reflect on their own unique qualities in order to expose and express their true lived experiences in writing.

Teachers and mentors who create opportunities for their students as writers must not only understand how to teach the process of writing but must also understand how to interact with students in ways that reflect understanding and support of their students' lived experiences and economic and cultural challenges. Providing high school students with multicultural authors as mentors and a university writing center with tutors in the writing process enabled participants in this study to learn how to find their voice in writing. Students gained knowledge on the structure of writing a college entrance essay and gained confidence in sharing their own unique stories for college entrance exams; and several authors at the university's literacy festival noted that students were more apt to write about themselves after reading books that mirrored their own lives. One 10th grader stated that after conversing with a young adult author, he was able to see how a part of his journey in life would be of interest to college and university essay evaluators. After reading a book about a child in poverty from one of the authors, another student shared that she never thought that some of her hardships in life that she conquered could help others who were struggling in their own lives. These students realized the impact they could have on others by writing about their own lives and sharing their stories.

The research indicated that a university literacy festival was an effective way to promote writing strategies for college entrance exams for high school students, especially to under-supported students. Participants learned to share their stories through writing; stories that involved how they were able to overcome challenges and barriers, how clubs and programs supported them, the importance of their cultural and ethnic identity, and the supportive role models they had in their family and community. The university literacy festival's writing sessions provided by multicultural young adult authors and the university writing center made a positive impact in writing engagement and confidence for high school students who attended from Title 1 schools. Participants gained insight into discovering their unique qualities and meaningful stories throughout the writing process.

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## **Author Bios**

**Cynthia Dawn Martelli** is an associate professor of Reading in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Culture at Florida Gulf Coast University. She is the program coordinator for C&I M.Ed. and for the Teacher Immersion Program (TIP). Dr. Martelli taught more than 14 years of English Language Arts in both elementary and middle school classrooms. Her research focuses around crucial issues surrounding the position of children's and young adult literature in teacher preparation programs. Dr. Martelli founded the annual FGCU COE Literacy Festival that connects over children's and young adult authors with over 2,000 students from Title I schools. Each student receives a free book from one of the participating authors.

**Vickie Johnston** is a level III Instructor of reading in the Department of Teacher Education and the Director of the Early Literacy Learning Model (ELLM) at Florida Gulf Coast University where she teaches literacy and teacher education courses. Dr. Johnston began her career interpreting for deaf high school and middle school students and has more than 15 years of teaching experience in both elementary and special education classrooms. She has taught in public and private schools in Illinois, Texas, Arkansas, Michigan, and Florida. Her areas of research include literacy, struggling readers, differentiated instruction, children's literature, and the integration of technology in literacy instruction.

**Jaimee Sidisky** is an elementary teacher in a Southwest public school. She is currently working on her doctoral degree in Educational Leadership.