

2016

## Identifying as author: exploring the pedagogical basis for assisting diverse students to discover their identities through creatively defined literacy narratives

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IDENTIFYING AS AUTHOR:  
EXPLORING THE PEDAGOGICAL BASIS FOR ASSISTING DIVERSE STUDENTS  
TO DISCOVER THEIR IDENTITIES THROUGH CREATIVELY DEFINED  
LITERACY NARRATIVES

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

in English- TESL

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By

Amber D. Pullen

Spring 2016

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### Authorization

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the current discourse surrounding the redefinition of concepts such as text and authorship in the field of composition studies. Drawing from scholarship on topics ranging from multi-modal composition to feminist historical-appropriation, the author builds a case for redefining these concepts to include a broader range of texts and author-voices from which instructors can draw for course readings. By focusing on the particular instance of selecting readings to teach a literacy narrative unit in a first year college composition course, the author shows how redefining and broadening concepts of text and authorship may allow for students to more easily identify with a literary heritage and identify themselves as authors whose literacy-related experiences have something significant to add to the academic conversation.

The chapters present a review of literature, introduce methods and processes for teaching a literacy narrative unit in a freshman composition course, offer the reflections of the instructor on teaching the literacy narrative, and justify a process of selecting texts which aren't necessarily identified as literacy narratives as models for student literacy narratives.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express gratitude and appreciation to my thesis chair, Dr. Tracey McHenry for her continuous support, levity, and guidance both in completing this thesis and throughout my graduate career. I would like to express my sincere thanks and admiration to Dr. LaVona Reeves for her mentorship, encouragement, and support throughout my graduate career and for emboldening me to present my work at the WAESOL conference. I also wish to thank Dr. Justin Young for his mentorship and guidance as I taught composition as a graduate-student-assistant instructor. Thank you also to my committee member, Dr. Shelly Shaffer, for agreeing to be available to read and respond to my thesis.

In addition, I wish to thank my mother, Christine, for her consistent motivation and encouragement, or inspiring me to challenge myself, and for many hours spent discussing composition pedagogy, ethnographic research methods, and critical theory in relation to my thesis. I am proud of you and you inspire me. I would like to thank my pastor, Jerod Gilcher, whose Biblical exposition and sermons illustrated to me how passionate and repeated inquiry into a text can be both joyful and life changing. I would like to thank Liz Lemon for illustrating how theories and ideologies such as feminism must be able to change and adapt to the context of my life and personal beliefs as they stand in order to be useful and not oppressive.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues, Liz Matresse, Andrew Copley, and Liz Cook. Thank you for being a resource to me as fellow instructors and for acting as a sounding-board and filter throughout my research and writing of this thesis.

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## **Preface: Personal Language Learning Profile**

### **Experience as an L1 English Writer**

In examining my own experiences as an L1 English writer, I have realized that I may have a bias toward more direct instruction formats for writing and grammar. This would impact me by creating a willingness to view explicit error correction on writing as a positive process. I attended a small, private Christian middle school in the late 90s in which we had a designated grammar class complete with learning meta-linguistic grammar terminology and sentence diagramming. Furthermore, we had a form-focused writing course which heavily emphasized the traditional five-paragraph-essay process. On re-entering the public school system in high school, I realized that my experiences in grammar and writing classes were no longer the standard.

However, far from being a negative influence on my writing, I received a lot of praise on my writing throughout high school which I did attribute in part to my explicit and very structured grammar and writing courses in middle school, in part to my love of reading for recreation, and in part to my affinity for writing. I was in fact such a proficient writer among my peers that my English teacher recommended me to be the copy-editor of our high-school newspaper, a position I held for one year before moving on to be the paper's editor-in-chief.

In college, which I began with an intention of majoring in journalism then switched to research-focused-writing in anthropology, my instructors continued to review my writing favorably, often with little need for revision at the sentence level and focusing

their concerns on content and the expansion of ideas. All of the positive feedback on my writing has definitely created a bias toward my own experiences with explicit grammar instruction and writing error-correction as having a positive impact on my writing.

### **Experience Studying a Foreign Language**

My foreign-language-instruction began, like that of many public-school educated Americans, in high school. I was eager to sign up for the two years of French available at my small, rural high-school in northwest Washington. As there were only two years of the language available, students were not allowed to begin their French coursework until their junior year.

French instruction in that setting was, to me, less than ideal. The majority of time was spent learning lists of vocabulary and using the vocabulary to complete worksheets. Focus on grammatical structures was minimal and included little explanation, focusing instead on memorization of a limited number of forms. There was no emphasis on application to conversation or writing. By the time I graduated from my high-school French coursework, I had no confidence in my own ability to speak or write in French.

As a result, I decided to place myself in French 101 when I began college a year after graduating from high school. Having taken two years of the language in high-school, I had the option of requesting to skip directly into 102 in college. However, I felt it would be best to “start from scratch” with my French FL instruction and possibly unlearn any bad habits or reduce the heightened affective filter transferred from my high-school French courses.

French in college was very different from what I had experience in high-school. Our instructor taught to all of the communicative skills and especially emphasized application of course material to conversation. Unless otherwise stated by the professor, all in class communication after the first week of the quarter was to be done in French to the best of our abilities. This excluded students' inquiry into "que veut dire..." or "comment dit on..." for defining new terms we were not able to learn after their introduction in French.

At first this was nerve-wracking, but three things helped me past my speaking anxiety. One was the realization that my classmates were as nervous about speaking French as I was, which actually led to a community attitude of enthusiasm for assisting and correcting each other. Second was that the conversations we had with peers and the professor in class, while subject to explicit error correction usually through re-casting, were not graded on accuracy, but as part of a participation grade. Finally, that all graded-for-accuracy speaking assignments were recorded in a language lab in which we could listen to ourselves to track our errors and re-record the assignments as many times as we wanted to before submitting them for a grade.

In this setting, once again, I found myself thankful for the direct grammar instruction I had received in middle-school. When new verb forms in French were introduced, I found I had a minor advantage over my peers. Because I had an existing understanding of grammar-meta-language, I was able to transfer some of this knowledge to new grammar functions I learned in French. It wasn't always exactly the same as in English, but it did seem to build logically on what I already knew about grammar in English.

## **Informal Teaching Experience**

As an eldest child I could probably identify informal teaching experiences as far back as I had siblings. However, the first experience I can identify as teaching, although not in an educational setting, would be leading a Bible study in high-school. When I was a junior in high school my youth pastor asked me to lead a weekly Bible study for a group of girls in the sixth-grade. I was responsible for guiding the time at the beginning, when the girls would share their triumphs and challenges throughout the previous week to ask for prayer from each other over both. I also had assigned questions for them to help them apply the passages we had been studying in the larger youth-group meeting time. In some ways, this was more of a mentoring scenario because much of what I did was in order to be supportive and available outside of the scheduled meeting times.

As an undergraduate student I became involved in extracurricular activities in which I met and interacted with international students. As vice president of the “International Friendship Club,” I organized activities which were meant to facilitate social interaction between international and resident students at my community college. This led to many opportunities for informal “teaching” on American customs and culture as well as English language. I often assisted international-student friends with their writing assignments, offering review feedback and answering clarifying questions. This is actually the context in which I first considered TESL as a potential career path. I considered taking a minor in TESL. However, I did not pursue that path during my undergraduate coursework. It was not until after I had completed my BA in Anthropology that I again considered pursuing further academic training which would allow me to work with ESL students.

## **Experience Teaching as an Undergraduate**

As an undergraduate student in anthropology, I was fortunate to gain experience in teaching discussion-groups for two classes during two separate quarters. The discussion groups were once weekly meetings of small groups of six to twelve students from larger, lecture-based courses. The discussion group teachers were responsible for facilitating discussion around topics assigned by the course instructor. As a discussion group teacher I was responsible to find my own examples to illustrate the discussion topics, come up with questions to help engage the students in discussion, monitor and guide the discussion to make sure it didn't deviate too far from the assigned subject matter, and grade the students' responses to the assigned readings relating to the discussion topics as well as overall student participation. I was also responsible to evaluate students' group presentations and monitor the question-and-answer time following presentations.

The discussion groups were taught by senior students who had taken the courses themselves the previous year. I was able to teach discussion groups twice during my senior year; for a course on Sex and Gender in Culture and a course on Peoples of Latin America. I often drew examples from popular culture and news items to relate to the course readings to help the students engage in the discussion topics.

## **Experience Working with ESL and Writing Students in an Academic-Support Setting**

After completing my BA, I began working in the testing center of my previous community college. I proctored tests for instructors, for placement or assessment, for

members of the community, and for the GED. Often I worked with ESL students as they took the college's assessment to see where they would be placed to begin reading, writing, and listening/speaking courses. In order to proctor the assessments, I had to learn how to accurately gauge whether students had understood the test directions. I realized through this experience that I still had an interest in working with ESL students. This experience led me to consider continuing my education with an MA in TESL and to pursue a post-baccalaureate Certificate in TESOL.

Recently, during my MA English-TESL, I have been working as a responder in the Writer's Center. I have been able to work with students from a variety of language and educational backgrounds. As a responder, I work with students to revise individual written-assignments for the greater purpose of assisting students to be more confident and effective writers. Much of what I do is help students to identify ways in which they can make the message they wish to portray in their work align with their voice as a writer. While "teaching" in this context is more indirect than in a classroom setting, I do help students to engage in a process of inquiry with their own writing to determine whether they are writing what they intend to say and whether it is true to the way they wish to express their ideas. I enjoy working in this context since it is so focused on helping students to claim agency as writers.

### **Experience Teaching ESL**

While all of my experience teaching ESL or EFL has taken place in higher education settings or affiliated programs in the United States, the diversity of backgrounds of my students has allowed me to assist in various aspects of writing instruction.

My first experiences with teaching EFL were very informal, consisting of interactions with friends who were international students during my undergraduate coursework. These friends often asked me for feedback on pronunciation and asked me to correct them if I noticed any errors in their spoken grammar. They also asked me to proofread drafts of their papers and explain conventions of grammar in writing on occasion, which I did after making sure it was clear that I would only give feedback and not revise their papers for them. I enjoyed helping my friends this way and it was actually these experiences which eventually led me toward an interest in TESL.

When I began my TESOL certification as a post-baccalaureate student the first group of students I was able to work with as a classroom assistant was in an EFL focused setting in which all of the students were native speakers of Japanese. It was an exchange program of a Japanese university which has satellite programs at public universities in the northwest United States. My role was to be available to a small group of students to answer any questions they may have during class and to help track in-class work for the instructor. I had been instructed by my TESOL program to not offer correction to students unless they asked for it or the instructor told me to give it. Students did sometimes ask for clarification on items such as the different forms or parts of speech for a particular vocabulary term.

My next experience was in a multi-lingual academic, or “for-credit,” ESL program at a local community college. I worked with a small group of native Arabic speakers in a larger beginning or level one reading and writing class. The lessons mostly consisted of students being introduced to a content set, usually vocabulary focused, then reading aloud through a reading which included the new content, then answering



questions about the reading and writing down their answers. In this case, direct error correction focused mostly on recasting during speaking or graded quizzes at the end of each week.

At the end of my TESOL certification, I was able to teach three out of five days a week of an intermediate to advanced multi-level Adult-ESL course which was part of a community Adult Basic Education program connected to a local community college. I still recall the enthusiasm and hopeful attitudes of this group of students fondly. The students were of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. They all held a firm belief that increased fluency in English would improve their lives, from the native-Spanish-speaking Nurses' Assistant who wanted to improve her English to continue on to train as a Registered Nurse, to the young, newly married Vietnamese wife of an American Air-force man who had registered her for classes so she would be able to get by on her own the next time he had to go on tour.

As this was the first ESL class I taught on my own, I was grateful for the very detailed course curriculum outlined in the teacher's copy of the assigned textbook. The classroom teacher, who would split the room in half while I was there and teach the more advanced group of students while I taught the intermediate ones, wanted me to adhere to the textbook lesson guidelines pretty closely, and I was happy to be able to rely on that resource. The text focused on teaching a grammar function and a vocabulary set in each lesson, usually building on previous lesson materials for the grammar. For example, a lesson on the past-perfect would begin by reviewing what the students had already learned about the simple-past. It also tended to follow an "I do, we do, you do" instruction model in which a grammar rule was explicitly taught, then practiced in a

highly scaffolded format, such as a cloze, then practiced in a form that allowed students to compose complete sentences in response to questions about a reading which utilized both the vocabulary and the grammar content. I was instructed to give explicit feedback both on spoken and written work, but it was supposed to be in a gentle format such as questioning or recasting. I was never supposed to tell students they were wrong directly.

During my MA English- TESL coursework, I have had two opportunities to teach ESL students. My first experience was as an assistant teacher in English 112. I was responsible for creating journal prompts and models which related to selected portions of the course text. It was actually during the internship with Dr. Reeves' English 112 class that I learned to create journaling assignments to act as pre-writes for larger papers and to provide models of the writing assignments to scaffold students' writing. Incidentally, I integrated this technique into teaching English 101 not only to ESL students, but also to L1-English students. I also met with four different students for one-to-one conferences in order to help them revise writing assignments. During class, my primary responsibility was to assist this small group of students as they completed in-class assignments.

Most recently, I have been able to teach an ESL section of English 101. The goals and major assignments of the course were the same as the standard English 101 courses. As an instructor specialized in TESL, I was able to offer additional scaffolding to help my ESL students meet the goals of the course. For example, I often made sure that there were questions assigned with course readings so that the students could read for specific information which would relate to lecture and discussion in the following class period.

## **Experience Teaching L1 English Writers**

My experiences teaching L1 English speakers in a college composition setting have shown me that it is not only ESL/ EFL students who make errors in writing conventions. In my experience, while L2 writers usually tend to have fewer types of errors, patterns in their errors which can generally be traced back to L1 transfer, and have some level of meta-linguistic knowledge which makes their errors quicker to explain, native-English speaking writers tend to have a wide variety of error types and little understanding of meta-linguistic grammar terminology. Explicit written feedback is necessary and often extensive due to the high variety of types of error in L1 writers work and their limited experience with direct grammar instruction and terminology.

While I and many of my colleagues who teach first year composition courses do take time to address the errors which occur most frequently in student writing, we find that often we do not have the time or resources available to address all of the errors in our students' writing while still meeting the course goals of introducing new skills and content. While this can be discouraging, we are often thankful that our students are able to access other resources on campus, such as the writing center, in order to assist them with frequent errors as well as additional support for finding their voices as authors.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The project explores implications of the current discussions centering on multimodal texts in composition studies. As a specialist in TESL, I feel that I have a particular propensity in my inquiry into composition pedagogy. The questions that I choose to ask regarding composition theory and practice relate to improving agency and self-definition through writing, which is essential to assisting ESL students to succeed in standard composition courses. This project is not meant as an exploration of the impact of multimodal composition in a specific context. Instead, the aim is to explore the existing pedagogy regarding questions of defining text and authorship and to propose a model for applying that inquiry to praxis.

In addressing the issues of text and authorship, I find it necessary to first address my awareness of myself as the author and researcher of this text. While such a statement may seem out of place in a discussion of pedagogy and teaching praxis, a statement of reflexivity preceding all scholarly research is standard across the social sciences and especially in anthropology, the discipline in which I first became aware of myself as an academic writer. Furthermore, it seems logical to begin a discussion on the changing definitions of text and author by first focusing on the identity of the author of this text, the role she has decided to undertake in writing, and what her purpose is in writing.

In many ways, this thesis acts as a literacy narrative. In it, I recount my experiences with teaching as a novice composition instructor. I reflect upon the experiences of teaching and developing a curriculum for teaching a literacy narrative unit in a composition course. I analyze that reflection and my understanding of myself as a researcher, an instructor in both composition and ESL, and an individual whose

experiences are uniquely different from and connected to the backgrounds of my peers. I reflexively analyze how my identity and past experiences have influenced my approach to teaching, inquiry, and research through the significant experience of teaching, observing curricular limitations, reformatting a curriculum, and applying it to further course contexts.

I find it important to note that biases may arise out of some aspects of my identity. As a woman who identifies strongly with the matrilineage of her family, it is significant to note that I was the first woman in my matrilineage to receive a college degree. However, I also come from a nuclear family with an intelligent mother who both facilitated and encouraged her children to challenge themselves academically and valued education as a way to enrich our identities and empower us. I understand what it is like for a student to see a passion for learning as integral to her identity, but to also not have a heritage of advanced educational success as a foundation for that drive to succeed academically.

As a Caucasian woman who was born into a middle class family who then declined into working class by adolescence, I am well positioned to identify with both empowered and oppressed aspects of society. My individual identity intersects aspects of both privilege and disadvantage in my race, gender, and socioeconomic background. This makes me particularly sympathetic to intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches to research.

The foundation for this research actually began almost a year before any formal study took place. During my first quarter of teaching an introductory composition course as a graduate student, I recognized that one of the units was not fostering the composition

and critical thought strategies it was intended to facilitate, and the following quarter I adjusted the curriculum to address this concern.

The adjustments were made with the specific goal of creating a writing unit in which students could utilize critical analysis and reflection while utilizing the format of the narrative genre. After teaching the adjusted curriculum, I noticed improvements in my students' work. I began to question whether there was any basis in the existing research for the changes I made to the curriculum in that unit, and the enclosed thesis is a result of that inquiry.

Because the formal research began after I had already made and enacted changes to the curriculum, this study does not include samples of student work or observations of a case-study. Instead, it builds upon my reflections on teaching and curriculum design to explore the existing research regarding defining texts, authorship, and multi-modal and collaborative composition.

Throughout my research, I have acted as both participant and observer, often recognizing my own experiences and those of my students in the theory and research I have read. While I was teaching in the context of predominantly native-English speaking courses, I was also actively applying the pedagogy of teaching a second-language to that composition context. Furthermore, in my experience of teaching freshman composition courses, I have always had at least one non-native English-speaker among my students. And as I was a student of TESL at the same time I was teaching composition, my teaching became a context in which I could practice the TESL methods I was simultaneously learning. I became a kind of student-teacher-action-researcher. As I move

forward in understanding the longstanding theories which underlie this issue, I must always remember the dual roles of my culture and identity which I assume as I research.

My identity, and therefore my biases, are influential as I add to the scholarly discourse, synthesize meaning for my fellow instructors, and apply practices in the classroom. As a woman, an amateur-anthropologist, and a student in teaching English to non-native speakers, I realize that inquiry centering on central concepts of Aristotelian Rhetoric must be continually and actively reinterpreted to include underrepresented and silenced voices as equals in any re-formation of the forum.

My background in anthropology has had a significant impact on my style of writing research focused texts. In that discipline, texts are often the result of long-term study of a unique people group, community, or subculture. It is a value within the discipline for the texts created about a people to also be accessible and useful to them. As a result, I strive to make my writing accessible and useful not only in adding to the academic discourse, but also as a resource to instructors and students. Furthermore, as my realization-of-self as an academic writer came about in a field in which the researcher's firsthand experience is the primary process of data collection, I write about pedagogy in a way that elevates my personal observations and voice to the level of scholarly source material. I write as myself as much as I can.

The process of redefining texts has been brought forth in the discourse of multimodal composition and holds further implications on our notions of who can be identified as an author. In order to question the standard definitions of concepts such as "text" and "author," it is necessary to understand how the existing definitions as understood in an academic context are shaped by both inclusion and exclusion. The

processes by which these terms have been defined, understood, and used has resulted in excluding many people from identifying as authors, largely due to factors such as race, gender, language, and socioeconomic status. One of my goals in discussing the process of redefining texts is to make room in the discourse for the voices of people who have been silenced or excluded throughout the history of the discipline. By doing so, I also hope to give my students opportunities to identify with those past voices and recognize the potential of their own voices as writers as a result.

Chapter two is a survey of literature. In order to understand the various ways in which existing discourse in composition studies and TESL preface my inquiry into text, authorship, and identity-analysis through writing, I explore relationships between a number of topic areas. I address current discussions on multi-modality in composition studies, composition and writing in TESL, review the current and historical contexts of author identity and audience awareness in English, offer historical-reconstruction in feminist theory as a model that can be applied to composition and TESL, and inquire into the theoretical basis for teaching literacy narratives.

Chapter three introduces my methods and process for teaching a literacy narrative unit in a freshman composition course. I introduce my process of selecting readings to scaffold students' writing of the literacy narrative essay. An overview of the assigned readings, analysis of the elements which identify the readings as adequate models for writing a literacy narrative, and summary of pre-writing or journal models are provided as an application of theory and a basis for further research into teaching praxis in this area.



Chapter four is a reflection on my experience with teaching a literacy narrative essay. I provide personal observations on the effectiveness of the unit as compared to a general autobiographical essay. While I did not obtain permission to provide samples of student work, I had written reflections on my experiences with teaching the unit curriculum at the time, and excerpts from those reflections are included and expanded upon.

Chapter five includes a discussion of my process of selecting texts. By relating theory summarized in the literature review to my experiences in teaching the unit, I justify a process of selecting texts which aren't necessarily identified as literacy narratives as models for student literacy narratives. I further assert that the value of redefining our concepts of text and authorship is that it can allow students to identify with authors and be more confident in defining themselves through their writing.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **Overview**

Increasingly, the fields of ESL and composition studies in the college setting are becoming so connected that they must be addressed together. In recent years, a majority of ESL students in the college setting have moved on from their ESL coursework to take mainstream English and composition classes as required for the degrees they wish to obtain at English-speaking universities. A current and relevant issue in the field of English composition, which therefore has implications on English language learners, is the reading and composition of multimodal texts in the composition classroom (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005; McCrimmon, 2006; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015). According to Anstey and Bull “A text may be defined as multimodal when it combines two or more semiotic systems” (Anstey & Bull, 2010). They enumerate five semiotic systems which are linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial. “Multimodal texts can be delivered via different media or technologies. They may be live, paper, or digital electronic” (Anstey & Bull, 2010). Often, multimodal composition is also collaborative.

Current research into this topic addresses the implications of multimodality both on the pedagogy, or theory regarding teaching methods, (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015) and praxis, or application of theory to teaching practices (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005; McCrimmon, 2006; Shin & Cimasko, 2008). Much of the research has focused on technology as the unifying element which connects traditionally separate modes of composition such as linguistic or text based versus visually focused composition (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005;

McCrimmon, 2006; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015). Still further research has focused on the difficulty of assessing multimodal texts created by students (Gallagher, 2014) and the impact of context, or the setting in which a text is created and delivered, on the portrayal and definition of the meaning of a work composed in a multimodal medium (Gallagher, 2014; Shin & Cimasko, 2008). However, little research has addressed the capacity of multimodal practices for inclusion of diverse students, students from groups who have limited power in society based on factors such as race, gender, linguistic background, and socioeconomic class, in the academic setting (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Sohan, 2015).

### **Composition Studies: Multi-modality**

Central to the concept of redefinition in the field of composition is the importance of context in multimodal composition (Gallagher, 2014; Shin & Cimasko, 2008). Much research has focused on multimodality in the context of technology related modes (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005; McCrimmon, 2006; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015). The impact on meaning-making in multimodal composition is another important focus of research regarding context (Gallagher, 2014; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015). Meaning-making in multimodal composition is closely related to self-identity and delivering information relating to identifying concepts (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015).

Dong-sin Shin and Tony Cimasko, in their article “Multimodal Composition in a College ESL Class: New Tools, Traditional Norms. Computers and Composition,” address the function of multimodality in effective communication of information and self-identity (2008). They observed ESL students in a first-year composition course who

used multimodal formats for an online argument essay assignment. The researchers found that the students tended to select modes based on a word-dominated discourse, and that non-linguistic modes were used more readily in instances of relaying meaning in emotional, individual, national, and cultural identities (Shin & Cimasko, 2008).

Chris Gallagher also addresses the impact of context on meaning-making in texts in “Staging Encounters: Assessing the Performance of Context in Students’ Multimodal Writing” (2014). He concludes that a clearly defined performance-based theory of context is necessary in order to accurately assess students’ multimodal writing. Gallagher focuses specifically on the importance of context in making meaning in multimodal texts by illustrating student’s abilities to utilize context in multimodal writing in assessment situations (2014).

Another factor in the redefinition of concepts in composition for the inclusion of multimodality is the reconciliation of existing modes (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005; McCrimmon, 2006; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015). One example of reconciliation of modes in composition is the inclusion of reading, literature, and critical-thinking curriculum in composition classes. Whether literature studies or critical reading should be included in the first year composition course has long been debated in the field.

Miles McCrimmon focuses on the differences between composition courses in the four year university and the two year college, especially in the necessity for combining reading with writing instruction for efficiency and economy in the two year college setting, in his article “Across the Great Divide: Anxieties of Acculturation in College English” (2006). McCrimmon concludes that the reconciliation of reading and literature curriculum to writing curriculum is essential to the acculturative nature of first

year composition courses in that it increases student awareness of the differences in expectations of K-12 and postsecondary courses (2006).

This concept of reconciliation of modes in composition is also related to the democratization of student power in the composition classroom (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Sohan, 2015). The redefinition of texts for the purpose of including multimodality may also include alternative texts such as the alternative reading of rhetoric and compositional strategies apparent in material artifacts (Sohan, 2015).

Sohan studies the discourse and rhetorical strategies apparent in a specific set of material artifacts, the Gee's Bend Quilts. She presents the quilts as a series of texts, composed by a skilled community of authors according to a high level of capability in effectively manipulating rhetorical structures in the article "'But a quilt is more': Recontextualizing the discourse(s) of the gee's bend quilts" (2015). Her argument is that by re-contextualizing the semiotic discourse of objects such as the quilts, we may allow students to write about material culture from a perspective of rhetoric and composition thereby enabling them to "blur and blend language, form, genre, and meaning in ways that push against the boundaries of academic discourse and, in the process, change how they consider the role of objects and writing in their lives." (Sohan, 2015, p. 313)

Hull and Nelson address the changing definitions of "text," "reading," and "writing" in an age of multimodality made relevant through digital composition. In order to explore the elements which give power to multimodality, the authors call for study of the role multimodal texts take in real-world contexts. In their article "Locating the Semiotic Power of Multimodality." (2005) they draw from a specific example of multimedia digital storytelling in order to detail multimodal analysis. Their analysis of

that text uncovered semiotic relationships between varying and concurrent modes of composition.

The authors argue that in these semiotic relationships resides the expressive power of multimodality, that “the meaning that a viewer or listener experiences is qualitatively different, transcending what is possible via each mode separately” (Hull & Nelson, p. 251). In concluding, the authors acknowledge how redefinition of the elements of composition to better include multimodal texts holds a great capacity for power-minority inclusion. The authors commend multimodality “as a democratizing force, an opening up of what counts as communication, and a welcoming of varied channels of expression” (p. 253). They close by wondering “how many other poets and storytellers there are for whom multimodality would offer unexpectedly powerful affordances.” (p. 253)

### **ESL Composition**

In a somewhat rare look into second language students’ transition from ESL coursework to college level courses, Carroll and Dunkelblau (2011) explored the kinds of writing tasks that ESL students are likely to encounter upon transitioning into standard college coursework in the article “Preparing ESL students for ‘real’ college writing: A glimpse of common writing tasks ESL students encounter at one community college.” By surveying a number of first year courses across disciplines, they found that

Students at two-year colleges are being challenged to write at quite a sophisticated level. Writing assignments across the disciplines are described as relatively long-two pages or more-and require extensive

critical thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These skills can be quite daunting for native English speakers and can take a long time to acquire. This is even more so for ESL students since they must grapple with achieving linguistic accuracy and academic vocabulary acquisition while they develop their critical thinking skills. (p. 8)

Carroll and Dunkelblau go on to recommend that ESL writing courses be expanded to address the critical reading and analysis skills students will need to write successfully in college level courses. Citing previous study, they show that in a majority of ESL writing classes, students are not required to interact with assigned texts or researched sources in a way that requires critical thinking about the text beyond a summary level. In other words, they do not interact with the text in order to analyze it and determine how it can be synthesized with other texts or their own experiences (Carroll & Dunkelblau, 2011).

Creatively redefining and utilizing texts from across disciplines and modes, as per multi-modal composition, may be one way to help ESL students to move beyond surface level paraphrasing and summary of assigned readings in order to synthesize the information between multiple texts and their own experiences.

While study of ESL students in college composition courses is rather limited, the relationship between language, multilingualism, and identity has been researched to a much larger extent in studies of second language acquisition. In “Identity and Intonation: Linking Dynamic Processes in an ESL Classroom,” Morgan (1997) explores how students’ identity impacts their use of varying spoken registers and intonation as much as the genre or context of communication does. By recording and teaching the variability of

spoken responses within a given context, Morgan fosters student engagement in a kind of multi-modal spoken composition process as shaped by their identities (Morgan, p. 446). This is another instance in which ESL students would benefit from their instructors awareness of the impact of a multi-modal redefinition of texts in order to include varying modes in the composition classroom.

In its most common definition, multi-modal composition address the use of varying technologies in the process of composing texts. The article “Tertiary Level EFL College Students’ Opinion toward Computer-based Concept Mapping in English Writing” addresses this aspect of multi-modality in EFL students’ college-level English writing (Chen, Chen, Chen, Wey, & Kuo, 2015). In a course which required students to collaboratively compose computer-based concept maps, EFL students were surveyed regarding their opinions on both the use of concept-mapping and the computer-based mode of composition. The results showed that not only did students view the process of concept mapping as a prewriting strategy, they also had an improved opinion of the usefulness of computer-based composition modes as a result of the focus of the course (Chen et al, 2015). It is of course relevant to consider the opinions of students in regard to the effectiveness of multi-modal composition processes when considering how to develop composition course curriculum.

### **Author Identity**

Some arguments against multi-modal composition, collaborative composition, and redefining text and authorship rely on a tradition of recognizing an author as possessing individual genius and owning particular texts which he has composed.



However, this concept of authorship and an author's identity is not as longstanding or unchanging as many would assume.

In their article "What is an Author Now? Discourse analysis applied to the idea of an author" Daniel Martínez-Ávila , Richard Smiraglia , Hur-Li Lee, and Melodie Fox (2015) explore how the concept of what an author is has shifted over time. They outline significant points at which "author" has been defined or redefined. Beginning with Aristotle, they show the authority of an author in shaping the meaning of a text and state that the primacy of an author over his text has persisted since that time.

However, they also show significant exceptions to that most traditional definition of the role of the author. The main historical example of an exception to the author-as-genius-agent model is in the composition of religious texts. In these works the author is viewed as a conduit of a divinely inspired message, not the willful creator of meaning (Martínez-Ávila, Smiraglia, Hur-Li Lee, & Fox, 2015).

Not only have religious texts traditionally viewed the author as a willing conduit instead of a willful agent, they have often included collaboration and multiple modes in the construction of texts. In the article "Middle English Literature and Illustrated Manuscripts: New Approaches to the Disciplinary and the Interdisciplinary," Richard K. Emmerson explores Middle English manuscripts to show the interdisciplinary nature of Medieval Literature studies (2006). Middle English manuscripts utilize both art and text to support each other in delivering a message. According to Anstey and Bull's (2010) definition, Middle English manuscripts would be defined as multi-modal texts because they utilize more than one semiotic mode in their composition. Furthermore, it was common for multiple scribes and artists to collaborate on a single manuscript.

Some well-known examples of collaborative, multimodal composition are the revelations of medieval mystics such as Marjorie Kempe and Julian of Norwich (Johnson, 1991). These women worked with scribes to assist them with recording revelations and visions, changing the text from a spoken to written mode, and collaboratively revising their messages to best address their audience. This example of collaborative multimodality becomes an even richer one if we accept, as these female authors and their scribes did fully believe, that the messages were imparted to them by God. Under this assumption, the remaining texts were created collaboratively by God, female-mystics, and scribes, utilizing the visual and experiential modes in which the women received the messages from God, the verbal-spoken mode in which the women dictated the message to the scribes, and the written text compiled by the scribes. Redefinition of our concepts of text and authorship to make room for multimodality will definitely benefit the ongoing scholarly debates over the correct way to attribute these medieval texts.

### **Audience Awareness**

In a postmodern classroom, the teacher never views or addresses the students as an empty vessel which contains no pre-existing information regarding the materials to be covered in the course. I believe it is not only pedagogically incorrect, but also counterproductive to the workload of instructors to assume that students have no existing knowledge of how to utilize elements of the rhetorical process. While most students do not know the terminology of Aristotle's rhetorical structures and lack a meta-cognitive awareness of how the structures interact in their own writing, they are actively engaged in and utilizing the structures, often on a daily basis. One aspect of multi-modality is the

increased recognition of students' abilities in composition being recognized in their existing day to day writing, such as the texts they compose in social media.

A majority of students face difficulty in exhibiting audience awareness in their writing due to the autonomous nature of creating a text (Carvalho, 2002; Ede & Lunsford, 1984; Ong, 1975). However, more recent research shows that students may already be skilled at imagining an audience and successfully addressing it in the context of social media and other online writing-scenarios (Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In these contexts, students are already used to understanding the relationship between author and audience as a process of ongoing dialogue in which the author and audience continually influence both each other and the created text (Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The acknowledgement of this existing understanding of audience by bringing these online-writing contexts into the classroom may be one way to address the longstanding problem of teaching audience awareness (Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2011).

While activating prior knowledge is a well-known strategy among educators at any level, it is sometimes difficult for instructors to creatively interpret the out of classroom situations in which that knowledge may be rooted. Lapp, Shea, and Wolsey (2011) propose the use of weblogs or blogging to

...foreground the needs of the audience for a given written work, and provide novice authors the tools to obtain and make use of audience feedback, and subsequently, grow as writers who are aware of their audience (p. 2).

In a case study in an elementary school classroom, blogging was used as a tool to improve audience awareness. The authors found that students writing improved through

their increased awareness of the audience through the feedback provided by blog comments. Among the 18 second-grade students included in the study,

93% of students stated they would make improvements to their writing if they knew someone would read it...Although students knew that not all of their writing would appear on the blog, their comments and behaviors suggested they were writing for an audience larger than themselves.

(p. 15)

Social media writing contexts also illustrate how many students are already skilled at reflecting on, shaping, and essentializing their identities in order to effectively address an audience. By essentializing their identities, students are actively defining themselves by the most basic terms or factors of their concepts-of-self, favoring some aspects of their identities and minimizing the impact of others in a process similar to branding. In their article “I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience ,”Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd (2011) research how Twitter users display strategies of self-identity-shaping to address specific audience demographics.

Some techniques of audience management resemble the practices of ‘micro-celebrity’ and personal branding, both strategic self-commodification. Our model of the networked audience assumes a many-to-many communication through which individuals conceptualize an imagined audience evoked through their tweets. (p. 2)

This is an excellent example of how multi-modal composition allows students to engage in composing in non-traditional formats in order to become better and more self-

aware writers. In the case of Marwick and Boyd's (2011) article, we can see that their students were already actively engaging in and using rhetorical structures, because their study shows that the use of social media requires students to identify themselves as authors who communicate a specific message to a dynamic audience for a specific purpose.

### **Historical Reconstruction: Borrowing from Feminist Theory**

While a focus on technology based multi-modality is somewhat recent, the concept of redefining works for the purpose of including minority voices in a scholarly dialogue is not. In the field of feminist studies, the process of analyzing existing texts in order to interpret them as foundational to concepts of feminist theory is referred to as historical reconstruction. Within feminist rhetoric, historical reconstruction often has the goal of creating a strong heritage of discourse both for women and for the field of feminist scholarship. The process of historical reconstruction in order to re-appropriate a heritage of scholarship for groups traditionally underrepresented in academia is a mainstay especially in intersectional-feminist research, which focuses on the relationships between power and other social identity factors such as race and gender, and is beginning to be common across other disciplines as well.

In her 1974 article "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker discussed a heritage of art and self-expression among African-American women. Focusing on the ability of oppressed peoples to make themselves understood as artists, she showed a connection between the recognition and integration of works by female and working class Westerners into the fields of art and literature to the still largely overlooked creative

works of African-American women from slave to post-reconstruction eras. In order to acknowledge the free expression of generations of enslaved people, Walker advocated for a redefinition of the concepts of art and authorship (1974). By adjusting the definitions of art, a greater number of people may be identified as artists and the inequality in social value between works considered as “high art” versus “handicrafts,” “folk-art,” or “cultural art” is made less disparate.

Often in feminist rhetoric an existing historical text is reinterpreted through a particular lens in order to define and categorize the work as foundational to an aspect of feminist theory, such as intersectional-studies. Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” speech is one such “document” which has been utilized to create a heritage of intersectional-feminist rhetoric and to address the oppression faced by black women in the field of feminist study (Hooks, 1981; Smiet, 2015).

This text was originally an extemporaneous speech given by Sojourner Truth at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio on May 29, 1851. The speech, now also known as “Ain’t I a Woman?” is widely referenced in intersectional-feminist study. Its particular wording is somewhat contested since Truth delivered it extemporaneously and, while a newspaper printed an account of the convention which mentioned the speech nearly a month later, no direct transcript exists. The difficulty in establishing provenance, authenticity, and exact wording of this piece could be a reason to exclude it based on standard scholarly definitions of “text.” However, historical reconstruction allows scholars to analyze the speech as an important text in intersectional-feminist study.

Katrine Smiet (2015) goes so far as to say that this process of reconstruction not only reinterprets texts for intersectional study, but identifies figures or authors as

intersectional in the process. This address both our understanding of the redefinition of what we understand to be a text and who can be considered an author.

The reclaiming of historical figures such as Sojourner Truth has been an important strategy for black feminists in their efforts to draw attention to the complex oppression that black women face. As black women, they are oppressed not only by sexist structures, but also by racism – both within the women’s movement and outside of it. (p. 10)

Recent works of MacDonald (2015) and Sohan (2015) regarding the unequal power distribution inherent in the definition and valuation of texts and authors give me great confidence in the necessity of actively including voices which have traditionally been underrepresented in academia including in the field of composition studies. Similarly, the current focus on redefinition of concepts of texts to include a wider range of modes in composition could lead to an acknowledgement of generations of people whose voices have been silent or absent from the field of composition (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Sohan, 2015).

In other words, the importance of redefining and re-contextualizing texts doesn’t only broaden the number of works which can be utilized in teaching composition. It also has the added value of allowing a greater variety of individuals to be identified as authors in the field of composition studies.

## **Literacy Narratives**

The application of these expanding concepts of texts and authors to a composition curriculum may appear to be somewhat convoluted. However, an already common English Composition assignment, the literacy narrative. A literacy narrative is defined in the article “Reading Literacy Narratives” as “stories which foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy... that both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy” (Eldred & Mortenson, 1992, p. 513).

Mary Soliday discussed literacy narratives as a means to students discovering that their experiences with literacy are unique to their identities in her 1994 article “Translating Self and Differences through Literacy Narratives”. She addressed how important experiences with literacy are often tied to transitions in an individual’s identity and assist to move them through liminal periods in their definitions of self. She further asserted that writing literacy narratives, especially in first year college writing classrooms, can help them to discover how their experiences are unusual and uniquely linked to their perceptions of self-identity. Soliday (1994) also illustrates how literacy narratives can help students who identify with oppressed populations or have trouble relating to the world of academia to see themselves as relevant and contributing to academic discourse.

Because literary narratives so often focus on the meeting and clashing of identities, languages, and cultures, writing literacy stories allows our basic writing or nontraditional students—those “others” of the academic landscape hitherto largely represented by teachers speaking on their



behalf--themselves to enter into and influence the contemporary debates surrounding multicultural education. (p. 513)

As a composition course assignment, the literacy narrative lends itself well to assisting students in exploring their self-identities through reading and writing assignments which question the standard concepts of text and authorship. In fact, Kara Alexander recommends in the article “Successes, victims, and prodigies: “Master” and “little” cultural narratives in the literacy narrative genre” that instructors consider multi-modal composition as a way to limit the impact of the “literacy narrative master narrative” on students’ literacy narratives.

The literacy narrative master narrative, which can be defined as a narrative message of “literacy equals success,” may actually do more to subordinate than to empower students’ agency. If students believe that their literacy narrative must adhere to the master narrative of literacy equating to greater success in life, they will not risk deviating from that model even if their personal beliefs and feelings do not line up with it (Alexander, 2011).

The literacy narrative master narrative can actually be implied by the context of educational settings. For example, Michael MacDonald (2013) explores the implications of English education for refugee students, specifically in the context of educators working for overseas NGOs in the dissertation “Emissaries of Literacy: Refugee Studies and Transnational Composition.” In this context MacDonald shows how the teachers and aid workers become identified as “emissaries of literacy.” In other words, they are set apart from their students because they control the distribution of a highly valued commodity, literacy. This not only perpetuates the literacy narrative master narrative, it

adds an element of social stratification which separates the literate teachers from their per-literate students. This illustrates how in a composition classroom setting it is important to understand the perceived power disparity between teachers and students and its impact on the students understanding of how to “challenge and affirm” their concepts of literacy and identity.

In his paper “Teaching the Literacy Narrative,” Andrew Copley (2015) implies that students’ adherence to the literacy narrative master narrative actually derives from their understanding of the teacher as their primary audience. “At times I have a sinking suspicion that my students are writing what they think *I* want to read. They want to impress their English teacher, so they tend to want to say that literacy leads to success” (Copley). This relates back to the issue of student-writers’ awareness of the audience in their writing. Specifically, students’ apparent desire to impress their instructor by reaffirming the literacy narrative master narrative shows the impact of the students’ understanding of the teacher as their primary audience.

In her 2010 dissertation, “Developing Dialogical Academic Writing Through the Use of Student Empowered Peer Review,” Caroline Coit (2010) addresses the problem of student writing in universities as monologic rather than dialogic. At the root of this problem is the fact that a majority of student writing is for an audience of one: the instructor. Because a late stage process of review by a larger audience apart from the instructor is not usually included in the writing process, students quite accurately assume that the only audience that really matters is their instructor. In order for students to develop dialogic writing, which centers writing as a continuing conversation between author and audience, the impact of teacher-as-audience must be reduced (Coit, 2010).

In the case of the literacy narrative, the weight of the teacher-as-audience on the students' writing is twofold. The student will struggle to imagine the audience while composing, as is usual in the writing process. In addition, many assignment prompts for the literacy narrative are structured in a way which favors the literacy-narrative-master-narrative.

Alexander (2011) cautions instructors as they create assignments for a literacy narrative:

Overall we should be deliberate and intentional as we design our literacy narrative assignments, for it is our role to ensure that the process of composing a literacy narrative teaches students about their literate lives and also helps them claim agency for themselves. (p. 629)

The inclusion of a greater variety of texts and authors in course readings can assist students to diverge from the literacy narrative "master-narrative" by helping them to identify with authors and engage in reflexive writing which questions the standard modes of composition. In addition to Eldred and Mortenson's (2010) definition of literacy narratives as "stories which foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy... that both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy," there must be some element of facilitating agency for students to actively define their own identities as expressed through literacy-related experiences. When teaching literacy narratives, it is important for instructors to begin with readings which model not only the elements of the narrative genre, but also assist students to inquire into and reflect upon their own identities in relation to the literacy-related experiences of others.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Why I chose to teach the literacy narrative**

During my first quarter of graduate-assistant-teaching an introductory composition course at a regional comprehensive university in the northwest United States, I was highly aware of whether the writing assignments I was teaching were successfully assisting the students to grow as writers. Throughout my first quarter of teaching, I reflected on whether I was an effective instructor and whether the individual assignments, especially the major essay assignments, were an effective venue to the students meeting the overall goals of the course.

I was fortunate to receive support in this process of self-evaluation, all graduate assistants in the composition department were required to be enrolled in coursework designed to develop their capabilities as instructors as well as in their understanding of the pedagogical underpinnings for the required course assignments which were standard throughout the department. As part of my required coursework as a graduate assistant, I also wrote a reflection paper on my experiences with teaching the course.

As I have looked back at that first quarter reflection paper, nearly two years later, I have not only been struck by my improved confidence in my own capabilities as an instructor made visible through my writing, but also by my confidence over my understanding of the changes necessary to the curriculum in order to better meet the goals of the course. In fact, at the end of my first quarter of teaching, I knew I wanted to change the Autobiographical Essay, the standard assignment in the department at the time, to a

Literacy Narrative which had been suggested as an alternative. The following excerpt of the reflection shows this intention to change that unit.

One of the main things I would like to change as I go into my second quarter of teaching English 101 is the Autobiographical Essay. My students seemed to have some difficulty addressing the reflection aspect of the assignment, and I think that is in large part due to the prompt I used for the unit. I think that this prompt left too much of an opportunity for students to focus more fully on the descriptive-narrative process because they had a little too much freedom in selecting subject matter. For some reason, I think that the structure of the prompt allowed students to select a “story they liked” and try to force reflection out of it instead of selecting an aspect of their personal history which already leant itself to the reflective process. At the same time, I don’t want to limit my students’ ability to write about something which was meaningful to them and I think that students’ ability to shape their own learning process is highly valuable.

As a result I am considering using a literacy-autobiography for the autobiographical unit next quarter. One of the reasons I think this may be more successful is that I had to create my own literacy autobiography for developing curriculum in English 581 this quarter. As I was creating my literacy-autobiography I was struck by how well the subject matter lends itself to reflection integrated into narration, which is one of the major goals of the autobiographical unit. Of course the added benefit of having

created my own literacy autobiography in another course is that I have my own samples of each step in the process I hope to teach next quarter.

(Pullen, pp. 37-38)

Much like Copley (2015) I was not convinced that the structure of the Autobiographical Essay was correctly challenging my students to become critically aware of the relationship between a particular experience and the shaping of their own identity. Moving forward, I hoped that the Literacy Narrative would foster this critical thinking process more effectively.

Furthermore, as an instructor of both composition and ESL who was trained in teaching ESL, I was able to utilize the pedagogical ideals and practices of teaching a second-language in my development and implementation of teaching in a predominantly native-speaker composition course setting. My understanding of the importance of identity to motivation in learning, my use of scaffolding in the form of providing models through assigned readings and journals, and the fact that I consistently provided students with time to pre-write and compose during class-time are all techniques common to second-language teaching.

### **Prefacing the Literacy Narrative/ Transitioning from the Essay Exam**

The unit preceding the Literacy Narrative in the freshman composition course I taught, which was standard across the department, was meant to introduce the critical reading and thinking skills which students were to apply to the three major genre papers in the course, a narrative, a researched-argument, and a reflection. While the course was categorized as a composition or writing course, it was presumed that students must be

capable of reading critically in order to write well. So the first unit in the course centered around assisting students to read, analyze, and summarize both scholarly and non-scholarly texts on the academic topic of literacy for the culminating purpose of writing an essay exam. The articles also offered critique of the structures of academia through the frameworks of such issues as the socio-economic, regional, linguistic, national, gender, and racial identities of students.

Margaret Mount (2014) discussed the difficulty of the assigned readings in the essay exam unit in her thesis "Academic Reading and Writing at the College Level: Action Research in a Classroom of a homogeneous Group of Male Students from Saudi Arabia." In particular, Mount discussed the challenges faced by her students in reading C.H. Knoblauch's article "Literacy and the Politics of Education." While Mount was primarily teaching ESL students, in my experience this article is challenging for both ESL and native-English-speaking students. However, I do feel that with the additional scaffolding an instructor trained in teaching second-language is able to provide, that this is a very useful text for preceding a unit on reading and writing a literacy narrative. Furthermore, other readings in the unit, such as Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," introduce many of the significant themes which will be further explored in writing a literacy narrative. Both the connecting theme of literacy and the various critiques of academia based on identity factors introduced in the readings assigned in the preceding essay exam unit were an excellent topical basis for introducing the Literacy Narrative readings. Furthermore, the skills needed to criticize and analyze challenging texts through reading could also help students to think analytically about their own experiences and self-identification in order to write the Literacy Narrative essay.

## **Goals of the Literacy Narrative**

While there was nothing inherently wrong with the design and overview of the curriculum for the general autobiographical essay, it became clear while teaching it that it might not be well suited to the course goals of creating inquiry based, analytical, self-reflective texts which explore ideas supported by evidence of some kind. The texts students created were relatively effective at utilizing the chronological structure of narrative writing, descriptive detail, and remembered dialogue. At times the students over dramatized detail in order to exhibit the emotional impact of the events on their lives, but too often the essays did not move beyond the surface of students asking themselves “how I felt” to reflecting on how the experience has shaped “who I am.”

A majority of texts produced were one dimensional interludes into a memories of stories from students’ pasts that they liked, but didn’t know why they liked them, and didn’t stop to question themselves. The purpose of the autobiographical essay was not only to teach the genre of narrative writing which students are likely to encounter during their academic careers, but also to help students be capable of creating texts which center on a controlling idea or thesis and display awareness of the self-as-author and the author’s interaction with the audience.

A narrative essay is meant to focus on a single significant event presented in a clear timeline and written from the perspective of the author. In general the author is the main character of the story and the details, setting, and other players are described in relation to their heroic identity. A literacy narrative does not deviate from this basic model of a narrative essay, but does add to its purpose in some pretty specific ways.



Eldred and Mortenson's (1992) definition of literacy narratives as "stories which foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy... that both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy" (p. 513) does seem to lend itself to a process of writing as inquiry in which students explore their own experiences with literacy and question how their own experiences line up with culturally held beliefs about it. However, I realized that not every student would be ready to doubt concepts about literacy which they continued to be influenced by in an academic setting.

For that reason, I decided to build upon the readings in the previous unit and open up discussion on the definition of literacy in the students own writing. Students were to write about the impact of a literacy-related event in their lives, but they were also responsible to define literacy, as they saw it, to their audience, as illustrated in the following excerpt from the essay prompt I wrote (See Appendix A for the full prompt).

In the Literacy Autobiography Unit we will explore how our own overlapping identities influence the way we shape and project our identities through literacy. We will address some readings which explore how individual *voice*, our ability to communicate and self-express through the medium of language, may be shaped, supported, or oppressed through literate actions. The final product of the unit is to *write an essay that describes and analyzes a meaningful literacy experience in your own life*. Draw from the readings from this section and/or the free-writes we will do in class during this unit to begin writing your essay. This should not be an essay on "how literacy changed my life overall." Instead, in the form of a

narrative, it should focus in on a single event in which literacy, however you define it, influenced you to be the person you are today. You are also responsible to define literacy for yourself and your audience.

(Appendix A)

I encouraged, but did not require, students to utilize an outside source in their process of defining literacy for their literacy narrative and indicated the readings for the literacy narrative unit as a starting point for defining literacy beyond “reading and writing.” I also invited discussion on the concept within class from the first day in the unit by defining literacy for myself as the ability to successfully utilize a set of symbols whose meaning is dependent on the context of a particular culture. This broad definition of literacy and the ensuing class discussion seemed to help students take a step back from the narrower definitions of literacy they had encountered in their academic pursuits until that time.

### **Process of Selecting Readings**

At the time I prepared to teach the literacy narrative, there was not a fully outlined curriculum available for teaching a literacy narrative essay in our department. There was a list of possible readings and there was a somewhat vague prompt for the essay. However, it wasn’t completely clear how to help the students integrate both the format of a narrative genre work and the critical-thinking skills of analysis and reflection which the essay was meant to facilitate for the students. I realized that I needed to select readings which not only acted as examples of a literacy narrative, but also aligned with the goal of assisting students to relate a narrative of personal experience to reflection on how the experience was meaningful to the shaping of their own identity and understanding of

their own beliefs. In other words, I wanted to help students to move beyond relating a narrated sequence of events to some level of meta-cognitive awareness of the influence of events on self.

For this reason I selected readings which are not necessarily categorized as literacy narratives per-se, but interpreted as such because they display a meta-cognitive questioning of the self and the place of self in the power structures of society.

Due to my background in TESL, I tend to be highly aware of the ways in which my students may feel excluded from the academic conversation. I understand that elements of my students' identities such as gender, race, economic background and language background may impact whether they are able to identify with and understand a particular text or the academic environment overall. While ESL students consistently experience this sense of anomie, or culturally-based inability to belong, in the academic discussion, I realize that many native-English speaking students have difficulty with feeling like they are a valuable part of academic discourse as well. As a result, I selected readings by authors who discussed or identified with disenfranchised segments of the population.

I felt that this might help students to identify with authors who were not themselves part of an established literary heritage, but had become self-identified as authors despite many obstacles to identifying themselves as such. At the time, I was not familiar with Alexander's (2011) arguments for lessening the weight of the literacy narrative master narrative on students' writing. But to some extent, that was one of my goals in selecting certain readings.

Because I have experience and training in teaching ESL students in English-dominant higher education settings, I tend to be sensitive to the ways in which these students may feel excluded. A current focus in second-language acquisition studies explores the impact of identity and motivation on the language acquisition process. In effect, language learners' ability to view the target language community favorably and themselves as part of that community motivates them to learn and positively impacts the language acquisition process (Ellis, 1994, p. 36). My understanding of this theory led me to consciously scaffold students' motivation by creating a literacy narrative unit that explored identity and facilitated agency.

Furthermore, the institution at which I taught the referenced freshman composition classes has in its mission statement the goal of improving access to first generation college students and other underserved populations who may not have the opportunity for higher education. I see assisting students to view themselves as integral to the academic community in which they learn as an essential element of facilitating their growth as writers. The students' ability to identify with a variety of authors and works will assist them to view the academic community favorably as well as to define themselves as writers and motivate them toward growth.

By assigning readings which deviated from the greater norms of what defines a literacy narrative, as well as being authored by people who were somehow identified with aspects of society which are not well represented in academia, I utilized the processes of historical reconstruction which I knew was standard in the field of feminist scholarship. I wanted to help my students realize their ability to define themselves as authors and to define literacy creatively as it applied to their own experiences. In effect, I hoped to help

my students create literacy narratives to subvert the literacy narrative master narrative and thereby be more able to shape their own identities.

## **Overview of Assigned Readings**

### **In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (Walker)**

Almost as soon as I considered teaching a literacy narrative, I thought of Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" as a potential text for the unit. Originally published in *Ms.* magazine in 1974, Walker's article explores and questions concepts of art and artistic-identity through the lives of African-American women living in the southern United States during the slavery and post-reconstruction eras.

Central to her assertion that these women must be included in an artistic heritage were Walker's memories of her own mother, who with limited time and resources managed to cultivate an artistic identity.

And yet, it is to my mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the Black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day. But when, you will ask, did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit? The answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high-and-low. For example: in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it

portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilting, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by "an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago." If we could locate this "anonymous" Black woman, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers - an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use. (pp. 14-15)

Similar to the process of historical reconstruction now commonly utilized in feminist studies, Walker called on her audience to question their processes of defining art and artist in order to create a broader heritage of artistic genius and agency among African-American women, who were still largely disenfranchised in the field of "high art" at the time. By assigning this reading, I hoped to instigate a similar process of questioning concepts of text, authorship, and literacy among my students as they defined literacy for themselves and wrote about their own experiences with literacy. Along with the requirement that they define literacy for themselves and their audience, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" is meant to aid the students in their process of inquiring through their reflection on their own experiences to "both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy" (Eldred and Mortenson, 1991, p. 513).

## **The House on Mango Street (Cisneros)**

*The House on Mango Street*, written by Sandra Cisneros (1991), is a novella in the form of a series of prose vignettes which display elements of poetic structures. Esperanza, both central character and narrator, writes about her experiences and perceptions of life as she comes-of-age in a Latin barrio in Chicago. In a juvenile voice, Esperanza writes about herself and the people around her in a way which reveals reflection on her growing sense of self identity.

Throughout the short vignettes run themes of language, education, gender, race, and socioeconomic-status in relation to identity and agency. More than once Esperanza makes references to her desire to become a writer and to have a house of her own. “Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (Cisneros, 1991, p. 8). Perhaps in an echo of Virginia Woolf, she seems to see authorship, ownership of personal space, and identity-of-self as linked to each-other.

While Cisneros does not present the work as autobiographical, Esperanza’s experiences hold a resemblance to the author’s personal history. Despite its unique format of vignettes connecting through a single narrator and place and its classification as a work of fiction and especially for the purpose of providing a broad number of modes in which to compose their own literacy narratives I do define *House on Mango Street* as a literacy narrative. In order to help define it as such, I also include the article “Language and Identity in Sandra Cisneros’ “House on Mango Street”” by Adriane Ferriera-Veras (2011) among the assigned readings.

## **The Yellow Wallpaper (Perkins-Gilman)**

Also among the works I considered including from the beginning of my plan to teach a literacy narrative was Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." The short story, told in a first person narrative, begins with the experiences of an unnamed woman who suffers from excessive emotional and mental stress at some point after having a child. Her husband, a physician, begins by ignoring her concerns over her own stability, then prescribes complete rest from her work in order to aid in her recovery. The ensuing narrative is a vivid depiction of the woman's depreciating mental health, which she attributes largely to the prescribed cure and her resultant inability to write.

Like *House on Mango Street*, this work is not categorized as a literacy narrative. However, it does explore concepts of identity and voice by focusing on a main-character whose identity and voice are being actively suppressed by those around her. And in fact, the unnamed woman who narrates the story of her own decline in mental stability does denote the silencing of her concerns over her health and the removal of her agency to work as an author as being tied to that decline.

Furthermore, the short article "'The Yellow Wallpaper': An Autobiography of Emotions" by Kelly Gilbert addresses the likelihood that Gilman's work was based on her own experiences with the stringent treatment process known as "rest-cure" during a period of mental-and-emotional duress. Much like the treatment prescribed to her protagonist, part of the rest-cure treatment was to not do any work which might be mentally stimulating. Gilman was very vocal about the negative impact of the treatment process, especially its removal of her agency as an author and resulting negative impact



on her sense of self. I assigned this reading to help broaden the students' inquiry into the concepts of authorship, voice, and agency in their exploration of literacy and identity.

### **Coming into Language (Baca)**

The final text I selected for the assigned readings in the literacy narrative unit was, to some extent, a response to my realization that all my other assigned texts were written by women. While my criteria regarding selecting readings which addressed or were written by disenfranchised voices seemed to predispose a reading list heavy on female voices, I felt it was important to include at least one male voice among my readings. For this reason I decided to include "Coming into Language" by Jimmy Baca (1991).

The narrative follows Baca from his early education through his realization of his identity as a writer. In elementary school through junior high school he was shamed for being illiterate, but not provided any resources to change that status. As an adult this pushed him into circumstances which linked directly to his inability to read, write, and exert agency through his self-identity. Baca was unjustly incarcerated twice due to some of the long term effects of his illiteracy, poverty, and a resulting lack of capability in defending his innocence. However, his incarceration also provided opportunities to finally learn to read and write and to become empowered through his increasing sense of identity through camaraderie with other incarcerated men with similar histories whom he met. Together they identified with a heritage of oppressed people shared through reading aloud.

There I met men, prisoners, who read aloud to each other the works of Neruda, Paz, Sabines, Nemerov, and Hemingway. Never had I felt such freedom as in that dormitory. Listening to the words of these writers, I felt that invisible threat from without lessen—my sense of teetering on a rotting plank over swamp water where famished alligators clapped their horny snouts for my blood. While I listened to the words of the poets, the alligators slumbered powerless in their lairs. The language of poetry was the magic that could liberate me from myself, transform me into another person, transport me to places far away. And when they closed the books, these Chicanos, and went into their own Chicano language, they made barrio life come alive for me in the fullness of its vitality. I began to learn my own language, the bilingual words and phrases explaining to me my place in the universe (Baca, 1991).

“Coming into Language” (1991) is the only text I assigned which clearly falls into the category of literacy narrative. To some extent, it follows the literacy narrative master narrative in that the narrator equates gaining literacy with success and finding his identity. However, it arrives at the conclusion of literacy benefitting individual success and agency by first addressing the unfairness of how illiteracy decreases individual agency. It acts of an excellent example of both challenging and affirming shared cultural beliefs about literacy (Eldred & Mortenson, 1991, p. 513).

## **Journal Models**

In addition to assigning readings which modeled the reflective narrative writing I wished my students to produce, I also had daily journals for the students to begin writing on topics relating to literacy. The journals were meant to act as guided pre-writing exercises for the students' own literacy narratives. Along with the journals, I included models which I had composed myself as parts of my own literacy narrative. This method of providing daily in-class time for composing journals, for discussing and relating the journals to the goals of the unit and course curriculum, and for providing models composed by the instructor with the writing prompts, is a scaffolding process I learned from Dr. LaVona Reeves in my TESL coursework and had seen her use very successfully in teaching the ESL composition course in which I interned. All included not only the retelling of a sequenced narrative of events, but also reflection on why the story was valuable to me and how it related to my concept of my own identity. The full group of models for the journals is attached in Appendix C. The following, which was prompted by a journal in which I wrote a story told and re-told in my family's oral-history, is the model for the final journal prompt and includes the kind of analytical reflection I hoped my students would engage in their own literacy narratives. Interestingly, in transcribing a story traditionally told in an oral format, I was engaging in multi-modal composition and assisting my students to do the same.

### **Journal Model Sample: A Story from My Family's Oral Tradition**

The strongest cultural influence in my mother's side of my family is of those members who were Quebecois immigrants to New England, primarily to

Massachusetts and New Hampshire. I have always known my grandmother as Memere and grandfather as Pepere, a remnant of the Quebecois-French spoken as the primary language of my family only three generations ago. One of my personal aspirations is to become fluent enough in Quebecois-French to access documents for tracing that part of my family lineage in hopes of finding and contacting any family members remaining in Quebec today.

I believe I identify most closely with this aspect of my family heritage, although it comprises less than half of my lineage background, because of my close relationship with my mother and my knowledge of her close childhood relationship with her Memere Gauvin, her maternal great-grandmother, who was of that immigrant generation. This story is part of the oral tradition of my matrilineage, originating from Memere Gauvin who was so beloved of my mother as a young girl. It takes place in Lawrence, MA during WWII.

Pepere Roy, my maternal great-grandfather, dearly loved his young brother-in-law Alfred, his wife's little brother, as if Alfred were his own sibling. Due to this, as America entered WWII Pepere Roy advised Alfred to join the merchant marines. At this time a post on a merchant marine boat was considered much safer than in the rest of the military, as these boats were supposed to be off limits to enemy-German interests.

Uncle Alfred did join the merchant marines. When he left for training, his young wife, Dolores, and their infant-daughter moved in with Alfred's mother, my great-great-grandmother Memere Gauvin. Alfred and Dolores' baby had been "sickly"

with a respiratory illness for quite some time, and Memere Gauvin and the rest of the household would be able to help care for her while Dolores was at work and Alfred was away. Soon Alfred shipped out on his first trip across the Atlantic.

One night soon after Alfred departed, Memere Gauvin had the sleeping baby in a bassinet at the foot of her bed. Memere kept close watch over the baby as she slept, checking on her throughout the night. This was the common practice when Dolores had to work in the evening. Late that night Memere was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of Alfred's voice. Thinking that she had dreamt it, she did not immediately sit up and notice him. Alfred was, after all, supposed to be on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic.

"Mamma. Mamma!" Alfred called out to her repeatedly, in an attempt to rouse her from sleep, until she did sit up fully awake.

"Mamma," said Alfred to his mother, "I'm here to take the baby."

He reached down into the baby's crib and picked her up. He carried the baby out of the room.

At that moment Memere heard the baby gasp. She got out of bed to check on the baby in her crib. The baby was still there, but she had died.

The next morning Memere Gauvin received a telegram. During the previous night Alfred's ship had been bombed in the Atlantic by a German submarine. There were no survivors.

## **Aspects of Model which Reveal Elements of a Literacy Narrative**

The journal model for writing a story from my family's oral history exhibits key elements of a literacy narrative. At its most basic level, it utilizes all the qualities common to a narrative work. It outlines a story in a clear time-sequence, introduces and gives an overview of the identifying factors of its characters, utilizes detail and dialogue to reveal the characters and events, and centers on a single event which has a central message. But it isn't only the written version of my family's most frequently told ghost story. It also reveals important things about the narrator and author, myself.

The story itself introduces a family who are committed to supporting each other through difficult circumstances. The introduction or preface reveals my valuation of my matrilineal relationships as well as my Quebecoise-immigrant and east-coast United States working class heritage. I introduce the importance of my relationship with my mother and the lasting impact of her childhood relationship with her great-grandmother. Especially in the opening reflection on why the story is important to me, my personal values and aspects of my identity are revealed. In a kind of metacognitive-aside, the introduction not only outlines the setting and relationships between main characters of the story, it introduces reflection on my values and views and analyzes why I hold them. This is the kind of analysis and reflection I hope my students will engage in when writing their own literacy narratives.

#### **Chapter 4: Reflections on Teaching the Literacy Narrative**

When I decided to teach the literacy narrative it was largely to address a problem I had perceived while teaching the autobiographical essay. I felt that the prompt and assigned readings for the literacy narrative would be more effective at assisting students to write personal essays in a narrative format that also exhibited analytical inquiry into the relationship between their own experiences with literacy and commonly held cultural beliefs about the impact of literacy and education on individual lives.

The autobiographical essay prompt left the subject matter completely up to the student, requiring only that the work be non-fiction and based on the students' own experiences. Many students had difficulty selecting a single significant event or experience in their life to write about. When they were able to focus in on a single event and sequence it in a narrative format, it was often clear that this was a story the student liked telling because it involved some aspect of drama or humor, but had not reflected in depth on what it was about that experience which was unique to the context of their life yet still related to some greater importance or universal theme.

Among the commonly told stories of "I got caught doing something bad" or "I had an injury" or "my grandmother died," what seemed to be lacking most was critical analysis and reflection. While the students included descriptions that were either excessively or barely detailed to often unintentionally comical effect, this wasn't a great concern to me. I realized that with minimal practice and by reading a broader number of texts, students could learn to use description more effectively. I was more concerned that the essays did not seem to be meeting the critical literacy goals of the course. These were stories which never reflected upon themselves deeper than reiterating a cliché life lesson

that shrugged-off any analysis of the human experience as compared to individual experience. For the most part the essays did not move beyond relating a story to reflecting upon its value.

The literacy narrative prompt guided students toward a more specific subject matter than the autobiographical essay. At the same time, by allowing students to define literacy for themselves it allowed students to creatively explore what literacy meant to them and how their perceptions of the value of literacy varied from the standard or commonly used definitions of it. In other words, the prompt fostered the application of processes of critical thought outlined as goals of the course.

When I read and graded students' literacy narrative papers after teaching the literacy narrative unit, I realized that it had been successful in helping students move past simply relating a narrative story they liked. The resulting works were mostly unlike the autobiographical essays in their retelling of past experiences. Instead, it seemed that a greater number of students had been able to move beyond memory to reflection, beyond summary to inquiry and analysis. Although often just as burdened by a famine-or-feast approach to the descriptive detail and authentic dialogue which are staples of the narrative genre, the literacy narratives seemed much more often to accomplish what the autobiographical essay had largely failed to do.

I feel confident in attributing this success in part to the assigned readings. I had intended the readings to move beyond simply modeling a narrative format and explore stories about literacy related topics. I had hoped that the readings would help students to creatively define literacy for themselves thus being empowered to explore its impact on their lives in a way that questioned the standard beliefs or master narrative. While reading



my students' literacy narratives, I felt that the readings had been successful in framing this.

Furthermore, I always hold a discussion at the end of each major unit I teach in a course, to gauge the students feelings about the success of the unit. While I don't record these discussions or track them in a quantitative manner, they are important to my understanding of how I can continue to improve the course and myself as an instructor. From these discussions I learned that students enjoyed writing the literacy narrative. Many students said that it seemed somewhat new and potentially challenging when I introduced the prompt at the beginning of the unit, but that the readings and journals helped them to better understand exactly what a literacy narrative was meant to be. In their final reflection essays at the end of the course, many students cited the literacy narrative as the most personally meaningful writing they had ever done and as important to them thinking of themselves as competent writers. A few students even mentioned that their ability to define literacy per their own valuation of it in the literacy narrative had helped them to feel motivated to explore other degree tracks than they had intended to pursue.

Interestingly, the literacy narratives I read that were the most successful at both challenging and affirming shared cultural beliefs about literacy had followed the suggestion of beginning with the readings for definition of literacy. One student referred to Walker's (1974) "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." Drawing from Walker's assertion that the beautifully crafted everyday objects created by impoverished undereducated African-American women such as quilts and flower gardens should be defined as art, the student shaped her own unique definition of literacy. She defined

literacy as including understanding and using material culture and write about a heritage of recipe sharing among the women in her family being a heritage of literacy. The result was a heartfelt narrative centering on learning cooking skills from a grandmother which also questioned the standard definition of literacy as only reading and writing in order to assert the sharing of a cultural heritage as central to literacy.

Another student quoted from Cisneros *House on Mango Street* (1991). She identified with the vignette titled “A Smart Cookie” in which Esperanza’s mother admonishes her daughter to not make the same mistake as she had, dropping out of school to be able to work and afford the material things which lacking had made her feel different and isolated from her peers. Esperanza’s mother concludes by expressing her feeling of having wasted an opportunity to succeed in school because despite her impoverished circumstances she was inquisitive and intelligent. “I was a smart cookie then,” she says.

The student compared Esperanza’s mother’s regrets over dropping out of school to her own immigrant parents’ pushing her to work hard and succeed in school and eventually be the first in her family to attend college. This student defined literacy to include not only the values of hard work rewarded by success, but also the people who provide encouragement and admonishment toward individual growth.

Much like the assigned readings and the models of my own writing used for the journals, the literacy narratives written by my students explored themes of identity, literacy, and power in relation to factors such as gender, family, and linguistic heritage. They moved beyond the basic structure of a narrative story to explore the relationship between self and society. The change in the focus of the unit from a general

autobiographical essay to a literacy narrative and the selected readings and pre-writing or journal activities was successful in helping students to more effectively meet the critical, analytical, and reflective goals of the unit and the course as a whole.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Justification for Redefining Alternative Texts as Literacy Narratives**

The current discussion of multimodality in composition studies focuses largely on the ability to integrate various types of media and genres of composition into the composition classroom. It is argued that for students to be capable of successfully engaged in a world which communicates in increasingly digital formats, they must be allowed to integrate skills of composition which relate various overlapping, often technology based, modes into the process of producing texts. As a result, many educators, especially in the field of composition, are examining the commonly held definitions of text and author in order to include multi-modal and collaborative composition processes (Gallagher, 2014; Hull & Nelson, 2005; McCrimmon, 2006; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Sohan, 2015).

These educators and researchers involved in composition studies are in the process of redefining concepts of text and authorship to include authors who create collaboratively and texts which include more modes than written-text-only communication. But how can this process of redefinition be used to not only include newer technologies for composition, but also broaden our understanding of who is capable of creating composed texts? If new texts can be created according to this new definition which allows for texts to combine semiotic systems such as linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial (Anstey & Bull, 2010), it is not unreasonable to conclude that existing works can be categorized as texts in a similar fashion.

A common practice in the pedagogy of teaching is to introduce new material by first facilitating students to activate their prior knowledge. This allows students to view new information in relation to the base of knowledge and experiences they already hold. Instead of teaching each piece of information as if it is discrete and not relevant to other contexts in education and life, activating prior knowledge allows new knowledge to be built upon an existing framework so that students can integrate knowledge and information into an interconnected and continuous model.

In the context of ESL students, activating prior knowledge draws from the concept of interlanguage construction in second language acquisition theory. Interlanguage construction purports that second language students draw from language structures, learning experiences, and communication strategies in their first language while acquiring their second language. ESL instructors scaffold this natural second language acquisition process in the classroom by facilitating students' transfer of first language knowledge and experiences to second language learning situations.

By integrating multiple modes of communication into a single text, multimodality can allow students of various social and linguistic backgrounds to draw from a rich number of existing experiences to build upon their understanding of how to create texts overall. They can draw from personal experiences which deviate from the standard definitions of what a text is to shape their identities of self-as-writer.

In other words, as the concepts of text and authorship are redefined, students are able to define for themselves a richer heritage of literacy related experiences. Much as Alice Walker does by asserting a broader definition of what it means to be an artist (Walker, 1974), this discussion of multimodality can assist students to identify as authors

in their own pasts as well as through those who composed in various modes before them. This echoes the process of historical appropriation which has already been standard practice in feminist study for many years and especially in intersectional feminism.

While the application of intersectional processes of inquiry across disciplines is somewhat recent, bell hooks (1981) focused on the relationship between factors of race and gender in feminist study. In her foundational book on intersectional feminism “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism,” hooks (1981) uses a historical overview of African-American women from the era of slavery to the present to focus in on racism within the modern feminist movement (hooks, 1981).

The concept of redefining works for the purpose of including minority voices in a scholarly dialogue is not new. This process of historical reconstruction of texts has long been a practice within feminist rhetoric, the goal of which is to create a strong heritage of discourse both for women and for the field of feminist scholarship. And in fact, historical reconstruction in feminist scholarship to specifically acknowledge what are now seen as intersectional groups can be seen to pre-date the foundational work of bell hooks.

Because definition is an evaluative process, the unequal power distribution regarding the value of one kind of text over another is made clear as texts are defined and categorized or rejected as not adhering to the standard definitions. Recent works of MacDonald (2015) and Sohan (2015) illustrate the necessity of actively including voices which have traditionally been underrepresented in academia, including in the field of composition studies.

Sohan (2015) introduced a process of analyzing the rhetoric of pre-existing visually based objects when she analyzed the discourse of quilts created collaboratively by African-American women in the rural community of Gee's Bend, Arkansas. The quilts created by the women exhibit purposeful decisions to subvert many of the stylistic traditions of quilt-making in order to assert the unique identity of this community of female artisans. Sohan explored these conscious decisions of composition as rhetorical strategies. Her argument is that by re-contextualizing the semiotic discourse of objects such as the quilts, we may allow students to write about material culture from a perspective of rhetoric and composition thereby enabling them to

blur and blend language, form, genre, and meaning in ways that push against the boundaries of academic discourse and, in the process, change how they consider the role of objects and writing in their lives. (Sohan, 2015, p. 313)

Sohan asserts that an understanding of rhetorical strategies exhibited in visually based artifacts allows students to write about visual materials more effectively. I build upon her assertion to argue that the ability to define visual materials as texts or to define the creators of such artifacts as authors will allow students to identify themselves as authors by first identifying with broader definitions of text and author. The impact of students being allowed to define these concepts more broadly to see themselves as authors and create analytical texts is made visible in my experiences with teaching the literacy narrative.

Requiring students to define literacy for themselves also created an atmosphere of reflecting upon and discussing literacy which deviated from the literacy narrative master-

narrative to both question and reaffirm what they understood about the impact of literacy on their lives. The students, although somewhat unknowingly, added to the current discussion of what it means to be literate and what it means to be an author in their literacy narratives. The students' definitions of literacy in their literacy narratives reflected broadening definitions of text and author to include personal experiences which were significant to their understanding of literacy and their own identities.

Similarly, the current focus on redefinition of concepts of texts to include a wider range of modes in composition could lead to an acknowledgement of generations of people whose voices have been largely silent or absent from the field of composition (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Sohan, 2015). In other words, the importance of redefining and re-contextualizing texts to include multi-modal and collaboratively produced works not only broadens the number of works which can be utilized as readings in teaching composition, but also has the added value of allowing a greater variety of individuals to be identified as authors in the field of composition studies. As a result this can further our students' capability to identify with texts, view themselves as authors, and see their self-identities as a continuation of a rich literary heritage.



## **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Future Implications**

The foundation for this research actually began almost a year before any formal study took place. During my first quarter of teaching an introductory composition course as a graduate student, I recognized that one of the units was not fostering the composition and critical thought strategies it was intended to facilitate. The following quarter I adjusted the curriculum to address this concern.

Later that year I began to read current related research in order to explore the present discourse relating to my creative selection of texts which did not necessarily fit into the category of literacy narratives, but were examples of works by authors from demographics which have historically been silenced. Because the formal research began after I had already made and enacted changes to the curriculum, this study does not include samples of student work, observations of a case-study, or surveys of the students' perceptions of the curriculum.

Further applications of this research would involve putting the research into practice in order to track its success. Based on my conclusions, composition instructors could select from a broader number of texts to help students to identify with authors from various backgrounds in order to be more confident in their own identities as authors. Further research could track students' growing capabilities to write in a narrative format while also analyzing and reflecting upon their experiences and their concepts of their identities.

Research could also engage students by collecting qualitative data on the students' experiences with writing the literacy narrative and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the readings to assist the writing process. While my background in anthropology and TESL does preface a bias toward participatory qualitative data collection or action research processes, it does seem to mesh well with collecting this kind of information. I believe that research into how students use writing literacy narratives to explore and reflect upon their identities should rely heavily on the students' perceptions of that process.

On a pedagogical level, the successful application of these processes of selecting course readings will allow for a richer variety of texts to be included in the fields of TESL and composition studies and increase collaboration between the two fields. By beginning with defining literacy for themselves, students were able to creatively explore what literacy meant to them and how their perceptions of the value of literacy varied from the standard or commonly used definitions of it. Furthermore, if students choose to draw from the assigned readings for their definitions of literacy, they must engage in the process of interacting with a text in order to analyze it and determine how it can be synthesized with other texts or their own experiences. As Carroll and Dunkenblau (2011) assert, these critical reading and analysis skills must be integrated into the ESL writing classroom. Assigning a literacy narrative in which students must reflect upon and relate their experiences, course readings, and their understanding of the value of literacy is the exactly the kind of scaffolding for academic synthesis from which ESL students will benefit as they transition into college composition courses. In fact, teaching composition coursework from the perspective of scaffolding and modeling each step, as common to

TESL pedagogy, will not only improve the motivation and success of ESL student-writers, but also native-English-speaking writers.

Finally, one of the current trends in higher education is to include more cross-discipline collaboration and interdisciplinary practice into curriculum design.

Reconsidering our definitions of concepts such as text and author can help to break down boundaries that may prevent such collaborative practices. By including a greater number of voices in the collective discourse the discussion becomes enriched and in turn allows for a broader forum for creating new works as well. Instructors and students will benefit from a more inclusive and eclectic approach to identifying and creating texts in English composition, ESL composition, and throughout academia.

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## Appendix A:

### Literacy Autobiography Prompt

**Rationale/Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate analytical thinking on a subject of which you are an expert, yourself. Throughout your educational and professional career, you will be asked to step back from a problem, experience, or project and break it down into smaller pieces to better understand the whole.

**Prompt:** How we are able to utilize and express ourselves through the medium of language is essential to our experience of and ability to function and succeed in society. In the Essay Exam Unit we explored how literacy is linked to our overlapping identities in society, such as race, gender, age, ethnic/language background, and socioeconomic status, which in turn influences our ability to access the structures of society, and specifically education. In the Literacy Autobiography Unit we will explore how our own overlapping identities influence the way we shape and project our identities through literacy. We will address some readings which explore how individual voice, our ability to communicate and self-express through the medium of language, may be shaped, supported, or oppressed through literate actions. The final product of the unit is to *write an essay that describes and analyzes a meaningful literacy experience in your own life*. Draw from the readings from this section and/or the free-writes we did in class during this unit to begin writing your essay. This should not be an essay on “how literacy changed my life overall.” Instead, in the form of a narrative, it should focus in on a single event in which literacy, however you define it, influenced you to be the person you are today. You are also responsible to define literacy for yourself and your audience.

Consider these questions in your writing, but do not feel obligated to answer all of them:

- Can you think of a significant event that helped or hurt your progress toward becoming a reader or writer? Can you think of an influential person in your life who has helped or hurt your progress toward becoming a reader or writer?
- Can you think of a moment that somehow changed your views about language? Can you think of a time when you judged someone for the way s/he spoke or wrote? Can you think of time when you felt judged for the way you speak or write?
- Can you think of a time when you had to switch back and forth between different ways of speaking or writing? Can you think of a time when you had to “learn the lingo” to be accepted into a certain group?
- Can you think of something you said, wrote, read, or heard that really *worked*-that had exactly the effect it was supposed to have on the people who heard it? Can you think of a time when you felt unable to communicate your ideas or feelings?
- Why does this experience stick out in your memory? What lessons can you, your classmates, and your teacher learn from this experience?



- How is the current “you” different from the “you” who is a character in the experience? What can you see about the experience now that you couldn’t then? How would you change your actions if you could?
- How has your experience affected your attitudes toward reading, writing, and communicating?
- How do you think your life experiences, cultural affiliations, race, gender, and/or religion have influenced this experience and your attitudes toward reading and writing?

\*Adapted from: Modarres, Andrea, Kristen Haven, and Kelly Meyers, eds. "Analysis." *A Student's Guide to First-Year Composition*. 28th ed. Plymouth, MI: Hayden McNeil, 2007. 155-80.

**Audience:** The audience for this reflective writing sample is yourself, your peers, and myself as your English 101 instructor. You will be including this paper in your final portfolio.

**Evaluation Criteria:** This writing sample will be evaluated on content/ideas, voice, organization, support, and conventions. Refer to the rubric on the back for a more specific breakdown of these criteria.

**Format/Requirements:** The paper should be at least three full pages, in proper MLA (Modern Language Association) format, which includes:

- typed, size 12 Times New Roman font, with the entire paper (even the heading) double-spaced
- one inch margins (top, bottom, left, right)
- proper heading (top left corner, your name, my last name, course, date)
- descriptive title (consider using a jazzy adjective + noun; avoid complete sentences)

## Appendix B: List of Assigned Readings

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Veras, Adriane Ferreira. (2011). Language and Identity in Sandra Cisneros's "The House on Mango Street." *Antares*, 5. 228-242.

Walker, A. (1997, Sep). In search of our mother's gardens. *Ms*, 8, 11-15.

## **Appendix C: Journal Model Samples**

### **Memories of being read to-**

I remember being read to, and being shown the words as they were read, from an early age. I was a quiet, serious, and apprehensive child. I worried about things, like safety, more like an adult than a young child. But I do remember the one-on-one time spent at home with my mother felt safe and positive. Often this time included my mother reading to me.

I had a large collection of children's books including the beautifully illustrated books of Beatrix Potter, and many of the Little Golden Books. My two favorite books as a young child were *The Poky Little Puppy* by Janette Sebring Lowrey and *The House that Had Enough* by P. E. King.

I recall being especially impacted by the cadence of the stacked adjectives used to describe the many good puppies and their one naughty brother in *The Poky Little Puppy*. "And down they went to see, roly-poly, pell-mell, tumble-bumble, till they came to the green grass; and there they stopped short," is one quote which I always associate with the comforting rhythm of descriptors in this book.

When I have looked back more recently about why these two books were so favored by me, I considered how the two are similar. In both stories the main character does something bad and suffers the consequences of their actions, but also has the opportunity to morally redeem them-self. I think that my love of these two books continues to be a reflection of some of my personal values; justice and grace. I highly value justice, especially in regards to socially-based power inequity. At the same time, I value the individual's ability to change and improve within that societal framework.

I have also realized, fairly recently, that the time I spent reading with my mother as a young child was a privileged experience. I realize that not all families have the capability to foster and support the development of reading skills in their preschool-aged children. My mother, a stay-at-home mom until I was in high school, was able to invest a lot of time and attention into mine and my siblings' education. I feel extremely blessed to have begun my language acquisition in such an environment.

### **Memories of Learning to Read-**

I learned to read somewhat late according to many schools and curriculums standards. I remember my teacher and para-educators in the first grade making me feel a lot of pressure to read, and I remember that this made me feel very frustrated and sad. I was so upset by the level of stress I felt about reading, that I remember not wanting to read at all in the classroom environment. Now I realize that their insistence that I read and their tones of admonishment were negatively impacting my affective filter.

However, my mother was not worried. When my teacher conferenced with her about the fact that I had not met the reading benchmarks outlined by the state, my mother told her that I had been read to from an early age. I understood the connection between words on a page and the words that were spoken to me, my mother said. "Stop stressing her out. You're making reading into a negative thing for her. She'll get it eventually. She's intelligent and I read to her at home all the time."

Of course she was right. By the beginning of second grade I was reading well. And by the following summer I was scorning the "silly" books favored by my peers, such as the Babysitter's Club. Instead I was choosing to challenge myself and read at a higher

difficulty level than expected for a child in that grade with books such as *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little Women*.

### **Memories of Learning to Write-**

I remember learning to write close to the same time that I learned to read. I had, of course, learned simple writing skills such as forming letters and writing my name earlier than that, but I really gained this literacy skill around the time I became a confident reader.

I had one friend in particular, at the age of seven and eight, with whom I loved to play very imaginative games. We spent so much time in her yard creating intricate stories to play-out. Often we would write the stories down.

One major continuous narrative which we wrote many stories about was “The Sea-monster and the Color-Kids.” It was about a group of orphaned children who sailed a ship in search of a sea-monster who had taken all color from the world in order to capture him and restore color for everyone. They had many adventures and were very brave. It makes me laugh to think about how earnest we were in developing these stories.

Later on, in high school, I was on the school newspaper staff. First I worked as the Copy-editor, and my senior year I was the Editor-in-Chief. My signature contributions to the paper were comedic poems regarding current events. I also was able to take AP Literature and Composition my senior year. I remember being particularly proud of an assignment in which we were to write a soliloquy for the play *Hamlet* from the perspective of one of the supporting characters. I wrote as Ophelia and my teacher used my piece as an example for succeeding classes for a few years afterwards.

### **A Story from My Family's Oral Tradition**

The strongest cultural influence in my mother's side of my family is of those members who were Quebecois immigrants to New England, primarily to Massachusetts and New Hampshire. I have always known my grandmother as Memere and grandfather as Pepere, a remnant of the Quebecois-French spoken as the primary language of my family only three generations ago. One of my personal aspirations is to become fluent enough in Quebecois-French to access documents for tracing that part of my family lineage in hopes of finding and contacting any family members remaining in Quebec today.

I believe I identify most closely with this aspect of my family heritage, although it comprises less than half of my lineage background, because of my close relationship with my mother and my knowledge of her close childhood relationship with her Memere Gauvin, her maternal great-grandmother, who was of that immigrant generation. This story is part of the oral tradition of my matrilineage, originating from Memere Gauvin who was so beloved of my mother as a young girl. It takes place in Lawrence, MA during WWII.

Pepere Roy, my maternal great-grandfather, dearly loved his young brother-in-law Alfred, his wife's little brother, as if Alfred were his own sibling. Due to this, as America entered WWII Pepere Roy advised Alfred to join the merchant marines. At this time a post on a merchant marine boat was considered much safer than in the rest of the military, as these boats were supposed to be off limits to enemy-German interests.

Uncle Alfred did join the merchant marines. When he left for training, his young wife, Dolores, and their infant-daughter moved in with Alfred's mother, my great-great-

grandmother Memere Gauvin. Alfred and Dolores' baby had been "sickly" with a respiratory illness for quite some time, and Memere Gauvin and the rest of the household would be able to help care for her while Dolores was at work and Alfred was away. Soon Alfred shipped out on his first trip across the Atlantic.

One night soon after Alfred departed, Memere Gauvin had the sleeping baby in a bassinet at the foot of her bed. Memere kept close watch over the baby as she slept, checking on her throughout the night. This was the common practice when Dolores had to work in the evening.

Late that night Memere was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of Alfred's voice. Thinking that she had dreamt it, she did not immediately sit up and notice him. Alfred was, after all, supposed to be on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic.

"Mamma. Mamma!" Alfred called out to her repeatedly, in an attempt to rouse her from sleep, until she did sit up fully awake.

"Mamma," said Alfred to his mother, "I'm here to take the baby."

He reached down into the baby's crib and picked her up. He carried the baby out of the room.

At that moment Memere heard the baby gasp. She got out of bed to check on the baby in her crib. The baby was still there, but she had died.

The next morning Memere Gauvin received a telegram. During the previous night Alfred's ship had been bombed in the Atlantic by a German submarine. There were no survivors.

## **VITA**

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