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SARINA CHUGANI MOLINA
University of San Diego
MARK MANASSE
San Diego Miramar College

Mentor Texts Squared: Helping Students Explore Voice Through Readings That Promote Critical Consciousness

Much research has been conducted documenting the reading and writing challenges students in precollege courses face (Crosby, 2007; Masterson, 2007). Some colleges label these courses "developmental," "remedial," or "basic skills" courses. These "developmental" students comprise both US-born and immigrant pupils from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds (Roberge, Siegal, & Harklau, 2009) and are often institutionally marginalized (Blumenthal, 2002), leaving them often underprepared when matriculating into credit-bearing college-level courses (Roberge, 2009). In this article, we report on a case study where a community college ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) instructor and three faculty members at a local university worked collaboratively on developing resources to support his struggling readers through leveled, culturally responsive texts. We share a unique approach to mentor texts, employing them both as exemplars for developing reading and writing skills, and also as a means to support avenues for finding "voice."

Introduction

Precollege, or students often labeled as "basic skills," in California community colleges represent students from a variety of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and they often struggle in finding success in their community college course work (Blumenthal, 2002; Cox, 2009; Rose, 2012). This can be a result of community college instructors' misunderstanding the depth of their students' academic abilities, and/or the students misunderstanding what is expected of them in a collegiate setting (Cox, 2009). Addition-

ally, the varied backgrounds of these precollege students often render them powerless, not knowing how to navigate or "bridge" the courses in the community college system. We find that even in the initial stages of the community college experience, introducing students to mentor texts that not only model the English skills they wish to hone, but also speak to their experiences, may be an important step to support them in crafting their own voices as they navigate the academic system.

Rose (2005, 2012) believes that when one becomes cognizant of the power of employing voice, and is able to speak for oneself, the potential for success in academia and society is much more likely. Unfortunately, finding voice in a culture and language that they may still be mastering can be challenging for many ESOL students. Consequently, basic skills instructors appear to not only "need to help students establish their own voices, but to coach those voices to be heard *clearly* [emphasis added] in the larger society" (Delpit, 1988, p. 296). In our case, this would mean providing explicit instruction on oral and written communication, but at the same time, helping them share their voices so that their intended meanings can be heard and understood.

In this vein, we piloted a process we called Mentor Text Squared (Mentor Text^2). We used leveled readings from blogs posted by Mike Rose, a renowned proponent of student equity and student voice, where the readings served as mentorship on two levels. On one level, the readings provided access to an authentic text in English that could help these ESL students improve their reading and writing abilities. On another level, these mentor texts also provided examples of agency and voice we hoped could in turn support student self-efficacy. To provide students with readings that they can connect to through the process of bridging has been long supported by the literature on English language teaching in the content areas. Bridging includes both the connections to previous learning but also to background experiences. This twofold purpose of bridging also supports the implementation of the mentor texts**,** which served both in the capacity of providing models of writing students can approximate, while at the same time allowing students to find critical connections with the readings and their own personal journeys as community college students.

In this article, we report on a case study conducted by a team of researchers from a university in Southern California and an ESOL instructor at a community college. The goal was to improve the social, cultural, and educational relevance of the materials presented to these students (Kumaravadivelu, 2008) via leveled, culturally responsive texts integrating authentic dialogues in an attempt to support students in exploring their voices as second language students in the commu-

nity college system. Recognizing the complexity of such an endeavor, we do not propose a solution to long-standing systemic issues in the community college sector, but we share some mediation tools used within one classroom to guide instruction so as to support students to be able to critically reflect on their own place within the community college sector and explore ways in which to share their voices in the English language.

Literature Review

In the following section, we first provide a contextual understanding of the ESOL classroom within the community college system and some of the challenges experienced by ESOL students within this system. Then, we share some approaches in which ESOL instructors can support these students in improving their academic skills through the use of authentic readings that shed light on their particular experiences and challenges in hopes that they can identify with the readings and express their own voices as they navigate through these challenges.

The "Nontraditional" Student Within the Community College System

Every year in California, 70-80% of first-time college students arrive at community colleges, the most common choice for higher education for low-income students, often lacking in the foundational skills in reading, writing, math, language, learning, and study skills necessary to succeed in college-level work (Illowsky, 2008; Marcott, Bailey, Borkoski, & Kienzl, 2005; Melguizo, Hagedorn, & Cypers, 2008; Rose, 2012). These institutions serve these "nontraditional" students who may be adults returning to school with families, jobs, and/or children to improve their work prospects or simply to further their learning, who may have not received a strong academic grounding in their previous educational experiences, and/or could be considered English learners (including immigrants, those raised in this country, and international students). These students are classified as "basic skills" students and are often institutionally marginalized, underserved, or hampered by a lack of collegiate know-how to navigate their community college education (Blumenthal, 2002; Cox, 2009; Rose, 2012).

The Classroom Context: Experiences of Cognitive Dissonance

The structural barriers often make it challenging for students to matriculate successfully and in a reasonable amount of time to credit-bearing courses, only to feel underprepared to meet the expectations within these courses. They also often experience a sense of fear in approaching their instructors to understand course expectations (Cox, 2009). In addition, the readings in these classes do not often speak

to the experiences and histories of the students, and the writing conventions are in many cases vastly different from the cultural ways of participating in discourse and writing in the students' first languages. Lea & Street (1998) further note the conflicting ways in which student writing is viewed that may not take into account issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority often inherent in diverse student writing practices.

Delpit (1988) outlines the five aspects of the "culture of power" inherent in the classroom that has relevance to our discussion on ESOL students here.

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."
3. The rules of that culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 282)

In the ESOL classroom, there are voices that are given power in terms of curriculum development and materials selection. For ESOL students, learning how to participate in classroom discourse, how to negotiate meaning, how to approach the instructor or the institution with questions without fear, among other such practices students learn how to navigate as members within the "the culture of power," are, we argue, an important part of the ESOL curriculum in addition to the traditional four skills. We find that these factors, among others (e.g., political, social, economic), contribute to the sense of dissonance and marginalization often experienced by many ESOL students.

To address this sense of dissonance experienced by many ESOL students from culturally and linguistic diverse backgrounds, researchers in the K-12 area have proposed the importance of engaging in culturally relevant pedagogical practice through the use of culturally responsive texts (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005). For the purpose of this article, however, we find that a broader term, *social relevance,* as defined by Kumaravadivelu (2008), captures the essence of what we are trying to understand through our first question. He defines social relevance as

> the need for teachers to be sensitive to the societal, political, economic, and educational environment in which L2 education takes place. … L2 education is not a discrete activity; it is deeply embedded in the larger social context that has a profound effect on it. The social context shapes various learning and teaching issues such as (a) the motivation for L2 learning, (b) the goal of L2 learning, (c) the functions L2 is expected to perform at home and in the community, (d) the availability of input to the learner, (e) the variation in the input, (f) and the norms of proficiency acceptable to that particular speech community. It is impossible to insulate classroom life from the dynamics of social institutions. (p. 207)

For adult ESOL students in the community college system, understanding the reasons students are attending English classes and their experiences, needs, and goals beyond the classroom appear to be central to the idea of social relevance.

In terms of raising cultural consciousness, he found that the traditional view of cultural consciousness or cultural relevance is no longer sufficient for the ESOL classroom. Instead, he believes that what is now required is a "global cultural consciousness." He goes on to say,

> For that purpose, instead of privileging the teacher as the sole cultural informant, we need to treat the learner as a cultural informant as well. By treating learners as cultural informants, we can encourage them to engage in a process of participation that puts a premium on their power/knowledge. We can do so by identifying the cultural knowledge learners bring to the classroom and by using it to help them share their own individual perspectives with the teacher as well as other learners whose lives, and hence perspectives, differ from theirs. Such a multicultural approach can also dispel stereotypes that create and sustain cross-cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications. (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, pp. 207-208)

The diversity present within the ESOL classroom lends itself to the opportunities for students to share their own cultural knowledge and experiences, but also to understand those of others in their classroom through a purposefully designed curriculum that encourages such interactions.

Bridging the Gap: Pedagogical Practices to Support the Development of Student Voice

To integrate these important elements into the ESOL classroom, it appears to be important for the teacher to invite the students to enter the dialogue around notions of culture, language, and power, while at the same time support them in developing the academic skills necessary to successfully navigate their own paths through their exploration of voice within the community college system. In this section, we highlight some approaches that have been supported by the literature that could support us in meeting these goals for our ESOL students.

Mentor Texts and Leveled Texts. There is much support in the literature for the use of mentor texts and leveled texts to provide models of writing and provide access to complex text (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007; Fletcher, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Ray, 2006) and the use of critical readings to deepen student understanding of the contextual factors that influence their place in society and support the development of their voices as they explore their own place and possibly enact change though challenging the status quo (Bartolome, 1994; Crookes, 2014; Freire, 2000; Nieto, 2010; Salazar, 2013; Yoder, 2001).

Reading Apprenticeship. In the K-12 arena, the idea around the importance of explicit instruction and explicit scaffolding of thinking processes by modeling teacher thinking and strategies has been acknowledged as an important way to support student cognitive development. Because this study took place in an adult ESOL reading class, we looked at ways in which the teacher could guide the students in the process of accessing and reading academic texts. We employed the use of reading apprenticeship (RA), a metacognitive tool to support students in accessing these texts. This metacognitive training has been recognized by the California Community College Success Network (3CSN) to help students read across the curriculum and provide faculty members—who may very well be experts in their fields, but not reading experts, the tools necessary to help their students to read academic texts. This approach helps train students on how to change perspectives when they read, appropriately annotate texts, and to verbalize their metacognition in a social setting (Lesmeister, 2010). RA looks at the teaching of reading from multiple dimensions: personal, social, cognitive, and knowledge building, as well as the metacognition connected to each of these dimensions (Schoenbach, Greenleef, & Murphy, 2012).

Reading Circles. In addition to the use of mentor and leveled texts on readings focused on raising critical consciousness and the use of RAs to explicitly support students in accessing and understanding academic texts, reading circles (RCs), also known as literature circles

(Daniels, 1994) with some modifications, were employed to engage students through the provision of roles and opportunities to deepen their understanding of the text through embedded academic discussions. The intention behind RCs is to provide students opportunities to support each other in accessing the text through their various roles. These rotating roles might include "summarizer," responsible for summarizing the main ideas, "quote finder," responsible for highlighting and sharing important quotes, "questioner/discussion leader," responsible for leading the discussions through thoughtfully selected questions, and "illustrator," responsible for exemplifying the main ideas through imagery. RCs are supported by sociocultural theory, which has its roots in the work of Vygotsky (1978), who asserts that all learning happens through social interaction, where social interaction supports the movement of learning from the social realm or the interpsychological dimension, where more capable peers serving as experts can scaffold the learning process through the co-construction of meaning within the zone of proximal cevelopment, to the "intrapsychological category" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 128). Slavin (2013) found that cooperative learning supports the development of not only analytical skills, but also may contribute to enhancing motivation and interpersonal relationships among the students. RCs also provide opportunities for students to integrate the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, but also to learn strategies to negotiate meaning to express themselves and to understand others. Because students use their prior backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences to contextualize the text, RCs also provide opportunities through discussions for ESOL students to share their cultural interpretations and understandings of the text.

Methodology

In bridging the theoretical ideas presented in the literature review into the practicality of the classroom, we came to the following questions about ways in which the ESOL instructor could:

1. Provide explicit guidance for students to understand and partake in academic tasks;
2. Create a classroom that is "socially relevant" and "culturally conscious"; and
3. Invite students to enter the conversation by exploring their own voices.

The instructor began the semester by first getting to know the students, their backgrounds, and experiences toward the English

language and reading specifically, and spent the first eight weeks introducing them to metacognitive reading practices as delineated by the RA program. Then, we purposefully selected readings from Mike Rose's blog to serve as mentor texts on topics with voices and experiences that students can relate to based on the instructor's preassessment in order to support students in developing their own voices and a sense of critical consciousness. The readings were primarily advocacy pieces to support students in seeing their value and their place within a larger discourse surrounding their lives, their intelligence, and their education within this context. We hoped that these readings could guide them to think critically about their lives and encourage them to understand the author's voice and in turn explore their own voices.

These texts were then leveled to help the students with diverse proficiency levels access the same text within this intermediate reading class. RCs were employed to provide opportunities for students to understand the text more deeply and to help them begin to craft their own voices within classroom discussions culminating in blogs posted in a public forum.

Research Context

This study took place in a community college ESOL reading class, three levels below college-level English. This was a basic skills course. This class met only one night per week, for three hours. Students who placed into this course needed to pass (or test out of) this three-unit reading course as well as a three-unit speaking/listening course and a six-unit writing course to move on to the next level. The next level of course work entails a six-unit reading, writing, and grammar course that is two levels below college-level English. This is the last ESOL class in the basic skills sequence. Once their ESOL course work is completed, students then matriculate into a one-level-below-college reading and a one-level-below-college writing course (for a total of six more units). Once they successfully pass these two last courses, they are ready to take college-level English, the first eligible transferable English course.

Participants

Research Team. The research team included an interdisciplinary team of higher education professionals, including the community college instructor with 15 years of teaching experience and three university faculty members from the Department of Learning and Teaching at a university in San Diego. One faculty member had expertise in K-12 English learner and multicultural education; one had expertise

in TESOL and teaching adult ESOL populations; and one had expertise in educational equity and teaching experience in the public school sector. Additionally, the team included a graduate assistant who was a full-time elementary school teacher.

Students. The classroom comprised 17 male and 15 female students. A diverse number of languages were spoken, with Vietnamese having the largest number of students followed by Farsi, Spanish, and Russian. Of the 29 students who indicated their ages in the demographic data, ages ranged from 19 to 53 with a mean age of 27.9. The number of years spent in the US ranged from less than a year to 21 years with a mean of 5.27 years in the US. The number of years studying formal (defined as "in school") English ranged from 0 to 13 years with a mean of 4.125 years.

Preassessment

We collaboratively designed a preassessment survey to understand student perceptions of their placement, proficiency, and self-efficacy levels related to learning English and used leveled reading texts from readtheory.org and readworks.org to assess their reading levels. Table 1 shows the number of students in each group leveled by reading ability.

Table 1
Leveled Grouping

Levels	*Group 1*	*Group 2*	*Group 3*	*Group 4*
Advanced	4	4		
Intermediate	4	4	4	4
Beginning	4	4		

As with most developmental courses, there was tremendous variation in range of skills within this ESOL intermediate reading course, which was three levels below transfer. Based on the collaborative review of the results of the preassessment and the judgment of the instructor, there were three levels identified. The instructor then placed them in smaller groups of four students in preparation for the reading circles. There were two groups of four students in the advanced level, four groups of four students in the intermediate level, and two groups of four students in the beginning level.

Mentor Texts

Next, we reviewed and leveled posts from Mike Rose's blog (http://

mikerosebooks.blogspot.com), which were preselected because of their relevance regarding identity and intelligence related to students who are often labeled as "nontraditional" in higher education. These blogs included *Professor X*, *Teaching Remedial Writing*, and *More Than a Paycheck*. Mike Rose (2005) himself was marginalized growing up as an Italian immigrant in an American public school system and nearly fell through the cracks until a teacher recognized his talents and skills and scaffolded his learning as he was allowed to enter the social and political conventions of language in academia. He is a success story and shares a multitude of experiences not only as a student, but also as a teacher working with students whom he found to be underprepared in the college classroom. On his blogs, he also writes about challenges that these marginalized students often experience in the public school and college systems related to issues of social justice.

We adapted these blogs to multiple reading levels to help tap into the students' backgrounds and experiences, serve as mentor texts, and differentiate instruction based on the initial preassessment data. These adaptations of leveled texts were developed by two research team members and checked for readability using Flesch-Kincaid reading levels (these leveled readings are available on http://goo.gl/Of1dVt). These adapted texts were reviewed during our collaborative meetings with the community college instructor and professor with expertise in the K-12 English learner sector and were further adjusted.

Leveled Texts

In an attempt to increase connectivity to and discussion about the text, the lowest-level students (as informed by the diagnostics and eight weeks of course work) received the lower-leveled version (as scored by Flesch-Kincaid and confirmed by the community college instructor), the middle-level students received the middle-leveled version of the reading, and the highest-level students received the highest-leveled version of the reading. At the end of each unit, students were provided with the original version of the reading, asked to read the original version to the best of their ability, and journal based on (a) their version of the reading, (b) class discussion, and (c) the original version of the reading.

The research team did discuss whether these leveled readings might make some students feel marginalized because of the different versions of the same readings, which would be counterproductive to the mission of this project: increasing connectivity to the reading as well as increasing social, cultural, and educational power in the ESOL classroom. Anecdotally, the instructor did notice students compar-

ing and contrasting their versions but also noticed a steep increase in critical understanding and discussion regarding the articles' themes.

Timeline—First Eight Weeks

During the first week of class, the students were given a survey and a reading diagnostic as a pretest. In Weeks 2-7 the instructor trained the class on key metacognitive reading strategies for the course, which were derived from the RA model (Lesmeister, 2010):

- Lens changing: thinking about a piece of writing from multiple perspectives;
- Talking to the text: how to annotate a piece of writing;
- Thinking aloud: how to socially construct meaning from text, read and question a piece of writing with a group of other students.

One additional strategy was practiced derived from "reader to reading teacher" (Aebersold & Field, 1997), which involved the awareness raising of receptive versus productive vocabulary levels. These four strategies were practiced with readings from the Internet and from publically available ESL readers. During the eighth week of the semester, the students took a midsemester survey and reading diagnostic assessment, reviewed and summarized the reading strategies from the previous weeks of class, and put their findings on oversized pieces of poster paper that remained on the walls for their reference for the rest of the semester. The students were also introduced to the reading circles they were going to be participating in for the rest of the semester as part of this study.

As an introduction to the RC methodology during the eighth week of class, the students were put into heterogeneous groups by strategy, and each student took charge of reviewing and then explaining one of the four reading strategies to his or her group members. Student 1 explained the strategy "reading lens," Student 2 explained the strategy "talking to the text," Student 3 explained the strategy "thinking aloud," and Student 4 explained the strategy "vocabulary levels." Then the students were jigsawed into larger homogenous groups by strategy, where each group would then have to create a poster for one of the four reading-strategy topics.

These initial weeks were used to gauge student reading-ability levels, build classroom community, and train the students on the reading strategies they would be using during the second half of the semester.

Timeline—Last Eight Weeks

Over the final eight weeks of the course during which time this study was conducted, the instructor had the students engage in reading circles with the three adapted texts for the three different leveled groupings. First, the groups met homogenously by level and heterogeneously by task for about 45 minutes (e.g., a group of four lowest-level readers met with the individualized task per group member of summarizer, quote finder and analyzer, question creator, or illustrator). As previously mentioned in Table 1, there were eight groups of four students meeting in this part of the class (if a student were absent, and a group of three created, the students chose one task to remove). During this period, the leveled groups were given silent reading time for their particular reading lens, and then silent writing time before they presented their thoughts and conclusions to their leveled group.

Next, the students met heterogeneously by level, but homogenously by task to further discuss the reading. This means that all the summarizers from each group formed a new "summarizer" group, the quote finders formed a "quote finder" group, the questioners formed a "questioner" group, and the illustrators formed an "illustrator" group. As a result, there were only four groups meeting, of about seven to eight students. The groups were again given about 45 minutes to discuss work on their excerpts, with the end task of creating a poster together to share with the class. It is important to note that each of these heterogeneous groups included students from various reading and speaking levels, which allowed them to participate in negotiating meaning by scaffolding learning for one another. After the posters were completed and presented, the instructor concluded the session with a whole-class discussion about the reading. The instructor then provided the students a postsurvey about the learning they derived from the class, and a link to the original article with a journal assignment on the topic for homework. With each subsequent reading (three total), students had to take on a new reading lens to provide them a focused opportunity to view the reading from a new lens.

At the end of the semester, the instructor included an authentic venue for the students to share their voices by contacting Mike Rose, who agreed to allow the students to write a response to one of the three blogs of their choice directly on his website, which was going to be read by the author himself and by other readers from the public.

Findings

In this section, we report on data that emerged from the project that provide some insight into the questions that guided the study: In what ways could an ESOL instructor

1. Provide explicit guidance for students to understand and partake in academic tasks;
2. Create a classroom that is "socially relevant" and "culturally conscious"; and
3. Invite students to enter the conversation by exploring their own voices?

Provide Explicit Guidance for Students to Understand and Partake in Academic Tasks

We attempted to address the need for our students to be socialized into the academic ways of thinking, reading, discussing, and writing to be successful in the community college classroom through the RA model in hopes that these tools would help them enter the conversation through exploring their own voices within the RC and eventually beyond, in the public online forum. We wanted to ensure that students were not only finding their voices through making these connections with the text, but that they also were improving in their abilities to read through the tools of RA, socially relevant mentor texts, and RCs.

Because the reading-comprehension tests were different in nature for each of the texts used, we sought to focus on student perceptions of their perceived growth of their own reading abilities. Though we recognize the issues around self-report data, for the purpose of this study, we wanted to probe the internal experiences of the students through their participation in this project with respect to their academic learning and growth. As shown in Figure 1, an interesting finding was that before the course interventions, only 11 students thought that they could understand 40-50% of readings in English they attempted with some help (from a tutor or teacher), but after the scaffolded reading opportunities provided in this study, the self-perceptions of their

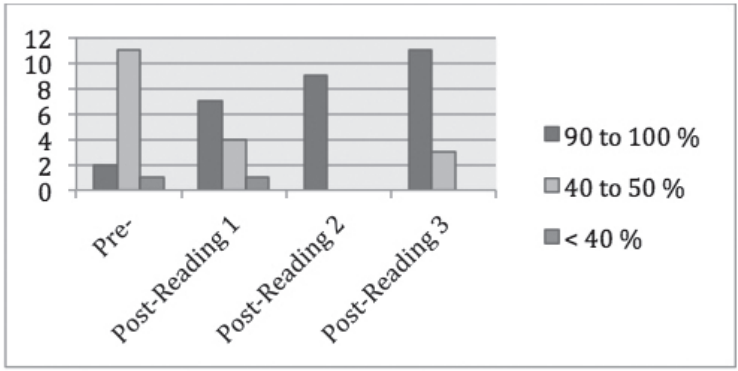

Figure 1. Self-perceptions of reading comprehension abilities.

comprehension levels seemed to steadily increase, with all students believing they could access readings in English on some level, with a vast majority believing they could understand 90-100% of readings they attempted.

A year after this study concluded, the instructor contacted the students regarding their current perceptions of their own reading abilities. Eighteen of the 32 students responded to this survey. All 18 reported they agreed or strongly agreed their English would continue to improve if they spent time on it. Sixteen reported that they now enjoyed reading in English for pleasure, and 17 reported that they now enjoyed reading in English for work/school. Seventeen students responded to questions regarding use of class material currently. All 17 reported that they used the strategies they had learned in their reading class at least 50% of the time, with 11 reporting they used the strategies 70% of the time or more. Twelve reported that they understand when they read in English at least 70% of the time, and seven students responded that reading is now their strongest skill in English, with no students reporting that reading is their weakest skill in English.

Creating a Classroom That Is "Socially Relevant" and "Culturally Conscious"

The instructor spent the first several weeks of the semester getting to know the students and their backgrounds and creating a strong sense of classroom community, where he hoped to create an environment where the students felt safe to share their voices. Though we understand that *social relevance* and *cultural consciousness* are broad terms encompassing their whole experiences influenced not only by classroom experiences, but by institutional, societal, and political dimensions surrounding their circumstances, we thought that for the purpose of this study, we were able to address this goal in one way by selecting authentic mentor texts written by Mike Rose on social issues that spoke to the experiences of the ESOL students in this classroom as represented by their ability to partake in discussions and share their experiences both in spoken and written form.

From the perspective of the classroom instructor, this part of the study—creating social relevance and cultural consciousness—seemed promising. He recalled,

> During the postreading class discussions, students often shared experiences when they, too, felt marginalized by former teachers and society as a whole. Importantly, it was not only the students with the highest speaking ability who spoke during these times, but—at times—broader and powerful conversations were initi-

ated by some of the students in the so-called *beginning* level. For example, via discussion, the class came to a consensus that the definition of "traditional" and "nontraditional" students should be transposed since they felt that more students were *like them*: older students, who have jobs and kids, going to school part time. They even went as far as to question why students *like them* were not, then, considered traditional.

The students in this class appeared to find the texts and conversations so personalized to their lives that they began to question whether the instructor *was* Mike Rose—the very author they had been reading all semester—creating connections among the readings, discussions, and their perceptions of the instructor's support for their success.

Invite Students to Enter the Conversation by Exploring Their Own Voices

The RCs included providing a role for each student to take leadership within his or her proficiency-level groups from a particular perspective and then also across groupings on the shared roles each of them had within the respective groups. The exploration of voice in this dimension of the project included not only the readings that spoke to issues surrounding their place in academic institutions and society, but also the space for them to speak their minds across proficiency levels, where before this project, those of lower levels of perceived proficiency would often allow those with higher levels of perceived proficiency to lead the discussions. These RCs with role allocations, we believe, allowed them entry into the discussions as valuable, contributing members.

Through an authentically designed opportunity to have them share their voices in a public forum, we looked for connections the students were making between the text and their personal lives. After the three readings were completed, the instructor received permission from Mike Rose to have his students post their blog responses directly on Rose's website. Twenty-four students (72%) of the class completed this assignment—12 students commented on the blog *Professor X,* six students commented on the blog *More Than a Paycheck,* and six students commented on the blog *Remedial Writing.* We thought that this data would show us to what extent students were able to connect with the readings and express their voices in the context of themes presented in these texts. In keeping with this authentic writing opportunity, the author, Mike Rose himself, graciously wrote the class a note, thanking them for their hard work and additions to his blog.

The data from the online blogs that students commented on

showed some evidence of the students' ability to make personal connections to the reading and enter the conversations by finding their own voices in response to the readings. The readings appeared to validate their experiences and allowed them to share their ideas, thoughts, and visions. Below are four excerpts from the blog entries, in their original form so as to preserve student voice, that exemplify these connections students were able to make through this project.

In the first excerpt, Rose's blogs on the nontraditional student resonated with a student who wrote about being a nontraditional student himself when he was in high school.

> I really like this blog because I leave a similar situation when I was in high school I was a nontraditional student, I studied and work at the same time. It's very difficult situation to be a nontraditional student because you need time to go to school, work and time for make a homework or study for a test, but at the same time I received more responsibility. … Thank you for the support to the nontraditional students is good to know that there's people like you to support us.—Student A

He appears to appreciate Rose's response in defense of the nontraditional student, providing context for the responsibilities they carry and the expectations of doing well in school.

The next entry is from an international student, nontraditional in the sense of her age, receiving criticism for her decision to attend a community college and defending her professors as "real" professors.

> … you're talking about me. I am a nontraditional student original from Japan. When I in Japan I never even met any nontraditional students. Maybe there are out there, but it's so unusual. All my family is graduated from college as traditional college students too. When I told my parents about me going to college at my age (I just turned 40!) they have bunch of negative comment about it. They thought It's way too late to go college at my age, and they can't believed there are any college are accepted me. After I told them about there is remedial classes that I can take. My father said, Really? Whose teaching those classes? Are they real professors?? Yes, they are real professors, who have so much passion for teaching. Matter fact, they are best. Because they have way more patience!"—Student B

In the following excerpt, Student C first expresses her gratitude for Rose's support of the nontraditional student and explains her rea-

sons for attending college. She indicates how reading these blog entries made her "express her ideas" and feel empowered to "learning something new everyday."

> Mr. Rose I feel very pledge writing a response to you because I know you support us "the nontraditional students" I'm very thankful with you for thinking that students from other countries have the ability to attend college, learn English and have a career so we can all have the opportunity to live better and I know is not about money but live with knowledge so we can teach are descendents what we know, also I want to say that people like you are doors open for us, your blog is so motivational for me and it make me express all my ideas and try to learn something new everyday.—Student C

In this last excerpt from Student D, we clearly see the issues around the length of time it takes for these students to reach their goals and the desire to be heard and be considered as "intelligent," perhaps even "more complex" than the traditional students as they attempt to succeed even with the busy lives they lead.

> Nontraditional students like me have a capability of pursuing our goals even if it takes a long time to succeed. I believe that we are also intelligent, more complex and hard working people despite of being busy in our daily lives.—Student D

These excerpts were selected as exemplars on the kinds of writing that emerged in the blogs that provided some indication toward a growing sense of critical consciousness.

Conclusion

Through this study, we created a systematic reading process we termed Mentor Text[2], which included the explicit teaching of metacognitive strategies through the steps outlined in the reading apprenticeship, role designation and discussion opportunities afforded through the reading circles, and differentiating instruction while maintaining academic rigor through leveled texts. The attempt was to provide students with scholastic, cultural, and social support, attempting to support students in exploring and crafting their own voices via two layers of mentoring from socially relevant reading selections that were accessible to the students. The goal was to assist ESOL students in finding their voices within the culture of power within the community college basic skills system in one reading class.

It appears that through this particular process, not only were the students empowered to explore their voices within the classroom, but the instructor also felt empowered to express his voice within academic circles beyond the classroom. He states:

> I felt like the Teaching Studio (an initiative of the Department of Learning and Teaching at the University of San Diego to support teachers from the field with questions concerning improving instructional practice) gave me the opportunity to work through an issue with professionals who treated me as a professional. No politics. All of us really wanted to come up with something that could improve student scholastic and personal lives. … It was fun to talk about and then implement ideas. I got to put together different pieces from our different perspectives for classroom implementation. … We need more of this in education. Time to talk, do, and reflect as professionals.

It is our sincere hope that these students continue to make their voices heard as they navigate through the community college system. A longitudinal study following these students throughout their academic journeys within the community college system can further shed light on the role that this course and other courses may have played in helping them to achieve their academic goals and in supporting the expression of these voices within and beyond the classroom.

Though this study shows some promise in terms of some of the tools that can be used within the ESOL classroom to support students in accessing and interacting with text as they explore their own voices and place themselves within the contextual space of the community college, much research remains to be done on how to support these students beyond the ESOL courses to continue to express their voices as contributing members of the community as they navigate the remaining segments of their journey within the community college sector and beyond. In other words, we are painfully aware that providing students with a classroom environment that is safe and supportive and designing curriculum that speaks to their experiences and supports them to think critically about their own educational endeavors in one classroom does not necessarily create future success in subsequent classes, at work, or in society. As such, we hope, like Rose (2005), that the education of the "underprepared" will continue to be of concern to teachers and society at large.

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Authors

Sarina Chugani Molina is a faculty member and coordinator of the M.Ed. in TESOL, Literacy, & Culture Program at the University of San Diego. She has 20 years' experience teaching English locally and internationally in a variety of different contexts. Her research interests include TESOL teacher professional development and teaching English as an international language.

Mark Manasse, an English and ESOL faculty member at Miramar College, has more than 15 years of teaching experience. He was the ACCE 2010 Continuing Education Person of the Year and a 2012 League for Innovation award winner. He is pursuing his PhD from the University of San Diego.

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