EMERGING INFORMATION LITERACY IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE ESL AND LIBRARY LEARNING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored the information literacy acquisition of 23 students enrolled in a learning community consisting of an advanced English as a Second Language (ESL) writing class and a one-unit class introducing students to research at a suburban community college library in California. As there are no other known learning communities that link an ESL course to a library course, this site afforded a unique opportunity to understand the ways in which ESL students learn to conduct library research. Students encountered difficulties finding, evaluating, and using information for their ESL assignments. Strategies that the students, their ESL instructor, and their instructional librarian crafted in response were enabled by the learning community structure. These strategies included integration of the two courses’ curricula, contextualized learning activities, and dialogue. ESL students in this study simultaneously discovered new language forms, new texts, new ideas, and new research practices, in large part because of the relationships that...
developed over time among the students, instructor, and instructional librarian. Given the increasing number of ESL students in higher education and the growing concern about their academic success, this study attempts to fill a gap in the research literature on ESL students’ information literacy acquisition.

Keywords: Information literacy; community college libraries; ESL; learning communities

INTRODUCTION

When writing a research paper for a history class, preparing a speech in a communications class, or creating a poster presentation for a biology class, community college students encounter significant challenges while conducting course-related research. First, they must overcome numerous obstacles in gathering information, such as selecting and scoping their research topics, choosing appropriate search tools, and using effective search terms. Then they are expected by their professors to evaluate this information according to criteria which can be baffling. Finally they must incorporate this hard won information into their projects according to strict stylistic rules, often with vague but stern warnings about plagiarism ringing in their ears.

To assist students in negotiating the obstacles of the research process, librarians offer instruction in information literacy, a broad concept encompassing finding, evaluating, and using information. While the various aspects of information literacy are challenging for all students, they are especially difficult for students enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. However, the literature on ESL students’ information literacy is scant and is especially missing fine-grained, qualitative analysis.

This qualitative case study used ethnographic methods to examine the information literacy acquisition of a cohort of 23 community college students. The students, enrolled at Ladera College, a small, suburban community college in California, were simultaneously enrolled in ESL 300, a five-unit advanced ESL composition course one level below “college English,” and LIBR 10, a one-unit course introducing students to research during the Spring 2011 semester.

Ms. Morgan, the librarian in this study, and Ms. Shah, the ESL instructor, were interested in meaning-making through educational activities that mattered to the students. Throughout this study, students were observed
doing research on issues of interest to them, such as the impact of drug-related corruption on education in Colombia, the DREAM Act, women in traditional Mexican households, and the oppression of the Baha’i faith in Iran. Discussion of texts by Frederick Douglass, Amy Tan, David Sedaris, Howard Gardner, and Richard Rodriguez in ENGL 300 classes was coordinated with information literacy instruction in Library 10 sessions. As students engaged in writing activities in ESL 300 on themes such as education, gender, and identity, they did research on these themes in Library 10. This coordinated instruction prepared students for college-level courses requiring research. It was an approach to basic skills education antithetical to the kind of “remedial pedagogy” found in some pre-collegiate courses—a dreary developmental wasteland of drills, sub-skills and very few thrills critiqued by Grubb et al. (2011a). At the core of the learning community’s culture was a sense that college was about serious ideas. Both Ms. Shah and Ms. Morgan centered class activities on meaningful themes and on meaning-making.

Presenting moments throughout the semester when the students, with support from their instructors, found ways to succeed as novice researchers, this study emphasizes three strategies that were employed in response to research-related problems: integration of the two courses’ curricula, contextualized learning activities, and dialogue to support students as they wrestled with the complexities of research and the difficulties of academic texts. These strategies were made possible by the structure of the learning community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesizes research at the intersection of ESL students, community colleges, libraries, learning communities, and information literacy.

ESL Students

A number of complications arise when discussing students in community college ESL courses. These courses tend to have a heterogeneous population of students who come from diverse backgrounds—not only in terms of the variety of languages they speak but in many other ways, including the length of time they have been in the United States, the kinds of educational experiences they and their families have already had, and their
reasons for attending college (Bunch, Endris, Panayotova, Romero, & Llosa, 2010). This sketch, based on my notes taken during the study, attempts to capture the diversity of community college ESL students:

A 20-year-old Iranian religious refugee who arrived two years prior to the study sat in the fourth row back, hoping to major in engineering at Berkeley. Next to him was a South Korean international student who had only been in the country five months but who had already managed to see three Broadway musicals during Spring Break when he visited friends in New York. In front of him sat a 38-year-old mother of three by day and janitor by night who had lived in the U.S. for most of nine years, although she had moved back to Mexico for one year since her arrival. Three rows forward two 19-year-old women whispered to each other in Spanish. Both originally from El Salvador, they attended a local high school together before attending community college.

ESL students generally fall into one of four categories: recent immigrants, international students, long-term adult immigrants, and Generation 1.5 students (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). Generation 1.5 students, sometimes called United States Educated Language Minority (US-LM) students (Bunch, 2008), are those students who have come into the United States at various points in their childhood or early adolescence, mainly speak a language other than English in the home, and have been through the U.S. educational system. International students have usually had a great deal of education in their own countries, including extensive English coursework, and therefore have different strengths and needs from Generation 1.5 and recent immigrants. Long-term immigrants may have lived in the United States for many years or decades and may have learned English through post K-12 coursework. This study includes students from all of these categories.

Community college is the most important institution of higher education in the United States for ESL students (Bunch, 2008). Because California community colleges are not required to track the linguistic backgrounds of their students, we can only estimate the size of the state’s community college ESL population. Woodlief, Thomas, and Orozco’s (2003) estimate that one-quarter of community college students in California are immigrants begins to provide a rough idea of the ESL population. Adding to this population, international students — that is, students who usually have had considerable education in their home country, to which they plan to return after college — are also found in surprisingly sizable numbers in California’s community colleges. Of international students in California, 21% are enrolled in community college (Douglass, Edelstein, & Hoareau, 2011). One report claims that at some of California’s community college
The growing demographics of these students have led a number of scholars to describe the education of language minority students — of which ESL students are a subset — as a mainstream concern (Bunch et al., 2010; Enright, 2010; Gándara & Contreras, 2009). In fact, Enright (2010) refers to language minority students as part of a “new mainstream.” Since the academic success rates of ESL students tend to lag far behind those of traditional students, there is an urgent need to understand how to improve support of their academic development.

Community College

Because of their open enrollment policies, geographically dispersed distribution, and relatively low cost, community colleges are, for many ESL students, the only viable entry into higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In addition, community colleges offer sub-baccalaureate degrees or certificates, which can increase ESL students’ earning power (Prince & Jenkins, 2005). Community colleges also provide a second chance to those ESL students who have not experienced much success in their previous educational endeavors (Grubb et al., 2011b).

However, community college presents a number of barriers to ESL students achieving their educational goals, including institutional problems associated with chronic underfunding (Hayward, Jones, McGuinness, & Timar, 2004, p. 20), organizational problems (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2009), and pedagogical shortcomings (Grubb et al., 2011a). Students hoping to get a bachelor’s degree who begin in community college are much less likely than similar students who begin in a four-year institution to reach graduation day (Sengupta & Jepsen, 2006; Shulock & Moore, 2007). This problem is especially acute for historically underserved students (Sengupta & Jepsen, 2006).

Although students reap many benefits from ESL courses, such as increased confidence and opportunities to interact with students going through similar experiences, the problems they face are significant, including “high attrition rates, vast heterogeneity in student needs, lack of full-time ESL faculty, and low levels of funding” (Szelényi & Chang, 2002). “Remedial pedagogy” (Grubb et al., 2011a, pp. 46–51), including decontextualized ESL lessons on grammar and vocabulary and writing assignments about personal experiences, have led to ESL students being
simultaneously “underchallenged” and “underprepared” (Curry, 2004, p. 55). In addition, research on the stigma associated with ESL instruction indicates that some students, especially those who have lived for some time in the United States, resist ESL courses because the instruction or classmates do not seem to be a good match (ICAS ESL Task Force, 2006; Woodlief et al., 2003).

Long sequences of ESL coursework can be demoralizing for ESL students, who frequently are short on two crucial resources — time and money. Although there is evidence that most ESL students would profit from ESL support concurrent with their mainstream coursework (Bunch, 2008), Woodlief et al. (2003) found that “college staff tend to have a mistaken view that immigrants master English before crossing over into the academic or vocational coursework” (p. 17). There are very few courses in community college like the one in this study that serve as a bridge between ESL and mainstream coursework (Woodlief et al., 2003).

Libraries & ESL Students

When it comes to college-level research, most ESL students are like other community college students in being new to the practices, skills, concepts, and attitudes needed for gathering, evaluating, incorporating, and documenting sources of information. However, ESL students are different from other students in that they have both unique resources (Hughes, 2009; Tao, 2005) and unique challenges as they learn about research (Haras, Lopez, & Ferry, 2008; Tao, 2005). Of all the themes found in the research on ESL students in academic libraries, the most prominent is the way in which students’ ability to use the library and do research is impacted by language.

Throughout the literature, language limitations are cited as the most significant obstacle that ESL students face in using the library (Koontz, 2008), performing research activities in general (Haras et al., 2008), searching databases (Badke, 2011; Bordonaro, 2010), communicating with library staff (Conteh-Morgan, 2001), and using sources without committing plagiarism (Amsberry, 2008; Chen & Van Ullen, 2011).

Although research in librarianship specific to US-LM students enrolled in ESL classes is lacking, studies have looked at US-LM students as a group and their interactions with libraries (Asher, Case, & Zhong, 2009; Haras et al., 2008). In a study of US-LM high school students at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles, Haras (2010) found a need for these students to engage in more research projects and receive more information.
literacy instruction before they arrive at college. Haras’ emphasis on educational opportunities to do research and sustained information literacy instruction for high school students is remarkably congruent with Bunch et al.’s (2010) assertion that community college students need access to courses in which academic literacy is required in order to give these skills an opportunity to grow. Bunch et al. (2010) argue against conceiving of ESL programs as preparation for academic literacy practices and in favor of integrating language and academic skills: “[F]oreclosing access to … college-level courses for long periods of time may also foreclose access to the very conditions under which students might develop the language and literacy necessary for academic contexts” (p. 13).

A number of researchers found that Latino students viewed the academic library as supportive and as a place to conduct research (Adkins & Hussey, 2006; Haras et al., 2008; Kraemer, 1997). However, this favorable perception of the library is complicated by the fact that there appears to be a link between students’ comfort level in the library and their ability to use the library (Adkins & Hussey, 2006; Haras, 2010; Haras et al., 2008). This study builds on these findings by exploring the role of the learning community structure in providing a comfortable environment for learning about the library.

Research on international students in the academic library, which reaches back to the early 1970s (Conteh-Morgan, 2001; Davis, 2007), is almost exclusively about undergraduates in four-year institutions and graduate students. Much of this literature, especially the early articles, offers librarians a “cultural road map” with tips for effective cross-cultural interaction and communication (Conteh-Morgan, 2001, p. 30). According to Tao (2005), international students are often highly motivated, but they may experience difficulty adjusting to the culture, the language, the educational culture, and the library. Partnering with ESL instructors or the office of international students, welcoming students warmly, improving communication with them, and empathizing with their possible disorientation are advocated.

**Learning Communities**

The learning community is perhaps the most highly praised kind of curricular reform for improving the outcomes of community college ESL students. Although the term “learning community” can refer to a variety of course arrangements for all sorts of populations enrolled in all types of
institutions, for this review of learning communities and ESL students it is defined as a curricular structure in which “ESL and disciplinary faculty collaborate, along with the involvement of student support staff, either to team-teach a group of students or to offer concurrent enrollment in ESL and disciplinary, credit-bearing courses” (Bunch, 2009, Kindle Locations 5571–5574).

Many researchers have praised learning communities as structures that can benefit not only ESL students, but also all community college students (e.g., Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bunch et al., 2010; Engstrom & Tinto, 2007; Grubb et al., 2011b). Because learning communities tend to promote a synthesis of learning, strong communal academic and social ties, and effective pedagogical methods, they foster more meaningful learning and deeper involvement, resulting in significant positive impact on student persistence, academic and social engagement, student success, and more supportive peer groups (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Learning communities help to counter the tendency of ESL students to be segregated from the rest of community college, where they find themselves in extended, multi-level ESL programs. These programs are designed to prepare students to enter college-level courses but more often than not prepare them to exit college. Of a state-wide cohort of first year community college students in California, 65% of students in Basic Skills-ESL courses dropped out within one year of enrolling (Sengupta & Jepsen, 2006).

Overcoming this structural segregation and lowering the attrition rate by allowing students access to college-level work are chief benefits of learning communities. Enrollment in college-level courses allows students access to authentic texts and tasks, including academic texts and discourses, which provide real opportunities to develop academic literacy (Bunch, 2009; Messina, 2003, p. 192). Learning communities also provide a way to replace tedious, decontextualized drills on grammar and vocabulary found in some ESL classes with more challenging, engaging, and ultimately more enjoyable learning (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007; Visher, Schneider, Wathington, & Collado, 2010). In addition, students in learning communities tend to feel more self-confident and to feel supported by peers, by instructors, and by the college (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007). Indeed, ESL students in learning communities reported feeling supported by their college, a feeling that, in turn, “was the greatest predictor of increased self-reported learning outcomes” (Smith, 2010, p. 261).

This support is particularly important for ESL students’ academic growth, since it allows students to engage in class discussions (MacGregor, Tinto, & Lindblad, 2000; Messina, 2003; Tinto & Russo, 1994), and to ask
questions (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007). Providing educational environments that are purposefully configured to promote discussions and asking questions is important for all students. In exploring the structure of classroom interactions in a pre-collegiate community college course, Hull, Rose, Fraser, and Castellano (1991) assert the close relationship between “talk” and learning: “In the classroom it is through talk that learning gets done, that knowledge gets made” (p. 19). Analyzing the “talk” of language minority community college students, Losey (1997) also focuses on the learning context: “Learning occurs through social interaction .... If social interaction does not occur or is limited, then learning is limited or does not occur. When students are put in contexts that lead to silence, they continue to be denied educational equality” (p. 206). Learning communities provide a useful structure for the production of meaning through talk and are, therefore, an especially appropriate structure for ESL students. Engstrom and Tinto (2007) found that many ESL students enter our college doors not feeling “safe” to learn. They often entered college afraid to speak in class .... Their lack of confidence in their academic abilities, self-esteem, and identity as college students were directly tied to their ability to speak, read, and write English. The learning community experience consistently created a safe, engaging learning environment where students took risks and participated. (pp. 43–44)

Learning communities have been lauded as vehicles for welcoming ESL and other language minority students into community college (Bunch, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2007), for encouraging them to join campus organizations and get campus jobs (Engstrom & Tinto, 2007), and for ushering them through the process of transferring to a four-year institution (Ornelas & Solórzano, 2004, p. 245).

One aspect of the learning community structure often overlooked is its benefit for the instructors (Grubb & Associates, 1999). Learning communities provide opportunities for instructors to develop new strategies collaboratively. In that way teaching in a learning community looks like “continuous staff development” in which instructors discuss insights and implement innovative techniques over the course of a semester (Grubb & Associates, 1999, p. 265). These insights and techniques can be applied to students beyond the learning community.

There is limited research available about learning communities that include a library course. In most of the research, librarians expressed enthusiasm for learning communities and supported learning communities, but, except for four cases, a library course was not actually one of the linked courses (Pedersen, 2003). Of these, the most successful learning
communities appeared to be those with the highest levels of collaboration between librarian and content-area instructor. If there is scant evidence of substantial library involvement in learning communities in general, there is no evidence at all of substantial library instruction in learning communities involving ESL students. Indeed, the learning community in this study, which links ESL instruction with information literacy instruction, is either unique or rare.

Information Literacy

The approach to information literacy in this study was influenced in three ways. First, Luke and Kapitzke (1999) urge librarians to cultivate critical perspectives in students. Rather than treating research as a process in which students track down “truth” or “fact,” Luke and Kapitzke encourage librarians to present research as dialogue – a dialogue between the students and the information they encounter.

This study’s approach to information literacy also emphasized contextualizing information literacy. In the same ways that scholars have contested the term “literacy” when it is conceptualized as a set of neutral, portable, and generic skills – “the intellectual equivalent of all-purpose flour” (Hull, 1997, p. 17) – the term “information literacy” has been critiqued by some librarians as a kind of universal leavening agent, a dash of which can be generically added to any information seeking enterprise from researching polymers to finding a job. Students need help wading into the information waters of their particular disciplinal contexts, since information literacy practices in, for example, biology, are different from those in political science (Elmborg, 2006; Grafstein, 2007; Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008; Simmons, 2005; Tuominen, Savolainen, & Talja, 2005).

Finally, Lloyd’s (2007) focus on the social aspects of information literacy acquisition was highly congruent with this study’s emphasis on the role of relationships in the learning community. Lloyd contrasts academic librarians’ somewhat sterile conceptualization of information literacy as a formal, straightforward process devoid of interpersonal relationships with a much more complex, subtle, and vibrant alternative view that emphasizes social relationships. According to Lloyd, “information literacy is constituted through the connections that exist between people, artifacts, texts, and bodily experiences” in ways that make information literacy acquisition difficult to see (p. 182). This emphasis on the social aspects of information literacy is especially applicable to ESL
students, for whom a supportive environment in which to engage in discussion is essential.

What does all of this signify for this study’s framework? First, the need to reform community college ESL instruction is clear. High ESL dropout rates attest to the dysfunction of current instructional approaches. Rather than overhauling instructional approaches in a substantive way, community colleges tend to tinker around the edges—a bit of tutoring here, or a slight modification of the ESL course sequence there. The learning community in this study was a somewhat bolder move, an attempt to recast a part of the students’ pre-collegiate experience by integrating the curricula of two courses.

Additionally, colleges tend to approach ESL education with a kind of “before and after” mentality—first the students’ language deficits must be addressed and then college-level learning can proceed. This leads to the mistaken notion that students can enter some sort of ESL carwash—a linear, straightforward, and unproblematic process that will remove deficiencies and apply a coat of “basic skills” wax—then exit college-ready. This impoverished understanding of the learning process fails to account for the need to prepare students with authentic learning experiences, setting them up for failure once they encounter the realities of complex, challenging intellectual endeavors. Students must have ESL support concurrent with mainstream coursework throughout their community college experience, not only before entering college-level courses. They require robust learning experiences—contextualized learning with plenty of opportunity to think critically—starting at the earliest levels of ESL. At these early stages, it is necessary for students to have access to texts, discussions, and assignments with which they can develop the kinds of practices needed in college-level courses. This support is far from simple to deliver, but one promising way forward is the learning community structure.

Finally, this study, which examines the intertwined nature of the students’ acquisition of emerging language and research practices, demonstrates the support that dialogue offers in developing these practices. For dialogue to happen, students need comfortable and safe learning environments that are intentionally structured to promote it. If this is true in the classroom, it is especially true in the academic library, where comfort level is linked to engagement in research practices. For students in this study, dialogue was made possible due to relationships built over time within the context of the learning community.
Research is difficult from beginning to end. From choosing a topic to formatting the hanging indentation of a citation, there are plenty of obstacles that challenge novice researchers. For ESL students, these challenges can be barriers to academic success, or they can be opportunities for emerging information literacy and linguistic skills. This study explores the obstacles that ESL students encountered while doing research and the strategies that were afforded by the learning community context to overcome these obstacles.

METHOD

Research Questions

This study was structured by a pair of four-part research questions: What were the obstacles that students faced when (1) seeking information, (2) evaluating information, (3) incorporating information into their assignments, and (4) documenting sources of information? What were the strategies that students and instructors constructed to overcome obstacles in these four areas of information literacy?

History of the Learning Community

The courses in this study were paired in order to address perennial issues involved in community college ESL instruction. First, the problem of under-preparation for college-level courses was important to Ms. Shah, the ESL instructor who proposed the pairing of the two courses. She wanted her students to have better research skills so they would enter the next course in the sequence, English 1, Ladera’s first college-level course in the English sequence, better positioned to thrive. Second, a dean instrumental in early planning for the pairing hoped to address the demoralization that many ESL students experience when faced with the long ESL course sequence with no transferable credit. She believed the one unit of transferable credit students receive for Library 10 would be a glimmer of light near the end of the long tunnel of non-credit ESL coursework, especially since Library 10’s one unit was transferable to both California State Universities and the University of California.

Ms. Morgan, the librarian who taught Library 10, was enthusiastic about creating the learning community for a number of reasons. First, a
semi-self-paced, workbook-based version of Library 10 had been offered at Ladera for many years, but it was plagued with low enrollment and anemic learning. Although self-motivated students with excellent time management skills generally gained a decent introduction to the library and to the world of research, many of the students fell behind in the lessons, misunderstood much of the content, and generally fared poorly in the course.

Second, Ms. Morgan was somewhat dissatisfied with the instruction offered in one-shot library orientations, the main way that information literacy was delivered at Ladera. This dissatisfaction with traditional “one-shot” library orientations, coupled with these orientations’ persistence as the main mode of delivering information literacy instruction, is found throughout academic libraries (Baker, 2006; Jacobs & Jacobs, 2009; Kutner & Armstrong, 2012; Ward, 2006). Before ESL 300 and Library 10 were paired for the first time in the spring semester of 2009, Ms. Shah had brought her ESL 300 students from previous classes to the library for “one-shot” orientations, but there were far too many concepts and techniques to cover in one or two sessions, and the library orientation assignments were only superficially related to the ESL 300 assignments.

In addition, there was another theoretical and practical issue that the librarians and the ESL instructor wished to address by creating a learning community. In the years before the learning community model was created, library orientations for the ESL instructor’s students — indeed, for all students — were designed in haste with almost no time for the librarian and the instructor to collaborate. Therefore, the instruction that the librarian gave to students was fairly generic in nature and not very well aligned with the instructor’s goals. A major goal of the learning community was to have time for creating and teaching information literacy curriculum that was more carefully aligned with the content of ESL 300.

Between the inception of the learning community in Spring, 2009 and the study in Spring, 2011, there were four cohorts of the learning community, all of which I informally observed. A plan took shape for a study that would attempt to capture the obstacles that students faced in finding, evaluating and using information and the solutions that students and the instructors constructed to address these obstacles. A pilot study was carried out during fall 2010 with a cohort of students similar to the one in the study engaged in the same curriculum and taught by the same instructors.
Setting

Although learning communities have been well-documented as strategies for increasing student success in community colleges, other instances of a learning community that consisted of an ESL course and a course introducing ESL students to research were not found. This site offered a unique opportunity for understanding more fully how to prepare ESL students for college-level research.

Ladera College, with an annual enrollment of 5,032 full-time equivalent students, is a small community college located in a densely populated suburb in a major metropolitan area of California (California Community College Chancellor's Office [CCCO], 2009–2010). The college’s physical setting attested to the highly stratified economic condition of the area. Perched on a hill overlooking an affluent community, the college served students from some of the poorest neighborhoods in California. Ladera offered a typical mix of community college classes, including basic skills, general education, and vocational courses. Ladera, designated a Hispanic Serving Institute in 2000, had a student body consisting of 43% Hispanic, 35% Caucasian, 8% Asian, and 3% African-American students, 66% of which were female, and 14% of which did not graduate from high school. Less than a quarter of the students took college prep courses in high school and roughly 80% of students work at least 20 hours per week (LCISR, 2007). Ladera had only 64 tenured or tenure-track full-time instructors (CCCO, 2010). The library, which was the main setting for this study, was located in the middle of the campus on the top floor of the three-story Student Resource Center, which was built in 2007.

Participants

Ms. Amina Shah, the ESL instructor, was a Pakistani-American woman in her mid-40s who had taught ESL at Ladera for almost 10 years and had an Ed.D degree. Ms. Melissa Morgan, the librarian, was a 40-year-old white woman who spoke fluent Spanish, had a master’s degree in Spanish, a master’s degree in library and information science, and a Ph.D. in comparative literature. Ms. Morgan had an excellent working relation with Ms. Shah.

The demographics of the study’s 23 students were similar to the students in the previous four cohorts of the learning community, taught each semester by Ms. Shah and Ms. Morgan since spring of 2009. Each semester, Latino students — especially students from Mexico — predominated, with students from a variety of other countries comprising a sizable minority. Of the 23 students who completed the course, 14, or 61%, were Latinos, with
five students from Mexico, five from El Salvador, and one each from Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, and Brazil. The other 39% of the students included two students from Iran, two from Turkey, and one each from Burma, Ethiopia, Jordan, the Philippines, and South Korea. The students ranged in age from 18 to 40, with four recently graduated from high school, nine more in their early twenties, seven in their early thirties, and the remaining three in their mid-thirties to forties.

There were more women \((n = 13)\) than men \((n = 10)\) in the course, as had been true for every cohort of the course since it began. Students reported a range of relationships and living situations, including 12 single students, four married students, one male who was divorced, one female who lived with her boyfriend, one male who lived with his boyfriend, a male and female who were engaged to each other, and two Catholic nuns who lived with other nuns at a church in a nearby city. All of the married students had at least one child, including one student whose wife had their first baby during the study. The divorced male student had three children.

All of the students had been born outside the United States. Their length of time living in the United States ranged from six months to 15 years, with the average length of time 4.5 years. Three students had gone back to their country of origin to live for at least one year. Although two students arrived in the United States within the last year, and four arrived at least 10 years ago, 17 of the students had been in the United States between 2 and 10 years. The vast majority of students (83%) were employed, with a range from 6 hours to 40 hours of work per week and an average of 24 hours per week. Only four students did not work. Approximately a third of the students worked 35 or more hours per week.

Students expressed a variety of educational and career goals. For example, Jose wanted to leave his job as an airplane mechanic and enter law or business school; Armelita hoped to stop clerking at Trader Joe’s and become a teacher or a social worker; and Mihret aspired to be promoted from her current position as a nursing assistant to a registered nurse.

Six focal students were identified to allow for more focused observation. They were chosen to provide a mix of backgrounds, including gender, ethnicity, level of education in home country, success in the course, and length of time in United States. Focal students were chosen, in part, based on regular attendance, which allows me to observe obstacles, strategies, and responses to those strategies. I make no claims about having a representative range of ESL students.

Focus students agreed to attend tutorial/interview sessions, during which I helped them with their assignments, asking questions about their work as
we went along. There were approximately 14 of these tutorial/interview sessions, unevenly distributed among the six focal students, as well as approximately three tutorial/interview sessions with other students in the study. All of these sessions, which averaged 45 minutes and ranged between 20 minutes and 2 hours, tended to cluster around essay assignment deadlines. Most parts of these tutorial/interview sessions were videotaped and transcribed. Drafts of the students’ essays were photocopied to allow analysis of students’ progress on an assignment over time.

Choosing to conduct research in a library in which I was a librarian and in which faculty, staff, administrators and students knew me allowed me intimate knowledge of the culture from the librarian’s perspective. During class sessions, I offered only minimal assistance to students and few substantive comments.

Data Collection Strategy

I studied the learning community throughout the spring 2011 semester, writing descriptive field notes while observing and participating (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I attended almost all parts of all class sessions each week, videotaping almost constantly. Interviews and informal discussions with Ms. Shah and Ms. Morgan were videotaped and transcribed.

Twenty-one students completed a survey about their work lives, their academic experiences and use of academic support at Ladera. In mid-April, four of the six focal students participated in a focus group, which was videotaped and the students’ contributions were transcribed.

Student assignments were analyzed, especially the most important assignments in the two courses. The five major assignments in ESL 300 included four essays, each averaging 800 words, and one group presentation. Ms. Morgan’s major assignments for LIBR 10 were three annotated bibliographies, each related to a major assignment in ESL 400. For each of these three annotated bibliographies, the students needed to create citations in MLA format for their sources and a three to five-sentence annotation describing the source and its relationship to their assignment for ESL 400. The course website was also examined. Ms. Shah and Ms. Morgan constantly added to this website, which had a great deal of materials, including assignments, extra exercises, and links to websites that supported the students’ learning. In additional each student created a website — an online portfolio of their major assignments and their reflections on these assignments. These student websites were all linked to the course website.
Copies of the three books that students used were obtained for textual analysis and background information: Gardner’s (2006) *Five Minds for the Future* and *Fifty Essays: A Portable Anthology*, edited by Cohen (2007), and *Rules for Writers* (Hacker, 2011).

Most parts of student and instructor interviews and selected classroom observations were transcribed, with emphasis on Ms. Morgan’s class sessions and the portions of Ms. Shah’s sessions that dealt directly with information literacy. Analytic memos (brief memos based on reviews of field notes) identified possible themes and coding categories. Using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti (Muhr, 2004), the transcriptions and memos were assembled and organized. Through an iterative process, codes were generated inductively, defined, and revised (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and applied to the data. Numerous queries were run to determine salient co-occurrences of selected codes. As patterns began emerging, more instantiations of those patterns were sought by running queries with combinations of codes.

**FINDINGS**

Students in this study experienced difficulties with many aspects of research. Strategies that were crafted within the learning community context in response to these difficulties were integration of the courses’ curricula, contextualized learning, and dialogue. These strategies are discussed within four phases of research: finding information, evaluating it, incorporating it into assignments, and documenting it.

**Finding Information**

This section deals with the students’ experiences while seeking information for LIBR 10 and ESL 300 assignments. Learning to find information was difficult for the students for number of reasons, but the students and their two instructors crafted imaginative and powerful responses to these difficulties. Some of the problems in finding information were fairly straightforward: a shortage of time, navigating to and within research tools, choosing search terms, and basic comprehension issues involving limited vocabulary. Two more complicated problems included narrowing the scope of research and the mutable, complex nature of the research process itself, in which the
research topic tended to shift as students encountered new pieces of information. Reading comprehension issues, which dominated the study, will be discussed in depth.

One of the chief obstacles that students faced in finding information for their various assignments involved comprehension and vocabulary issues. Although these issues mainly came into play after the students had identified likely sources of information that they felt fairly confident were useful for their projects, basic comprehension and vocabulary problems also impeded students as they attempted to find information.

One strategy employed by both Ms. Morgan and Ms. Shah for dealing with reading comprehension issues during the finding phase of the research process was to highlight important information in or about an information source and simplify difficult aspects of it. For example, toward the end of the semester, Celia was looking for information for the third major assignment in ESL 300, an essay on a topic of the students’ choosing related to gender. Not surprisingly, considering that she was a nun, Celia was interested in issues at the intersection of gender and religion. During a Library 10 class work session, she asked for help from Ms. Morgan, with whom she had a very warm relationship built on numerous one-on-one sessions both in the class and outside of class at the reference desk. Ms. Morgan sat next to Celia, asked a few questions, and suggested a search in Gale Virtual Reference Library, a database comprised of online specialized encyclopedias that she had just introduced to the class.

Looking together at the resulting encyclopedia article citations, Ms. Morgan asked Celia if any of them piqued her interest. Celia pointed to an article title “Women’s Christian Temperance Union” and asked for the meaning of the word “temperance.” Ms. Morgan explained the meaning of it and offered some historical background. Celia was not interested, so they continued looking.

This example illustrates that the finding phase of research involves challenging kinds of reading, since students are confronted with long lists of citations or links about texts that are only loosely related and about which they do not know very much. Research requires students to be able to scan search results, chapter titles, section headings to skip sources that do not pertain to their research topic and zoom in on the information that they do seek. Therefore, even during the finding stage of research, which is usually conceived of as preliminary to the heart of research involving reading, note taking, and synthesizing, students face problems involving vocabulary and reading comprehension.
Skimming another encyclopedia article, Ms. Morgan used the mouse on Celia’s computer to highlight this key sentence: “Religion in its broadest sense understood as systematized and communal belief and practice, has been one of the main means historically through which gender construction has been both undertaken and maintained.” She read the sentence aloud for Celia, and then she simplified it, “So, religion is very important to our ideas about gender.” She went on to preview the article with Celia, scrolling down and reading aloud the section headings.

This strategy accomplished a number of important things simultaneously. First, it gave Celia access to a specific piece of information that was potentially appropriate for her research project. Second, it supported Celia’s interaction with a daunting text, encouraging her to find more information in that article, that encyclopedia, and encyclopedias in general. Third, it modeled for Celia how to preview an article in order to determine whether it was worth saving and reading more carefully later. Finally, it strengthened the already strong bond between student and librarian – a particular relationship between two women who would work together for the remainder of the semester and possibly in subsequent semesters, but also a relationship between a student who, like most students, would need extensive student support from many quarters – counselors, tutors, and other support services – over the course of her time in higher education, and a librarian, who was honing her skills at providing assistance. This relationship and all of the benefits that flowed from it for both Celia and Ms. Morgan flourished in the context of the learning community. Because the students worked with both Ms. Morgan and Ms. Shah throughout the semester and because they spent more time together as a group, relationships were able to take hold and develop.

One of the issues novice researchers face is that when they do reach out for help from a librarian, they often have difficulty articulating their research interest. This problem was sometimes exacerbated by language issues at times. For example, Celia told Ms. Morgan somewhat haltingly that she wanted to research “the dignity of women in the Christian sacred tradition.” Ms. Morgan understandably began helping Celia to look for information that categorized the approaches to and roles of women in Christianity, especially in the Catholic Church, no doubt because Celia was a nun. However, Celia had a different focus in mind. She emphasized the word “dignity” in trying to convey the nature of her focus, but Ms. Morgan could not understand this attempt at clarification.

Celia’s determination to find the information she sought took the form of dialogue. Ms. Morgan listened carefully as Celia found the words to
explain that she was less interested in women in the history of the Christian religion and more interested in them from a doctrinal perspective. She said that she wanted to focus on the dignity of women in Christianity based on contrasting their treatment in the New and Old Testaments. For her to express such complex ideas to Ms. Morgan illustrates the power of this learning community, in which relationships, dialogue, and intellectual curiosity were privileged.

This moment shows the emergent and interwoven nature of language acquisition, language use, meaning-making, academic literacy skills, and information literacy, refuting the idea that language minority students must wait to learn how to do research until their English is college-ready. Celia did not wait to perfect her English before seeking information for her research. She perfected it in the act of seeking. She plunged in, supported by two instructors, trying new language forms, new texts, new ideas, and new research practices simultaneously.

It is worth repeating that the structure of the learning community, at least in part, allowed for these kinds of dialogues. After all, what fueled the talk in these courses? One of the ingredients was time and another was the contextualized nature of learning – the fact that the search for information was a real search for a real assignment in ESL 300. Ms. Morgan was able to have a lengthy in-depth conversation with Celia because of learning community’s most powerful affordances: contextualized learning, powerful relationships, and plenty of time.

Evaluating Information

Students encountered several types of problems while evaluating information. Students tended to possess only emergent skills and limited knowledge for assessing information in terms of genre, authorship, audience, and credibility. In order for the students to thrive, both in this course and in subsequent college courses, these nascent practices and conceptions needed to grow. The students’ ability to conduct research in ESL 300 was constrained by the lack of an appreciation of the distinctions between genres, such as differences between an encyclopedia and a newspaper; kinds of authors, such as a professor and a politician; types of audiences, such as a popular readership composed of parents and a scholarly audience consisting of researchers; and, sources of information with varying degrees of credibility, such as a Wikipedia webpage and a peer-reviewed article.
The problems that the students faced are common to all community college students. For example, the difference between a magazine and a journal and the importance of gauging an author’s expertise are concepts that are new to many students in community college. However, the students in this study faced additional challenges related to language. One particularly daunting issue was gauging credibility.

Students’ problems with issues involving credibility were significant. Students tended not to focus on issues related to credibility, and in the few instances when credibility did surface as a topic, students approached the concept without nuance, regarding information as either true or false. Community college students in general do not emphasize credibility as a criterion for evaluating information in the research process, and, when they do engage in discussions of credibility, they, like the students in this study, tend to place information in simple categories, such as fact and falsehood, or fact and opinion (Fry, 2009; Hiss & Boatright, 2003; Leckbee, 1999). Complicating the problem in this study, students sometimes declared that gauging credibility was an important part of the research process, but their actions did not match their words.

For example, in interviews and during the focus group, Jose mentioned the importance of credible sources more than any other student:

You can find a lot of things on the Internet that are just not, you don’t know the sources [unclear], you don’t know who typed. But when you learn how to do a good research you learn how to identify what are the most trustable websites, the most trustable sources of information to do your homework and help you with your tasks.

Although Jose said that trustworthy sources were important, he reported that his favorite news source for the war in Iraq was Fox News, which he appeared to embrace uncritically. In addition, he seemed to equate the need for credible sources with the need for “true” or “correct” sources in an uncomplicated sorting process involving a dichotomy of “true” and “false” information.

Like Jose, Gisem, a student from Turkey, affirmed the necessity of gauging sources’ credibility in the research process. However, again like Jose, she conceptualized the assessment of credibility as a straightforward practice of identifying the “truth” about topics. Her understanding of the treatment of Armenians by the Turks during the early twentieth century was, like Jose’s view of the war in Iraq, similarly lacking in nuance. The problem was not that Gisem’s essay lacked credible sources. Indeed, in her final essay she quoted a high-ranking figure in the Reagan administration who offered useful critiques of claims of an Armenian holocaust:
Bruce Fein, who was the legal consultant of former president, Ronald Reagan, quotes “If Armenians have proof, why are they scared to take their dispute with the International Court of Justice? Because they know that their archives also show that they betrayed Ottoman and killed many Turks in order to get independence.”

However, Gisem placed inordinate trust in the credibility of the Turkish government’s archives, which she invoked but did not discuss. Predicated on what appeared to be a dichotomous conceptualization of credibility assessment — a simple sifting of the true from the false, Gisem’s stance seemed inflexible, nationalistic, and unexamined:

This ugly attack to my history, country and people didn’t affect my identity, my love and trust towards my country but instead made me more passionate. Thanks to the archives that we have as a nation, I have endless confidence in my country.

Seeking to instill in students a more nuanced understanding of credibility, Ms. Morgan tried to raise the students’ awareness of expert, authoritative information beginning early in the semester. The emphasis on the expertise of the author, a central tenet of information literacy, is sometimes presented to students in ways that diminish the students’ own sense of authority (Luke & Kapitzke, 1999; Patterson, 2009), but Ms. Morgan deftly led students to see the value of authoritative sources while honoring the students’ experience.

Ms. Morgan defined research for the students in such a way that acknowledged the students’ knowledge: “Research is filling out your own understanding of a topic.” She explained that she was going to teach students how to find information written by “experts,” including people “who might have studied an issue for many years.” After discussing such experts as professors and other researchers, she then asked the students how they would get expert information on the experience of ESL students in college. A student responded, “Interview students,” which Ms. Morgan enthusiastically endorsed, explaining briefly that information from such experts is sometimes called “primary sources.” By framing the students’ college experience as a source of specialized, authoritative knowledge, Ms. Morgan defined the concept of expertise and, by doing so, was able to include students as experts. Another example of Ms. Morgan’s approach to teaching credibility comes from her work to support the students’ research needs related to their first essay for Ms. Shah’s class. Ms. Morgan’s demonstrations in the early weeks of the course took the students to such websites as the Pew Hispanic Center, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), and the National Center for Educational Statistics. She taught students to assess the credibility of websites by looking for an “about” or “about us”
link, clicking on it, and reading the information. For example, on the PPIC website she demonstrated finding and clicking the “about” link and reading aloud some of the text found there, including the word “non-partisan,” which she explained briefly. Teaching students about differences among Internet domains, she showed them how to perform advanced Google searches limiting their searches to .org or .gov. The learning community structure created a contextualized learning opportunity — all the students were focused on writing their essays related to education, so these three websites were potentially related to their topics. The learning community context also allowed time for Ms. Morgan to teach these techniques for gauging credibility and for students to practice using them with guidance during workshop portions of the course.

In addition, throughout the semester Ms. Morgan demonstrated how to look for and assess the authors’ credentials and affiliations. She noted “Works Cited” or “References” wherever they appeared, soliciting from the students the idea that these lists of sources indicated that the author had done research. She emphasized that these authors included lists of references for the same reason that the students themselves created such lists of sources — to show their research. Just as Ms. Morgan invited students to perceive themselves as similar to seasoned researchers by framing their college experiences as authoritative knowledge, she also subtly included them in the research community by highlighting the similarities of their bibliographies to the bibliographies published online and in print. This strategy of inclusion was also deployed in her teaching about a popular information source among students — Wikipedia. Ms. Shah and Ms. Morgan viewed the students’ relationship to Wikipedia as a resource, but as a resource that needed refining. Students used Wikipedia throughout the semester in a variety of ways that benefitted them. For example, Marcos found an interview of Noam Chomsky by Amy Goodman through Wikipedia’s entry on Chomsky; Celia skimmed a Wikipedia entry on “gender” during a class discussion; Shway expressed his appreciation of Wikipedia’s concise and understandable coverage of such terms as “thesis statement”; and Jaime instantly found biographical information there when Ms. Shah mentioned Leonardo da Vinci. Information on Wikipedia was easy to access, students usually arriving at the website via a Google search. Wanting to build upon students’ research practices, Ms. Morgan and Ms. Shah told students that they were allowed to cite Wikipedia in their essays, but that they should try to find more authoritative sources. Reflecting out of earshot of students, Ms. Morgan expressed the hope that this policy might result in less plagiarism from Wikipedia, a problem that
librarians and instructors across campus had witnessed for some time. The instructors also encouraged students to think of Wikipedia as a starting point. Ms. Morgan advocated using Wikipedia to build background knowledge and to find more authoritative sources, which is how she and the other librarians at Ladera used it.

Ms. Morgan taught a lesson on Wikipedia early in the semester that illustrates her approach to teaching credibility in such a way that positioned students as authoritative. Displaying a webpage from Wikipedia, she asked a series of questions: “Who creates the entries?” “Who writes it?” “Where does it come from?” When her questions were met with an intrigued silence, she clarified, “Who is allowed to put the information up here?” One student answered, “Everyone.” Ms. Morgan affirmed this answer, writing on the white board the phrase “The wisdom of the crowd.” She went on to say, “You can write on Wikipedia; I can.” She added that “You can find information about your hometown,” a philosopher or a singer. Pointing to the phrase on the board, she explained that some people say the information on Wikipedia is “wisdom.” Writing a second phrase on the board “ignorance of the mob,” she said that other people say it is not the wisdom of the crowd. She asked what a “mob” is. A student offered, “Fools.” Melissa acknowledged this response, defining mob as “A big, angry, large group.” She said, “I love Wikipedia,” but she cautioned the students that anyone can contribute to it. Aral asked, “And that’s why they say it’s not trustable?” Ms. Morgan briefly debated whether or not students should trust it, contrasting it with more authoritative books and articles. She then went on to edit the Wikipedia article on Ladera College, typing, “Ladera College is in Barbados, and you learn how to ski and make cupcakes and every student gets a hundred dollars to go to class.” The students seemed delighted and intrigued by Ms. Morgan’s demonstration. She explained that a problem with Wikipedia was that “there is no filter.” Ms. Morgan solicited ideas for improving the article, encouraging them to contribute information about the college that would be useful to readers unfamiliar with the school, “If you were a new student, what would be helpful?” After some debate, they choose the issue of parking, discussed the wording, and added the information to the article. Ms. Morgan’s approach to Wikipedia positioned the students as experts and as producers of information. Her approach also avoided a heavy-handed approach to Wikipedia as a tree of forbidden fruit, declared off limits by the authorities, yet irresistibly delicious. Instead, she encouraged students to view it as an exchange — a place where local, informal experts could share their knowledge in order to help newcomers. Her more nuanced approach to teaching
concepts related to credibility was, in part, afforded by the learning community affordances of time and relationships. It required time to carry out the Wikipedia discussion and activity. It also required a good deal of dialogue with the class — dialogue that flowed partly due to the relationships fostered through the learning community.

**Using Information**

When asked why students use information from outside sources in their essays and other college assignments, Aral responded eloquently: “I have to use it. It is required for me, because if I don’t use the research and I just my opinion about it … it’s not complete. That’s just your opinion, but what about other people’s opinion? Because the world is just about communication. You have to know other people’s opinion …”

Aral’s response illustrates the understanding that the students generally had about research and its purpose — the idea that research completes academic writing by linking the writer’s ideas to others’ ideas. Although the students generally had a clear understanding of the whole point of using outside sources of information, incorporating outside sources of information into assignments was difficult for almost all of the students. The three most substantial issues that students faced when incorporating ideas from outside sources into their compositions were problems with reading comprehension, a lack of background knowledge, and dealing with sources embedded in other sources (indirect quotations). Two of these three issues, the problem of reading comprehension and embedded sources, will be discussed.

A primary problem that students faced was understanding the meaning of the outside sources they found. These outside sources were not prescreened by the course instructor, nor did they include the contextualization of a textbook; in cases when students read sources outside of class, these sources did not afford students the aid of instructor-led discussion or peer-assistance. Armelita summarized this problem, “In school I feel under pressure; find all the information, understand it. If I don’t understand it, I have to get another.”

Armelita’s comment highlights an important tradeoff involved in the kind of reading that students did while researching. On the one hand, if they did not understand a source, they had to find another source. As Armelita pointed out, this contributed to the “pressure” that the research process generated. On the other hand, the research process does allow for
finding and using alternative sources of information, which can be seen as a benefit. After all, how often are college students asked to read very challenging texts with the possibility of rejecting them and finding easier texts? This almost never happens in higher education; required reading is just that — required.

Often the problem was a single word. Nadimah and Ronato, working as a pair, needed a definition of “curricula.” Elsewhere the class ran into the word “somatic” and “cliché.” The word “canvass” presented difficulties to Aral, Mariana, and Ignacio during a group work activity as they tried to make sense of a challenging paragraph by Edward Said. These classroom moments in which students struggled with outside sources illuminate the significance of reading comprehension in the research process. Students were trying to use outside sources, but their attempts were severely hampered by the difficulty of the vocabulary.

The structure of the learning community allowed both the librarian and ESL instructor to see more clearly the difficulties involved in making connections between outside sources and the students’ essays. Ms. Shah mentioned this advantage of learning communities to the students: “That’s why teaching these courses as learning communities [is good]. Even though it’s required in ESL 300 that you refer to some outside source, sometimes the librarians don’t see … how. And sometimes as a composition teacher, I don’t see the detail that you go through when you’re researching. So it’s nice for us to see that combination.” Seeing that combination — making visible the invisible in the complicated process of incorporating outside sources of information into essays — was an important affordance of the learning community structure that aided in overcoming the difficulties that this process created for students.

With the benefit of this vision, Ms. Morgan was able to help Jose and the members of his group use a source of information for their Howard Gardner presentation. She allowed and even encouraged them to use a book review, something that she explained later in an interview she would not have done had she been assisting students at two institutions where she had worked in the past, Stanford and UC Santa Cruz. Previously, Ms. Morgan dissuaded students from using book reviews because of their brevity; however, through the learning community, she recognized the students’ struggles to find and use outside sources. As a result, she changed her mind about the appropriateness of a genre of information and concluded that book reviews were actually quite useful to students because they are shorter and thus easier to digest. Ultimately, this helped alleviate students’ difficulties with incorporating outside sources. It also potentially
strengthened Ms. Morgan’s ability to support students beyond the learning community struggling with reading comprehension issues.

Another problem that students experienced while trying to incorporate sources into their essays was confusion caused by quotations embedded within an information source. For example, Armelita was confused by Stephen Jay Gould’s essay “Women’s Brains,” in which Gould quoted three nineteenth-century scientists who declared women to be intellectually inferior to men based on their measurements of women’s brains. Gould quoted the scientists in order to critique “‘scientific’ claims for the constitutional inferiority of certain groups” (p. 190). However, Armelita was convinced that Gould agreed with them.

Armelita’s mistake was similar to Rigoberto’s confusion concerning Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Rigoberto mistakenly thought that King agreed with the Alabama clergymen, whom King was actually opposing. Similarly, Jose, Mariana, and other students overlooked the fact that Edward Said was presenting Samuel Huntington’s East versus West dichotomy in order to argue against it. In all of these cases and more, students mistook conflict for unity. Students were not able to understand quotations embedded in texts because they could not see the conflict between the quotations and the surrounding text. In each case, the misunderstanding seemed to stem from a perception of the information source as being a straightforward, unitary expression of a harmonized and static idea. Students needed to see that these sources were complex presentations of arguments and that academic discourse about ideas evolves over time through contestation. One solution to this problem came when Ms. Shah and Ms. Morgan emphasized the conflictual and evolving nature of ideas in academic discourse — the concept that ideas are contested and rarely completely settled. For example, Ms. Shah’s very first point when introducing Edward Said’s article was to draw out from the students its similarity to King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Through guided questioning and explicit instruction, she helped students recognize that both King and Said were writing in opposition to the writings of others. Ms. Morgan and Ms. Shah also highlighted the importance of conflict and change in academic discourse when they led the students in a rare team-taught exploration of specialized encyclopedias. They emphasized the fact that definitions of “gender” varied from discipline to discipline depending on whether the author was a sociologist, a historian, or a psychologist and that these ideas changed over time.

Students often gained insights about the centrality of disputation in academic discourse during the using phase of the research process. For
example, while Jose was trying to insert a quotation into his essay about the Bush Administration’s decision to go to war in Iraq, he realized that his topic involved a number of complex issues, each with conflicting perspectives. Lucia came to a similar realization when trying to incorporate outside information into her essay critiquing traditional notions of femininity in Mexico. Jaime’s encounter with conflicting academic interpretations of the Salvadoran Civil War powerfully informed his understanding of why members of his extended family disagreed vociferously about the war. As with Jose, Lucia, and Jaime, other students realized the importance of conflict in academic discourse by engaging in the kind of contextualized research that was enabled by the learning community structure. The learning community offered a vantage point for Ms. Morgan to view this using phase of research and its impact on the students’ development. Students beyond the learning community potentially gained from Ms. Morgan’s efforts to support students’ emerging understanding of the argumentative nature of academic discourse and its role in the research process.

**Documenting Sources**

Using outside sources of information involved more than incorporating ideas. When students incorporated these sources, they also needed to document them according to the system of style rules set by the Modern Language Association (MLA). Student experienced difficulties with in-text citations, including parenthetical citations and “signal phrases” — that is, phrases that signal the introduction of outside sources, such as “according to Frederick Douglass.” Students also encountered problems with creating accurate, individual citations and formatting their works cited page as a whole.

Ms. Morgan’s feelings about teaching documentation had evolved over time. Originally, she found it boring and relatively unimportant compared to the other areas of information literacy. Over time, she came to see it differently. She realized that students and some professors, although not Ms. Shah, placed a great deal of emphasis on mastering it. Also, some students expressed anxiety about documentation. While working with students and instructors outside of the learning community, she saw that the way ESL students presented — that is, their first impression and the way they appeared to observers — seemed to impact the degree to which they were taken seriously. In other words, the documentation and formatting of essays was, in a sense, equivalent to pronunciation and grammar.
when speaking — a few small errors could cause the reader or listener to fall quickly into deficit-oriented thinking across categories. Basic errors in citation and formatting could have an inordinate impact on the instructor’s reaction to the ideas expressed in the essay.

Dismissing these problems as inconsequential — an attitude taken by some educators and researchers who care deeply about educational equity and who wish to emphasize more substantive issues — seemed unproductive to Ms. Morgan. She asserted that it might be forgivable for a graduate student at Berkeley or Stanford to neglect to center the title on his essay, but for ESL community college students, who face subtle and subconscious discrimination across community college campuses on a daily basis, cosmetic flaws in academic discourse add to deeply held deficit-oriented beliefs about ESL students’ capabilities.

Documentation was a new concept for almost all of the students. Armelita highlighted the importance of learning MLA documentation style, describing LIBR 10 as, “Learning the citation and research.” Writing about her experience of LIBR 10, Valentina, one of the most advanced students in the course, mentioned citing sources: “I learn how to correctly site my sources so it would make easy to the reader find out if the article I wrote was of its interest …. By the end of this semester I think I’m capable to not only organize my sources but also to make a good research of them and look for the sources others cite on their work.”

One example of the difficulty that students experienced with documentation was found in Valentina’s third essay, written late in the semester. In this essay Valentina quoted Dave Barry in the middle of her account of her own family’s attitudes about gender and cooking. In this case, her in-text citation was completely missing. In addition she did not acknowledge Barry or include the page number of the quotation:

Thank God my grandmother didn’t think that way when raising my dad and her brothers, “most males rarely prepare food for others, and when they do, they have their one specialty dish … that they prepare maybe twice a year in a very elaborate production” but my dad and uncles, they all know how to cook and be in charge of a house and because of that thinking my dad also didn’t think it was fair that just only I was a girl I need to be an slave in the kitchen.

Although Valentina’s handling of the Barry quote was flawed within the essay, she did provide a full citation on her list of works cited. In addition, two other full citations on her list of works cited lacked corresponding in-text citations. Valentina had an emerging appreciation of documentation. She understood the importance of citing her sources on the “works cited”
page, but she did not have a similar appreciation of the need to link her quotations to these citations through in-text citations. Evidence of this emerging understanding was observed over the course of the semester in the work of many students. The students’ emerging understanding of documentation was furthered by coordinated instruction. The instructors’ dovetailing of their assignments was a potent affordance of the learning community structure. Students were required by Ms. Morgan to turn in annotated bibliographies of sources that they might use in whatever essays they were preparing for Ms. Shah. Ms. Morgan’s hope was that these bibliographies would support the students in their preparation for turning in essays to Ms. Shah. About a third of the sources that students gathered for Ms. Morgan’s assignments were incorporated into their essays for Ms. Shah. When that occurred, students were well-positioned to create their list of works cited by copying the citations they had already made for Ms. Morgan’s assignments and pasting them into their essays for Ms. Shah. Because the annotations consisted of summaries and possible ways of using the sources, these bibliographies had the addition potential benefit of aiding students in incorporating the information contained in the sources into their essays. For example, Martina, who wrote an essay in ESL 300 about inequities in the education system of Colombia, her home country, created the following citation and annotation of a report that she found with Ms. Morgan’s assistance:


This document is very rich in statistics and different sources about what are the causes that produce the increase in violence and in drugs traffic in colombia, so it is very helpful for essay because I want to establish the connection between education, violence, poverty and drugs traffic in my country.

Since these annotated bibliographies were a key way in which the curricula of the two courses were coordinated, it is important to ask why only a third of the sources identified in the bibliographies were incorporated into Ms. Shah’s essays.

Although both Ms. Shah and Ms. Morgan mentioned many times that the work in LIBR 10 was meant to be used in ESL 300, the students had difficulty understanding this, even late in the semester. In addition, Ms. Morgan’s strategy to assist students with their list of works cited was also hampered by somewhat flawed synchronization between her
assignments and those of ESL 300. For example, although Ms. Morgan was able to give Aral written feedback to correct capitalization mistakes on one of his citations, he received this feedback a week after turning in this flawed citation as part of his essay’s list of works cited. Ms. Morgan and Ms. Shah worked hard to coordinate the timing of assignments, but in some cases improving the sequencing of their assignments would have helped students more effectively. Sequencing of due dates might have been improved had the instructors been given release time to collaborate.

Another strategy for dealing with documentation issues was the instructors’ decision to focus on the basic formatting and conceptual aspects of documentation and not to overemphasize the details. During an interview Ms. Shah shared her belief that what was important for the students to learn about MLA style was “the general appearance” of the paper, not the details. She explained that “the first quick and easy step” for students was to get their essays “looking as MLA-formatted as possible.” Empathizing with her students, who were sometimes frustrated with the minutia of documentation, Ms. Shah focused instead on the overall appearance of the essays in order “to put them at ease.”

Ms. Morgan referred to the details of MLA as “the logistical, hands on, nitty-gritty stuff.” She contrasted this with what she termed the “conceptual” – the fact that “when you do research you are in conversation in a field or discipline … looking at other people working on that topic, and you’re citing them … giving them credit. And you’re integrating those experts and perspectives into your own analysis, so you’re figuring out how you have your own voice and analysis and clearly show where you’re bringing in these other expertise.”

She then connected the ways in which the students’ understanding of the “conceptual” aspects of documentation facilitated the “nitty-gritty”:

I think that conceptual part is really important to anchor it. Because I feel like they get that. When we get into the whole idea of what is research and why it’s important to cite sources … that is what will both help them understand what citation is — documentation — and what will get them through the drudgery of documentation.

Empathizing with the students, focusing on the basics of MLA, and stressing the concepts undergirding documentation, the instructors provided the students with support without over-emphasizing the mechanics of documentation.

Ms. Shah described an encounter with former students from earlier cohorts of the learning community that offered some evidence that the
introduction to documentation that students in the study received prepared them for college-level coursework:

Well, I met three students this morning, and they were all thanking us for the MLA .... [They] went on and on about how being in English 110, the teacher is telling them about MLA formatting and “we are so glad that we already know it” .... I get it directly from the horse’s mouth that they are applying it.

CONCLUSION

What are the implications of this study for academic libraries? Linking library instruction to an ESL class so that the instructional librarian and the ESL instructor can coordinate their instruction is a powerful way to support students as they grapple with the difficulties of research. Such learning communities allow the instructional librarian, the ESL instructor, and their students to address the intertwined difficulties of doing research. The structure of the learning community allows the librarian to see researchers as writers and the ESL instructor to see writers as researchers. For both educators, the insights gleaned while working with each other and with students in the learning community potentially strengthen their teaching ability with all students.

In this learning community, ESL students gained a basic understanding of research – everything from major concepts, such as the idea that an event can have multiple interpretations, which led to Jaime’s realization of why members of his family disagreed so strongly about the Civil War in El Salvador, to very specific details and mechanical skills, such as Mariana’s ability to create a hanging indentation for her citations.

The research process presented a range of challenges to which students and instructors responded by fashioning strategies. Of the many strategies that were enabled by the structure of the learning community, this report has examined three: integrated curricula, contextualized learning, and dialogue. What is the significance of these strategies, and how do they extend what we know about instruction for community college ESL students?

First, the learning community in this study bridged pre-collegiate instruction, ESL 300, with a college-level course, Library 10, through the integration of the two courses’ curricula. Researchers have called for more bridging mechanisms like the one in this study that provide both challenge and support – configurations of instruction that support ESL students while exposing them to conditions under which growth of academic
discourse is necessary (Bunch et al., 2010; Haras, 2010; Woodlief et al., 2003). Without this bridge, ESL students lack access to classes in which academic language is used authentically and therefore do not have opportunities to develop crucial linguistic and literacy practices (Bunch et al., 2010). By carefully integrating their curricula, the ESL instructor and the instructional librarian provided an overarching strategy that supported students throughout the semester as they accessed the demanding realities of academic research.

Second, the students’ information literacy instruction was contextualized – it was carried out in the context of real ESL assignments. Although the integration of the two courses’ curricula made contextualized learning possible, it was not inevitable that contextualized learning would happen. After all, Ms. Morgan could have taught the students generic information literacy skills that crudely matched the work that they were doing in ESL 300. She might have led them in sanitized, decontextualized lessons about finding, evaluating, and using information that were loosely integrated with the objectives of ESL 300. She and Ms. Shah did not necessarily have to venture into the muddy and exhausting terrain of contextualized learning. However, they decided to go beyond integrating their curricula and to choose to contextualize the students’ learning activities, eschewing “remedial pedagogy” – a decontextualized, drill-based approach to teaching that sucks meaning and enjoyment out of the learning process (Grubb et al., 2011a). The highly contextualized pedagogy in this learning community was the antithesis of remedial pedagogy. This study, in which ESL students did not wait until their skills were developed before engaging in the rigors of authentic college-level research practices, indicates a promising approach to improve ESL retention and success through the provision of contextualized learning.

Third, this study builds on the findings of previous research that indicates learning communities provide a supportive space for ESL students to engage in meaning-making through dialogue. In this study students discussed complicated concepts with a librarian, and, in doing so, were impelled to use complicated academic language forms. When, for example, Celia realized that she needed to clarify her research topic with Ms. Morgan, she was both challenged and supported. In a sense, the contextualized learning made possible by the learning community’s structure got Celia into linguistic trouble, and the dialogue that she had with Ms. Morgan enabled her to get out. Celia gained access to both the challenge and the support required to develop her emerging academic literacy practices. Answering the call for learning structures that encourage
classroom talk, this study suggests that dialogue afforded by the learning community structure simultaneously contributes to the development of practices related to both academic discourse and information literacy.

This is the first study to examine a learning community linking library instruction and ESL. It explored a new pedagogical structure for introducing ESL students to research that may contribute to educational equity by increasing their academic success. Further research is needed to examine whether such a learning community contributes to students’ academic success in college-level courses which involve research projects, especially in college composition courses. Further research might also analyze how participation in such a learning community is related to students’ use of the library for other community college courses, at transfer institutions, and with family members, such as children. Although educational equity is a concern for all community college students, it is an even more pressing issue among most ESL students. As more and more language minority students enter a community college system that sometimes seems better at hindering than furthering success, the need to craft effective ways for ESL students to become successful researchers becomes more urgent.

NOTES

1. Pseudonyms were used for participants and the name of the college.
2. The ESL 300 course met for 17 weeks on Tuesdays and Thursdays mornings from 9:45 to 12:00. Library 10 course met Thursdays from 12:10 to 1:00, 10 minutes after ESL 300 finished.
3. All student work is presented as it was written.

REFERENCES


