Bridging Literacy Practices through Storytelling, Translanguaging, and an Ethnographic Partnership: A Case Study of Dominican Students at Bronx Community College

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ABSTRACT: This article reports on my attempt to use storytelling as an entry point into academic discourse in a learning community designed to meet the learning needs of ESL students who recently emigrated from the Dominican Republic. Based on research suggesting a correlation between academic success in a second language and first language literacy skills, this learning community linked an ESL course to a Spanish composition course for native speakers. Storytelling constituted the cornerstone of an ethnographic partnership established in order to create a "place for students' self" within Academic Discourse and to inform the translingual pedagogical alliance formed with the Spanish instructor. I will discuss the impact this approach has had on students' success indicators and ways in which it can be implemented in other teaching contexts.

KEYWORDS: translanguaging; bilingualism; academic literacy; learning communities; personal writing.

INTRODUCTION

Providing access to higher education for students who are disadvantaged by structural inequality is a fundamental concern of Basic Writing theory and practice. Addressing this concern entails opening up the ownership of dominant languages, dialects, and Discourses[1] whose mastery is a precondition for socio-economic empowerment. The conversations in this special issues seek to question our conceptions of Academic Discourse and explore the possibility of using storytelling to create points of entry into

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this dominant Discourse for students who tend to be excluded by it. This article focuses on the following question: How do we take into account the linguistic and cultural diversity of our students as we use storytelling to create these points of entry?

This question will be explored through a case study of Dominican students taking English and Spanish academic literacy development courses in a learning community at Bronx Community College (BCC), and whose average GPAs and retention rates turned out to be exceptionally high. While some of this exploration will deal specifically with the learning needs of Spanish-speaking ESL students, especially recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic, the pedagogical implications have relevance for all basic writing students who are at risk of being excluded from higher education because of a gap between their home language and literacy practices and Academic Discourse.

Given the attacks that neoliberal forces have been carrying out against "basic writing spaces" (Lamos 5-6) and bilingual education (Macias), notwithstanding the explosion of linguistic diversity that characterizes current demographic trends in the U.S., we must create pedagogical spaces where basic writers can join Academic Discourse using all of their linguistic resources. The number of Americans who speak a language other than English at home totals nearly 60 million, accounting for more than 20% of the population, and this number will continue to increase. Among these Americans, Spanish is used as a home language by 62% of the population, and the presence of Spanish speakers in the U.S. will continue to grow (Macias 40). In light of these demographic trends, it should not be difficult to see that increasing access to higher education among language minority students, especially Spanish speakers, is an issue of national concern. Unfortunately, Hispanic students—especially recent immigrants who arrive in the U.S. as teenagers—are at a high risk of school failure (Fry "The Higher"). Graduation and retention rates at Bronx Community College, a Hispanic Serving Institution (Santiago), reflect this sad national trend.

As a language and literacy scholar and an ESL instructor, I felt it was important to create a special "basic writing space" dedicated to the learning needs of such a big part of BCC's student population by formally inviting their mother tongue into Academic Discourse. Writing instructors, especially those who teach at Hispanic Serving Institutions, have a special responsibility to find ways to make sure "Hispanic students' cultural and ethnolinguistic identities figure prominently in the construction of the writing classroom community" because instructors who do not "aspire to understand stu-

dents' worldviews, behaviors, and ethics can easily thwart students' efforts to succeed academically" (Mendez Newman 17). I will add that especially in the case of Latin@ students who are not native English speakers, writing instructors should also aspire to let their students' first language and literacy practice figure prominently in the writing classroom for two very good reasons. First of all, language plays a central role in the way human beings define themselves and make sense of the world around them (Weedon; Parmegiani "The Dis(ownership)"). It is impossible for me to fathom how basic writers—especially ESL students—could feel that there is room for them in an academic Discursive community if the languages, dialects, and literacies that shape their identity constructions and give expression to their world views are not welcomed in the classroom. Secondly, pedagogically speaking, students whose lives are characterized by complex linguistic repertoires –including monolingual basic writers who need to straddle significant dialectal variation–must draw on all of their linguistic resources in order to succeed academically. This process of "accessing different linguistic features of what are described as autonomous languages in order to maximize communicative potential" will be referred to as "translanguaging" in my argument, as it is often done in composition and language and literacy studies (Garcia 8; Garcia, Flores, and Woodley; Canagarajah "Codemeshing").

This article reports on my attempt to create a basic writing space to meet the special learning needs for Latin@ ESL students by linking one of my ESL courses to a Spanish composition course offered by the department of Modern Languages. The link was created within the framework of a learning community (Hanson and Heller). I argue that in order to understand students' "worldviews, behavior, and ethics" (Mendez Newman), and by so doing, increase access to Academic Discourse, the learning process needs to be bidirectional. In other words, students need to learn from teachers, but teachers need to learn from their students too. This pedagogical principle gave life to an ethnographic partnership based on a storytelling process that focused on students' literacy narratives. This ethnographic partnership informed the integrated pedagogical strategies in the learning community and gave life to a translingual Academic Discourse in which students participated simultaneously as experts and leaners. This approach has had a strong positive impact on students' success indicators and has important implications for basic writing theory and practice.

DOMINICAN STUDENTS AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

Dominicans are the fourth largest Latino group nationwide and the largest in New York City (US Census Bureau). Unfortunately, educational achievement among Dominicans is among the lowest of any Latin group in the country (Utakis and Pita). In 2000 only 51% of Dominicans in the United States who were twenty-five years old or older had earned a high school diploma; only 10.6% graduated from college (Hernandez and Rivera-Batiz).

There are several reasons why Dominican students face particularly strong challenges while pursuing an education in the United States. Reports published by non-government organizations highlight that the educational system in the Dominican Republic is "deeply inequitable, and it reproduces an exclusionary social order" characterized by low levels of academic literacy development among students who are not from a privileged socio-economic background (UNDP 177). Consequently, many Dominican students who enroll at BCC are basic writers in their first language (Parmegiani and Utakis). Once in the United States, Dominicans are often "relegated to under-resourced and underperforming schools, resulting in part from residential segregation" (Bartlett and Garcia 46). In addition, like other Latino groups and immigrants from developing countries, Dominican students often have to deal with challenges related to poverty (Fry and Gonzales), interrupted education (Fry "The Higher"), family separation (Bartlett and Garcia 157), and the expanded financial, family, and educational responsibilities that come with starting a new life in a new country (Bartlet and Garcia).

According to Dulce Maria Gray, an additional explanation for high student failure rates among Dominicans is their resistance to integration: "Most arrive with the belief that their life in the States is temporary; that as soon as they become financially stable, as soon as their children finish school, they will return to the island" (182). While such a sweeping generalization about Dominican students' alleged lack of desire to integrate is obviously problematic, it is important to keep in mind that many Dominicans in the United States keep strong ties with their country of origin, and this has important implications for schooling, especially in terms of language and literacy. A study carried out at Bronx Community College by Sharon Utakis and Marianne Pita to investigate the Dominican students' identities at this institution and their implications for ESL writing instruction has confirmed the "transnational" character of this population. In his monograph about Dominican communities in Washington Heights, a neighborhood adjacent to Bronx Community College where many of the students who attend this

institution reside, Jorge Duany defined the term "transnational" as describing a lifestyle "characterized by a constant flow of people in both directions, a dual sense of identity, ambivalent attachment to two nations, and a far-flung network of kinship and friendship across state frontiers "(2).

These studies imply that in order to function within this "far-flung network of kinship and friendship across state frontiers," Dominican students must not be put in "subtractive schooling" situations," where academic achievement comes at the cost of a loss of their native language, Discourses, and other fundamental aspects of their identity (Valenzuela; Bartlett and Garcia). In other words, effective schooling for Dominican students must allow them to retain their proficiency in Spanish and in the "ways of thinking" (Gee) that shape linguistic exchanges in their communities.

SUCCESS RATES AT BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Bronx Community College is an open-admission, Hispanic Serving Institution (Santiago) which is part of the City University of New York (CUNY). In Fall 2012, Latin@s made up 61% of the student body (CUNY Office of Institutional Research). About 40% of first-time students report that English is not their native language. While it is important to highlight that not every Latin@ student is an ESL speaker, the vast majority of ESL students at BCC speak Spanish as their first language. About 20% of all the students enrolled at BCC were born in the Dominican Republic; in addition, a significant number of U.S. born students are of Dominican descent (BCC Office of Institutional Research, personal communication).

Most of BCC's incoming students begin their college career with a strong desire to succeed. According to a survey carried out in 2007, 91% of first time BCC students indicated that they intended to earn at least a bachelor's degree. In most cases, however, a harsh reality gets in the way of students' intentions. One-year retention rates for the entering class of Fall 2008 was at 65%; only 20% of the entering class of Fall 2003 completed their associate degree within six years (BCC Office of Institutional Research, "Making" 1). Obviously, graduation and retention rates need to be drastically improved if BCC is to live up to its mission, which is encapsulated by its official slogan: "transforming lives."

To this end, in 2010, Bronx Community College's Executive Council identified the need to improve the freshmen year experience as a strategic priority for increasing success rates. As part of this priority, the college carried out a self-study in collaboration with the John Gardner Foundations of

Excellence to identify the most important obstacles that stand in the way of students' completion of their degree (BCC Office of Institutional Research, "Freshman"). Among other factors, the findings that emerged from this self-study highlighted the role of "student dispositions" in creating barriers to academic success. The executive summary made the following statements about students' dispositions:

a. Students are not well prepared for college success (they lack basic skills, prior knowledge, and effective study skills)

b. Students are unfamiliar with college expectations, what is re-quired to be successful in college, and how to navigate academic affairs, policies and procedures of the college. Some may have negative views of education and do not trust teachers.

c. Students have multiple and competing roles (parent, worker, caregiver and financial responsibilities) (Freshman 1).

This study is certainly a step in the right direction, but while there is no doubt that Bronx Community College students often face enormous challenges in meeting academic demands, I am uncomfortable with the idea that they categorically "lack basic skills and prior knowledge." Tak-ing the time to understand the knowledge and skills students bring to our classrooms and how they differ from the skills and knowledge that are re-quired to succeed academically is a much more productive starting place for removing systemic barriers to academic success. Given the ethnolinguistic demographic of the student body, it seemed to me that creating a learning community based on the skills and knowledge that Spanish-speaking ESL students bring to our classrooms could have a strong impact on success indicators at the college level.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE, TRANSLANGUAGING, AND DOMINICAN STUDENTS

According to James Gee, "Discourses 'with a capital D'" involve speech acts but also values and cultural norms which determine whether or not an utterance is considered appropriate in a given sociolinguistic situation.

> Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identi-ties as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes . . . . A Discourse, then, is composed of ways of talking, listening (often,

> too, reading and writing), acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and using tools and objects in particular settings at specific times, so as to display a particular social identity. Discourses create social positions. (Gee 127-28)

Applying this notion of Discourse to the situation many Dominican students and basic writers in general face in trying to meet college demands points to the fact that their challenges are indeed related not only to second language acquisition, but also to the need to navigate divergent—and sometimes clashing—Discursive practices. The few studies available on the way literacy is conceived in Dominican secondary schools show that expectations around Academic Discourse differ radically in the United States.

> What counts as literacy, and which literacy practices are considered, varies situationally and relationally. Thus, a student who has gone to school in the Dominican Republic for many years has experienced a way of communicating 'in and around writing' (Hornberg 1990) that is profoundly different from what is expected in the United States. . . . It is not just that English differs from Spanish . . . the language and literacy practices in which students engage vary in the two societies and the two school systems. (Bartlett and Garcia 120)

For example, Leslie Bartlett and Ofelia Garcia have found that U.S. schools put more emphasis "on the development and expression of personal opinion" as opposed to a focus on "specific recounting of factual information" in the Dominican Republic. Also, in the United States, "teachers expect much more independent reading than students normally did in the previous schools" and to consult multiple sources, which students often did not have the opportunity to do in a developing country where access to educational resources is limited (121). Eliane Rubinstein-Avila's case study confirms that Dominican students might experience a sense of loss when asked to use writing to take a position on an issue and to defend it by using supporting evidence because these are writing tasks that they were not trained to do while developing academic literacy in their first language (584). Linda Watkins-Goffman and Victor Cummings' study of a Spanish Composition course at the *Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo* found that teaching practices were founded on the assumption that academic literacy consisted of a set of decontexualized skills such as "learning the use of accents, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, and syllabification" (338). According to Judy Kalman and Brian Street, this approach to reading and

writing "as neutral, objective skills that are learned through a progression of ordered exercises and then transferable to any situation" has dominated official discourses on literacy in Latin America "for decades, if not more" (1). (See also Hace de Yunen and Montenegro).

For Gee, it would be almost impossible for an immigrant student who attended a poorly funded school in the Dominican Republic to master Academic Discourse. For Gee, "Discourses are intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structure in society." Access to dominant Discourses, "which can lead to the acquisition of social goods (money, power, status)" (132), is only granted on the basis of birth into the right set of socio-economic circumstances. Dominant groups "apply rather constantly tests of the fluency of the Discourses in which their power is symbolized . . . to exclude non-natives." Deliberate attempts to learn a Discourse that a person has not been socialized into from birth can lead, at best, "to partial acquisition" which marginalizes (146). Gee envisions only three possible subject positions vis-à-vis Discourse: "insiders" (people who have had full access to the Discourse by virtue of birth), "outsiders" (people who are excluded completely from the Discourse), and "colonized" (people who occupy a marginal position because they can only claim a partial command of the Discourse) (155). In such a scheme, because recently immigrated Dominican students could never pass "the nativity test," they could never hope to harness the power that comes with the appropriation of Academic Discourse in English. According to Gee's logic, the same conclusion could be drawn about basic writers who are native English speakers whose dialects and "ways of thinking" diverge from Standard English and the ways of thinking that are considered acceptable within Academic Discourse.

I do not want to deny that, for many basic writers, taking ownership of Academic Discourse can be a daunting process, especially when this process entails mastering a second, third, or fourth language. Nevertheless, I find the "birth right paradigm" problematic as the only way for theorizing how dominant languages and/or dialects come to be owned (Parmegiani "Reconceptualizing" 360; Parmegiani and Rudwick "Isi-Zulu" 112). Like Lisa Delpit, I find Gee's assumption that dominant Discourses are simply beyond the reach of basic writers problematic because it can lead to a "dangerous kind of determinism as flagrant as that espoused by the geneticists: Instead of being locked into your place by your genes, you are now locked into a lower class status by your Discourse." Delpit could not have put it more cogently: "members of society need to access dominant Discourses in order to have economic power" (300). According to her, the way out of this "dangerous

kind of determinism" is to consider the countless examples of human beings who have been able to improve the socio-economic circumstances into which they were born, thanks to their successful acquisition of Academic Discourse.

A second point Delpit finds problematic about Gee's assumptions is the notion that, especially for women and minorities, the acquisition of a dominant Discourse is likely to require the adoption of "values that deny their primary identities." I do not doubt that non-mainstream students can face pressure to assimilate as they seek to appropriate Academic Discourse, and that this pressure can have a detrimental effect on the learning process. Nevertheless, as Delpit points out, human beings have the ability to straddle a multitude of Discourses as they create subject positions. Echoing warnings that have been given against "subtractive schooling" for Latin@ students (Valenzuela; Bartlett and Garcia), Delpit points out that the goal of Academic Literacy instruction should not be "to eliminate students' home languages, but rather to add other voices and Discourses to their repertoires." To this end, we need a translanguaging approach which places at the center of the learning process those "naturally occurring" language practices which are often hidden "behind the back of the teachers in class" (Cangarajah "Co-demeshing" 401).

Avoiding subtractive schooling through a translanguaging approach is very important for Dominican students, whose transnational lifestyle makes it particularly difficult to be put in a situation where they "feel they have to choose between Spanish and English, being Dominican and being American" (Utakis and Pita 122). Rather than presenting their home language, dialects, and ways of thinking as an impediment to their mastery of English and Academic Discourse, we need to welcome "the complex discursive practices of all bilinguals" (Garcia 53) and use them as a resource to allow students "to perform their learning – reading, writing, listening, discussing, taking notes, writing reports and essays, taking exams – by drawing on their entire linguistic repertoires." The idea is certainly not to restrict students' access to dominant languages, dialects, and Discourses by confining them to what they already know, but rather to increase this access by *building* on what they already know.

Finally, before applying Gee's notion of Discourse to writing instruction, it must be pointed out that students are not as passive with respect to dominant Discourses as his theory implies; on the contrary, students have the ability to challenge and reinvent dominant Discourses as agents, and use them for liberatory purposes. Civil rights movement leaders did this (Delpit 300), and so did prominent Latin@ academics such as Victor Villan-

ueva and Gloria Anzaldua. Again, there is a lot a translingual approach can do to facilitate this process of Discoursive appropriation (Parmegiani "The Power" 79). In Delpit's words, to unfold this process it is essential to validate students' home languages and Discourses which are so "vital to [students'] perception of self and sense of community connectedness." Also, if a clash between home and Academic Discourse does indeed occur, teachers must be able to "recognize this conflict" and diffuse it by making sure the Academic Discourse of the classroom "contains within it a place for the students' self" (301). There is a lot translanguaging can do to reduce "the risk of alienation at school by incorporating languaging and cultural references familiar to language minority students" (Garcia, Flores, and Woodley 52). And there is a lot personal storytelling can do to identify and diffuse Discoursive tensions by examining how ways of thinking and using language clash and how these clashes can be implicated in power relations.

CREATING A PLACE FOR "STUDENTS' SELF" WITHIN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE THROUGH STORYTELLING

The debate about whether it is appropriate to make room for the self within Academic Discourse is certainly not a new one within composition studies and basic writing theory, and it peaked with the public conversations between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae which took place in the nineties. Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk revisited this debate in 2006 arguing that the boundaries between academic and expressive writing are not clear cut. Far from being mutually exclusive, they actually both play a crucial role in the production of *meaningful* Academic Discourse. According to Mlynarczyk, "it doesn't seem feasible" for basic writers and ESL students to join a Discoursive community which mystifies them "without using the primary resource they bring with them to college–their own expressive language, language that is close to the self . . . . Students need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse and not just a pale imitation of their professor's language" (13).

Amy Robillard's call for the need to include students' personal narratives in the composition classroom is particularly relevant for this article. Responding to composition scholars who have criticized the use of expressive writing for turning attention away from pressing issues of race, class, and gender, she argues that in a basic writing classroom, creating "a place for the students' self" through their personal narratives is quintessentially *political*. According to Robillard, in a classroom context which is basically "a middle

class enterprise" (Bloom) and where teachers "have been trained to mar-ginalize the kinds of narrative and descriptive writing tasks which resonate with the working class experience and to valorize the abstract, analytical writing tasks at which the professional /managerial class students excel" (Peckham 273), giving non-mainstream students the opportunity to bring their life experiences into Academic Discourse creates "class consciousness" by allowing students to understand "why things happen" as they "create their own meanings from their own histories." Similarly, Anne-Marie Hall and Christopher Minnix argue that, far from being politically neutral, "the literacy narratives of our students can challenge power and grant access to Academic Discourse" (64).

Shifting the focus from politics to pedagogy, I would like to argue that creating "a place for the student's self" within Academic Discourse is an imperative for promoting success rates among basic writers and ESL students. First of all, inviting students to bring their life experience into a prestigious Discourse whose mastery is correlated with socio-economic em-powerment is a way to validate who they are and the knowledge they bring to the classroom. Research points to the fact that this is crucial to promote success among students who tend to be marginalized by Academic Discourse because of their racial, social, and/or linguistic background. For Delpit, it is precisely a teacher's belief in his or her students that can make it possible for non-mainstream students to "transcend the circumstances into which they were born" (298) and achieve what for Gee is almost impossible. But in order to do so, teachers "must saturate the dominant Discourse with new meanings, must wrest from it a place for the glorification of their students" (Delpit 298). Peter Rondinone's and Mike Rose's literacy narratives are cases in point which are confirmed by well-known studies on the relationship between teachers' attitudes towards students' home languages, dialects, literacies, and learning outcomes (Au; Gregory and Williams).

A good starting point for saturating the dominant Discourse with spaces that welcome Dominican students' selves in all their cultural complex-ity is Ellen Cushman, Barbier Stuart, Catherine Mazak, and Robert Petrone's call to "draw on students' experiences and backgrounds as resources in order to develop meaningful and congruent pedagogical practices that will foster academic achievement" (205). Geneva Gay argues that in order to bridge the gap between home and school language and literacy practices, "culturally responsive teaching" must use the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropri-ate and effective for them" (29). (See also Morrel; Perez.)

Within the context of a "culturally responsive" pedagogy, inviting students' personal narratives into Academic Discourse is not only a way to validate who they are, but also an ethnographic tool for instructors to understand the "cultural knowledge" and "prior experiences" upon which learning must be built. This sort of knowledge is crucial for promoting the acquisition of Academic Discourse among Latin@ students.

According to Utakis and Pita, "writing teachers have a special responsibility to understand the Dominican experience" to promote academic success in learning institutions that serve large Dominican populations (120); similarly, Beatrice Mendez Newman argues that "Hispanic students' cultural and ethnolinguistic identities should feature prominently in the construction of the writing classroom, *regardless of the instructor's ethnicity*" (my emphasis, 19). I will add that ethno-linguistic differences between the instructor and the students open up precious opportunities for creating ethnographic partnerships that reduce power/knowledge differentials by making the learning process bidirectional. Not only do students learn from their teachers, but teachers learn from their students too.

Forming an ethnographic partnership with my students based on bidirectional learning was a precondition for achieving the pedagogical outcomes I envisioned for the learning community. Fulfilling my aspiration to "understand students' worldviews, behaviors, and ethics" (Mendez Newman 17) and to "saturate the Dominant Discourse with new meanings" (Delpit), could not have possibly happened without learning from my students, who obviously know more about their world views, languages, literacies, and Discourses than I do.

INVITING THE MOTHER TONGUE INTO A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Learning communities, as defined by David Hanson and Jacob Heller, can be described as "small groups of students who take clusters of courses together with both the faculty and the students teaching and learning together." Clusters share a common theme and a range of integrated activities "to provide greater coherence, develop a deeper understanding . . . and encourage student-student, student-faculty and faculty-faculty interactions" (1). There is plenty of evidence that learning communities have a positive impact on students' success rates, especially among basic writers; studies have shown that "students' socio-economic status had less effect on their achievement gains in schools with collaborative teacher communities"

(McLaughlin and Talbert 9).

Learning communities have been offered at Bronx Community College under different configurations for several years, but until Fall 2013 there were no clusters linking Spanish classes for native speakers to ESL courses. I felt this type of cluster could potentially improve success rates dramatically among Spanish speaking ESL students (Parmegiani and Utakis). First of all, study after study has demonstrated that support for students' home languages leads to higher educational achievement in a second language (August and Shanahan; Genesee; Lindholm-Leary). Secondly, as we have seen, reports compiled by non-governmental organizations suggest that many students who arrive at Bronx Community College from the Dominican Republic are basic writers in their first language, and hence they are in great need of Spanish Academic literacy development. We have also seen that there is a wide gap between the rhetorical expectations that shape Academic Discourse in U.S. colleges and in the schools students attended in their countries of origin. Hence, as Bartlett and Garcia recommend, I felt it was important to give Spanish-speaking students an opportunity "to develop academic literacy practices in Spanish that are similar to the academic literacy practices is U.S. schools" (22). Last but not least, given the central role language plays in identity construction, it was clear to me that creating a nurturing pedagogical space to develop ESL students' mother tongue would be a powerful way to create a space for students' self within Academic Discourse.

The learning community cluster in Fall 2013 comprised an advanced ESL class that I taught (ESL 03), a Spanish class for native Speakers (SPN 122) taught by Dr. Alicia Bralove-Ramirez of the Department of Modern Languages, and a First-Year Seminar (FYS), an extended college orientation course for freshmen students, which I also taught. In addition to teaching ESL 03 and FYS, I sat in SPN 122 as a participant observer and language learner.

ESL 03 is the third course in the remedial sequence for non-native English speakers, and while its focus is preparing students for academic writing, all language skills are developed. If students pass the exit examination, which consists of an essay question they have to develop by making connections between their personal experience and a book they read in the course, they have two more levels of remedial instruction: English 09 and English 02. Some ESL 03 students are able to skip one of the subsequent levels if they perform exceptionally well in ESL 03 or ENG 09.

FYS courses were first introduced at BCC in Spring 2012 to improve success indicators (Zeindenberg, Jenkins, and Calcagno). Because this initiative turned out to be successful (Parmegiani "Inviting"), and because

courses that "orient students to U.S. school communities" are particularly helpful for ESL students (Bartlett and Garcia 9), I decided to include it in the learning community cluster.

FORMING AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PARTNERSHIP

As I designed the learning community as a "basic writing space" (Lamos 5-6) for Spanish speaking students, it was clear to me that in addition to inviting the mother tongue, I had to form an ethnographic partnership with my students in order to achieve the pedagogical outcomes I envisioned. As we have seen, "aspiring to understand students' worldviews, behaviors, and ethics" (Mendez Newman 17) is crucial for helping basic writers take ownership of Academic Discourse. There was no way this aspiration could have been fulfilled without creating a bidirectional learning process which put my students in the position of experts on their own Discursive practices.

It was also clear to me that my participation in the Spanish composition course as a language learner would bring more depth to the ethnographic partnership I was seeking to establish. First of all, putting myself in my students' shoes by trying to engage with Academic Discourse in a language that I am not fully proficient in provided me with precious insights into the challenges students face in their struggle to master Academic Discourse in English. In addition, I felt that putting myself in the role of a language learner vis-à-vis my students, whose command of Spanish was infinitely stronger than mine, would amplify the bidirectionality of the learning process. Also, showing an interest in students' first language was a way to show interest in who they are and their cultural heritage, which again, is a factor that was found to be crucial for including basic writers into Academic Discourse. Finally, my participation in the Spanish course and my frequent meetings with the Spanish instructor allowed for a greater level of curricular integration that would not have been possible had I not watched the learning process unfold in the Spanish class right in front of my eyes.

THE ROLE OF LITERACY NARRATIVES

A process of personal storytelling was essential for the ethnographic partnership. Given my need to learn as much as possible about the linguistic resources of my students, a lot of this process consisted of literacy narratives, or a form of storytelling "that foregrounds issues of language acquisition and literacy" (Eldred and Mortensen 513). Literacy narratives can take the shape of formal, published autobiographies, but they can also emerge

through "ordinary people's conversations about their daily lives. . . and in the classroom talk and writing of the students" (Soliday 512). Literacy narratives constitute an ideal point of entry into Academic Discourse for ESL students and basic writers in general for several reasons. In Hall and Minnix's words, they can constitute a "wedge to create a space for our students in the world of academic literacies" (60). They create a place for the students' self by recognizing the value of their languages, literacies, and life experiences within the dominant Discourse. They blur the boundaries between what is personal and what is academic by allowing students to join critical conversations about language, identity, structural power relations and agency while examining their life experience in conjunction with other texts. They provide teachers and students with opportunities to examine the different Discursive conventions that students must be able to navigate as they move across different sociolinguistic domains. Not only can this examination help students master aspects of Academic Discourse they find baffling, but it can also help them build the sort of "rhetorical dexterity" (Carter) they need in order to feel like it is possible to acquire the dominant Discourse without having to renounce fundamental aspects of their identities.

The storytelling process that led to these narratives consisted mainly of informal conversations about how students were expected to read and write in their countries of origin (in most cases, the Dominican Republic), and how they are expected to read and write at Bronx Community College. In the ESL course, these conversations were prompted by questions I posed to the class based on what I had learned from the literature and from the stories my previous students had shared with me. For example, I asked questions such as "What happened the first time you had to write an essay in the U.S?" "Are there things your professors expect you to do here that your teachers in your home country would not agree with?" "Besides having to use a second language, are there other challenges you face when you have to write an essay for your professors at BCC?" Students answered these questions in groups and through informal writing assignments in which personal narratives were often used to support and challenge different positions. In the FYS course, students delved deeper into this storytelling process with the help of two peer-mentors who guided them through a series of reading, writing, and speaking activities. As part of these activities, students had to use their own literacy narratives to validate, challenge, or problematize some claims made by Bartlett and Garcia about how Academic Discourse is taught in the Dominican Republic. These activities culminated in a metacognitive journal assignment in which students had to write a multi-paragraph reflection on

whether they experienced different expectations around Academic Discourse as they moved from the secondary schools they attended in their country of origin to Bronx Community College. Students had the opportunity to draw on this journal assignment for their final FYS project, which was a letter addressed to a future FYS student in which graduating FYS students discussed the impact this seminar had on their college experience. The following literacy narrative excerpts were taken from the writing assignments described above.

STUDENTS' VOICES: NAVIGATING DIVERGENT ACADEMIC DISCOURSES THROUGH LITERACY NARRATIVES

The literacy narratives of my students confirm what the literature suggests: regardless of the language of instruction, the ways of using language that are considered appropriate for Academic Discourse in students' countries of origin differ significantly from what is expected of them in U.S. colleges. First of all, thesis driven expository essays, which are arguably the cornerstone of college level Academic Discourse in the U.S., did not feature prominently in students' development of academic literacy in their mother tongue. In the stories they shared, several students recalled a sense of total loss when they were asked to write an essay for their English placement test, and the reasons for this went beyond the fact that the essay in question had to be written in a language students were not proficient in.

"In the Dominican Republic we didn't do essays"
One student illustrated the idea that students' difficulty with academic writing in English go beyond second language acquisition with the following story.

> When I first came to the States, I didn't know English. The first time I came to BCC they told me that I had to do an essay. I didn't even know what an essay was. Fortunately, the teacher knew Spanish and told me that an essay is an "ensayo," but I told her that I didn't even know how to do an "ensayo."

In a similar narrative, another student made the point that for some Spanish speaking ESL students, understanding what is expected from them when they are told to "write an essay" entails much more than translating one word from English to Spanish:

> In the United States, the professors usually give essays every week. In the Dominican Republic they don't do that. This reminds me of my first day of class. The professor gave us an essay about discrimination. I was confused because I didn't know what is an essay. I asked to my teacher, and she told me that an essay is the same as what Spanish people call "ensayo." However, I still didn't know how to write an essay because in the Dominican Republic teachers don't use essays.

"I copied and pasted the information I found"

The idea that "teachers don't use essays" in the Dominican Republic, of course, needs to be qualified. While many students have shared stories about how much more they are expected to write in the U.S., several of them mentioned that occasionally, they did have writing assignments in the Dominican Republic, but they were of a totally different nature: writing was used primarily as an assessment tool to check students' ability to repeat information they were expected to study, rather than as a way to use information critically to construct an argument. The following narrative illustrates this point:

> In the Dominican Republic we didn't do essays, but we did something similar with a different organization. When teachers gave us a topic, in the introduction we had to explain what we were going to do and what the writing was about. To write the body, we had to find all the information we needed and then make a summary. We could use google search, copy, and paste. In the conclusion, we described everything we did.

It is hardly surprising that the same student, like many others, was completely baffled when she was accused of plagiarism at Bronx Community College after she did what she had been taught to do to produce Academic Discourse in high school.

> My first essay was a disaster. I didn't know what an essay is, so I copied and pasted the information I found exactly like it was on the internet. When the teacher saw what I did, she gave me a zero. At that moment, I tried to explain to her that I didn't know how to do an essay. Then she gave the opportunity to do it again. She explained to me how to do it, and told me that to copy information is called plagiarism, and that it is penalized.

Fortunately, the teacher in question understood where the student was coming from and gave her the opportunity to redo the assignment after going over Discursive conventions that clashed with what the student had learned while developing academic literacy in her mother tongue. Other students explained that rhetorical elements that are considered fundamental for a college essay in the U.S. were simply not covered in the Spanish classes they took in high school in the Dominican Republic. Several mentioned that they did not have to use a "thesis statement," and that expressing a personal opinion about a topic at the beginning of an essay was actually frowned upon. A student explained that:

> If I was to give an essay like the ones my professors want at the BCC to one of my teachers in the Dominican Republic, they would be very surprised about my work, give me a bad grade and tell me that they don't care about what I think.

Another student made a similar point by stating that "we didn't have to show our critical thinking when we did research. We just had to put information like we found it." And again, his narrative, like many others, returns to a Discursive clash around the issue of plagiarism. "Sometimes we took little pieces from the sources, and it was not a big problem, like if we did that at BCC."

Students' literacy narratives confirmed that the teaching of Academic Discourse in the Spanish classes students took in high school approached literacy as a set of "neutral, objective skills that are learned through a progression of ordered exercises and then transferable to any situation" (Kalman and Street 1). Several students mentioned this approach in their explanation of why they felt so lost the first time they were asked to write an essay in the United States: "They didn't teach us to write an essay because teachers are only focused on grammar, on explaining how to write a correct sentence, or the parts of a sentence. They taught a lot of punctuation and when we need to put an accent on a word."

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Ethnographic Partnerships Are a Gateway to Translanguaging

Keeping in mind what students had shared in their literacy narratives as part of the ethnographic partnership was extremely helpful in refining the translingual pedagogical strategies we had conceived at the beginning of the semester based on the evidence that Dominican students' struggle

with college-level English writing was related not only to second language acquisition issues, but also to divergent literacy practices (Bartlett and Garcia; Parmegiani and Utakis; Rubinstein-Avila). In other words, the rhetorical expectations students were expected to meet while engaging with Academic Discourse in Dominican secondary schools often clash with what U.S. college professors expect. Students' literacy narratives confirmed this, making the Spanish instructor and I more confident that we were on the right track in using our collaboration to give students the opportunity to "develop academic literacy practices in Spanish that are similar to academic literacy practices in U.S. schools" (Bartlett and Garcia 22). Initially, we had some concerns about privileging American English ways of writing (Spack; Zamel), but as the ethnographic partnership progressed, we found that students do not need "to be held hostage by language and culture," but they can be encouraged to mediate divergent literacy practices "and conflicting rhetorical structures to their advantage" (Canagarajah "Critical" 68). We also found that literacy narratives played a crucial role in helping students identify and resolve those "conflicting rhetorical structures" they encounter along their life trajectories. Students' personal reflections on how they were expected to write in the Dominican Republic, and how they are expected to write at Bronx Community College not only made them more alert to conflicting "rhetorical structures," but it also helped them develop a more positive self-perception as learners and writers. The stories they shared made it easier for them to see that the difficulties they were facing with English academic writing were not due to a personal cognitive deficit, but to the need to add to their Discursive repertoire new rhetorical skills that the Spanish instructor and I were presenting as being well within their reach.

Students Need to Practice Close Reading

Literacy narratives made it clear that because in Dominican schools reading and writing revolves largely around repeating information uncritically, in the learning community—both in the Spanish and the ESL class—they had to be provided with plenty of opportunities to engage in close reading exercises, to pay attention to how language constructs meaning, and to how the reading of a text lends itself to a wide range of interpretations. Students were always encouraged to come up with their own interpretation by making connections with their personal experience and by supporting their points with textual evidence, which was not something they had been asked to do in their high school Spanish class. Fundamental rhetorical elements of

the "typical U.S. college essay," such as the use of a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph to articulate a position, using research to support that position, and attributing sources, were not taken for granted but demystified—in both the Spanish and the ESL course—through a continuous storytelling process which examined divergent literacy practices in the context of students' lives. This storytelling process was part and parcel of an Academic Discourse that transcended language boundaries. It expanded "students' sense of personal agency" as they discovered not only that "their own stories are narratable, but also that through their stories they can engage in a broader critical dialogue with each other and with well-known texts" (Soliday 512) within a dominant Discourse.

The Mother Tongue Is a Powerful Learning Tool in the ESL Classroom

While the literacy narratives were produced mainly in the ESL and FYS courses, which were both taught in English by an instructor with a limited command of Spanish, students' mother tongue played a central role in the creation of a translingual Academic Discourse in these two classes. As recommended by Elbow (1999), I found it pedagogically productive to invite the mother tongue into the composition process. Rather than reprimanding students for "speaking Spanish" or even "thinking in Spanish," as some colleagues have been known to do, students were encouraged to speak English as much as possible, but they were also encouraged to resort to their mother tongue if that was the only way they could get their ideas across. In the words of a teacher quoted by Bartlett and Garcia, "If you don't know a word in English, write it in Spanish. You can always get the English word later" (Bartlett and Garcia 143). Giving students the opportunity to use Spanish to fill in lexical gaps was crucial for allowing a greater level of complexity in students' engagement with Academic Discourse while creating opportunities to build vocabulary in their second language.

The Language Teacher Becomes a Language Learner

Translanguaging in the learning community was enhanced considerably by the bidirectionality of the learning process that resulted from my participation—with my limited Spanish proficiency—in the Academic Discourse students created in their mother tongue in the Spanish course. In order to be able to participate, I had to turn to my students as experts in order to fill *my* lexical gaps. In addition, my lack of familiarity with cultural references

and rhetorical conventions made me experience a sense of Discursive loss that was quite healthy for anyone who, as a second language instructor, is in a position of Discursive power with respect to his/her students. This sense of loss allowed me to empathize with my students in ways that I could not have imagined and to develop a much greater appreciation for their intellectual and linguistic sophistication. The moments of silence I experienced in my ESL class when I asked what, to me, were very simple questions expressed in very simple English were met with a lot more compassion on my part, after I experienced the embarrassment of being silenced by the fear of having to say something in Spanish in front of the rest of class.

My sense of loss in the Spanish class provided me with opportunities to build bridges across Discourses and languages with my students by using our mutual expertise, as I checked with them about my comprehension (or lack thereof) of what had happened in the Spanish class. These translingual check-ins were often the starting point of conversations about mechanical aspects Academic Discourse that students are expected to produce in Standard American English. For example, my asking about the meaning of words I didn't understand in their mother tongue created opportunities for students to increase their vocabulary in their second language by learning the English translation of those words. This process also helped us identify cognates and false cognates and go over idiomatic expressions. In addition, the check-ins provided occasions for approaching grammar contrastively. For example, after I inquired about the conjugation of a certain verb in a certain tense, I was able to examine with my students morphological and syntactic features of the English language using their mother tongue as a frame of reference. This examination allowed me to point out common pitfalls for Spanish speakers, but also provided easy mnemonics anchored in their mother tongue for helping them find ways to remember to use auxiliary verbs and inflections that often get lost as students translanguage.

Lastly, discussing not only my sense of loss with my students, but also the sense of empowerment I felt as my budding ability to engage with Academic Discourse in Spanish got stronger, allowed me to put my own unfolding literacy narrative on the table. Exposing both my vulnerability and my capability as a language learner was crucial for building trust and creating a safe space where students were comfortable enough to bring their own struggle with language and literacy into our Academic Discourse.

IMPACT ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Not surprisingly, the translingual pedagogical alliance discussed above had a positive impact on student's success indicators. In Fall 2013, the average GPA of the ten students enrolled in the learning community was almost two points higher than the average GPA of all the ESL students who had started BCC in Fall 2013 (Parmegiani "Inviting"). By the end of the term, all the students enrolled in the learning community had passed the exit exam for their ESL level and the Spanish course. Comparative GPAs are not yet available for Spring 2014, but all learning community students passed the subsequent ESL level, and three of them even passed the CUNY Assessment Writing Test (CATW), which allowed them to exit remediation one semester earlier. The Spring Fall retention rate for learning community students was 100%, while it was only 65% for all the first year students who had entered BCC in Fall 2013.

Given the small number of students in the learning community, and given that so many variables come into play in determining students' academic performance, these quantitative findings cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the differentials in average GPAs and retention rates are very encouraging. For this reason, this learning community program is continuing and its impact is being monitored through a longitudinal quantitative study of success indicators and a series of focus group interviews. While a statistically sound argument for implementing this large model on a large scale cannot yet be made, these findings suggest that creating learning community clusters where ESL writing courses are linked to composition courses in students' mother tongues could potentially increase success indicators significantly in colleges characterized by a strong presence of ESL students who share the same first language.

CONCLUSION

This article has told the story of my attempt to fulfill my responsibility as a basic writing instructor to make sure my "students' cultural linguistic identities figure prominently in the writing classroom community" (Mendez Newman) in order to increase their chances of academic success. Given the ethnolinguistic profiles of many Bronx Community College students and current U.S. demographic trends, part of my discussion has focused on Spanish speaking ESL students, especially recent immigrants from the Dominican Republic, but the need to "create a place for students' self" within Academic Discourse is certainly not restricted to this student population.

As an ESL instructor and language and literacy scholar, I felt compelled to take my students' first language as the starting point for creating this space and saturating Academic Discourse with new meanings. The link between Spanish and English in the learning community provided this space and these meanings.

The pedagogical need to "aspire to understand students' worldviews, behavior and ethics" (Mendez Newman) made it clear to me that learning had to be bidirectional, and that my efforts to engage in Academic Discourse using my students' mother tongue would go very far in giving me access to their Discursive universe through the ethnographic partnership I sought to establish. Literacy narratives and my participation in the Spanish course as a language learner, prompted by my genuine interest in my students' translingual trajectories, allowed me to design pedagogical strategies which capitalized on students' linguistic resources. This capitalization had a positive impact on student's success indicators. Given the small scale of the study, a statistically sound argument for implementing this model on a large scale cannot yet be made; nevertheless, these findings suggest that creating learning community clusters where ESL writing courses are linked to composition courses in students' mother tongues could potentially increase success indicators significantly in colleges characterized by a strong presence of ESL students who share the same first language.

Fortunately, it is not that difficult to pilot such clusters, especially in colleges that have learning community programs in place. Most majors have a foreign language requirement, and often departments of modern languages offer courses in ESL students' mother tongue. Creating a translingual pedagogical alliance similar to the one described in this article has minimal cost for the college (three hours of reassigned-time per instructor, in the case of Bronx Community College), but it can make a big difference in terms of student retention and graduation rates. If colleges do not have a learning community program in place, it is still possible to create this type of link by applying for a grant that would pay for the reassigned time the instructors need in order to constantly design and refine translingual pedagogical strategies tailored to their students' needs.

Bidirectional learning, ethnographic partnerships, and literacy narratives can also be implemented in teaching contexts where students' languages vary, or where the mother tongue in question is not taught at the college, or even where administration will not commit to starting this kind of program. When I teach stand-alone classes attended by linguistically diverse students, I still approach the learning process from the assumption

that in order to be an effective writing instructor, I need to learn as much as possible from my students about their language and literacy practices. Far from being an impediment for literacy narratives, linguistic diversity within a classroom makes storytelling about language and literacy all the more compelling, as students who grew up in different continents, speaking different languages, practicing different religions, find commonalities in their struggle to mediate conflicting rhetorical structures while wresting a place for themselves in Academic Discourse.

And while it might not be possible to spend much formal instructional time translanguaging in a linguistically diverse class as in a learning community where students share the same mother tongue, writing instructors can still capitalize on students' translingual repertoires. It would be ideal if the instructor has some knowledge of their students' mother tongue in order to guide the translanguaging process and clarify grammatical, lexical and rhetorical issues by using students' first language as a frame of reference. As a multilingual ESL speaker myself, I am fortunate enough to be able to do this—different degrees—even in a class where Spanish is not the only mother tongue spoken by the students. Monolingual English speaking instructors may also use their students' first language as a resource. Familiarizing themselves with their students' mother tongues does not necessarily mean achieving high levels of proficiency. Being able to say a few words in the languages that are so important for students' identities goes very far in creating that "place for students' 'self'" that is so important for the successful acquisition of Academic Discourse. Even a basic understanding of the fundamental grammatical structures of those languages can be extremely helpful in making sense of students' error patterns and in finding ways to address them.

Whether or not writing instructors working with ESL populations are willing to engage with translanguaging themselves, it is very important that they do not feel threatened by the "naturally occurring" linguistic practices of multilingual basic writers (Canagarajah 410), but that instead, they find ways use them as a resource. For example, they could encourage students to use bilingual dictionaries, or to consult with their same language-speaking peers to reflect on how they would address relevant linguistic and rhetorical issues in their mother tongue, and by doing so, they could create occasions for telling stories about language and literacy.

Note

1. In keeping with Gee's distinction between "discourse with a small d" and "Discourse "with a capital D" (127-28), I will upper case the word "Discourse" throughout the paper. I discuss this distinction in this article's section entitled, "Academic Discourse, Translanguaging, and Dominican Students."

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