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# Transforming Literacy Education for First-Generation College Students

By Earl Aguilera and Geraldine Lopez

“Remedial.” “Underserved.” “Struggling.” These are just a few of the words people have used to describe the first-generation college students we have worked with over the years. While many teachers have read articles and heard talks about not viewing learners from a “deficit” mindset, how we actually work with marginalized students in our classrooms can be a different challenge altogether. Put another way, how can we English/Language Arts teachers approach our work with students in a way that is responsive to both their lived experiences and the broader social, political, and economic realities that they face?

In this article, we address this question through the lens of our own experiences as co-instructors over three years of working with first-generation college students in New Jersey’s Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. After sharing some of the background and context that guided our most recent course design, we overview some of the teaching approaches we engaged to support the transitional literacy practices of our students. Finally, we close with a few “lessons learned” that reflect the challenges, tensions, and affirmations we experienced as we worked with our students throughout the summer.

## THE CONTEXT OF OUR TEACHING

The stated mission of the EOF is to provide financial assistance and support services for students from “educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds” who attend institutions of higher education in New Jersey (Office of the Secretary of Higher Education). On a practical level, EOF programs strive to foster resilience and college-readiness for historically marginalized and minoritized students who demonstrate aspirations to succeed in a college setting. Students from such backgrounds

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have been shown to face additional challenges navigating the transition from high school to college (Roderick et al. 178). Forty-one of NJ's community colleges and four-year (public and private) colleges participate in the program, though spaces at each college or university are limited. As EOF is a campus-based program, student recruitment, selection, program services, and specific criteria for admission and program participation is determined by each campus. Since the fund was established in 1968, it has continued to support many first-generation college students across the state.

At our own institution, a small urban university within a large metropolitan area of New Jersey, a five-week summer program was developed to serve EOF-participating students by integrating elements of counseling, tutoring, and supplemental coursework. Over a period of three years, the first author of our article, Earl Aguilera, served as lead instructor in what was then referred to as a "Developmental Reading" course. By background, Earl has worked as a high school English teacher and K-12 Reading Specialist with focus on adolescent and adult literacy. The second author, Geraldine Lopez, was a former student of the program, having graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees with EOF support. She has since served in the program as a supplemental instructor, or "SI." In the most recent iteration of the course, we taught the reading together, working with two cohorts of 16 and 19 students each.

We framed the design of this most recent course around the idea of *transitional literacies*. We use *literacies* in the plural to describe the multiple social practices ("multiliteracies") that people engage in when exchanging meaning, either through print or digital texts (Serafini and Gee 3). And when we talk about *transitional literacies*, we emphasize the ways people draw on multiple literacy practices to navigate moments of major change, or transition in their lives; in the case we'll discuss, the emphasis is on the transition from high school to college. Digging even more deeply, our teaching philosophy is inspired

by critical perspectives on literacy education, stretching back historically to the transformative teaching projects of Paulo Freire in the 1970s. As Luke summarizes, *critical literacy* refers to the “use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique and transform the norms, rule systems and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (5). The overall purpose of our course, then, was to support students in using a variety of literacy strategies to understand, critique, and even transform the dominant norms, rule systems, and practices in their higher education experience.

To illustrate how we approached this goal and put our philosophy into practice, we next overview our own approaches to three recognized areas of English/Language Arts education: text selection, everyday practice in multiple literacies, and assessment. Our purpose here is not necessarily to argue that our approach should be seen as “what works” or “best practice.” Instead, we hope that our experiences and reflections will help expand approaches for supporting students typically labeled as “remedial,” “underserved,” or “struggling,” especially in ways that are responsive to the changing needs of our diverse communities.

### **THEORY TO PRACTICE**

A key consideration for educators in the world of English/Language Arts is the choice of texts we use for our courses. In different contexts, these decisions may be guided to various degrees by students, teachers, departments, schools, or districts. In all cases, these decisions reflect a set of values, perspectives, and assumptions that can influence our students’ literacy experiences. Keeping this in mind, we built our course around two core texts. The first was John Langan’s *Ten Steps to Advancing College Reading Skills*. This book draws on the concept of “reading strategies” and provides exercises and examples of how to put these strategies into practice. We valued this text not only because it fulfilled the officially-sanctioned purpose of the course that we inherited, but also because it drew examples from a wide variety of academic subjects. This provided openings for us to engage students in

discussions about literacy practices across disciplines and contexts. We also saw this curricular move as essential for expanding students' access to certain "genres of power," which we will define here as ways of reading, writing, doing, and being that are commonly valued in higher education and dominant society (Luke 8).

The second text, we decided, should be one that students could resonate with on a more effective and experiential level. For this purpose, we chose Kathleen Cushman's *First in the Family: The College Years*. This nonfiction text tells the stories of a number of students who, much like our own, were the first in their families to attend college. This concept, of *being the first in your family* -- the pioneer, the explorer -- without a blueprint or backup plan, formed the core organizing theme of our course as well. It was through this thematic lens that we began to explore, with our students, the role that a variety of literacy practices might play in mediating their transition from high school to college. We used a digital version of the text, which included embedded YouTube videos, images, and a navigation structure designed for computers, smartphones, and other personal electronic devices. Considering the positive responses we received from students through class discussions, written reflections, and end-of-course evaluations, we felt reaffirmed in our decision. We were regularly energized by the ways students interpreted and connected the stories from the text to their own experience.

Beyond text selection, we also put a great deal of effort and attention to implementing activities that engaged a wide variety of literacy practices -- what the New London Group and others have called "multiliteracies" (Serafini and Gee 2). We found that the regularity of this practice (along with specific assessment approaches we will discuss shortly) provided students the chance to engage in modes of reading and writing that were valued in the academic courses and overall institution of higher education they would be entering in the fall.

In the spirit of pushing the bounds of what “counts” as literacy, we also explored a variety of composition practices through digital tools, as well as creative practices of digital media production. Through group and whole-class assignments, we explored practices of collaborative writing using Google Docs, experimenting with situations where the entire class could benefit from shared knowledge and effort, such as group note-taking. We also engaged in creation of digital media texts through a video production project that served as the culminating assignment for the course. In this project, students were tasked with representing the core theme of being “first in the family,” as it pertained to their individual and collective experiences. Students took on roles as designers, interviewers, and content producers, engaging in interviews with fellow participants, faculty, and staff in the program. In the end, we presented these videos at the program’s end-of-summer ceremony, with peers and family members in the audience cheering on their hard work. We recognize, as instructors, that many times such activities are considered “extracurricular” or reserved for students who have already mastered “basic literacy skills.” Nevertheless, we made a conscious decision to incorporate these as part of our “multiliteracies” approach. A variety of organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), have identified these experiences as essential to all students participating in a 21st-Century global society (NCTE Executive Committee).

Tied deeply, of course, to questions of instruction, are questions of assessment. We refer to the family of approaches we took in this course under the umbrella term of “responsive assessment” (Routman 37). Building on prior work in formative assessment, we worked to ensure that assessment took place throughout the entire process of instruction --rather than just at the end -- through observation, essay commentary, in-class discussion, and feedback from students.

Beyond using assessment to inform our own teaching practice, we also emphasized specific practices to provide students with feedback they could act on right away. We re-framed this assessment as cycles of “feed-forward” to emphasize our role in pointing the next direction students could focus on for improvement (Fisher and Frey 98). A *revise-and-resubmit* policy to replace the grade on any submitted student essay is one concrete example of how we approached this challenge. Simply put, we invited students to revise any graded assignment for a new grade that would *replace* their previous one -- thus effectively minimizing the stigma of “failure” and encouraging a more experimental approach to the practices of writing. We were not overwhelmed with resubmits to grade over the summer, and we received positive feedback from the students who took advantage of this opportunity and literally watched their grades improve with additional effort.

Throughout our course, we worked to imbue our approach to text selection, “multiliteracies” activities, and responsive assessment with the spirit of transformational teaching, particular from a critical literacies perspective. Like all educators, we were met with both success and challenge, and thus will outline three broad take-aways from the experience below.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

The first realization for us throughout this process was the depth of commitment it takes to create a “student-centered” classroom experience. While this term has become commonly used in a variety of circles, we have come to understand this approach as one that really puts students’ experiences above *everything else*, including curriculum “content,” disciplinary norms and practices, and standardized assessment expectations. Part of the goal was for students to transition from their experiences of conditioned passive learning to become engaged, critical thinkers. Throughout the course, we were aware of the importance of supporting students’ access to genres of power, including the genres of exam writing; however, we made a purposeful decision to focus more on the quality of experiences that

students had during the course -- trying to ensure they experienced reading and writing as meaningful and worthwhile. While we enjoyed a fair amount of leverage as seasoned instructors in our particular program, those considering broader contexts of implementation may face additional challenges.

Our second major lesson as teachers was that such a student-centered approach does not require us to “dumb down” the field of literacy studies. Instead, we found the opposite. To fully support students in developing deep knowledge -- about literacy as a social practice, about its historical use for good and ill, about what should “count” as literacy in the first place -- we had to approach the research base in literacy education with both scholarly rigor and a deep commitment to practical application. Yes, we discussed Louise Rosenblatt’s ideas of *effere*nt and *aesthetic* reading (though we called them “lean forward” and “lean back” reading as a scaffolding device). But we also worked with students in developing personalized and practical applications of these ideas to their everyday life experiences.

Finally, our experiences have taught us that a critical pedagogy that seeks to empower students with agency over their learning can involve a loss of control on the part of the instructor -- and that is not necessarily a bad thing. Truth be told, we had no idea how our students’ “First in the Family” video projects would turn out. Divided into small teams, students progressed at different paces throughout the project, challenging us to quickly respond to changing circumstances. On the other hand, this project gave us opportunities to observe students enact their own transformations throughout the course.

One illustrative case centers on a student who we’ll refer to as Luna. Like many of her classmates, Luna began our course somewhat apprehensive about our instructional approach; indeed, we regularly pointed out that there were seldom “easy answers” to questions about literacy. And while over time we



noted her work ethic and consistent performance in class assignments, it was not until she took on a leadership role in her video production team that we really saw Luna shine. Not only did she guide her groupmates toward the completion of a highly-praised final video product, a role she took great pride in during our culminating ceremony, but she also took up opportunities to exercise creative agency beyond what our “traditional” assignments afforded. Luna’s story, as well as the stories of many of her classmates, continues to inspire us toward creating more transformative moments for all of our students.

### **TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHING FOR ALL**

In our teaching practice, we strive to push back against language and literacy practices that label our students as “remedial,” “underserved,” and “struggling.” Our students’ lives are far more complex than these any kind of label assume. To move past such labelling practices, we would argue instead that educators consider how these students’ curiosities, passions, and motivations might help teachers transform educational experiences for the better.

That said, we also remain acutely aware that the majority of students qualifying for the EOF program have indeed been systematically marginalized, many times by the institutions claiming to serve their interests. In reflecting, we are careful not to overstate the impact our own teaching practices may have on these broader issues. Nevertheless, we count ourselves among the lineage of educators and scholars who continue to demonstrate the impact that transformative teaching can have on the life of a student. We hope that our own experiences and reflections as educators will inspire new ways of thinking and teaching that move away from deficit mindsets and toward a view of students from a perspective of strength and agency. All of us can be challenged by major life transitions that can have a profound impact on our lived experience. We should continue to strive, as educators, to support the diversity of ways that all learners navigate these transitions, as we continuously improve our practice to respond to

the changing needs of all of our communities.

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