

Building Academic Literacy from Student Strength: An Interdisciplinary Life History Project

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ABSTRACT: U.S. high school graduates for whom the home language is not English run the risk of inadequate preparation for the rigors of higher education. Whether this poor preparation is the result of disruptions caused by the transition to a new country/language/culture, or of a watered-down high school curriculum that reacts to language error but does not always help the student develop a rich academic literacy, there is a need for courses and assignments that acknowledge the strengths of multilingual writers and that build fluency and academic literacy in ways that allow students to make meaningful connections with the college curriculum. This article describes a pilot ethnographic research course, life history project designed in collaboration with a professor in Family Social Science and two ESL basic writing instructors.

Throughout my life, I had thought that writers were naturally gifted with the ability to write, but my thought was far off from the reality. I learned from my life history project that anybody can be writer if they dig into the writing process, and commit to writing.

— First-year student (writing in his third language)

Much has been written recently about the academic needs of multilingual students who find themselves at the intersection between ESL and basic writing as they enter college (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Murie and Thomson; Portes; Roberge; Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix). The term “generation

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1.5” has been used recently to describe students who are not fully first- or second-generation immigrants, students who were born in one country but now reside (and go to school) in another country. More broadly defined, these are students for whom the home language is not English but who are graduating from U.S. high schools. Unlike the more traditional international student, whose native-language literacy has been more fully developed in the home country through secondary and post-secondary schools, a “generation 1.5” student may have a disrupted education, a less developed native language literacy, and may have learned English more through exposure than through systematic, disciplined study of English as a foreign or second language. On the positive side, compared to the more traditional international student, a “generation 1.5” graduate from a U.S. high school is likely to enter college with more idiomatic fluency in English, wider experience living in U.S. culture, and a greater investment in education and career placement. Nevertheless, this resident (generation 1.5, immigrant/refugee, language-minority) student is more likely than an international student to end up in a basic writing program, for many of the same reasons that other basic writers are there: less experience with academic reading/writing, non-standard features of writing, an uneven high school preparation for college, and lower placement test scores. Like other basic writing students, these are students who need courses that are rich in literacy and offer ways for them to develop a sense of self and voice in college. For these students, it is not enough to review features of English in preparation for college writing, there is a critical need to build academic literacy (Adamson; Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Kutz; MacGowan-Gilhooly; Murie and Thomson; Spack; Zamel “Acquiring,” “Strangers”).

This article describes a Life History Project developed to engage multilingual students in extensive writing for real purposes. Through this project, students developed an extended biography, or life history, of an elder in their community, based on data collected from six hours of interviews. Students interviewed the elder three times, drafting and revising the life history to create a final document to be presented to the elder as a gift. This assignment plays to the strengths of the writers, positioning them not as “language deficient” ESL students, but as bilingual, bicultural experts engaged in a significant writing project that documents the life of a family member or acquaintance in the community.

DISRUPTED ACADEMIC LITERACY

It is easy enough to position “generation 1.5” students as deficient—in fact, the label itself has come to imply deficiency. Students who move to a new country early in their lives, switching languages mid-stream, often experience disrupted education, making it difficult to develop full literacy in their native language. A Vietnamese student who leaves Vietnam in second grade has fewer opportunities to become a proficient reader and writer of Vietnamese. At the same time, it takes some years before that student has reached grade level in coursework in English, creating potential difficulties in both languages. For families entering the U.S. as refugees, there can be additional disruptions caused by displacement during the resettlement process. For the Somali students we are currently seeing at the University of Minnesota, for example, there has typically been a four- to six-year stay in refugee camps in Kenya, often with limited access to schooling during that time. For Hmong students a generation ago, this disruption was even more extreme, with seven to twelve years in Thai refugee camps, where instruction, if available at all, was in Lao or Thai, and families generally had no written materials in Hmong. Even with continuous education, a student who arrives in a new country will face the disruptions caused by a switch to another language and a different education system. Thomas and Collier’s extensive research on language-minority students demonstrates that for students switching to a new language in their schooling, it takes five to seven years to be on a par with other students at that grade level; for students with limited schooling in their first language, this increases to seven to ten years. Across all groups studied, the most significant variable predicting how much time students need to reach grade parity is the amount of formal schooling they had in their first language.

Once a student has entered public schools in the U.S., the “catch-up” game begins. One problem is the lack of consistency in approaches to teaching English, which Mark Roberge characterizes as “a bewildering variety of programs, classroom placement options and instructional approaches, e.g. bilingual, ESL, immersion, two-way immersion, sheltered content, remedial/developmental, pull-out, and mainstream” (116). For a mobile population, this means repeated shifts in how English is taught, inconsistent guidelines for mainstreaming in the schools, and a lack of coherence in the overall education. Premature mainstreaming or mainstreaming based primarily on oral proficiency may mask deeper weaknesses students have with read-

ing and writing. Long-term ESL placement, on the other hand, may deprive students of critical college-preparation coursework. Students who are adjusting to a new language, making up for disruptions in education, and coping with all of the questions and concerns of any first-generation college student, have numerous reasons for finding the transition to higher education difficult. In high school, these students may well have missed out on important academic training: how to read extended academic texts, how to analyze information, how to pull from different sources in developing a paper, how to cite references, how to read critically. In short, many of the resident students graduating from U.S. high schools, unlike the academically trained international ESL students, need developmental work in acquiring academic literacy.

GENERATION 1.5 MEETS COLLEGE

This is not to say that for many second-language students graduating from U.S. high schools, the academic preparation is not excellent and the transition to college relatively smooth. For under-prepared multilingual students, however, the impact of this under-preparedness on academic progress can be significant. Some students are denied access to higher education altogether because entrance test scores are compared to scores of native speakers of English or because of legislation that restricts remedial course instruction (Smoke). Other students are placed into ESL courses with foreign international students, whose needs are often very different (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Still others are placed into basic writing or developmental reading courses, where the instructors may or may not have expertise in working with second-language students.

Under-preparedness at the college level can lead to a perpetuation of the kind of deficit instruction students received in high school. If a student has not mastered English, it is tempting for teachers not to demand large reading loads nor to engage in lengthy discussions, and so students in pre-college ESL programs are again likely to have more limited assignments and short readings, when regular college students must be able to read, for example, two chapters of a challenging anthropology textbook every week. Writing that contains language errors is often met with hostility and discomfort about “standards” and grading (Zamel “Strangers”). Teachers may be reluctant to demand much extended writing if that writing is error-ridden, leading again to a diminished literacy development. Students who have not done much extended writing, performed research tasks, or read much academic text, may flounder in college.

If the need is to acquire college-level literacy, then we must move beyond traditional ESL skills-based courses that focus primarily on grammar and language learning. Recent literature on ESL writing calls for this shift. Instruction must move away from what Vivian Zamel refers to as a “static notion of language” as separate from knowledge where “language must be in place and fixed in order to do the work of the course” (“Strangers” 6). Rather than a limited, skills-based model of language and learning, second-language writers need “multiple opportunities to use language and write-to-learn, course work that draws on and values what students already know, classroom exchanges and assignments that promote the acquisition of unfamiliar language, concepts and approaches to inquiry, evaluation that allows students to demonstrate genuine understanding” (Zamel, “Strangers” 14). Disrupted or inadequate high school preparation results in students needing coursework that assists them in building academic confidence and competence—coursework that includes source-based writing, that helps students to develop a writer’s voice and to find a legitimate place in the curriculum. Trudy Smoke calls for “curricula that stress communicative discourse, ethnography, and multicultural perspectives to give diverse groups material they can identify with and find relevant” (210). Eleanor Kutz urges us to build courses that acknowledge students’ prior knowledge and “underlying competence” to “provide a base for their participation in academic communities” (92).

THE LIFE HISTORY PROJECT

The Life History Project described here is our response to this need for assignments that build academic literacy in ways that also allow students to create a place for themselves and their own history in the curriculum. The project calls for extensive writing, with a rich data-gathering phase and the synthesis of historical and personal stories, and it acknowledges the expertise that students have as bilingual, bicultural writers.

It was important to us to create a project that moved beyond the arena of ESL writing instruction to connect with other academic fields at the University. Daniel Detzner, in Family Social Science, had for years used life history projects in his Families and Aging course at the University, and in his research on Southeast Asian families. A grant from the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing on campus funded the collaboration. During the pilot year, Robin Murie and Molly Rojas Collins, instructors of the two courses, gave the assignments, worked with the students on their writing,

and offered writing and editing advice. Detzner visited the classes weekly, offering training in how to interview elders effectively, holding class discussions on the impact of aging and life course development, sharing his own research and writing process, and talking about how one fits pieces of a life puzzle together to create a life history. Detzner's expertise and social science training gave an added academic legitimacy to the project. Moreover, by serving as an additional reader of these life histories, Detzner broadened the audience for the papers to include a professor outside the field of ESL. Although the grant that funded Detzner's participation has run out, he still volunteers to visit the class several times a semester to talk about his research with life histories and to offer students advice on developing interview questions and putting a life history together. In addition, we have developed a collaboration with the Immigration History Research Center on campus, whose library has begun an archive of these student-written life histories. Collins and Murie, ESL writing and literature instructors, adapted this project to fit the needs of two different courses in the Commanding English Program on campus: one, an immigration literature course and the other, a basic writing research course.

The Commanding English Program, now in its twenty-fifth year at the University of Minnesota, is designed for resident first-year students for whom English is not the home language and who, based on entrance tests, demonstrate a need for continued language support. Unlike an intensive ESL program for international students, Commanding English builds language and academic skills into a curriculum constructed of courses typical of the freshman year. The program is mandatory, but offers a supported first-year curriculum that is credit-bearing and fills many of a student's distribution requirements (social science, science with a lab, humanities, literature, writing). Students take a two-semester basic writing sequence, immigration literature, college speech, and reading classes that are connected to courses in humanities, social science, and lab science. Students take one linked pair each semester. The reading instructor uses textbook material from the course with which he or she is linked, so that students are both developing reading skills within the context of an academic field and, at the same time, receiving supplemental support for the content course—sociology or biology, for example. (For a full description of the program, see Murie and Thomson. The program website is: www.gen.umn.edu/programs/ce/.) The goal of the program is to support students in their acculturation to academic coursework: reading 100 pages of sociology a week; annotating

and responding critically to readings; drafting and revising literature essays; developing and writing up a research project. The Life History project fit naturally into this framework of improving English language mastery by doing real college coursework.

The project was piloted successfully in two different courses in our curriculum. The first pilot of the project was offered in a section of Literature of the American Immigrant Experience that had a companion Writing Workshop, where much of the drafting could take place. This paired combination was being taught in a high school outreach program that offers college courses to academically motivated second-language high school students. The high school juniors in this course, offered during the first semester, came from a variety of countries: U.S.-born Hmong whose families were from Laos, students from Mexico, Ecuador, Somalia, the Ukraine, and Pakistan. Many of them had not read full novels or written extensively in English before. The focus of the project, in addition to helping students build fluency and ease as writers, was on exploring literature from the inside out. Students were asked to consider how writers make choices on what story material to include and to notice what techniques writers use to make a story interesting. Students drafted the project in the Writing Workshop and turned it in for a grade in the literature course.

The second pilot of the project had a more deliberate research component so that it fit as a topic choice for the second-semester research writing course. Students in the program were given the choice of three research topics: international human rights, leading to extended research on a human rights issue of the student's choosing; topics of race, class, and gender, relating to a sociology course in the program; and the third topic, described here, writing a life history of an elder. The section of writing that offered this topic was deliberately scheduled at the same time as one of the other sections, so that students were choosing the section for its content, not because of the time schedule. Not all immigrant students care to highlight their status as newcomers or to engage with others in their community as part of a graded writing course. Identity is important, particularly for adolescents negotiating between cultures (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal). Students who may be striving to fit in on campus should not be required to position themselves as members of an ethnic or immigrant community, and so it was important for us to make this particular topic of research a voluntary one. In the research writing course, the focus of the project became more academic. Students read articles on the life process, cross-cultural studies

about aging, and social science articles about life history writing and remembering. A sampling of readings included: “Vietnamese War Widow” (Freeman); a chapter from a text on aging entitled “Aging in Other Cultures” (Barrow), and Detzner’s article “Conflict in Southeast Asian Refugee Families: A Life History Approach.” Students were also asked to do library and web research to broaden their focus beyond their interview material.

Components of the Life History Project

In both the literature and the research courses, the project had similar components. We began by asking students to locate an elder whom they would interview at three different times during the semester. Students were told about the importance of doing ethical work with human subjects and given clearance forms for both the elder and student to sign. Human Subjects clearance during the pilot year was obtained in a way that protected the privacy of the elder: the final projects were returned to the student, who gave a copy to the elder, but no portion of the biographies was kept by anyone at the University. Currently, Human Subjects documents have been rewritten to give the elder an option to have their life history archived at the University’s Immigration History Research Center, or to be shared as an example in future classes. Not all students chose to interview an elder from their own ethnic community, and this was fine. In fact, it was important to all three of us that the students not be made to define themselves as refugees or be held to interviewing an elder in their own community. Interestingly, even a number of those who chose to interview someone from outside their immigrant community ended up telling an immigration story—but from a much earlier time in history.

Both courses began with an introduction and discussion of what a life history is. Students read articles about immigrant elders, thought about whom they would interview, and arranged the mechanics of setting up interviews, locating a tape recorder, etc. (See Appendix B.) Students in the research writing class began with a short paper defining the concept of an elder, based on both their individual and community definitions. The class discussed these definitions, and the potential of differences across cultures. As a way to begin thinking about how to ask questions and do follow-up probing, students were asked to bring in a biographical object—an artifact or treasured possession that holds an important place in the owner’s life. The instructors modeled this process by presenting biographical objects of their own and responding to follow-up questions from the class. Students

then brought in their objects, answering questions as the others in class probed for the object's importance. This preliminary assignment helped students to develop interview skills and observational techniques and to notice the richness that one detail can bring to a story. In the research-writing course, students wrote a short paper on the history and meaning of their biographical object, including important details. One goal of this writing assignment was to practice the detailed writing and storytelling they would be doing later in the course.

The core of the project consisted of three separate interviews with the elder, focused on youth, middle age, and old age. Each of the three interviews took one to two hours and was written up as a five- to seven-page prewriting, so that by the time students were working on the final project, they had gathered impressive amounts of material. Each of these three prewritings was not simply a transcription of the interview, but the first attempt at writing up the story of this part of the person's life. At the beginning of each life stage interview, the class reflected on that particular stage of life, discussing what life experiences they might anticipate hearing about and, as a group, composing interview questions to elicit information. Sample questions are included in Appendix A. At the end of each interview phase, students debriefed as a class: addressing such questions as what was going well, what were the frustrations, how does one draw out information without being intrusive, and so on. Students in the research writing class had the additional task of finding library and web-based sources to give context to the life history at each stage. Throughout the semester students worked on research methods and strategies, building a bibliography of material relevant to their subject and learning to make appropriate transitions between individual stories and wider historical perspectives.

Feedback on the three prewritings focused on the content and typically included requests for more detail, comments about particularly interesting passages, and suggestions of ways to extend the writing and to work on the organization and pacing of the story. Comments also looked ahead to the next interview and prewriting cycle. The prewritings allowed the instructors to identify problems that students might be facing early on—a student without the first prewriting, for example, might be having difficulty accessing or communicating effectively with the elder—and then could offer advice on strategies to elicit better interviews or on selecting a different person to work with. While our focus was on content, we gave feedback if a persistent pattern of error was observed (control over past/present tense, for

example) or if language problems interfered with basic comprehension. The prewritings comprised the bulk of the writing in the first half of the course and were spaced in such a way as to provide students with continuous feedback and to ensure that they were completing the work in a timely manner. (During the pilot year, Collins and Detzner shared the task of providing feedback to students. Currently, this is done by the writing instructor alone.)

During the final weeks of the course, students compiled their draft material into a coherent narrative. Here class discussion centered around how to put the “puzzle” together from the prewritings, and students worked on what information to include, what information to add, how to organize, what sub-headings to use, how to introduce the project, whether to include photographs, illustrations, family tree diagrams, maps, poetry, and in the case of the research course, how to incorporate the outside research done on aspects of the history that this person had lived through. Students wrote two drafts of this final project. On the first draft, they received feedback on content and organization, and on the second draft, on language and form.

As a final piece, students in both pilots were asked to write a short reflection paper, expressing their own thoughts on the project. During the last week of the semester an oral reading was arranged, with invited guests, who responded to the projects. At one of these, the dean of the college, himself an expert in African-American History, spoke as one of the guests, about the importance of gathering oral histories, encouraging the students to continue this kind of writing. A representative from the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing also attended, expressing enthusiasm for funding further projects of this nature.

Strengths of the Project as a Writing Assignment

The Life History Project allowed students to build academic literacy in multiple ways. It asked the writers to connect the story of the elder they interviewed with more academic conversations about human development, cultural practices, historical contexts, international policies, and the situation of the elderly, and in particular of elderly immigrants, in the U.S. This combination of substantial amounts of drafting and revising and of connecting personal and academic writing made this an effective assignment for the bilingual, bicultural writers in our program. It was clear to all three of us from the onset that students were receptive to this assignment and willing to write, and all of the students in both courses completed their projects on time, with energy, and rated their experiences highly.

Success was measured informally in numerous ways: through class participation, by what students said about the project to the guests at the final reading, in course evaluations, and in comments written in the reflection papers. None of this gave us the kind of quantitative data that could be used to formally evaluate the project. This must be left to a future study. However, the measures that we did have all pointed to a project that was highly successful. Course evaluations were as high as any in the program. In the high school literature course evaluation, students were asked whether they would recommend this project to future students: all but one said yes. Two of these high school students went on to win Gates Millennium Scholarships their senior year (out of the 1,000 given nation-wide), and all but two of the students are in college now. Surely, the college coursework they took with us while in high school played a part in this success. Perhaps most telling were the comments students made in their reflective papers, some of which are incorporated in the discussion that follows.

The final project, based on the three interviews and interview write-ups, was long: fifteen to twenty-three pages. But how did the project serve to build academic writing proficiency? It seemed to us that there were a number of strengths to the design of this project.

Audience and purpose were real. While the life histories were submitted for a course grade and returned to the student, the ultimate goal was to create a document that could be passed on to the person who had been interviewed. This concrete audience and purpose added meaning to the project and also guided revision decisions. For example, when one student wondered whether the project should include specific names on the family tree, she decided that because this was being written as a family document—history being recorded for this family’s archives—that, yes, specific names and dates would be more useful.

For many of the students, the Life History Project became much more than a course assignment, a theme expressed frequently in the students’ reflection papers. A Hmong student wrote of his deepened appreciation of what his father had gone through to get the family out of Laos. Another student described the honor of being able to give her paper as a gift to her aunt, writing: “To me this was the most important paper that I have ever written because I have given all the effort I could give to a paper and it is more than a paper to me.” This outside purpose, to create a polished document for the elder, became more and more important as the course progressed, and many of the students requested extra time and additional editing feedback to polish the paper.

Data collection was extensive. One of the difficulties novice writers have is generating enough material to work with, something that can be even more of a constraint for those writing in a second or third language. As a result of doing three long interviews, students had pages of stories, descriptions, and commentary. Each interview segment was drafted, so that students had at least fifteen pages of notes to work from as they put the final project together. Students in the writing course had the additional research component, with teacher feedback on various summaries of their research findings along the way. As one student wrote in the final reflection paper:

Having the prewriting due with enough time has totally helped to build and stabilize the whole life story. . . . [T]he hardest part of the paper was at the end when I had to convert three prewritings into one big writing about twenty pages long. This process took me days because each prewriting contained different information that fit in many ways in this paper. . . . [T]he harder the paper, the more interesting it was becoming because it was sort of like a puzzle that connected.

Many of the students expressed satisfaction with the amount of information they had to draw upon in writing the final project.

Research was contextualized. Students enrolled in the research course were given the task of extending the personal story of their elder with research from written sources. This proved to be a challenging but productive task. Students first had to identify places in the life story of the elder where the reader would want or need more context—this could be historical, cultural, or even theoretical. Because they had the life history as a foundation, students were able to discard unrelated sources, but faced challenges in finding research that gave the information they needed. This generated fruitful discussions about the audience and purpose of research in academic writing. It changed the assignment from telling one person's story, to creating a more academic, research-based document that explored historical and cultural forces in the life of an individual. Students read historical documents, conference proceedings, anthropological studies, web documents, articles, and visited the archives of the Immigration History Center on campus. By having a clear context, students were better able to pull out information from the research, choosing what was important for their subject's life and finding ways to incorporate the information into the life history.

This context helped novice researchers to move away from the problem of what to include from the sources they read. As one student noted: “Research methods make big papers more extended and it gives more ideas and new shades. When researching, it is very important to know what exactly you are looking for.” The research component was one area where the writers consistently described themselves as being stretched and challenged.

Student work was connected to literature. In the Immigration Literature course, this history research component was not required. Instead, as students read works of immigration literature, they asked questions about how the piece was written, whose life story was being told, what information was included, and how they thought the writer crafted the story to create literature. Students looked at the use of metaphor in *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (Lum McCunn), the use of dialogue to create dramatic effect in *Bread Givers* (Yezierska), the use of description and specific detail to create imagery in *Farewell to Manzanar* (Wakatsuki Houston and Houston), and considered how some of these techniques might work in their own pieces. Writing a life history as part of this course gave students an inside view of literature and the process of creating stories. Students enhanced the life histories with family photographs, maps, illustrations, poetry, and artistic cover designs. One writer began her father’s life history with Hmong creation stories, as a way into the thinking and belief systems of Hmong elders. To produce a life story, all of the writers had to sequence and create narrative out of the information they had from their interviews.

Writing was seen as a creative process. In their reflection papers and in discussions at the end-of-term oral reading, students in both the literature and research courses commented that through this project they felt they were being asked to become writers: making choices about what to include, what to delete, how to present information, whether to write in the first person or third person, when to add direct quotations and when to summarize the story. Their responses reflected an appreciation of the choices they were given autonomy to make: “I feel like I am a real writer now.” As one student wrote: “I found out that telling a life story is very complicated, more like a puzzle than real life. If you don’t tell the story in order, it wouldn’t make any sense to anybody.” Another student summed it up this way: “I learned how to become a descriptive writer which is a enjoyable work and elaborating things for the reader. I learned as a writer you have to be sincere when telling a story of a person, but at the same time you are the author and you decide what part of the story you want to tell and how will you use the research.”

Extended drafting and reader response created a safe place to develop fluency. If one is to build confidence and voice as a writer in another language, it is important to have a place to write safely. Students drafted three interview prewritings without having to worry about a writing teacher's typical focus on errors, thesis statements, and other features of writing that often elicit judgmental response. Commentary, instead, focused on meaning: asking for clarification, for more detailed description, responding to particularly moving passages, suggesting areas to focus on in the final project. Editing comments were reserved for global patterns (past/present tense shifting) or places where meaning was unclear. The sheer volume of writing was impressive to both the teachers and the students: three interview prewritings, description, history notes all leading to the final fifteen- to twenty-page project. The effect on students' English was also visible to us. In one student's words: "At first, I was satisfied by the ideas that I have put for my paper but I had problems with some grammar. Later on I have noticed that my grammar has improved and had less editing to do." Another student wrote: "As a writer I changed a lot over the semester. I had lots of problems with editing, tenses, and articles. At the end of the semester I didn't have that many problems with tense. . . . When I finished each part, I felt like I had accomplished a lot." Interestingly, this perceived improvement with verb tense and articles came more from the push toward fluency than from focused grammar editing. The other noticeable effect was related to students' confidence as writers: over and over students told us that they were impressed that they had written such a long paper.

Students were able to find themselves in the curriculum. As a writing project, this assignment demanded that students write extensively, synthesize information from research and interviews to build a life history, make decisions on what to highlight and what to reduce or cut; it asked for creativity, and it demanded serious attention, since the end result was a gift to an elder as much as a grade. But beyond developing writing skill, the project also created a place within a school assignment for students who often must struggle to find themselves in the curriculum, and in so doing, generated important learning that was genuinely connected to students' lives. In many cases, this assignment connected the writer to the elder in new ways as well. The students' reflection papers spoke to this:

If I go back to the person I interviewed, who was a neighbor and a best friend of my dad . . . I knew this man for about fourteen years, but the knowledge I had from him was far from what I learned about

him after conducting an interview. . . . I was able to feel and see how life went to this old man. I was able to see how he believed in me and decided to share with me his life history. Through his experiences I learned that one can make a person from himself if he/she has confidence in himself/herself.

The most interesting part of the project was interviewing the elder because when she was telling her story, I felt the same feelings that she was expressing. For example, when she was talking about her house, she was showing me the pictures of the house and also the pictures of the bombed house. She used lots of sad words when she was talking about it. I could feel the depth of her sadness from her face.

Connections to elders may be particularly important in families undergoing a cultural shift. Intergenerational tensions may be part of an inevitable dynamic within most families; conflict between generations is inherent in immigrant families because of the very different historical, linguistic, and social experiences of youth, parents, and grandparents in the original and the adopted countries (Detzner "Conflict"). Although we do not have conclusive evidence for a positive change in the attitudes of the students engaged in the life history project, we noted a considerable empathetic response among students as the life story unfolded during the semester. Students recorded the courage, strength, determination, and sacrifice that parents and grandparents needed over many years as they sought a safe haven for their families. One student expressed a new admiration for the resilience and power of her Somali aunt, who had left home to get an education, had built up several business ventures in Somalia, Kenya, and now in Minnesota, and had clearly persevered against formidable odds. We did not survey elders' perceptions of the assignment; however, other researchers indicate that the life review process that occurs when an elder brings to consciousness the experiences of a long life has a positive, therapeutic impact (Butler; Baum).

When the life history project was extended with library research, students were asked to find themselves in the curriculum in more academic ways. At the University, outside of a few Global Studies or African History courses, there are not many places in the curriculum where a Somali or Oromo student is likely to see a reflection of her own history or experiences.

The research students did for their projects led directly to information about why the family had chosen to emigrate, to specific information about historical conflicts in the home country, to articles about cultural practices such as bride price or nomadic life, to political discussion of colonialism that had shaped conflicts that brought families to the United States. Students were researching the forces behind their own family history. Some had emigrated when they were too young to understand what was happening, others later in their teen years when assimilating to the new culture may take on more importance than listening to an elder. Parents are sometimes reluctant to discuss the traumatic and humiliating events of their family life with their children, hoping to shield them from the pain of adult life. Or they may assume that the children understand these experiences implicitly. As a result, some refugee children find themselves cut off from their homeland, native language, and friends without really understanding what happened or why the parents were forced to leave (Detzner et al.).

Not all of the students chose to interview an elder from their community. Several students selected U.S.-born elders (librarians, former high school teachers), and in so doing gained access to information about American family values, religious views, struggles for education and employment, worries about the future of today's youth, and so on. Nor were all of the interviews face to face. One student purchased a phone card to interview her grandmother in Ecuador, and from the write-up, it was clear that these phone conversations had created an important link between them.

This project rejected the deficit model of “remediation.”

One of the real strengths of this project, it seemed to us, was that it positioned the writers as experts, calling on the expertise of students who are bilingual and bicultural and building on the students' access to several languages and cultures. These students are the ones who can speak both languages, who can capture the story and write it in English so that future grandchildren might also read it. Several students did talk about the difficulty of doing the translation work between languages, feeling that important nuances were lost in the transition to the English language; nevertheless, they were able to complete the life histories in English, the language in which the next generation in these families will be more conversant. Beyond language, the students also know enough of the home culture to be able to interview an elder with the appropriate deference and intuition about what questions to ask, or not to ask. One Vietnamese writer described the strategies he planned to use if the Cambodian elder he was interviewing did not want to talk about his experiences under the Pol Pot regime. He explained

that he would politely ask a gentle question, but if he sensed reluctance, he would move to a different question. As it turned out, the elder did want to tell his story, but in all likelihood, the cultural sensitivity of the interviewer was the key to setting up a comfortable space for the story to be told. As a Southeast Asian himself, the student had insights on how to work with this elder, gaining a trust that an outsider might not have. (Through an undergraduate research grant, this student has continued to compile life histories of other Southeast Asian refugees.)

FINAL REFLECTION

The students, in their final reflection papers and in the presentations at the end of the semester told of the importance of gathering the stories they included in their life histories. The trip to the Immigration History Center on campus had demonstrated the dearth of materials written about recent immigrant families and also showed that there was a place in the archives for family documents, memoirs, and oral histories. In addition to sensing the importance of doing this type of writing, students also clearly felt they had learned a great deal about writing, which was reflected both in their writing over the course of the term and in their comments in response to the question: “What have you learned in the course?” Sample responses to this question included:

This class helped a lot and I learned a lot because my writing has improved. I can research anything I want.

I have learned how to do an interview and using research to support the paper.

I believe that my writing has not only changed in this class, but it has also improved in my other classes. For instance, I learned how to be specific and explain things in the order that they happened, so that the reader would know the main theme of my paper without any confusion.

It helped me learn a lot about Somalia.

Students wrote that they had learned how to interview, to ask good questions and follow them up; they had learned how to incorporate research and how to organize a long project: “In my first draft, I repeated a lot of

information, had long paragraphs, didn't do good editing, but as I continued with my writing, I learned how to not repeat the same information, shorten the paragraphs and explain them, how to edit and also how to use sub-headings."

Were the papers perfect? No. They were written by novice writers. Not all of the elders were equally forthcoming in their accounts of their lives, not all of the writers were able to produce strong writing. However, the papers were interesting to read and all three of us left the course wishing there had been ways to keep copies for ourselves. We will remember the Hmong writer who described his father's boyhood in the mountains of Laos in vivid detail—the chicken feast for a large, hungry family, the games boys played, and the more meager meals of salt and rice and hot pepper. There were odd parallels with a Mexican family across the globe in a paper that described similar poverty and meals of tortillas with salt, rice, and hot pepper. This assignment challenged the top writers in the class, who produced detailed, crafted pieces. The project also seemed accessible to the less accomplished writers, helping them to build fluency and tell a worthwhile story.

The Life History Project was the result of collaboration between two departments, with partial funding from a grant from the Center for Interdisciplinary Writing on campus. For us, the legitimacy of a social science researcher combined with the expertise of second-language writing instructors was important to the success of the project. Students responded positively to the "visiting professor" and to the serious attention their writing received. It took extra resources to team-teach the course in this way, but the initial pilot project is now ready for further dissemination.

It is our impression that the students in both the literature and the research course left with an appreciation for writing and a confidence that comes from writing a major project that is well received. The project resulted in education that connected students to real learning and substantial literacy growth. Our primary goals were to empower students as writers to use their own voices and histories in an academic context and to give them confidence as researchers working with complex issues. If the assignment also enhanced harmony between generations that are frequently at odds over the Western values and "strange ideas" that young students bring home with them from college, then it had additional benefits not easily measured by the number of pages written or the final grades given. There may be lessons here for basic writing instructors of both immigrant and non-immigrant students and for those who seek to strengthen the curriculum

with multicultural content. Basic writers—whatever their native language or dialect—do not need to be restricted to a deficit curriculum of paragraph writing or short, formulaic essays. Even when English has not been fully “mastered,” it can be used for meaningful writing that is significant for the student authors. By so doing, students can be brought into the real work of the academy—writing to record and make meaning of the information and the stories that are important in our lives.

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APPENDIX A

Prompts to Elicit Interview Questions for the Life History Project

Early Years:

These questions focus on getting description and stories from childhood.

- Where did you grow up?
- Describe your home/house/village/city/block.
- Who lived in the house with you?
- What rules did your family have?
- Were rules different for boys than for girls?
- What were the consequences of breaking the rules?
- What responsibilities did various family members have? What were your responsibilities as a child?
- Did you go to school? What was it like? Describe the school.
- Did you play any games?
- What type of family or community celebrations did you have?

Middle Years:

These questions focus on major life events and experience of adulthood.

- Is there an important object or photograph from adulthood that tells a lot about you at that stage of life?
- Where were you living during this period of life and what was going on in your village, region, or country at that time?
- What are 2-3 events or experiences from your middle years that are important memories to you?
- Did you face any serious difficulties, obstacles, or barriers at this time in life? Were you able to overcome those barriers?
- Did you get married? If so, how did you meet and what was the ceremony like?
- Did you have children? If so, describe each one briefly.
- Who lived in the house with you during these years? What were the responsibilities of each?
- What was the work that you did to help support the family?

Later Years:

These questions are focused on later life and the reflections and advice about life.

- What does it mean to be an elder in your culture and family?
- How is life different in the old world and the new?
- What do you miss the most about the old world and what do you like most about the new world?
- What are your hopes for the next generation?
- What have you learned in your life that you want future generations to know?
- What values do you believe are most important for the children to remember and practice in the future?
- What does it mean to be a strong family?

APPENDIX B

Tips for Interviewing

This list is a compilation of some of the advice students were given before they did the interviews. Each interview was followed by a class debriefing of the process.

- Set up a date and time for the interview.
- Having a tape recorder will free you up from notetaking so that you can interact with the person you are interviewing. Make sure the tape recorder works, has batteries, etc.
- An elder may need you to speak loudly enough, articulate clearly. Try to avoid distractions in the room (radio, television, other people) if you can.
- How long should the interview be? An hour and a half should be enough. Don't overstay your welcome, but let the person say what needs to be said.
- Is it appropriate to bring some food or a small gift to the interview?
- Plan ahead and write down the questions you want to ask. Before you do the interview, it is a good idea to tell the person what you want to talk about in the interview so they can prepare.
- Ask good follow-up questions. Probing for details is a key.
- Expect both joys and sorrows from someone who has had a long life. The joys are easy to hear; the sorrows may become difficult. You are not a counselor and if you sense that the elder has painful memories, you can back off and move to a new topic. On the other hand, you don't need to run away from a tearful moment if the elder still seems to want to talk. This is something that you need to judge sensitively. When in doubt, back off.
- End each interview with a positive question so that the conversation finishes on an upbeat note. "What was your favorite memory of . . . ?"
- Always thank your informant at the end of the interview and ask if they have questions for you.