

## Making Connections: Student-Teacher Rapport in Higher Education Classrooms

Roehl Sybing

University of Massachusetts Amherst

[rsybing@umass.edu](mailto:rsybing@umass.edu)

*Abstract: Educational research asserts the importance of establishing rapport between teachers and their students for the sake of fostering a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Especially given the disparities in outcomes of university students, it is imperative for educators and policy makers to look at teaching practices in the college classroom as well as policies relevant to teaching and learning in university contexts. This paper reports on an ethnographic study of a college-level academic writing class, centering on how its writing teacher seeks to establish rapport and facilitate understanding with first- and second-year undergraduate students. The findings presented in this paper highlight examples practitioners can examine to validate student knowledge and participation as well as mitigate the effects of differences in identity between teacher and student. This paper closes by inviting discussion and reflection of college-level teachers' practices in the classroom and whether they elicit engagement from students.*

*Keywords:* higher education, classroom interaction, student-teacher rapport

### Introduction

Contemporary research has begun to explore the importance of establishing rapport between teachers and students in higher education contexts (Arghode et al., 2017; Estepp & Roberts, 2015; Lee, 2015). Despite this, popular perceptions of higher education do not always center around images of classrooms engaged in discussion and engagement by students. Using the website Google Images, a cursory search of pictures of college classrooms yields images of lecture rooms with large numbers of students passively listening to a teacher who is presumably a master of the relevant course knowledge. The college teacher may not always be expected to connect with their students on an emotional, casual basis, or engage and validate the knowledge that they bring to the classroom. Theory on teaching and learning emphasizing the importance of rapport between teacher and student clashes with the historical traditions of the academy, as well as the feasibility of pedagogies in contexts that serve massive numbers of students.

The traditions of the academy, however, have been shown not to produce outcomes that are equitable to everyone they serve. As sociocultural research emphasizes the differences in culture and identity across the range of diversity encountered in universities in the United States, it is important to recognize that the instructional methods of old may not be suitable for all. With students of color and low-income students graduating at lower rates than white students and high-income students respectively (Musto, 2017; Tate, 2017), it is worth exploring, in addition to reforms of policies, how practitioners in higher education can better accommodate all students.

To that effect, this paper presents an ethnography of a writing teacher promoting a pedagogy that runs counter to that of the perceived typical college lecturer. The narratives presented in this discussion are intended to depict a teacher who values the knowledge and participation of students and mitigates the typical asymmetric power dynamic within the classroom. In so doing, this paper will present a framework that will allow for future research investigating the effects of teacher pedagogy on student-teacher rapport and learner outcomes in higher education contexts.

## Historical overview

The need for more dynamic forms of teaching in higher education is apparent in the diversity of students entering college and the outcomes that colleges produce. Verner and Dickinson (1967) were among the first scholars to assert that differences in students in terms of prior education received limited the effectiveness of traditional lecture methods in university education. Moreover, differences in education level are informed both socioeconomic status and ethnicity, particularly in the United States context (Roithmayr, 2014). Recent statistics show that college classrooms in the United States have become more diverse across all cleavages since at least the 1960s in terms of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status, challenging what has traditionally been a white, male, and upper-class higher education context (*National Center for Education Statistics*, 2010). As the college classroom becomes more diverse, it is important to accommodate the growing body of knowledge that diversity brings to higher education.

Diversity in student enrollment, however, has not been matched by diversity in graduation. Graduation rates over six-year periods have highlighted disparities across racial and ethnic lines, with African-American and Hispanic students completing college at a much lower rate than their white and Asian-American counterparts (Tate, 2017). Only 38% of African-American students are shown to complete an undergraduate degree or certificate program within six years, far below the aggregate average of 54.8% of all college students. The income divide yields a starker picture in which only 16% of low-income college students in the United States eventually earn an undergraduate degree compared to 60% of their wealthier peers (Musto, 2017). Absent intervention in the status quo prevailing over higher education, the disparities across race and income (and other cleavages less examined on this issue) are certain to persist and contribute to the social inequities that perpetuate the hegemony of privileged classes at the expense of those at the margins (Roithmayr, 2014).

In examining the recent data connecting student success in higher education to differences in identity and resources, it is unproductive, and perhaps detrimental, to treat all learners in a given classroom in the same manner. For educators at the practitioner level, the implication here is that students at the margins are not served by the status quo in higher education. A different approach, given the disparity in outcomes produced in higher education, is thus required.

### *Student-teacher rapport*

Chickering and Gamson (1987) provided some early definition to pedagogies that transcended assumptions of simple knowledge transfer. In their article about undergraduate teaching, they emphasized that a successful educator:

1. Encourages contacts between students and faculty
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Uses active learning techniques
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations, and
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 3).

This set of principles was intended to address perceived shortcomings that were associated with "[a]pathetic students, illiterate graduates, incompetent teaching, impersonal campuses" (p. 3). Among their most pointed assertions was that learning was not meant to be a passive endeavor

primarily conducted in large lecture rooms with students quietly listening to their professor. Instead, they emphasized that learning was a collaborative process between student and teacher, and even between students. Complementing this belief was the acknowledgment that learners were not uniform, bringing with them diverse and disparate skill sets, ideologies, and dispositions that affected how they expanded their understanding of unfamiliar knowledge. In turn, some of the dispositions that Chickering and Gamson advocate in higher education practitioners, particularly relating to contact between student and teacher and respect for variety of learning styles, require teachers to establish the kind of rapport that is less likely to be established through didactic, almost mechanical pedagogies in classroom settings.

This discussion continues to generate some degree of contention within research on teaching and learning to this day, as evidenced by elements of contemporary literature that still advocate for the effectiveness of lecture-based teaching, one of the mainstays of university education (e.g., Grauer et al., 2008; Taglieri et al., 2017; Thrall et al., 2016). However, such research either has been critiqued for limitations relating to methodology (Thistlethwaite et al., 2012) or, more importantly, highlights the importance of further inquiry into non-lecture methods of teaching (Reimschisel et al., 2017). In either case, even if there is a concession that lecture-based teaching has a place in higher education as an effective pathway to student success, there is an argument to be made that innovations in pedagogy along the lines of teacher rapport with students have yet to be fully identified.

Exploring this aspect of teaching and learning has been made important by the contemporary empirical research on rapport in higher education, which has drawn connections between strategies for building rapport and facilitation of the learning process. Estepp and Roberts (2015), for example, identified discrete strategies for university-level practitioners such as encouraging more interaction in the class, relating personal experiences to the concepts being taught, and proactively expressing respect for their students as pedagogical implications for rapport when indexed to greater learning outcomes. Further research on engagement with student (e.g., Arghode et al., 2017) has also explored how rapport with students can be built through understanding students' perspectives and preferences, which is seen as a means to connect with students in a positive way. Outside of the classroom, Lee's (2015) research with university writing tutors has pointed out the importance of rapport through engaging and conscientious feedback in the writing process in building confidence in students.

Extending this research can potentially yield implications for addressing, at least in part, the wide disparities in outcomes witnessed in higher education when teachers reach out to their students across differences to co-construct knowledge in a manner that students can understand. Scholars (e.g., Colbert, 2010) have drawn connections between the role of pedagogies of active learning in accommodating various learning styles to the development of culturally responsive classrooms, which, in Wlodkowski and Ginsberg's (1995) view, "help students relate lesson content to their own backgrounds" (p. 17), with the assumption that "ignor[ing] student norms of behavior and communication provokes student resistance" (p. 17).

As a result, the study presented in this paper attempts to explore the following question:

RQ1: What pedagogical strategies does a teacher in an academic writing course in a higher university context employ to establish rapport?

Exploration of this research question assumes that rapport between students and their teacher is not a given, particularly because of differences in identity and differences in perceived power. Where students in any formal context are typically considered novices unfamiliar with the content knowledge presented to them, teachers are typically thought of as experts whose job is to transfer necessary knowledge. In addition, institutions of education lend power to their practitioners in allowing them

the ability to assign grades, essentially bestowing the role of gatekeeper onto teachers. This asymmetric power relationship arguably contributes to distance between student and teacher, providing a significant obstacle to establishing rapport built on empathy and trust difficult. The speech and pragmatic acts that practitioners perform under such conditions can provide useful guidance to researchers, educators, and policy makers for examining interaction among participants in higher education.

### Theoretical perspective

The framework intended to examine teaching methods in the classroom is founded on the principles for understanding language socialization and the knowledge that language socialization helps to facilitate. Ochs and Schieffelin (2011) explore language socialization as a process in which novices are "socialized" by experts in knowledge, rituals, and discourse. Within this construct, it is overly simplistic to assume that novices lack knowledge of their own; instead, experts are considered experts because the knowledge they have is ratified by the culture in which they exist and interact. This concept can be typically visualized by adults teaching children, or older educators who are masters of content knowledge teaching learners who lack such knowledge. Such teachers are ratified by the culture whether through advanced degrees or teaching certifications, and such ratification perpetuates the need for students to comply in the learning process. In such approaches to teaching and learning, students may not necessarily enter the classroom with zero knowledge, but with a lack of knowledge that is relevant to what educators believe is necessary for post-education life. It is, in such deficit models, necessary for the classroom teacher to transfer the essential knowledge that education assumes students do not have.

The research presented here looks at a teacher's speech acts and actions that are intended to facilitate understanding of knowledge while negotiating the contributions that learners bring to the classroom. Ochs (2004) provides a useful definition for understanding knowledge and expertise that is the subject for socialization within a context. In her discourse analysis of socialization through rituals taking place at a softball game for children, Ochs makes distinctions among the following elements:

- *categories* (e.g., first base, second base, pitcher, catcher),
- *rules* (e.g., hit the ball and run to first base, avoid being tagged out),
- *expectations* (e.g., being able to swing a bat in a certain manner), and
- *strategies* (e.g., knowing when to run or to stay on base).

Through this framework, socialization within a community builds and reinforces not only a textbook definition understanding of any particular activity, but an understanding of how one's actions with that activity affects their perceived performance and, thus, their standing within the given community. In this framework, a novice within an activity may have a surface understanding of how an activity is done (via rules), but not a deeper insight in what to do in a dynamic situation (via strategies). More generally, novices may have gaps in insight in any of the four categories, and thus build their insight through experience and effort within their community.

### Research site

The research centered on a public university course that focuses on expository writing for academic purposes. The university's writing program organizes the course and requires it for all undergraduate students who do not fulfill the program's writing requirement in advance via tests such as Advanced

Placement exams. Writing teachers in the program are typically hired on an annual, contractual basis, and have various academic backgrounds from education to fine arts. The course is held three times a week, with this section being conducted in the late morning.

The university itself is a major public university with a strong emphasis in research in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). The university's undergraduate enrollment is around 23,000 students, the majority of whom are white and male, countering national trends indicating higher education is becoming more racially diverse and female-oriented (*National Center for Education Statistics*, 2010). The university is situated well away from major urban population centers, and the town in which the university is hosted is small, with a total population of about 37,000 people.

This section meets in a part of campus that is intended for the university's "honor students," even though the writing course is a required course open to all first- and second-year undergraduate students. The building that houses the classroom for this section is newer than most of the buildings on campus; the university's main science complex, in contrast, is older and has smaller classrooms with fewer accommodations for technology such as projectors and overhead document cameras. This classroom is large enough to seat its 15 students and provide enough room at the front for the teacher to work. There are whiteboards on two walls, with a screen for the projector positioned over one of the whiteboards to indicate the front of the classroom where the teacher is usually situated. Long tables form a large rectangle with seats positioned along the outside of the rectangle so that class participants can see each other.

Class sessions are 50 minutes long and generally focus on a particular element of academic writing, such as primary sources or formatting of bibliographies, rather than on providing silent time for writing, which is done at home and posted on the course's online portal. When homework writing is presented in class, it is typically shared amongst peers for feedback. Any writing actually done in class is typically considered "generative writing" as a means to help students plan their essays or reflections at home.

## Participants

The teacher, given the pseudonym Emily, is a doctoral student in the university's education program and a first-year instructor in the writing program. Emily has work experience in higher education contexts, but this is her first teaching experience in a public university. In interviews conducted with her, she says that she applies a lot of what she learned from her doctoral studies into teaching her writing class. The narratives used in this paper relate to experiences in her second semester of teaching.

There are 15 students in the section of the writing course observed for data collection. Of those that gave informed consent, three students are perceived African-American females, one is a female international student whose native language is Mandarin Chinese, and the rest are a mix of perceived white male and female students. All students in the class are first- and second-year undergraduate students in various majors.

Excerpts of interviews with two students are used in this paper for analysis and discussion. Jeremy is an English and theater major who transferred from a small fine arts school. As perceived in participant observations, he participates in class more often than do most of his classmates. He describes himself as a good writer and doesn't consider the writing class a significant challenge. However, he doesn't consider himself a "good test-taker," and not getting a good score on the necessary Advanced Placement exam is what required him to enroll in the writing course. He participates in local theater productions as an actor and aspires to write a novel. Perceived by the researcher as white, Jeremy indicated in his interview that he was a quarter-Native American. The

discussions that revolved around essays about multiculturalism especially resonated with him as a result.

Lonnie is a first-year history major whose goal is to become a history teacher. He was born in Mexico to a Mexican mother and a white, American father. He identifies more with his white heritage and noted in his interview that his ancestors fought in the American Revolution and the Korean War, facts which serve as his motivation for studying history. He was fluent in Spanish until his family moved to the United States, when he believes he began to lose fluency in Spanish due to lack of exposure in the language. He was homeschooled until entering college, making university his first experience in a formal education context. Unlike Jeremy, who is local to the area, Lonnie struggled with his classes in the first semester because of adjustment issues relating to homesickness and unfamiliarity with formal education.

These students and their teacher became the focus of this paper because of their frequent interaction in class. The content of the interviews with these two students were based on these interactions.

### **Researcher lens**

The researcher in this study is a second-generation Asian-American and doctoral student. His parents come from the Philippines and he was born and raised in the United States, knowing only standard American English until he studied Japanese in college. While he was pressed by his parents to do well in school – he earned an honorable mention in a creative writing contest in high school – he was a marginal student in college who struggled to adapt to discussion-based learning employed in recitation sessions for his science and political science courses. Part of the personal rationale for this study was to explore how pedagogies that aimed to facilitate academic socialization in higher education could produce benefits to learners when traditional, more passive models of learning were just as present in the classroom.

After graduating college, the researcher became a teacher at various language schools in Japan for three out of the first five years of his professional career (he returned to the United States for two years to earn a graduate degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), after which he became a high school and university teacher of English as a foreign language for nearly eight years. Throughout his professional development, he became aware of pedagogies that focused more on active learning as a means to elicit spoken production from language learners in a communicative environment. He then adapted scholarly work and professional advice on the subject to his own pedagogy to encourage language learners to speak and to overcome anxiety to communicate in a foreign language. He returned to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree in education with a research emphasis on academic socialization and language socialization in higher education contexts. The experience gained in promoting active learning in his own classroom makes up part of the lens that informs the analysis of the research in this paper.

### **Methodology**

After receiving permission from the course instructor and her department, the researcher conducted weekly observations of the class section beginning in the second week of the university's spring semester. During observations, the researcher would sit among the students and monitor whole-group and small-group activities. When asked, the researcher participated in activities and answered questions that students may have. Field notes about observations made during class were recorded in a written journal. Classroom observations were about 50 minutes long.

In addition, semi-structured interviews with the course instructor and select students were conducted outside of class sessions and recorded using a digital voice recorder. Interviews with students were typically 30 minutes long, while interviews with the teacher lasted at least 60 minutes. Field notes and transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for themes and narratives that might prove useful for discussion about active learning and teacher facilitation in the classroom.

## Data analysis

Preliminary composition of field notes and structuring of interviews were conducted with an approach toward examining academic socialization through a framework adapted from theory on language socialization (e.g., Ochs & Schieffelin, 2001).

Ochs' (2004) framework can be adapted to analyze what takes place in a college classroom. The following data exemplar, represented in Table 1, looks at a field note from one of the class sessions and defines elements that fit into the four elements of the established framework.

**Table 1. Analysis of data exemplar through Ochs' (2004) framework.**

*Teacher groups students together for a group activity. Each group has a different piece of information about Hurricane Maria, provided by a primary source. Questions to answer about the information are shown on the PowerPoint slide. (PO – 03/22/2018)*

<b>categories</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• primary sources</li> <li>• type of information (e.g., newspaper article, blog post)</li> </ul>
<b>rules</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• answer the questions</li> <li>• present the information according to the questions asked</li> </ul>
<b>expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• present to the whole class in a manner that they can understand</li> </ul>
<b>strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• determine consensus on answers to questions</li> <li>• negotiate how to present</li> <li>• decide who presents</li> </ul>

In the class activity highlighted in Table 1, small groups of students discuss a piece of information taken from news sources. The terminal goals for this activity are both explicit through rules (i.e., answer the questions and present the information) and implicit through expectations (i.e., present to the class in a meaningful way). Less stated and less prescribed by the teacher is how students are to most successfully participate in this activity; those elements are outlined by the researcher's understanding of strategies at the time of the activity. In this case, the researcher believes that students need to come to a consensus on the answers to the questions on the PowerPoint slide, decide who presents the information, and how that information is presented to the whole class. Through this analytical framework, the researcher can examine discourse practices, behaviors, and dispositions and frame them in explicit terms conducive to discussion of classroom interaction.

Field notes and interview excerpts are analyzed to form narratives relevant to the themes presented in the findings section of this paper. They are analyzed through the framework provided above and rendered into narrative form for the purposes of this paper. The narratives presented in this study are intended to express how the teacher and her students negotiate the elements of socialization in their writing class. With respect to the teacher specifically, the narratives also focus on what the teacher does to facilitate understanding and encourage participation from her students.

## Findings

Three major themes were seen by the researcher as evidenced in the data collected for this study. These themes speak to what the teacher does, but excerpts of interviews also touch on perceived effects or influence. During data analysis, it was apparent to the researcher that the teacher sought to achieve a more equal power dynamic with students and encourage their input by explicitly validating their participation, validating their knowledge, and relinquishing their own role as an authority figure.

### *Validating student participation*

*Teacher asks about example outline of essay shown on PowerPoint slide. One student answers often. After four answers, teacher responds, "Yeah, you're on it today!" (PO – 04/04/2018)*

During sessions, the classroom is typically quiet in the absence of group or pair work as students' attention is fixed on the teacher or disengaged from the class work altogether. In this instance, Emily is reviewing a graphic organizer of an essay outline displayed on the projector. The outline refers to an essay printed in one of the course textbooks which students were supposed to have read prior to the class session. Emily asks about the purpose of each paragraph detailed in the outline, waiting for students to raise their hands and answer. Only a handful of students volunteer answers over the course of the semester, while most students in class remain silent unless directly called on. Steve, one of the white male students, raises his hand to answer one of Emily's questions after a long silence. Emily is satisfied with his answer, as well as the three answers that he gives in quick succession when no one else chimes in.

In the view of the researcher, this positive reinforcement is intended not only to give praise for the perceived "correct" answer, but for the willingness to participate as well. Especially when the class in this whole group discussion is fairly quiet, the researcher sees that it is important to provide positive reinforcement to those students who do participate. The act of praise in this case is meant to encourage further participation and engagement with the knowledge being presented.

Of course, student participation must be seen by the students as rewarding and having a tangible benefit. Emily references the same instance above in her interview and notes the progress Steve has made as a result of such participation.

Interviewer: Now, you said that, um, it sounds like you've seen a turning point with this student? That they are able to write now?

Emily: He had a big comeback, he had a period of time where, um, so, unit three, they did research papers. And he, like, I don't know, he kept sleeping through his alarms and, like, not coming to class, and not doing assignments. He was just out to lunch for, like, half of unit three. But in the end, he made this big comeback. I don't know what it was. Actually, you were in the class that day. He was sitting there, we were talking about reverse outlining, and he kept raising his hand, like, all the time. And I was like, "You're on it today!" And he wrote in his reflection, he was like [...] so, they do tell me what they're thinking about in their reflections. This told me when I read his thing that something happened a little bit. "I feel like I learned a lot in this unit, and I realize that I am a better writer than I think I am. At the start of the unit, I

would put off a lot of work, because I would think it would be very troublesome, and I wouldn't be able to think of stuff to write. As we progress with the unit, I saw my writing improve more and more. It wasn't just writing a boring research aspect paper, but it was a topic I had some interest about. When I eventually decided to stop putting stuff off and sit down and write, the words would just start flowing in my head. I learned from my peers different techniques to think of ideas and different approaches to writing. Also, I started participating more in class, and I realized that the answers that I've been thinking of but keeping in my head were the right answers, and that I had no need to fear of being wrong. I feel, like, in the end, I develop more as a writer, and I gain more confidence when people were praising my work."

Interviewer: Wow. How do you feel about that?

Emily: I feel good. I mean, I feel, like, happy. I mean, he may just be, like, "tell me what I want to hear." But, um, I feel good that, because I think when I read that, it doesn't sound like someone who says, "I hate writing." It sounds like he actually feels more motivated and he developed more of an interest in doing it. I think, for a student like him, he needs to build confidence, that he can do it, and his paper was actually pretty good.

Student participation in the writing process is validated just as is student participation in the class. Composition writing, at least in this class, focuses on the process as much as, if not more than, the product itself, requiring creation and revision through feedback. In the following interview excerpt, Jeremy describes the writing process for a previous assignment, and notes how feedback from Emily and subsequent engagement in the revision of his essays have served a purpose.

Interviewer: Is there anything new that you have learned in this course so far?

Jeremy: Yeah, you know, I really like how she sets it up where there are multiple drafts and it's kind of like, the writing is a work in progress until you get to that final draft because most of the English classes I've had, you just hand in the final draft. You have to figure out all the rough drafts and stuff for yourself beforehand. So, I haven't gotten nearly as much feedback as I've gotten in this class. I feel like there's been a lot of feedback, which I like. I appreciate that. So, it's different, but it's useful for me. So, I like that. Yeah, that's something new.

Interviewer: Was there any part of the course, maybe big or small that you thought, "Oh, this is more challenging than I thought it would be?"

Jeremy: Uh...more challenging? I guess it would be...the homework itself isn't very difficult, but I guess the frequency of the homework, I wasn't expecting as much. Just 'cause the majority of English classes I've taken, it's a lot of reading and there are, like two or three essays, but they're like big essays, they're very important for your grade. Um, just the frequency of homework, the fact that there's a lot of it, it's more challenging. You know, just keeping on track.

Lonnie corroborates the expectations set by Emily as described by Jeremy. Students *must* participate in the course in an active manner and are rewarded in a way that helps them further in the semester, as Lonnie describes in the following interview excerpt.

Interviewer: The writing class, is it academically challenging?

Lonnie: Yeah, I would say it's not...hard in terms of studying, but it is hard in terms of the amount of work that you do. Uh, there is a lot of stuff you need to keep track of, and if you miss any of the assignments, you are already at a disadvantage. Not necessarily in terms of your grade, but just in terms of writing your paper, there's a lot of stuff in the assignments that helps you write a better paper for what you want to go for, that you may not have ever considered or ever heard of before.

Interviewer: Okay, and...do you feel like you would have been able to write an essay for your history class without taking the [writing] course?

Lonnie: Oh, yeah, definitely. Um, it wouldn't have been as good, though. I've had a lot of, um, experience writing history essays before, my AP classes and everything. But I think that taking this class has given me, like, a fresh perspective on how you should go about looking at an essay in the first place. Then, not even to get started writing it. And so definitely I could have done history essays, but I don't think I would have done them as well.

The writing course as perceived and depicted by Lonnie and Jeremy emphasizes rigor and reflection throughout the writing process. As Lonnie indicated in an excerpt presented earlier in this paper, he is capable of sitting down and writing an essay in one short period of time. The product from such a rushed effort would be, in his view, acceptable. However, being able to write an essay in a comprehensive process that involves drafting and outlining, from both students' perspectives, is seen as beneficial. The full process of writing, in the expectations that Emily sets, does require participation; one simply cannot, for example, read a book or passively absorb information about writing and become successful in producing an essay. As Lonnie says, the writing that he produces without rigor would be acceptable, but would not be as good as an essay that is produced through the participation that Emily recommends.

The feedback process, while aimed at producing better writing, or at least more disciplined writing, also has a more profound effect on Emily's students, as perceived by Jeremy in the following interview excerpt.

Interviewer: Have you ever, um, yeah, what's your general opinion about this professor?

Jeremy: I really like her. I think that she cares about students doing well. She frequently gives feedback. She's very good at giving you different chances. I feel like I'm doing well, but it seems to me, like, if a student wasn't doing well, she would do everything to help. It seems to me like she wants everybody to succeed, and she's passionate about what she's teaching. And she's friendly.

Interviewer: Um, as in giving different chances and wanting to help students succeed, can you give an example?

Jeremy: Sure. One of the students, I can't remember her name. She's like an international student, she doesn't speak English very well. I get the sense that she, you know, I've seen her talking with her and kinda giving her feedback and wanting her to raise her hand and have a chance to speak up. So, like, giving students who may be, like, having a hard time, whether it's based on the language barriers, which is not their fault. Um, a chance to speak up and be more integrated in the class I think is really admirable and I like that she does that.

The ritual of feedback in the writing class, whether feedback is given by Emily or by classmates, seems to create the expectation of shared interest and support within the classroom and among the students. Through this excerpt, Jeremy depicts a culture fostered by Emily of one that is welcoming of all students. Class rituals such as feedback are mentioned in the same conversation as examples that highlight empathetic practices that take into consideration the different characteristics of the learners in the class.

Literature on culturally responsive pedagogy from scholars such as Warren (2018) has drawn connections between a teacher's capacity for empathy and their capacity to learn about students as a result. However, this anecdote provided by Jeremy presents teacher empathy as an exemplar for classroom practices that are intended to have a material benefit (in this case, improvement of students' writing practices) but also have the effect of fostering a more open and respectful environment within the classroom.

#### *Validating student knowledge*

*Teacher reviews insider/outsider concept for ethnography essays. Teacher elicits topics that all students have chosen and asks questions about each topic. "So what do you want people to know about vegans?" (PO – 04/11/2018)*

Emily chose ethnographies as the third assignment of four for the writing course. In this unit, students are expected to conduct research on a community of their choice, in consultation with Emily, and write an essay providing insight into that community. The challenge of ethnography, Emily emphasizes, is to depict the subject in terms that outsiders would be able to understand.

Students come to class having chosen a community to write about. She goes around the class and asks each student what they have chosen. Each topic is written on the board. "Fighting game community," "student athletes," "independent artists," "vegans," and "Chinese students" are among some of the topics that the students call out.

"What do you want people to know?" is the sort of question that Emily asks to some of her students about their chosen communities. Sometimes, it is intended to clarify the community, as was the case with "Chinese students," intended to mean Chinese international students at the university. Other times, it is meant to preface what each student is later asked to do, which is to pair up with another student unfamiliar with the topic and discuss. Emily asks "What do you want people to know

about vegans?" to elicit a brief answer to highlight the requirement of explaining unfamiliar concepts to outsiders.

In any case, this class activity is centered on the students' knowledge, deemphasizing what the teacher knows and what the teacher expects to read in students' essays. Other examples presented thus far have highlighted how Emily attempts to focus the class on the input that her students contribute. Unlike rituals such as peer feedback, however, this activity is a teacher-to-student interaction. For this researcher, this serves as a means to publicly validate everyone's contribution in front of everyone else. Just as struggles in whole class activities magnify students' anxiety and threaten their willingness to participate (as seemed to be the case presented earlier in this paper when Lonnie missed a question), activities such as these provide public positive reinforcement of students' ideas.

As much as these sorts of activities encourage students to participate and contribute their insights, they produce a community-building effect as discussed previously and in discussion of the next field note.

*Teacher pairs students so that each student is unfamiliar with their partner's chosen community. Students reseat and share what they know about their chosen communities with each other. Richard talks about car culture with Allie, who talks about mixed Trinidadian culture. Allie appears genuinely interested, asking questions about people who are into car culture. Both exchange looks of interest about the other's chosen community. (PO – 04/11/2018)*

The field notes collected for this study document many instances where students appear unengaged and remain quiet in whole group activities. In contrast, the pair work and small group activities provide opportunities away from the direct and constant monitoring of the teacher to have students interact with each other in ways that they probably would not do otherwise.

This does not mean that the fostering of communication from and among students is wholly unstructured, against which Boud et al. (2001) provide strong warnings. Emily plays a role that may not have an immediately obvious purpose to the class. Across participant observations, students are seen to sit in the same seats, sitting next to the same students in class each session. At times, Emily counts off students into groups to reseat them. Absent the reseating, students have little other opportunity in class to talk with other students besides those next to them. In the above field note, Allie and Richard sit at opposite ends of the classroom, as Allie, a perceived African-American, invariably enters each session with her other friends. However, Emily structures the pair work activity so that students learn new insights that they would be unlikely to learn outside of the activity.

The next excerpt of Jeremy's interview highlights the effects of community-building activities, which appear to transcend the immediate, material benefits of this knowledge sharing in class.

Interviewer: When you say discussion-style activities or discussion in class as works for you, are we talking about in the whole class or in small groups?

Jeremy: I think both. I really like whole class discussions because I like hearing what other people have to say, so I think there's some fascinating things that people can bring to the table, their own views on certain topics. Um, and I like having, I think it makes the class closer when you have, you know, people that can come out and, kind of, give in their two cents. Um, so, yeah, I've been always into that. And then

also like the small group discussions, um, I learn a lot about other people, other students, kind of where they're coming from and how their thinking may not align with my own.

The small group and pair work activities that Emily has structured appear to tap an intrinsic motivation in at least some of the students, who are less likely to engage (or are at least less interested) in the whole group activities such as presentations. Later in the interview, Jeremy indicates how the presentations to the class, which are prepared in small group discussions, appear to him as simply regurgitating key points, reducing them to a mere recitation that does not interest him. Whether it is lack of interest or, perhaps for other students, anxiety to contribute in front of the entire class, activities that involve groups of only a few students each can provide a safe space to share ideas, while the reseating of students by the teacher can elicit the opportunity to learn unfamiliar ideas.

This exchange of ideas, however, is not possible without the validation of the students' knowledge. Traditional models of education, as typified by the lecture, favor the expertise of the teacher much more than they do any expertise provided by their learners. In this classroom, however, Emily appears to emphasize what her students have to say by giving those ideas a platform in the various classroom activities she has designed. This speaks to another theme that relates to differences in power and authority, as discussed in the next section.

#### *Relinquishing role of authority*

The students in the writing class call their teacher by her first name. In contrast, when another course is mentioned, particularly a required lecture course common to the STEM majors such as Organic Chemistry or Introductory Biology, students refer to the teacher by their family name, complete with a title such as Mr., Ms., or even Dr. The decisions made regarding how to refer to a person draw on a speaker's assumptions of power and status. When the students refer to Emily by her given name, a more symmetrical connection between teacher and student is assumed.

Educators do not enter the classroom on equal footing with those of their students. Teachers are seen as authoritative sources of knowledge necessary for students to complete coursework. Parallel to this, they award grades for good performance and can fail a student who does not master the presented content knowledge or is otherwise noncompliant or cooperative during class. Quite simply, a student can face difficulties if their teacher does not approve of their performance. A teacher in this case can be the gatekeeper of expertise status as well as academic success.

This perceived circumstance can create a large divide between students and their teacher. When Lonnie remarks about getting "roasted" a second time after giving an answer that wasn't seen as accurate, he appears to be reacting to the exercise of authority, however gentle, by the teacher. This suggests the likelihood that interactions in the class will involve asymmetrical power dynamics especially if the teacher plays a role. Intervention through pedagogy, as discussed in previous sections, can influence how the teacher can mitigate her role as an authority figure in order to validate what students bring to the classroom.

*Brief discussion between activities centers around meaning of "savage" in casual conversation.  
Teacher asks students what it means. (PO – 02/21/2018)*

Here, Emily takes a moment created by a natural break between class activities to refer to a previous discussion of an essay about World Englishes and how different communities create different varieties of English which may, in turn, seem foreign to other communities.

In the instance described by the above field note, Emily attempts to elicit some conversation into the meaning of "savage," a colloquialism among her younger students, as an example of differing varieties of English, as used by students in her class in the previous semester. In doing so, her unfamiliarity with the word in such context indicates how she and her generation doesn't use the word in the sense that her students more likely do.

For one, a lack of expertise dispels any potential notion that the teacher knows all. At first glance, this is not significant, since she is the perceived expert on writing in the class, not the expert on varieties of English. However, as she asks her students what the word is intended to mean, she is validating what knowledge might be important and, at the same time, validating any knowledge her students have on the subject.

For reference's sake, the Urban Dictionary entries for "savage" suggest it is a synonym for "cool" or "badass" (n.d.), and the end result of this brief exchange involves some of Emily's students giving some example uses involving the word, clearing up some confusion, if not all. However, what is important to take away from this instance is Emily's deference to the student's expertise, decentering her authority and valuing her students' contributions.

As for knowledge that the teacher might be expected to know and convey to students, the perceived lack of knowledge on the teacher's part can provide a useful opportunity to validate students' knowledge and mitigate differences in power.

*Teacher mentions the difference between "pp." and "p." in MLA citation. Asked why there's a difference. Says "I don't know why, there's probably a reason." (PO – 02/28/2018)*

In the session that focuses on copyediting, Emily spends a moment pointing out that "pp." in an essay's reference list is used when multiple pages are used, as opposed to the use of "p." to indicate the use of a single page. When asked the reason for the distinction by a student, Emily doesn't have a conclusive answer. Rather, she re-emphasizes what MLA style, the copyediting style that is used for essays in her class, prescribes.

The opportunity presented here is one in which Emily, who has exhibited expertise in other instances, can remove herself from the position of authority and express the same uncertainty as do her students. Rather than act an authoritative force in the classroom, Emily can be seen as existing on the same level as her students, searching for the same answer that one of her students is looking for. While she is still the gatekeeper, ultimately deciding how her students' essays will be received and what grades her students will have, her self-effacement in not knowing a particular answer serves as a substitute for validating students' knowledge, lowering her own status and mitigating the power distance between her and her students.

## Reflections

This paper examines pedagogy as a means to improve learner outcomes in higher education. However, policy implications are not a central focus of this discussion, as this study is an attempt to highlight what individual practitioners in higher education can do to reach students who come from different backgrounds and circumstances. The researcher for this study recognizes that class sizes considerably larger than the fifteen students in Emily's writing course will continue to be a presence in major universities, at least in the foreseeable future. As such, there are concerns of the practicality in hiring and educating more instructors to ultimately reduce class sizes at the college level. Despite this, research (e.g., Goldacre et al., 2013) applying at least some of the principles of active learning and

rapport building to large university classrooms holds some promise for lecturers connecting with greater numbers of students. This paper is thus an attempt to depict the possibility that any classroom can be collaborative and welcoming of the insight that learners bring to higher education.

### *Implications*

Teachers in higher education contexts are likely to encounter students with interests and goals that are disparate from those of their peers. Jeremy, the theater major and actor, sees different goals for his academic writing than does Lonnie, a history major and aspiring future teacher. Connecting with both students, and with the other students in class, is a task that a method of instruction that treats all learners the same may not be able to accomplish. Practitioners who are able to practically find time to connect with their students on an individual basis (primarily because of manageable class sizes), should consider the following questions to inform their pedagogy:

- How much time and effort in the course is devoted to the insights that students bring to the classroom?
- How is student knowledge elicited in class in a way that is non-threatening to learners?
- To what extent is peer interaction with respect to class material encouraged and structured?
- To what extent is the teacher's authority and expertise emphasized or de-emphasized to their students?

As for theory on academic socialization, the framework developed for this study might have benefited from a deeper exploration of cause and effect in academic settings. While the framework provided by Ochs (2004) provides some useful definition to examining rituals and practices within the classroom, it appears to miss elements of analysis that would have been able to explore why students and their teacher make the decisions that they do. In Ochs' softball example, the child struggled with understanding the strategies employed while batting and running the bases. In a stakes-free situation, however, behavior may have differed from that which may exist in an academic situation with larger implications. Ethnographers researching academic environments may want to expand their theoretical frameworks by considering the following questions:

- What are the stakes involved in participating in the academic community being observed?
- What motivations (intrinsic or extrinsic) do novices such as in the academic community being observed have when participating?
- What motivations do experts such as practitioners have when fostering participation by novices?

### *Limitations and future directions*

Data collection was limited to participant observations and interviews; replication of this research should be complemented by document collection (e.g., collection of essays and other written work) and audio recordings of class sessions for transcription and discourse analysis. The latter aspect of data collection would have served a purpose in tying pedagogical practices to discourse practices on the part of the teacher.

Research in teaching pedagogies could have also been accompanied by direct observation of effectiveness in addition to perceptions of effectiveness. While the two interview subjects express

general satisfaction with the course and perceive gains in their own writing ability and organization in a way that is attributable to the course or the teacher, the research into teaching methods in higher education contexts would benefit from an empirical examination of effectiveness on academic performance.

Finally, while this paper is framed as a discussion of alternatives to traditional teaching methods in higher education in the United States, the comparisons drawn between lecture and more dynamic pedagogies were only meant to serve as a framing of active learning as an innovation not yet fully embraced by university educators. Contrastive studies that explore the differences in approach to pedagogy as well as effectiveness are welcome in exploring larger questions regarding what methods of instruction are most appropriate in the various facets of university education.

## Conclusion

In summarizing the findings discussed in this paper, this study of one university-level writing class identifies a teacher's strategies for establishing rapport, particularly through valuing the participation and knowledge that students contribute to the class while also de-emphasizing the expertise she brings as an authority figure. More important than the discrete acts or utterances produced by the teacher is the general philosophy guiding the building of rapport within the classroom, to which students appear to respond favorably and which has generated perceptions of pathways to student success.

There is no shortage of literature regarding learner-centeredness, active learning, or culturally responsive pedagogy. However, given the stakes of improving learner outcomes in higher education in the United States, researchers would benefit education by more closely examining alternatives to the status quo in pedagogies in the university classroom. Discussion of reforms intended to ensure more equitable outcomes in higher education are always incomplete without reforms to curriculum and campus climate in a manner that ensures a greater sense of inclusivity accommodating all students. Moreover, the ethnography presented in this paper, at least in the view of the researcher, did not encounter instances of overt discrimination or marginalization of underrepresented students that culturally responsive pedagogies would be suited to address. Therefore, it would be presumptuous to assume that the pedagogical implications presented here can serve as a panacea to all the ills that college classrooms in the United States might face.

The only assertion that can be reasonably made by this research is that teacher practices that establish rapport, center education around the needs and knowledge of learners, and equalizes power dynamics between teacher and student are the precursor to pedagogies that respect and negotiate differences among all learners. At minimum, the findings presented through this research should be part of a larger discussion about the nature of the university classroom and what teaching and learning can look like in order to produce the most effective learner outcomes in higher education.

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