

“YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHERE I’M FROM”: COMMUNITY, CULTURE, AND CRITICAL LITERACY IN AN INTENSIVE WRITING COURSE

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Destiny’s hands shook; her voice cracked then went silent. No one looked away or laughed nervously or rolled their eyes. They were a band of brothers and sisters, and so they waited until she regained her composure—which she did, long enough to finish: *“Around 2 a.m. the phone rings at my house, and it was my Grandma telling my Dad that my Papa had passed away.”* She got the words out and what remained—a description of placing her childhood treasure into her grandfather’s casket. It was a goldfish, part of a pair that he had given her long ago, and the other remains still in her dresser drawer with the hope that when she dies *“one of my family members will go and get my goldfish and put it in my casket with me.”* That final sentence filled the room and, then, it erupted with applause.

Tayshaun was next. He cleared his throat, gently pounded his chest a few times, and shook his head. A few of his friends muttered “Come on, man” and “You got this.” Then he shared that his name, ending in “Jr.,” defined but would never limit him. *“Because my name is Tayshaun doesn’t mean I’ll abandon my sons when they need me.”* More thunderous applause. Then Angel shared what it was like to meet her father for the first time—at 16, in a memoir that began with: *“You look just like him. Those were the words I’d heard and hated my entire life”* and concluded: *“The way he twiddled his fingers. His shy smile. The way his eyes cast down. The way his*

shoulders hunched forward. I realized that the miles hadn't kept me from inheriting his small habits of his cowardice." Unlike Destiny, Angel didn't cry. You could tell that she had cried herself out on the topic long ago. That didn't, however, stop the rest of them. They clapped, rubbed away tears, and said only "wow" or "damn" as she took her seat.

In a vast common room on the third floor of a university education building, we sat in awe while most of the twenty-seven students read their memoirs. Not all of them divulged pain and sorrow. Marcus confessed that, as a 6'3" basketball player, he finds it hard to convince others that he wants to be a doctor, that he has made honor roll every year of high school, and that his favorite movie is *Toy Story*. He led with: *"What do you see when you look at me? You do not have to lie; all you see is a tall, black man."* Another student wrote about his grandmother's soul food, and yet another talked about how the cheerleading squad gave her a second family.

More amazing than the memoirs is the fact that these students, mostly seniors from an urban district in Virginia, shared them publicly and transformed into writers after only four days in an intensive writing course.

In this article, we provide background into the program and the week-long writing course in which this community emerged by describing our pre-program analysis of student writing samples, the theoretical perspectives that influenced the design of this course, our selection of memoir writing as the focus for the course, key instructional practices related to our theoretical perspectives, and findings related to the students' experiences. In doing so, we work to reveal the general aims and characteristics of the program as well the specific goals of our memoir writing unit and how we identified those goals as especially important. We conclude by discussing students' experiences in the course and implications for future research and instruction. We discuss these topics by addressing the following questions:

1. What challenges were associated with developing a week-long intensive writing course for low-income and minority students?
2. What course goals, theoretical perspectives, and instructional practices were used to address these challenges?
3. What themes emerged in student writings and how did those themes coincide with our course goals and theoretical perspectives?

The Overarching Context: The AP Challenge Program

The AP Challenge Program (APCP) was a federally-funded grant designed to increase participation and success of students from low-income and minority backgrounds in AP courses and in college. The students discussed in this article came from three different high schools in the same urban school district to attend APCP for their third and final summer of a week-long residential program held at the University of Virginia in June 2011. The residential program provides students with prerequisite skills for success in AP courses. In addition to the residential program, AP Challenge faculty and staff provide year-long professional development with AP teachers and high school guidance counselors. Many APCP students are enrolling in AP courses for the first time, and the program recognizes the importance of providing ongoing support in and out of the classroom to ensure students' success.

AP Challenge students are identified through a collaborative effort with university faculty and high school guidance counselors. All are minority students from low-income backgrounds who must show potential for success in AP courses and have the desire to take AP courses when adequate support is provided. AP Challenge teachers work with university faculty to design “pre” AP summer courses so that these “nontraditional” AP students will have the necessary, scaffolded skills for success in the AP courses

they are scheduled to take the following fall semester. During the time of this study there were ninety-seven students, twenty-five teachers, and six counselors who attended. Of that group, twenty-seven were third-year students selected to attend the writing course described here.

APCP was developed to address the gap in Advanced Placement (AP) participation and exam performance between minority and low-income students and their non-minority peers. To that end, data collection included an examination of student and teacher attitudes and comparisons of the performance of students in the treatment schools to matched comparison students in control schools on AP course grades, AP exam scores, college applications, college acceptance and attendance, and (when possible) first-year college course grades.

Students and their AP teachers attended a residential camp together, with the purpose of challenging, supporting, and inspiring students to reach their full potential. Implicit in this program is community, complete with social activities (planned by residential counselors) in the evenings and a culminating showcase at the end of the week. Therefore, we do not take full credit for the community created during this writing experience. However, they were *not* a community of writers. They had not signed up for a residential *writing* camp, and many were surprised to find this new aspect included in the program. Several confessed that they struggled as writers, and AP teachers and university staff agreed that students lacked sufficient skills for college-level writing. To that end, we were charged with developing a one-week intensive writing session.

Research on Other Intensive Writing Courses

Research on intensive, week-long writing courses for high school students such as the one we designed is scant; Barnett, Albert, and Brody provide an overview of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY), explaining that the writing instruction at that program is inspired by the writing seminars offered by the university. The student population and

academic goals of CTY do not match those of the AP Challenge Program, making the challenges we faced in designing our program different. This is also the case when comparing the AP Challenge Program to other summer programs for the gifted, such as Duke's Talent Identification Program and the Summer Enrichment Program offered at the University of Virginia. These programs do not target the ethnically and economically diverse population that the AP Challenge Program does. There are a handful of residential creative writing programs for high school students offered at universities across the country; however, these cater specifically to avid writers and focus entirely on writing, also making them distinct from the characteristics of our program. Many week-long writing intensive activities are professional development workshops designed for writing teachers, such as those offered by the National Writing Project. These workshops engage teachers in writing and provide them with many strategies for writing instruction but are also very different from teaching a week-long writing course to the students who attend the AP Challenge Program.

Analysis of Student Writing

In an effort to design a writing course targeting specific student needs, we began our course development by analyzing the students' writing. Before the program began, we spent five hours reading and evaluating sixteen student writing samples from third year APCP participants. (We solicited writing samples from twenty-seven students expected to attend; however, only sixteen students turned in the requested two writing samples.) Writing samples consisted of personal narratives, literary analyses, persuasive essays, or creative fiction. In addition, students responded to three questions about their perceptions of writing with regard to their strengths, areas for improvement, and favorite type of writing. Figure 1 below shows the strengths, weakness, and preferred genres indicated by these students.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	PREFERRED GENRES
Idea development	Grammar	Creative writing
Grammar	Planning	Personal narrative
Personal relevance	Time	Analysis, poetry
Idea development	Vocabulary	Creative writing
Supporting details	Vocabulary	Literary analysis
Brainstorming/ prewriting	Organization	Personal narrative
Thesis	Organization	Creative writing
Grammar	Planning	Literary analysis
Supporting details	Thesis writing	Creative writing
Grammar	Planning	Personal narrative
Idea development	Organization	Personal narrative
Idea development	Vocabulary	Creative writing
Idea development	Supporting details	Persuasive
Idea development	Organization	Personal narrative
“Getting point across”	Literary analysis	Personal narrative
Sentence variety	Planning	Creative Writing

Figure 1: Students’ Strengths, Weaknesses, and Preferred Genres

In addition to analyzing these data, we evaluated the students’ writing samples. We first evaluated writing samples holistically and crudely coded each student as three (strong), two (average), and one (weak). Figure 2 summarizes the students’ average scores. Following this holistic scoring, we each read writing samples and interview responses from eight students each. (We also double-coded samples from three students to ensure alignment.) We decided to summarize students’ perceptions of writing in paragraph form, along with our general impressions of the students’ writing. We wanted to know if their perceptions of their own writing were aligned with our evaluation of their work.

Score Range (Average 2.125)	Number of students in that range
1-1.5	4
2-2.5	10
3	2

Figure 2: Students' Average Scores

Students had also noted (during data collection on student engagement at a May 2011 professional development session) how they defined student engagement and an example of engaging instruction. We included that in our notes so that we could consider their thoughts when designing the week-long writing curriculum.

When we concluded this analysis, we had a detailed description of each student's attitude toward writing as well as the areas of need revealed by an analysis of that student's work. We found that many students' works: (1) lacked detail and specificity, (2) struggled with idea development, and (3) were abstract and devoid of examples. We also noted that many students' assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of their works aligned with our own readings. We relied heavily on this information as we thought carefully about what we would focus on in the course, what kinds of assignments we might give, and why we would give those assignments. Since we did not have samples from all of our students, we used part of our first class meeting for all students to respond to a writing prompt. We examined these, paying special attention to those students who did not provide an earlier writing sample. Our readings of these samples further indicated a range of ability levels and showed that the students who needed additional support had similar areas of need as those whose samples we had previously read and analyzed.

Course Goals and Theoretical Perspectives

We sought to create a writing class that appealed to a diverse group of students from low-income backgrounds with varying levels of interest in writing, while addressing the issues in the student writing samples described in the previous section. We considered various theories and approaches before deciding on the following theoretical perspectives, which we believed would value our students' backgrounds and experiences, help them grow as writers, and give them the ability to generalize and apply what they would learn in our course to other contexts, both in and out of school. The theoretical perspectives we adopted were: (1) writing as a communal act, (2) culturally responsive pedagogy, and (3) critical literacy. We believed these three theories built on each other: emphasizing the communal aspects of writing could help us build a supportive and engaging community, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy could help our students make connections between the content of the course and issues that mattered to them, and focusing on critical literacy could enable them to consider complex and relevant concepts such as identity and social justice, which they could apply to other situations, both in school and in their personal lives.

We selected each of these theoretical perspectives because of the diverse nature of our student population; when we say "diverse," we do not refer solely to the students' ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, but also to the range of writing abilities, genres of interest, and views of engagement expressed by our students in their earlier writing samples and survey responses. Since our students' beliefs about writing and levels of self-efficacy in this subject were so wide ranging, we felt it was important to establish a community where all writers felt encouraged and free to take risks in ways suited to their individual interests. We chose culturally responsive texts in order to show students some ways to connect their out-of-school lives to the work we would do in our course, and we decided to emphasize critical literacy because of the transformative nature of that approach's focus on reading the word and world, such as how society and author have the ability

to influence one another. We viewed critical literacy as a cognitive “step up” from culturally responsive pedagogy: once students made connections with their cultures and out-of-school lives, we could work with them to consider the issues of identity and injustice that are integral to critical literacy. In the sections below, we describe these perspectives in more depth, discussing how each influenced the design of this writing program.

Writing As a Communal Act

Although writing is often thought of as a solitary activity, research counter indicates this, instead emphasizing the impact of the communities in which writers work. Harris explains that “we write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say” (12). Harris also asserts that writers’ goals are not only based on their individual interests, but also on the values and characteristics of the communities to which they belong. We kept Harris’ insights in mind as we worked to construct this writing community; we wanted to create an environment in which students took risks in their writing (regarding both the content of their works and the writing strategies they used) and supported one another during this risk-taking process.

The idea of a writing community was especially important to the design of our course because of the research indicating that the type of community in a classroom plays a major role in the way students in that classroom engage in literacy practices. For example, Knoester found that a community can either encourage students to read and write or dissuade them from doing so. Knoester found that students actively engaged in literacy when they felt they were a part of a community in which they were encouraged to read and write about topics of interest to themselves and their peers, as this gave them the opportunities and encouragement needed to be “experts” on issues that they found meaningful. Knoester’s findings informed our study, as they communicated to us the importance of creating a community in

which students are encouraged to write about issues that are relevant to them and to take risks while doing so. In addition, we believe that Knoester's findings align with Harris' statement that communities can "instigate or constrain" the subject matter writers address. It was important to us that we created a community in which our students felt comfortable writing about topics that were important to their lives and identities.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogies are described by Moje and Hinchman as educational beliefs and practices "that apply academic knowledge to issues and problems in (students') own communities" (345). Implementing a pedagogy that combines academic knowledge with topics that are relevant to students' lives can be a challenge; the commonly held "picture of U.S. schooling leaves little room for teachers to imagine a curriculum that would support adolescents' burgeoning and multiple literacies, especially those cultivated in out-of-school contexts" (Heron-Hruby, Hagood and Alvermann 312). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell caution educators against "a curriculum, taught under the guise of standards and rigor, that lacks immediate relevance to students' lives" (285). We took advantage of the flexibility offered in our course that allowed us to teach in this way. We wanted our students to see the writing they did with us as applicable to their communities and relevant to their out of school lives and worked to integrate texts and practices that would help us achieve this goal.

Critical Literacy

We emphasized the principles of critical literacy when planning this course; specifically, we wanted our students to understand the relationship between written texts and the experiences and circumstances that inspire those texts, as described by Freire and Macedo. Freire argued that literacy instruction is always either oppressive or emancipatory; therefore, we tried giving students the freedom to explore their own interests, to collaborate, to roll

their eyes, to laugh, to walk away (or, in one case, to angrily throw away a draft). We wanted them to craft not just a piece of writing but a relationship with writing, an understanding that the writing itself was part of their voice, their identity, their lens for understanding the world around them. To achieve this, we grounded our critical literacy instruction in place-based education, or the “local phenomena and students’ lived experience” (Smith 586). This allowed students to consider how their experiences, attributes, and identities could be best conveyed in a piece of writing. Freire explains that “without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle” (186); therefore, we sought to create a writing environment in which students explored their identities critically, with an eye on how their lived experiences and circumstances contributed to these representations of self.

Memoir Writing

We decided that a unit on memoir writing would combine our theoretical perspectives with the needs and characteristics of our students, believing that the genre would be an appropriate fit for a group of writers with diverse interests and ability levels and particularly aligned with culturally responsive pedagogy and critical literacy. We felt that giving students opportunities to write about meaningful events in their lives would make the material personally relevant and engaging. Perhaps even more importantly, however, we believed that memoir writing would honor the students’ backgrounds and home lives; privileging these aspects of the students’ lives, we reasoned, could contribute to conversations related to critical literacy, including how the relationship between identity and struggle and how critical analysis of literature involves understanding the text as well as the environment that influenced it.

Key Instructional Practices

We describe three key instructional practices that were integral to putting our theoretical perspectives into action. These practices helped us build a close-knit and supportive writing community in

which students could write about topics that mattered to them while thinking critically about their identities and the influences on those identities.

These practices are as follows: (1) beginning the first class with identity-focused writing samples, (2) using “bodystorming” to help students actively reflect on their identities, and (3) analyzing mentor texts that explore issues of hidden identity. Figure 3 lists these practices and how they each contributed to the community that developed in our course, and related to culturally responsive pedagogy, and to critical literacy.

Instructional Practice One: Beginning the Course with Identity-Focused Writing Samples

One of our opening course activities involved two pieces of writing with the same name: George Ella Lyon’s poem “Where I’m From,” and rapper Jay-Z’s song, also titled “Where I’m From.” While these works are different in some aspects of their content and genre, they also have a number of similarities. By addressing where the author is “from,” each piece provides insight into the influences that contributed to the current identity of that individual. For example, Lyon discusses being “from” objects such as “the Dutch elm/ whose long-gone limbs I remember as if they were my own” and memories like “the finger my grandfather lost/to the auger,/the eye my father shut to keep his sight.” These images suggest that where one is “from” is not tied to a specific location; instead, individuals are influenced by meaningful memories and objects that have specific meanings tied to them.

Jay-Z’s rap “Where I’m From” is similar in some ways to Lyon’s work and different in others; parts of it are more location-specific, describing Jay-Z’s recollections of growing up in the Marcy area of Brooklyn: “Where I’m from, Marcy son, ain’t nothing nice been many places but I’m Brooklyn’s own.” However, this text, like Lyon’s, describes how individuals are shaped by specific memories that carry particular meanings; lyrics such as “I’m from where the hammer’s rung, news cameras never come” and “I’m from where the beef is inevitable” provide insight

Practice:	Contribution to community:	Relation to culturally responsive pedagogy:	Relation to critical literacy:
Beginning the course with identity-focused writing samples.	Depicted the course as a place where a range of writing styles, influences, and experiences are valued.	Showed we valued the places and experiences associated with students' out-of-school lives.	Provided introduction into how authors convey their identities.
Using "bodystorming" to help students actively reflect on their identities.	Allowed students to be physically engaged, work together, and create a visual representation of the community.	Gave students an opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences.	Allowed for students to consider connections between experiences and identity.
Analyzing mentor texts that explore the issue of hidden identity.	Established our class as a place where students felt free to express important aspects of their identities, especially those that remain unseen to others.	Provided relevant examples of ways that young people hide aspects of their identities.	Prompted discussion of how and why inner and outer identities can differ and the struggles associated with identity construction.

Figure 3: How key instructional practices related to our theoretical perspectives

into the struggles that Jay-Z experienced in his hometown and offer opportunities for listeners and readers to connect with their own difficulties.

Contribution to our class community. The Lyon and Jay-Z pieces contributed to our class community by depicting the course as a place where a range of writing styles, influences, and experiences are valued. By including texts that offered a variety of perspectives on where someone may be “from,” we intended to encourage the students to share the diverse experiences and influences that contributed to who they became—and are becoming. We believed that reading and listening to these authors share their formative experiences could help our students feel more comfortable sharing theirs. While we did not believe an accepting classroom was something that could immediately be created, we felt these texts represented a strong starting point toward the formation of such a community.

Relation to culturally responsive pedagogy. These texts made explicit our value for the places and experiences associated with our students out-of-school lives. Since the Lyon and Jay-Z texts look at being “from” a place as thinking about more than a specific geographic location, we used them to define “relevance” as more than just growing up in a specific area. Although our students were from the same general community, we wanted them to know that we looked at their out-of-school lives as encompassing more than the location in which they were raised. While we wanted to emphasize relevance, we also wanted to do it in a way that avoided generalizations; we felt these texts were effective tools for indicating that we valued entities that are relevant to our students, while also showing that people can be “from” the same place but have very different experiences and identities.

Relation to critical literacy. These texts illustrated how authors convey their identities, shedding light on an important aspect of critical literacy. One’s *critical* identity or literacy is often shaped by influences of place, personal struggles, and previous

experiences, and these texts allowed us to discuss with our students how these authors used the places and experiences from which they were “from” to address their present identities. This became a starting point for their *thinking*; just as these authors addressed previous experiences and struggles in conceptualizing the adults they ultimately became, we asked our students to think of the experiences and challenges making them who they are.

Instructional Practice Two: Using “Bodystorming” to Help Students Actively Reflect on Their Identities

After discussing the “Where I’m From” pieces, we engaged the students in an activity that allowed them to reflect on their own identities in a kinesthetic way. In this activity, called “bodystorming,” students, with the help of a partner, traced their bodies on large sheets of butcher paper and then recorded significant experiences or aspects of their identities on the tracings of relevant body parts (see Azano and Dinkins’ 2009 article for step-by-step recommendations for teaching with bodystorming). Before getting started, we displayed a few images from the artist Kara Walker who uses silhouettes to tell stories of slavery. We encouraged students to “strike a pose” on the paper—a pose that might tell one of their stories. To that end, some students emphasized certain aspects of their bodies: one wrote about the significance of her hair, while another traced himself with arms outstretched to symbolize his generosity for others. Another, who traced himself in a basketball pose, listed his basketball accomplishments and described the importance of his family to what he has achieved. The student who eventually wrote her memoir about being on the cheerleading squad posed in a full split. Because our butcher paper was blue, these bodystorms were eventually referred to as our “avatars” (based on the blue Na’vi people from the film *Avatar*, but also pointing to our hopes for the students’ transformative experiences).

Contribution to our class community. Bodystorming played a major role in our class coming together as a community; it allowed the students to be physically engaged, work together,

and create a visual representation of our community of writers. This activity was especially effective because our students had a wide range of writing backgrounds and interest levels. While the Lyon and Jay-Z pieces were effective, we believed we needed to think beyond the written word in our instruction to gain the “buy-in” of some of our students who were less writing-oriented. Involving our students in a cooperative and kinesthetic activity helped all our students rethink the expectations of a writing class and enabled those who didn’t see themselves as writers to feel like they could still participate fully.

Relation to culturally responsive pedagogy. We viewed bodystorming as a way to help our students reflect on their personal experiences, enabling them to collapse “the separation between school and community” (Tremmel 35) while also brainstorming ideas for their memoirs. We saw bodystorming as an especially appropriate way to make connections with students’ out-of-school lives because the activity required the students to recall specific memories and connotations they associated with particular body parts. We believed this to be more effective than traditional brainstorming because the students were forced to make direct connections between their bodies and meaningful experiences, requiring the written content to be directly related to the their lives.

Relation to critical literacy. Bodystorming allowed for students to consider the connection between experiences and identity, relating it to critical literacy’s emphasis on the process of identity formation. Freire’s statement that individuals become who they are through their lived experiences is conceptually related to this activity; we wanted our students to brainstorm meaningful experiences in their lives and consider how those experiences helped construct their identities. Once the students had considered this relationship, we believed, they would be well-positioned to craft memoirs that explored particular experiences and the contributions of those experiences to their identities.

Instructional Practice Three: Analyzing Mentor Texts that Explore the Issue of Hidden Identity

Our class analyzed two texts that explored aspects of young people's identities: an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and another from Nikki Grimes' novel *Bronx Masquerade*. Each of these texts address what we called "hidden identity:" an important aspect of one's identity that is not seen or acknowledged by others. Each piece is told from the point of view of an urban young person and addresses the disconnect between how individuals see themselves and how others see them.

The pieces differ in their subject matter and in the characteristics of the narrators: the section we selected from *Bronx Masquerade* is written from the point of view of Devon Hope, a high school-aged male who is a talented basketball player and a lover of poetry. Devon feels a need to hide his interest for poetry from his peers, who refuse to acknowledge him as anything more than a basketball player, explaining: "I tell (my classmates) I'm heading for the gym to meet Coach and work on my layup. Then once they're out the door, I cut upstairs to the library to sneak a read" (Grimes 30). Devon summarizes his hidden identity with the closing statement to his section: "Don't call me Jump Shot. My name is surprise" (32). The section we used from *The House on Mango Street*, "My Name," is told from the point of view of Esperanza, a young girl who describes the meanings that her name holds but wishes to take "a name more like the real [her], the one nobody sees" (Cisneros 11). Esperanza's statement that she would like to call herself "Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X" (11) sparked a thoughtful discussion among our students about the messages names send and how changing one's name could help an individual feel more control over his or her identity.

Contribution to our class community. Our readings and discussions of these works established our class as a place where students felt free to express important aspects of their identities, especially those that remain unseen to others. The freedom and comfort these texts facilitated helped our students produce personally meaningful pieces that revealed frequently undiscovered

aspects of their identities. For example, the piece from *Bronx Masquerade* resonated with some of the students who play basketball and even functioned as a model for a student who wrote a memoir that challenged others to see him as more than a talented basketball player. In his memoir, this student wrote: “It is a never ending cycle of basketball this and basketball that. I wonder sometimes if people like me for me or if they just like me because I play a sport. They do not know me for real.” Inspired by Devon Hope’s situation, this student found the courage to inform his audience there is more to him than he believed some assume. Another student wrote about the challenges being a successful, African American golf athlete. And yet another wrote about her name—her mother’s desire to give her a unique name and her experience being ashamed of and then embracing that name.

Relation to culturally responsive pedagogy. These texts provided relevant examples of ways that young people hide aspects of their identities, encouraging our students to make connections to their own lives and identities. The topics addressed in these texts were applicable to our students’ lives, as illustrated in the previous example in which one of our students echoed Devon Hope’s concerns in his memoir. Our bilingual students identified with Esperanza’s discussion of how her name is pronounced by both English and Spanish speakers: “At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something...”(11). Even in those instances when students could not directly identify with the content of these pieces, they could still identify with the concept behind them: having a “real” identity that goes beyond what others assume. In our discussions about this topic, students with a wide range of interests and identities made connections between these texts and their own experiences.

This was the case with Zenalisa, who was teased about the uniqueness of her name and temporarily chose to go by her middle name. In Zenalisa’s memoir, she describes instances when others told her that her name “...doesn’t sound like a name.” Zenalisa

explains, “Being young, little jokes like that would hurt my feelings so I never told anybody what my name was.” She went by her middle name for “a long time” before finally embracing her name:

As someone gets older they mature, become wiser and they learn that what others think about you or say about you doesn't matter. That's a lesson I have learned. My parents named me [what they did] for a reason: the name in their eyes meant different, intelligent, unique. Now I like to believe all those adjectives describe me.

In Zenalisa’s situation, the “real” her was aligned with her actual name all along; her increased maturity helped her embrace the uniqueness that her name represents.

Relation to critical literacy. Our work with these texts prompted discussion of how inner and outer identities can differ, which led to a conversation about how struggle is a contributing factor to one’s identity. We discussed the individual struggles faced by Devon and Esperanza and how those struggles influenced the identities portrayed in these pieces while working toward Freire’s idea that identity emanates from an individual’s struggles. As students worked on their memoirs and we conferenced with them on these works, we returned to the issues of identity and struggle raised in these pieces and asked the students to reflect on how the issues of struggle and identity were related to their lives.

Data Analysis

After our students completed their memoirs, we analyzed them to determine the extent to which their writings reflected our instructional goals and theoretical perspectives. We analyzed these memoirs using Miles and Huberman’s three-pronged process of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

Miles and Huberman describe data reduction as “the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the

data” (10). To this end, we reduced the data by examining the students’ memoirs and looking for selections from the texts that stood out to us as particularly thought-provoking and potentially representative of key ideas. This represented the initial stages of our analysis, as it allowed us to focus on especially significant aspects of the students’ memoirs that we continued to consider during our subsequent analysis.

We identified emerging themes and used them to construct data displays. These emerging themes were intentionally general, as we sought to identify some major ideas that we could use to display the data, knowing that we would refine these themes as analysis continued. We listed emergent themes alongside excerpts from student memoirs and continued to search the data to identify additional evidence that supported the themes. While doing this, we found ourselves revising these themes, refining them to best fit the data. Miles and Huberman state that designing a display and deciding which data should be entered into it are part of analysis, and this was certainly true in our case—these activities helped us to identify important elements of the data and clarify our interpretations of it.

We completed our analysis by drawing and verifying our conclusions. While we had already constructed working themes, we drew “final” conclusions by revisiting our data displays, the themes we constructed, and the student memoirs used to construct these themes. This allowed us to continually refine the themes and confirm that our conclusions matched the students’ memoirs.

Findings

Two findings related to our students’ experiences emerged from the memoirs the students created during the week we spent with them and were constructed through the use of the data analysis process described in the preceding section. In the following discussion, we incorporate excerpts from selected student writings that embody relevant themes and ideas.

Finding One: Students Used Their Memoirs to Express Their “Inner Identities,” the First Step Toward Developing Critical Literacy

Our students used their memoirs to explore deeply personal issues related to their identities—especially the aspects of their identities that went beyond what others see at first glance, which we termed “inner identities.” Just as the characters in our mentor texts from *The House on Mango Street* and *Bronx Masquerade* did, many of our students described elements of their identities they believed others were not aware of. One especially impressive example was Todd’s memoir, which addressed expectations he believed were placed on him because he is Asian American: “*Because of my race, I’m expected to do great things in my future as if it was set in stone so many years ago. Maybe it’s because I’m Asian and that there are so many stereotypes concerning Asian people.*”

Todd’s memoir continues to explain that, while he doesn’t know what his future will hold, he knows he will not be limited by expectations others place on him:

Like a crazy man in denial, I tried to destroy the titles placed upon me by others. Doctor, Surgeon, Chemist, President, Mathematician, all possible outcomes that I have thought about, but not all will be my profession. I will walk the path that I see fit for my future as my own. Maybe I want to be an Artist, Game Developer, or possibly a Policeman.

One especially impressive aspect of Todd’s piece is the way he acknowledges the direct relationship between his work and the world around him. A tenet of critical literacy, as described by Freire, is that the world influences the written word and the written word in turn has an influence on the world. Todd addresses how the expectations of other have inspired his memoir: “*Destiny. Expectation. Future. Words that heighten the stress on a single being. Either it comes from family, friends, or the community, it’s all the same.*” Todd concludes his memoir by responding to those expectations, explaining that he will make the choices that decide

his life: "...no amount of fear or doubt will ever determine my destiny. It's mine and mine alone."

A number of other students addressed this same contrast between assumed characteristics and inner identity. Justine's memoir addresses the stereotypes she dealt with as a cheerleader, explaining:

I have always found my [way] back to cheerleading, but of course the stereotypes came along. I would hear, "She thinks she's better than the rest", or "she thinks she's cute in that little skirt," but little do they know I am more than a short skirt or a shimmery pompom.

Justine's piece goes on to explain her interest in a range of academic subjects, her desire to challenge herself in school by taking challenging courses, and her role as senior class president. She states: "*I challenge myself with arduous courses in school and actually enjoy Socratic seminars on almost any subject. I love writing research papers on famous people, places, and events, and I still hang my honor roll report card up on the refrigerator!*" Justine acknowledges the ways she defies stereotypes by describing herself as "*the cheerleader who does not fit the stereotype that once lived.*"

While both Todd and Justine's memoirs deal with struggles associated with stereotypes, Tayshuan's piece addresses a different kind of struggle between inner and outer identity, discussing the difficulties posed by having his father's name, but wanting to craft a very different life from the one his father has led. Tayshaun's piece asserts that, while he carries his father's name, his actions will be entirely his own: "*Because my name is Tayshaun doesn't mean I'll use alcohol as an excuse for my actions. Because my name is Tayshaun doesn't mean I'll abandon my family when they need me most.*" Tayshaun's piece appears to draw inspiration from the selection our class read from *The House on Mango Street*, in which the narrator explains that she does not want her life to resemble her great grandmother's, whose name she carries: "Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (Cisneros 11). Tayshaun, like Esperanza, acknowledges

the challenge of crafting an individual identity while sharing a first name with a family member; his discussion of this challenge reveals his awareness of his individual identity and personal goals.

Finding Two: Students' Identities Emerged from Their Experiences, with Place Serving as the Backdrop to those Experiences

Our students' memoirs suggested that their identities primarily emerged from their experiences, but also indicated that a sense of place was implicitly important in the identity-creation process. Many of the students' memoirs referred to specific experiences, such as performing in a band, playing a sport, or taking part in specific family activities. However, the experiences the students described were also related to a sense of place, representing various community-based social norms. The values the students placed on these experiences reflected a combination of their personal characteristics and the social norms of the communities and places in which these experiences took place.

Michael's description of his experience as an African-American playing in a state golf championship is an excellent example of the relationship between experience and place. While Michael's piece addresses the sacrifices he has made to be a successful golfer (*"He lives with no best friends, no relationships, cause he knows that no one will understand the life that he lives. A life where every day from 8am until dark he spends his life on the golf course with the exception of school."*), the issue of place also figures heavily in his discussion of the challenges that accompany his success as an African-American golfer. While describing competing at the State Golf Championship, Michael illustrated the difference between the location where the tournament was held and the features of his own community:

From being placed seven hours away in a land where there holds no black soul, no rap music being played, no basketball hoops in sight. He was stuck in a petite, ridged, dreadful county called Smith. He was stuck in hell hold for three frightening days. Half of the people

*who lived in the county have never seen a black person in their life,
and they wanted to keep it that way.*

Although Michael's memoir depicts his identity as a golfer, this identity and its corresponding experiences could not be adequately addressed without acknowledging place; the location and social norms of the community where the golf tournament was held represent his view of himself as an outsider in the golf community and ultimately confirm his desire to succeed and his pride in his accomplishments: *"They can't take away the records he has set, can't take away the history he has made away, can't take away the overwhelming amount of trophies, medals, and certificates that this young man has earned."*

John's memoir addresses the importance of his experiences to his current identity, while also suggesting that it might be difficult for an outsider not from his community to make sense of his experiences and accomplishments. John's piece, titled "Spoken Word" and organized in rhyming stanzas, explains his circumstances growing up as well as his conduct in school:

*Now I may not be hood but I have a story of my own
Spending 80% of my life at home
Being a kid growing up, I spent most of my life alone
Day and night alone,
just dying to be free, so I can let me be me . . . but in response they
say boy you're not grown
If only I were grown, to know what you've known*

*Waking up early everyday just to go to school
Joking around, having fun, acting like a fool
No matter what I did trouble always seemed to find me
New people from left to right is all I could see*

John's line, *"Now I may not be hood but I got a story of my own"* situates his experiences, introducing the challenges of spending most of his childhood alone. Although John does not spend a lot of

time describing a particular place as Michael does, the closing part of his piece describes his upcoming journey to college and juxtaposes the circumstances in which he grew up with the new life ahead of him:

*So now you can look at me and tell me what I've done
I'm doing I'm making so see you when I make it to college son
It's a wrap I'm done . . . YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHERE I'M
FROM*

An especially significant aspect of this closing stanza is the reference to the “Where I’m From” pieces by George Ella Lyon and Jay-Z we examined in the early part of our course. John’s statement that the reader has no idea where he’s from suggests that an individual meeting him now cannot understand the challenges he’s faced and overcome in his life. In addition, the statement can suggest a physical journey: he looks at his current life and considers the possible places he will travel to attend college, as well as the possibilities that await him after graduation. The potential places John’s success can take him go far beyond the community in which he was raised; it can be inferred that he believes some of the people he meets now and will continue to in the future will not understand the experiences or places from which he is “from.”

Conclusion

Our students’ experiences in this course were especially significant because of the implications for critical literacy *instruction*. Our students looked at the relationship between written texts and the social contexts in which they were created in a variety of ways. Each of the three key instructional practices previously described helped our students understand the relationship between the “word” and the “world” and view these two entities as potentially influencing one another. Their memoirs actualized the importance of incorporating culturally responsive and place-based pedagogies into writing instruction. By providing

a range of activities for our students to engage in critical literacy practices, we were able to incorporate our students' diverse interests, backgrounds, and ability levels and show them ways that writing is relevant to their individual struggles and identities.

When we were charged with creating a week-long writing course for students at the AP Challenge Program, we knew we needed to create a writing class that appealed to a diverse group of students from low-income backgrounds with varying levels of interest in writing. In addition, we understood the importance of addressing the issues in the student writing samples we collected before the program began. We considered our students' diverse backgrounds, ability levels, and levels of writing interest when selecting our three theoretical perspectives: (1) writing as a communal act, (2) culturally responsive pedagogy, and (3) critical literacy. We believed these three theories built on each other: emphasizing the communal aspects of writing could help us build a supportive and engaging community, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy could help our students make connections between the content of the course and issues that mattered to them, and focusing on critical literacy could enable them to consider complex and relevant concepts such as identity and social justice, which they could apply to other situations, both in school and in their personal lives.

We believe that our students' experiences in this course indicate the successful implementation of each of our theoretical perspectives: our class community was supportive and fostered student engagement in all of our students, the culturally responsive texts helped the students make connections to their own lives and communities, and the use of critical literacy instruction helped students thoughtfully write about their identities and the relationship between their identities and the world around them. We feel that this relationship between students' identities and the world around them is especially important because of the ways our students critically considered the similarities and differences between their individual senses of self and any outer representations of those selves. We worked to

facilitate this critical awareness by selecting texts such as *Bronx Masquerade* and *The House on Mango Street* that address the same contrast between assumed characteristics and inner identity. As our students read these texts, they grew more comfortable expressing these identities and how they do or do not align with outwardly expressed characteristics or attributes. We attribute our students' comfort with expressing these elements of their identities to the critical literacy skills they developed while taking our course. Once our students learned to look critically at the concept of identity, they became more confident expressing their views of themselves and at times calling attention to ways their particular notions of self may contrast with others' perspectives. As our students adopted the attitude that individual identity is defined by oneself and is sometimes in opposition to others' perceptions, we believe they developed increased senses of social justice. By taking a critical perspective on the attributes one possesses and why, these students demonstrated understandings of the limiting prejudices often exhibited by society and how the inaccuracies of those prejudices were exposed by the nuanced contrast between one's inner identity and the ways an outsider might make assumptions about that identity.

Future research can build off of the findings presented here by further examining the impact that critical literacy practices can have on students' experiences as readers and writers, using different sampling procedures and methodologies. Since this article sought to describe our experiences creating this course and our students' experiences in it, we were practitioners as well as investigators. While we believe our instructional practices and students' experiences to be significant, a study of similar topics by researchers who are not also responsible for instruction could produce useful results. In addition, we constructed our findings using only the students' memoirs as data; future studies could employ additional methods of data collection, such as systematic observations and student interviews to further inform conclusions.

In addition, future research can further investigate teachers' experiences creating intensive summer writing courses such as the

one described here. Since this article focuses on our experiences creating this course as well as our students' experiences in it, future studies can build off of this article by examining in more detail teachers' experiences creating intensive summer writing courses, especially those designed for underserved populations. Studies such as these could provide insights into the teachers' objectives, how they decided on those objectives, and which instructional practices they felt best helped them achieve them.

Our experiences and findings suggest the importance of (1) planning intensive writing courses in ways that account for students' specific writing-related needs and attitudes, (2) using texts that allow for students to form connections with their out-of-school lives, and (3) equipping students with critical literacy skills and working with them to apply those skills to their own identities, experiences, and home lives. The combination of these approaches, and the theoretical perspectives to which they relate, allowed our students to think of both the "word" and the "world" when creating their memoirs.

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