

Rethinking roles, relationships and voices in studies of undergraduate student writers

SAMANTHA LOOKER

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

ABSTRACT: Undergraduate students have a complex and often problematic history of representation in research on writing pedagogy. They have been described as novices and outsiders, while having minimal input into how they are studied and represented. In this piece, I share my efforts to rethink the roles and relationships among researchers and student participants, and particularly to rethink how students contribute to pedagogical research. In my recent experience working with six, undergraduate, student co-researchers, I found myself complicating not only the roles of students as research participants but also my own role as researcher, a role that became increasingly hard to extricate from those of teacher, colleague, advocate and friend. Such complications, I argue, are actually strengths and sources of especially rich data, for strong interpersonal connections lead to increased trust and engagement. Trusting, engaged students contribute information and examples that a researcher may not think to ask for. By blurring researcher and participant roles and foregrounding student voices, then, we can deepen the connections and conclusions made in pedagogical research, and students can be not just participants in our research but skilled researchers in their own lives.

KEYWORDS: Academic writing, feminist methodology, interviews, qualitative research, participants, university students, writing pedagogy.

When I was a Ph.D. student in Writing Studies, I gained my knowledge from the wide variety of sources typical to a graduate education, including published scholarship, faculty mentors and disciplinary discussions at conferences. But many of my priorities regarding this knowledge, my sense of what mattered and why, came from my students.

The students in the pre-college and first-year writing classes I taught during my M.A. and Ph.D. work¹ fit many people's definition of "basic writer", routinely using dialects and registers – or languages other than English – that were socially indexed as

¹ I taught two types of writing courses: One was an academic writing course of the type often required of first-year U.S. college students, frequently taught by graduate teaching assistants at large public research universities like mine. I taught a two-semester sequence for students with lower placement scores, distinct from the one-semester course taken by most students at my university. The other course was a pre-college Summer Bridge writing course. At the time of my study, my university's Bridge/Transition program, which served at-risk students of color, accepted approximately 100 incoming first-year students each year. Fifty of those students, identified on the basis of factors including standardised test scores and grades as needing the most guidance, spent part of the summer between their high-school graduation and first year of college in Summer Bridge, a six-week intensive course of study in composition, reading, math and science intended to strengthen their basic skills and give them a head start on their fall coursework. All students in Bridge/Transition spent their first two years of college under the guidance of the Transition program, which provided regular academic advising, smaller class sections for some general education classes, and other resources intended to keep students on the path to successful graduation.

having low prestige. In my writing classes, which focused on language variation and ideology, these students' language backgrounds gave them enormous advantages for understanding the issues we discussed. Listening to my students, both during my class and in the years following, I heard analytical skill and insightfulness that led me to view them in many ways as intellectual peers. In sharp contrast to my students' skill with using and understanding their language, however, I also heard their alienation and confusion around doing so in some academic contexts. Often, these feelings were traceable to messages circulating about the nature of academic writing and language, which typically seemed to locate students like them as outsiders to the academy.

This relegation to outsider status is not unique to basic writers. As Jennie Nelson (1995) explains, "describing students as newcomers or outsiders who need to be initiated into the academic discourse community has become a commonplace in discussions of writing" (p. 411). In general, university students have a complex and often problematic history of representation in pedagogical practice and scholarship. Marguerite Helmers (1994) illustrates, in her book *Writing Students*, that instructor testimonials have largely defined students by their "inability to perform well in school" (p. 4), their "resistance to pedagogy" (p. 6), and their tendency to "outrage us morally" (p. 11). Helmers explains that students are typically represented as inferior to and dependent upon both teachers and academia in general:

The three most common tropes of writing about students...characterise them as lacking, as deviant, and as beginners. With each of these constructions, students are posited in a state of absence, dependent upon the teacher in order to be fully realised as an individual. The teacher remains at the centre of the discourse, control unthreatened and authority undisputed. (p. 45)

While Helmers' and Nelson's studies were published in the mid 1990s, more recent scholarly portrayals of students still display similar themes. Articles in composition journals continue to describe students with words like "novice" and "inexperienced", while portraying teachers as their primary sources of scholarly guidance and exposure or enculturation to academic discourse: We "provide underprepared students with exposure to the practices and values of the academic discourse community" (Launspach, 2008, p. 56), for instance, and we guide their "acquisition of these new ways of being and communicating" (Kill, 2006, p. 217). These kinds of descriptions create a "them/us" dichotomy in which professors, graduate teaching assistants, and other classroom "authorities" are insiders in relation to academia and students outsiders.

Additionally, students often lack input into how they are portrayed in pedagogical scholarship simply because their presence is limited to a small snapshot. While we can draw many interesting and worthwhile conclusions, even from these brief pictures, students' voices are often limited to perhaps a single interview (as in, for example, Brent, 2005; Power, 2009; Rodgers, 2011), a text they have written (for example, Boscolo, Arfe & Quarisa, 2007; Cho & MacArthur, 2010), or a survey or questionnaire (for example, Mateos, Villalon, de Dios & Martin, 2007; Morozov, 2011). The researchers, therefore, are left to fill in many gaps in interpreting students' statements and writing and in drawing connections among what is observed.²

² Also, if teachers' voices are present in studies in addition to those of students, the teachers' interpretations often dominate, and can be portrayed as more sophisticated or more accurate than those

Longitudinal studies, working with students over time and often engaging in multiple types of data collection, have been one way of increasing students' presence within research on writing pedagogy (see, for example, Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor & Otuteye, 2005; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Sommers, 2008; Sternglass, 1997). Further, a small number of composition scholars (for example, Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Roozen, 2005) have worked with their undergraduate student research participants as "co-researchers", endeavouring to give these students more input into the research process, and thus into how they are studied and represented. Yet working *with* students in this way remains far too uncommon; the prevailing representation of students remains through the teacher's or researcher's eyes.

Continued work on levelling the "them/us" dichotomy between researcher and student participant, I will argue here, is a vital step in research on writing pedagogy that involves undergraduate students. Students, with the wealth of experiences they bring to college, can be amazing resources for professional knowledge building within composition. At the same time, if professors and researchers treat students like the experts that they are, these students' knowledge can continue to grow through their engagement. In this piece, I share my own efforts to rethink the roles and relationships among researcher and participants, and particularly to rethink how students contribute to pedagogical research. I have endeavoured in my own work to build on the examples of other researchers, inspired, for instance, by the depth of Roozen's (2005) co-researchers' engagement in selecting material from their "literate lives" for study. In my recently completed dissertation research (Looker, 2011), one of my key goals was methodological, focused on what benefits co-researcher status would have for students. As I will explain here, however, their co-researcher status had equal benefits for me and my thinking, benefits that can extend to illustrate what scholarship on writing pedagogy can gain through more active student participation.

THE STUDY AND METHODS

My dissertation research, a longitudinal study of undergraduate student writers' encounters with representations of academic literacy and standard language, happened in collaboration with six student co-researchers, all of whom were former students of mine. The first-year and pre-first-year writing courses in which I first worked with my co-researchers focused explicitly on ideologies around academic writing and language. I designed these courses to engage students with professional discourses on writing and language through professional-level disciplinary reading, discussion and writing. Following my classes, I continued my efforts to include students in professional discourse by inviting some of them to talk further with me about the themes we had explored in the course and how those themes continued to play out in their lives. The study that resulted followed my co-researchers through three to five semesters of coursework, examining the situations and discourses within which they wrote and how they negotiated complex and sometimes competing expectations. Following my former students allowed me to draw conclusions about not only how

of the students. For example, a student Brent (2005) interviewed states, "I handed in an outline to my professor and she handed it back and said that it wasn't very good" (p. 269), and her comment is immediately followed by the researcher's statement that "I know from speaking to the professor that there was a lot more to this conversation than simply saying 'it wasn't very good'" (p. 270).

students negotiate writing practices and pedagogical expectations in the university but also how opportunities to engage in scholarly conversation about and interrogation of academic language and literacy standards can facilitate this negotiation.

The student co-researchers included both Summer Bridge and first-year writing students. I met three of them when they were students in my first-year writing class in the fall of 2007. Hannah³, a white student from a Chicago suburb, used skills gained from her communications major toward active participation in extra-curricular activities, occupying roles including football promoter, sorority officer and research assistant. Ali (short for Alison), from a different Chicago suburb, identifies as half white, half Latina; she majored in education with a minor in Spanish. Anny, whose given name is Jinyoung, emigrated with her family from Seoul, South Korea, to suburban Chicago when she was a sophomore in high school; she gained U.S. citizenship during her junior year in college, where she majored in chemistry and she is now headed to dental school.

I met the other three co-researchers when they were students in my Summer Bridge writing courses. Pierre, my student in 2006, recently graduated with a Bachelor's degree in sports management. He is African American and comes from an area of Chicago's south side where few youth are college-bound and many do not finish high school. He goes back occasionally to his high school to speak to current students about why they should stay committed to their education and attend college. My other Summer Bridge students, who took my Bridge Composition class in the summer of 2008, are from the same part of Chicago. Rob, a Latino cinema studies major, went on to take my advanced composition course in the fall of 2009, while still participating in my research. Areia (pronounced ah-REE-uh) is an African American majoring in African American studies, with plans to go to law school so that she can work for fair treatment of low-income African Americans.

I recruited all of these students to my research after they had completed my classes. Rob was unique in becoming my student again during the research. I began working with Rob, Pierre and Areia in fall of 2008; Hannah, Ali and Anny joined the research the following semester, in spring of 2009. Each student met with me for one or more interviews per semester during the time between the start of our work and spring of 2010 (fall, in Pierre's case, since he sought me out for further discussion after I had stopped requesting interviews).⁴ In conjunction with the interviews, the students chose samples of their written work in classes and school-related contexts (such as program or scholarship applications) to bring to me as illustrations of what we were discussing. Rob, quantitatively the most engaged in the research, provided me with a total of

³ The names used here are all the students' real names. I offered my student co-researchers a choice between real name and pseudonym, in order to give them space to claim their attitudes, experiences, and writing if they wanted to. As I told my university's Institutional Review Board when applying for human subjects research permissions, identifiability must be approached as a right as well as a risk when authorship and intellectual property are involved. Given the choice, all of the students asked to use their real names. As Pierre said, "Why would I hide? They're my ideas."

⁴ When students were available, I also approached them after the formal interviews were over to ask them to read text or listen to a summary of an idea to make sure that they still felt comfortable with their comments and my use of them. I was reassured by moments like a lengthy discussion with Pierre reaffirming everything he had said in an earlier quote and an eager note from Rob asking how conference attendees had reacted to his ideas. (They thought he was brilliant, and I told him so.)

seven formal interviews, 57 pages of written work, and regular informal contact over email and Facebook to discuss both of our scholarship. Ali, representative of a more typical level of engagement, provided me with five interviews and 23 pages of text, stopping by my office to chat throughout 2009 when she had texts to give me. My relationships with these students were often reciprocal. For instance, as Anny worked on her personal statement for admission to pre-dental programs in 2010, I assisted her with the statement, and she in turn allowed me to record our conversations about it and keep copies of her drafts.

As I designed my methods, I was mindful of the connections I already had to my research participants. I wanted to do the research in a way that would maintain and enrich those connections. I chose to engage in what Shulamit Reinharz (1992) calls “multiple in-depth interviewing,” which involves repeated meetings and eventual sharing of data to “invite the interviewee’s analysis” (p. 36). This sharing of data for analysis is often called member-checking or participant-checking (as in, for example, Lather, 1986; Michael-Luna & Canagarajah, 2007; Reason & Rowan, 1981). In addition to rich data, multiple in-depth interviewing also builds trust and “strong interviewer-interviewee bonds” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 36). I planned to meet repeatedly with my co-researchers, interviewing them about their experiences with writing and language, specific texts they shared with me, the contexts in which they wrote and spoke, and the relationships among their writing and language practices in different settings.

Through regular meetings and sharing of texts, the students and I examined their literate work in and out of school, their feelings about it, and their teachers’ receptions of it. As co-researchers, they joined me in selecting areas of focus and interpreting our data, a task for which I believed them to be well prepared, given our shared background in writing and language study. In the process of working together, they and I examined many textual representations of their teachers’ expectations for academic writing, including marginal commentary on essays, assignment prompts, and lists of tips or rules for writing. To complement these individual representations of academic writing expectations, and inspired in part by the commonalities among them, I supplemented this data by examining representations of academic writing circulating on a wider scale, in the form of first-year composition handbooks. Overall, I aimed to explore the homogenous academic writing expectations conveyed to students, the intellectual and psychological effects of those expectations, and the ways in which we might instead create richer opportunities for student exploration and understanding.

My goal for my student co-researchers was to involve them in inquiry about academic writing and language to the point that they could use disciplinary frameworks to analyse their own experiences, they could engage in grounded critique of the presumed homogeneity and rightness of “academic” and “standard” language varieties, and they could use this knowledge to empower themselves to participate in the disciplinary worlds of the university (whether they chose to analyse, align with, or challenge the language practices therein). In encouraging students to take an active role in my research, I was guided by perspectives from feminist research and ethnography. As Reinharz (1992) describes feminist research, it works to create social change, involve the researcher as a person, and form a deep relationship with research participants. Joanne Addison and Sharon McGee (1999) describe feminist research as

“challenging some of the academy’s long-held beliefs concerning what knowledge is, how it can be constructed, and who is allowed to be in the position of labelling and owning knowledge” (p. 2; see also Lather, 1991). Feminist pedagogies and research methodologies, as Gesa Kirsch (1999) explains, “represent challenges to established power – the power of tradition, of knowledge, of position. And often such challenges are pursued collaboratively, whereby conventional hierarchies of researcher/subject and teacher/learner are leveled to permit greater cooperation and creativity” (p. 97). While some degree of power imbalance is inescapable in a situation where one person is the primary teacher and researcher, I see the feminist collaboration and cooperation between researcher and participant as key in beginning to blend these roles and lessen the hierarchy inherent within them.

Another vital aspect of feminist interview research that inspired my treatment of student co-researchers when reflecting on and writing up our interviews was what Reinharz (1992) calls “believing the interviewee” (p. 27). It is “a controversial idea,” she says, because “science relies on scepticism” (p. 28).⁵ In place of that scepticism, a feminist researcher can choose to hear what his or her interviewees have to say and communicate it with minimal interference. This is a particularly controversial practice in pedagogical research, I would add, given the tradition of scepticism toward students’ perceptions and opinions. For me, this approach has been intensely useful toward the goal of treating students as scholars; my co-researchers’ interpretations should carry weight with or without mine supporting them. Like Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (1991), I have been interested primarily in understanding what students’ literate experiences meant to *them* (p. xvi), and I framed my interview methods accordingly.

CONTEXTS IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse analysis methods, particularly those involved in critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2003; Rogers, 2004) and mediated discourse analysis (MDA) (Scollon, 2001), were key in framing these interviews as I analysed and wrote about them, and as I checked in with my co-researchers on their interpretations. As Rogers (2004) describes it, CDA involves studying (often embedded and implicit) power relations as they are indexed through discourse. A CDA approach helped draw my attention to the ideologies and power structures indexed in how students and teachers talk about writing, as well as the constructions of student agency (or lack thereof) that circulate in wider representations like textbooks. MDA added a layer of attending closely to the many practices surrounding texts and discourses, and the links among those practices. As Scollon (2001) explains,

There is a necessary intersection of social practices and mediational means which in themselves reproduce social groups, histories, and identities...A mediated discourse analysis does not neutralise these practices and social structures as “context,” but seeks to keep them alive in our interpretations of mediated actions. (p. 4)

⁵ As Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Royster (2010) explain in their recent article “Feminist Rhetorical Practices: In Search of Excellence”, feminist scholarship has for decades pushed against more historically traditional definitions of rigour and excellence within research practice.

Guided by an MDA perspective, I prioritised not only obviously “relevant” data, but a great deal of what might seem like asides, in order to get a full picture of my co-researchers’ literate lives, practices and ideologies.⁶

Fairly early on in the research process, my co-researchers’ contexts for writing proved just as relevant as the writing itself, particularly in understanding how their writing connected to power relations. This was especially true of co-researchers who had been my students in Summer Bridge composition classes, since they came from low-income areas and went to underfunded high schools with few college-bound students. Throughout our interviews, then, we regularly reflected on their backgrounds and how those affected their senses of themselves as college students.

Pierre, for instance, described to me his sense of the enormous difference between his high school and those attended by many suburban Chicago students. There was a student leadership program in the Chicago area in which high-school student delegates spent a day at another high school, learning about its operations and students. When Pierre spent a day at a more affluent suburban high school, what stood out to him was the inequality:

Their school really had all the things to prepare them for college. This is no comparison, you can’t compare things we don’t have to things they do have. They had classes where they teach from PowerPoints. No teachers were teaching from PowerPoint at my high school!

Pierre’s educational background was an important theme for him, so it reoccurred throughout our work together. In a later interview, he explained that he felt the differences in his level of college preparation acutely throughout his time at the university. Midway through his junior year, he found that he still felt like he was adjusting to college.⁷

Pierre: I didn’t go to no college prep school, I didn’t go to no high school where we were in a class and students were actually paying attention and wanted to learn! [*laughter*] You know, you had your people that just sat in class, blah blah blah...students cursing the teachers out, you know, it wasn’t a learning environment. I came from a high school where it was never a learning environment.

Sam:⁸ I think that’s another thing a lot of teachers assume is that you know how to be in a classroom, like that students who come here have experience with being in a classroom and having discussions, you know, and that’s something some students need to learn how to do! Because they haven’t had the opportunity before.

⁶ Since my focus in this piece is on relationships with co-researchers more than analysis of texts and discourse, I focus here on the importance of MDA to my framing of interview data.

⁷ In these interview transcriptions, brackets indicate things that were not said: *Plain text in brackets* is used for small comments, changes or additions meant to elaborate, clarify or adjust the grammar for consistency with this text, while *italicized text in brackets* indicates a non-verbal action, such as laughing or gesturing.

⁸ In relaying interview data, I make a point of quoting myself as well as the students I work with, for two reasons: One, I don’t want to reinforce a scholar/student opposition by leaving my students’ spoken language unedited while editing my own. Two, I believe it is incredibly important for published academics, and other people whose language passes for standard on a fairly regular basis, to be conscious of and open about discussing the many ways in which our language is frequently far from formal or standard.

Pierre: Yeah, exactly, and I'm still learning...College is still an adjustment to me, and I've been here for two-and-a-half years, you know, so it's like people think I should be adjusted but it's still an adjustment to me. It's still, because of where I came from, you know? Four years of going to high school, academic demands are not high...

Like Pierre, Areia has been aware of the discrepancy between her schooling background and that of many of her university peers, as well as between her everyday language practices and those considered "academic". She connects these discrepancies to socioeconomic and racial background. For this reason, she told me, she feels strongly about judgments made against language varieties traditionally considered African American:

Areia: The way you speak, that's where you live...like say Black English, most of the time they [Black English speakers] live in urban areas, and like Black English is looked upon as uneducated and broken...Incorrect English leads to being uneducated and uneducated leads to being poor because you've got to have money to be well educated, and being poor leads to being in an urban area because that's where most poor people live.

Sam: It's all tied together.

Areia: Yes, it is...but like using it against us, I don't think is right. It really, language, it can hurt you in so many ways, and...if everybody was to agree that Standard English was the best...it'd still be a problem of the poor people getting educated to learn it...

Sam: Yeah, not everybody has access to that dialect and the opportunity to learn it...

Areia: A lot of people...the teachers don't teach correctly, or they don't have the right books, or – always, everything just falls back to money!

While Areia felt, on one level, like her issues with linguistic equality were indicative of larger flaws in the public education system, she also indicted higher education for perpetuating the same sorts of linguistic prejudice that she saw outside of academia.

The theme of linguistic inequality reappeared periodically in our interviews and Areia's writing. In a paper for her first-year writing class responding to the prompt "What Is the University?" she wrote,

Most universities are dominated by the dominant race, where the dominant language is "Standard English"...It is an embarrassment that people...come to the place of "hope" and "opportunity" and can't express themselves...If they try to use their own language then it is not accepted...Minorities come here thinking they will be able to fit in because society has led them to think that great diversity lies within [the university], and when they come here they get a culture shock...They are shocked because it wasn't made for them. This is the level at which they are expected to fail.

Comments like Areia's reaffirmed for me that students' backgrounds, part of the context in which they do their academic writing, play an active role in their experience and thus are essential objects of analysis when I aim to understand their experience as writers.

When I discussed writing with my Summer Bridge co-researchers, then, and especially when I heard about and saw responses to their writing, I kept in mind this context of their backgrounds in writing, language and education. The significance of

certain data is only fully understandable in this wider context. For instance, a response to student writing, such as a teacher's use of the label "not appropriate" to describe a student's word choice,⁹ can contain messages that affect students' self-perceptions as writers and academics. Feedback on writing, I believe, can evoke more than just the writing for students; it evokes a sense of students' right to be in the university, so students' voices on this matter can contribute in essential ways to our understanding of subjects like uptake of instructor feedback in revision. When students share their experiences outside of college and their backgrounds before their arrival, they bring another layer of meaning to data about their college writing.

CO-RESEARCHER CONTRIBUTIONS

In designing my study, I anticipated that attending to students' life contexts would enrich my data. I anticipated that their active roles in the research would have benefits for them, although I didn't anticipate the full depth and range of forms those benefits would have. I also did not anticipate the depth of the benefits that students' co-researcher status would have for my own understanding of what I was doing. As I researched together with the students, I found myself complicating not only the role of students as research participants but also my own role as researcher, a role that became increasingly hard to extricate from those of teacher, colleague, advocate and friend. At the same time that my and my co-researchers' complicated roles made the research especially fulfilling personally, their contributions took the research in directions that I had not anticipated and gave me richer data than I had hoped for.

Scholars such as Mortensen and Kirsch (1996) point out that ethnographic literacy researchers must be reflexive about their power in interpreting data and creating narratives from participants' experiences and texts, and I was especially conscious of the need for reflexivity in this study because of my desire to avoid falling into typical patterns of representing college students. Since a primary goal of my work was to upset the binaries in research and teaching that almost always include students on the side of absence and disempowerment, my methods encouraged the students with whom I worked to take a very active role in the research. They and I worked in cooperation to set the topics covered in interviews and to choose texts and experiences that presented interesting and relevant examples for the study. I went into initial meetings with my co-researchers with a set of interview questions to work from, including "How do you define college-level writing?" "How have your college instructors tended to respond to your writing so far?" and "What people or ideas have influenced how you write essays?" However, after the first interview, I rarely needed to ask questions other than "How are your classes?" "What are you working on?" or, simply, "What's going on?" – and sometimes, not even that. The students set the agenda for our meetings, often arriving with stories and documents prepared, and sometimes even initiating the meetings when their stories couldn't wait. (Rob once urgently requested a meeting with me after some particularly critical remarks from his first-year writing teacher, telling me in an email, "Looks like my style of writing is going to die for sure.") While some of the students' agendas were right in line with

⁹ In addition to being present in individual teacher feedback, this label was incredibly common in the first-year writing handbooks I surveyed, frequently applied to vocabulary and grammar from more casual registers or nonstandardised dialects.

the sorts of questions I had already asked – bringing a graded paper to show me how teachers were responding to their writing, for example – many of them weren't.

For example, Ali came to one of our interviews wanting to tell me about her class on immigration, cross-listed in Latino Studies and Asian American Studies, because discussion in that class was troubling her. The problem she was having, she told me, was with “talking in an academic language”. In this small, discussion-driven course, the teacher and two of the other students talked at a level Ali perceived as very different from that of her own language and, possibly, from that of the rest of the class, since most of her peers tended to remain silent as she did. As she described the situation, her teacher and two peers

talk in this way that like I understand it, but I would never think to use words like that initially. And I feel stupid because like I can't express myself in that way. And so I don't want to raise my hand in that class, because like I'm afraid I'm not going to say it right or something, and everyone's going to be like laughing at me in the corner, like that's my biggest fear.

After Ali raised this topic, she continued to work through it with me, explaining how her professor would frequently talk above the students' heads: “She'll ask her questions in ways that I have to think about it for a second, and then I have to be like ‘oh, that's what she's talking about,’ and I'm just kind of like, why can't you say it like that to begin with?”

Meanwhile, Ali told me, the course readings were aimed at more of a general audience and were much more approachable than the teacher's questions. Because of the simpler language of the articles, Ali said, “I don't understand where she [the teacher] got her words from.” Even so, Ali said that some students were comfortable talking at the teacher's level because they were “well versed” enough in the theory to “talk the talk” with complex language. A few even disapproved of the course readings for not having more academic word choice:

We read something and it wasn't written like scholastically, it was really written like just talking to you, and he [my classmate] was saying how that wasn't directed to our class because we're all like part of academia and how we should all have a bigger vocabulary than that. And I remember...I was kind of like, my vocabulary's not that big and I *liked* how he wrote it, like I can understand it, I was like that's the *point*, to reach it out to everyone, not just those in academia. Because like we're learning a lot about race and it doesn't just apply here; it applies everywhere!

Ali saw legitimate reasons for keeping language more simple, and she did not see her vocabulary as indicating a lack of sophistication in her thinking. However, she still felt the need to defer to people with larger vocabularies: “I'm pretty well versed in racism, and how it's all constructed...and I would have liked to talk, but I felt silly talking!” Despite having both personal and academic knowledge of racism, Ali was not confident that she could “raise my hand with confidence and kind of sound like I knew what I was talking about.” She thus showed me an interesting tension between her academic and experiential knowledge, which was substantial, and the *sound* of knowledge in this class, which she saw as grounded in language choice that did not always align with her priorities and training.

I was pleased that Ali had brought these concerns to me, since our discussion became a mutually beneficial interaction for us. I was able to give Ali feedback and encouragement on an academic issue that was troubling her, doing my best to reassure her that the teacher's spoken language did not necessarily indicate an unwillingness to hear students like Ali. I told her,

Some people get so just engrossed in their academic work that they can't talk to normal people. I know a lot of people like that! They just can't like take it down a notch to talk to people who haven't read everything that they've read. And it doesn't mean they're not willing to listen to those people; they just can't express themselves to those people.

Ali felt reassured after talking to me and told me she'd try to talk and to encourage some of the peers she had befriended to talk as well – something that she was indeed able to do, as I found out in a later interview. I, meanwhile, received data that I would not have gotten if Ali was not alert to the sort of data we had been discussing and comfortable enough with me to share it, feelings of insecurity and all. Would I have thought to ask the question, “What registers are employed in the spoken discussion in your writing classes, and how do your registers compare to those used by your teacher and other students?” I certainly hadn't yet at that point. Since she shared my interest in language issues and was alert to data, though, Ali thought to bring this issue to me and thus enriched my research.

Similarly, Rob maintained an intense interest in writing style differences and preferences, first displayed to me in our Summer Bridge class, throughout his participation in the study. This sustained interest led to fascinating data for me as well as to fulfilling, active inquiry for him. When Rob was a sophomore, he registered for my advanced composition class, which was a more advanced language and academic writing-themed course with an emphasis on ethnographic research. When it came time to do a research project in the class, he chose to look into how students are discouraged from using their own voices in their writing, or as he put it, “academic writing and the laundry list of things you can be able to put into and the other things that you are damned for life for putting into a paper.” Rob was no longer just participating in my research at that point. He was taking up the research for his own purposes, using the themes of our inquiry to help him in analysing his own experiences for his own project. When I asked him in an interview the next semester why he chose the topic that he did, he said that it was based on his experience transitioning from Summer Bridge through his first and second semester writing classes. He had immediately identified with our composition class's topic of language variation, which he saw as having deep personal relevance to him and his classmates:

It started with the topic in Bridge. The first assignment opened doors and gave us something to write about. It was just life experience – “Is she for real? We can talk about this? We've got stories for you!” This was important. I mean, it was a perfect topic for us. It gave us a good comfort feeling, you know, you just gotta come in here, paper, pencil, brain, and just say what you have to say.

Then, he said, “Freshman year came crashing down.” This was when he visited me repeatedly with heavily marked-up papers in which he didn't feel the teacher was ever reading beyond the grammar to his points; whole paragraphs were crossed out, marked “awkward” or labelled as “not knowing what [they're] trying to say.” Rob

explained to me that he and his peers¹⁰ were used to some degree of criticism in their writing, but this was more than he could take:

We take detours. We'll start struggling, take a beating from a red marker, heal up, revise. It's street strategy, basically the same rules as out there. We know most of us can survive the beating. But eventually something is going to block us. Personal matters on a paper, like the whole "awkward" thing. Personal statements are like a punch in the stomach, they stop us in our tracks.

Truly, though, this didn't stop Rob in his tracks. Instead, he channelled that frustration into research the next semester. The process of that research and our discussions throughout and since have been richly informative for both of us.

The paper Rob wrote for my class was called "Jumping through the Hoops of Academic Writing." In it, he wove together scholarly quotes on academic writing, his own opinions and experiences on the topic, and interviews with other students with similar experiences and backgrounds to his. The "hoops" his title refers to are college writing teachers' expectations, to which students are expected to conform, as he wrote in the paper, "like a well-trained circus animal". Some of those hoops, he wrote, "will have that ring of fire around it", and those are the ones he finds particularly hard to jump through. Among those, he wrote, are differentiating between academic and expressive writing and finding a personal voice:

When writing academically, you are simply following a teacher's expectations of what has been turned in before you ever came here, so it's a simplified route for you to take when writing, but some of us writers can be very expressive and will be led off that path onto something that can fulfil our needs to be heard through our writing, rather than to be just like every other student who writes to get their instructor off of their back.

In this paper, then, he was already beginning to explore the idea of a student taking detours from the direct path that would come up in our later interviews. This willingness to detour is something that he claims as part of his writing identity, something he is comfortable with even if it is not always well received.

Rob, to me, epitomises how personally fulfilling being granted the status of co-researcher can be for a student, and how amazing the data from such students can be when they gain this status. Truly, our interactions focused on things that interested both of us. They were not just interviews, but conversations in which we both learned. Like Ali, he went beyond being a co-researcher in my project to be a skilled researcher in his own life.

REFLEXIVE REFLECTIONS

Because my six co-researchers were all former (and briefly current again, in Rob's case) students of mine, I was simultaneously researcher and teacher throughout this

¹⁰ Rob often spoke in "we" terms when talking about himself and his Bridge/Transition cohort. He viewed their similar backgrounds and high school experiences as giving them similar perspectives on the adjustment to college.

process. I was also learner, mentor, friend, advocate, ally and more, as students did what was necessary for them in our research relationship, including seeking advice, venting frustrations, sharing news and setting goals. To some, this list might be little more than a list of obstacles to researcher objectivity. Inspired by feminist methodology, though, I consider it necessary to foreground my own positioning in interpreting the data so as to avoid any illusion of objective authority. What I would argue is that the multiple roles I have played in my research, which deepen my connections to the students and deepen the connections we can make among various aspects of ourselves, are far from a flaw. They're a strength. I have come to believe that embracing multiple roles in the process of ethnographic research, being our full selves rather than striving for an impossible objectivity, creates richer data than we might otherwise have and enables us to make a greater impact on our participants' lives, the field and society. Like Carmen Kynard (2011), "I'm not an observer anywhere in what I'm talking about, and I don't pretend to be." Rob and Ali, then, are not unique among my co-researchers in being people I've worked with in roles of both researcher and teacher, both collaborative scholarly colleague and supportive friend.

By forming these sorts of relationships in a longitudinal, co-researcher-driven study, I gained information and insights that would not otherwise have been possible. Had I not known about Pierre's class and educational background and how that affected his sense of himself as a university student, I may still have known that he frequently sought advice on his writing from me and his high school teachers, but I would not have fully understood his desire for that continued community. Had I only read Ali's writing for her immigration class, without understanding how that writing connected with the classroom discourse, I would not have realised how salient and worrying register differences were for her. Had Rob not brought me the heavily marked-up essays that made him fear his "style of writing" [would] die", not only would I have lacked context for the passion he displayed in his research on teacher expectations for my class, but he also may not have pursued the project at all. I credit the students' comfort with me and their interest and engagement in the research with many of the conclusions we were able to draw, and many of the connections that became clear to me within their language and literacy practices. Beyond the individual contexts of these particular students, also, what I have learned from them is helping guide me toward further inquiry into issues that were priorities for them. Their contributions have underscored for me the importance for pedagogical practice and research of a number of issues, like classroom discussion registers and word choice in teacher comments, and of students' perspectives on these issues.

Based on my experience, I advocate more widespread acknowledgment of the great resources that undergraduate writers can bring to our scholarly inquiry. My participants' co-researcher status has benefited this research by giving me information and data I may never have thought to ask for, and it has benefited the students by encouraging conscious attention to the ideologies about language and writing operating around them and creating space for reflection and discussion on what they've noticed. I agree with scholars like Lillis (2001), Helmers (1994), and Kynard (2002) that attitudes toward student writing and writers in pedagogical research often limit scholars' abilities to see students' authority, intelligence and potential contributions. This is incredibly unfortunate, since we can benefit from listening to students and seeing the language-related knowledge and experience they already

possess, as well as the understandings they develop through classroom work, as resources for both pedagogy and research. Students' viewpoints, with or without researchers' interpretations, are vital tools for better understanding the effects and effectiveness of our pedagogy and pedagogical scholarship. In research and pedagogy, students should be seen as scholars – by teachers, by researchers and by themselves.

REFERENCES

- Addison, J., & McGee, S. J. (Eds.). (1999). *Feminist empirical research: Emerging perspectives on qualitative and teacher research*. Portsmouth, NJ: Heinemann.
- Boscolo, P., Arfe, B., & Quarisa, M. (2007). Improving the quality of students' academic writing: An intervention study. *Studies in Higher Education, 32*(4), 419-438.
- Brent, D. (2005). Reinventing WAC (again): The first-year seminar and academic literacy. *College Composition and Communication, 57*(2), 253-276.
- Chiseri-Strater, E. (1991). *Academic literacies: The public and private discourse of university students*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton.
- Cho, K., & MacArthur, C. (2010). Student revision with peer and expert reviewing. *Learning and Instruction, 20*, 328-338.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fishman, J., Lunsford, A., McGregor, B., & Otuteye, M. (2005). Performing writing, performing literacy. *College Composition and Communication, 57*(2), 224-252.
- Helmets, M. H. (1994). *Writing students: Composition, testimonials, and representations of students*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Herrington, A., & Curtis, M. S. (2000). *Persons in process: Four stories of writing and personal development in college*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and identity: The discursive construction of identity in academic writing*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Kill, M. (2006). Acknowledging the rough edges of resistance: Negotiation of identities for first-year composition. *College Composition and Communication, 58*(2), 213-235.
- Kirsch, G. (1999). *Ethical dilemmas in feminist research: The politics of location, interpretation, and publication*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Kirsch, G., & Royster, J. J. (2010). Feminist rhetorical practices: In search of excellence. *College Composition and Communication, 61*(4), 640-672.
- Kynard, C. (2002). "New life in this dormant creature": Notes on social consciousness, language, and learning in a college classroom. In C. Schroeder, H. Fox & P. Bizzell (Eds.), *ALT DIS: Alternative discourses and the academy* (pp. 31-44). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Kynard, C. (2011, Feb. 10). "I carry the eyes of Ida B. Wells": *Discourse, rhetorical action, and the power of the word in the writing of black female college students*. Presentation at the University of Illinois Center for Writing Studies Colloquium Series, Champaign, Illinois.
- Lather, P. (1986). Issues of validity in openly ideological research: Between a rock and a soft place. *Interchange, 17*(4), 63-84.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Launspach, S. (2008). The role of talk in small writing groups: Building declarative and procedural knowledge for basic writers. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 27(2), 56-80.
- Lillis, T. M. (2001). *Student writing: Access, regulation, desire*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Looker, S. (2011). *Enacting and interrogating the "academic" in undergraduate language and literacy practices*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Retrieved from Illinois IDEALS: <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/24009>
- Mateos, M., Villalon, R., de Dios, M. J., & Martin, E. (2007). Reading and writing tasks on different university degree courses: What do the students say they do? *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(4), 489-510.
- Michael-Luna, S., & Canagarajah, A. S. (2007). Multilingual academic literacies: Pedagogical foundations for code meshing in primary and higher education. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 55-77.
- Morozov, A. (2011). Student attitudes toward the assessment criteria in writing-intensive college courses. *Assessing Writing*, 16(1), 6-31.
- Mortensen, P., & Kirsch, G. (Eds.). (1996). *Ethics and representation in qualitative studies of literacy*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Nelson, J. (1995). Reading classrooms as text: Exploring student writers' interpretive practices. *College Composition and Communication*, 46(3): 411-429.
- Power, L. G. (2009). University students' perceptions of plagiarism. *Journal of Higher Education*, 80(6), 643-662.
- Reason, P., & Rowan, J. (1981). Issues of validity in new paradigm research. In P. Reason & J. Rowan (Eds.), *Human inquiry: A sourcebook of New Paradigm research* (239-262). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rodgers, J. (2011). Defining and experiencing authorship(s) in the composition classroom: Findings from a qualitative study of undergraduate writing students at the City University of New York. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 30(1), 130-155.
- Rogers, R. (Ed.). (2004). *An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Roozen, K. (2005). *Mapping critical connections: Tracing undergraduates' literate lives*. Doctoral dissertation. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (ID 3182367)
- Scollon, R. (2001). *Mediated discourse: The nexus of practice*. London, England: Routledge.
- Sommers, N. (2008). The call of research: A longitudinal view of writing development. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(1), 152-164.
- Sternglass, M. S. (1997). *Time to know them: A longitudinal study of writing and learning at the college level*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Manuscript received: April 24, 2012

Revision received: June 28, 2012

Accepted: July 7, 2012