

Demographic Tipping Point: Cultural Brokering with English Language Learners as Service- Learning for Teacher Candidates and Educators

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Changes in the demographic composition of the United States relative to the increase in English language learners (ELLs) in newcomer and refugee populations generate the need for cultural brokers, particularly in the ranks of educators and teacher candidates. Applied learning, especially as used in service-learning opportunities in teacher candidate preparation programs, can produce educators with greater cultural understanding and skills in best practices for literacy instruction. Examples of service-learning for this purpose are highlighted, as well as emerging strategies in professional development for educators who work with ELLs and their families.

“America is on its way to becoming a microcosm of the entire world. One out of every ten people is foreign-born. One out of every five school children is foreign-born or had foreign-born parents. We are literally becoming a country made up of every country in the world.” So said

Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the United States Census Bureau in 2000 (Pipher, 2002, p. 55). By the midpoint of this century, our nation will be even more racially and ethnically diverse, according to projections released in August 2008 by the Bureau. Today's minorities currently comprise about one-third of the U.S. population and are expected to become the majority by 2042; the nation is projected to be 54 percent of former minorities by 2050. In 2023, today's minorities will comprise more than half of the U.S. population of children as well. By 2050, children are expected to be 62 percent of former minorities, compared to 44 percent today; thirty-nine percent are projected to be Hispanic, up from 22 percent in 2008. The Hispanic population is projected to nearly triple during 2008-2050, and its percentage of the nation's total population is projected to double, from 15 percent to 30 percent—meaning nearly one in three U.S. residents would be Hispanic (Bernstein & Edwards, 2008).

As a country made up of many countries throughout the world, the United States is facing a demographic tipping point—a cultural learning curve not yet seen in its history. When newcomers and members of the mainstream culture speak different languages, the learning curve is especially steep on both sides. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2000, 4.4 million households encompassing 11.9 million people were linguistically isolated—nearly double that of the previous decade. Linguistic isolation is defined by the Bureau as a home in which no one aged 14 or over speaks English at least “very well” (Shin & Bruno, 2003). Although mainstreamers may assume that newcomers do not want to learn English, many speak multiple languages already and are indeed learning English (Pipher, 2002), even though it takes most English language learners (ELLs) from one to three years to learn social English and five to seven years to learn academic English (Sutton, 1998).

The U.S. Department of Education defines ELLs as national-origin-minority students who have limited English proficiency. ELLs represent one of the fastest growing groups among the school-aged population in this nation as well, increasing by over 169% from the years 1979 to 2003 (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, & Rivera, 2006). Of those, the number who spoke English with difficulty (i.e., less than “very well”) grew by 124% (Hill & Flynn, 2006). Over 400 different languages are

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spoken in this group; Spanish is most common, spoken by 70% of ELLs (Francis et al., 2006). In fact, ELLs are expected to comprise 30% of school-aged population by 2015 (Hill & Flynn, 2006). This dramatic increase in the number of ELLs attending U.S. schools over the past 25 years has revealed critical learning, language, and acculturation needs of students and families. Who is best positioned in our culture to address these needs? How can it be done?

EDUCATORS AS CULTURAL BROKERS

Cultural brokering is defined as the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change (Jezewski, 1990, as cited in National Center for Cultural Competence, 2009). A cultural broker acts as “a go-between, one who advocates on behalf of another individual or group” (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2009, p. 1). Cultural brokers can help to ease people into each other’s cultures by assisting newcomers and members of the mainstream culture to navigate the tensions of finding balance between respect for ethnic traditions and respect for human rights (Pipher, 2002). Cultural brokers also can help ELLs acquire language through meaningful use and interaction in different social settings and for different purposes (Campbell, 2010). Where is the best place to find such cultural brokers? In our schools.

Schools are frontline institutions for acculturation, where children receive the information they need about the world in which they now live; therefore, educators are the most important cultural brokers in our society. Nearly all newcomer and refugee families have tremendous respect for education and educators (Pipher, 2002). They recognize the need to learn the language, and hence the culture, as soon as possible; children want to learn English, learn in school, and fit into their new society (Campbell, 2010). Because language learning is cultural learning, every language reflects the norms, behaviors, and beliefs of a unique culture; therefore, “the learning of a new language also involves the learning of new norms, behaviors, and beliefs” (Campbell, 2010, p. 316). Pipher (2002) also states, “To really become American, refugees must become both bilingual and bicultural” (p. 76). Furthermore, teaching language requires educators to learn the culture of the language: “All language learning is cultural learning” (Heath, 1986, as cited in Campbell, 2010, p. 315).

To be effective cultural brokers, educators must be able to communicate with students and their families. When educators facilitate language learning, they serve as cultural brokers and help students and their families to work through cultural conflict and encourage them to become empowered to have control over their destiny. This facilitation of

language learning occurs most appropriately and effectively by building on what students and families already know. The concepts, language, and strategies that children have already acquired at home, their “funds of knowledge,” are the connecting points upon which to teach new concepts, language, and strategies (Campbell, 2010). Rejection of children’s home language and culture may result in responses that include failure to learn, withdrawal and passivity, and/or power struggles with and resistance to teachers and the school culture (Campbell, 2010). Students’ native language and culture may be treated as inferior, not worthy of being used as tools in the school setting. “In fact, when we do not allow students to build on their existing language, we and they lose a great deal of richness and value, and we perpetuate the myth that non-English languages are not school languages” (Campbell, 2010, p. 320).

The challenge, then, lies in developing educators who are much better prepared than those in previous generations to teach in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms and to effectively use the funds of knowledge that children and their families bring to the school experience. Of course, classroom teachers or even ELL teachers cannot learn all there is to know about the various cultures in schools. Educators can, however, better interpret the cultures of diverse student populations in their schools through awareness of how much culture affects language acquisition and behavior, insight into their own culture, and discernment not to interpret the behavior of others through the eyes of their own culture (Haynes, 2005). This awareness, insight, and discernment can certainly be developed through professional development with experienced teachers, but initially—and perhaps most importantly—it can be developed through the applied learning experiences of teacher candidates and educators.

CULTURAL BROKERING AS SERVICE-LEARNING

Applied learning emphasizes the relevance of what is being learned to the world outside the classroom, and makes that connection as immediate and transparent as possible so that students can focus on learning and applying the skills and knowledge they need to solve a problem, implement a project, or participate in the work force (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2006). This results in the formation of partnerships and connections with individuals and organizations outside school that provide the necessary out-of-school contexts for students to demonstrate the relevance of their learning. Research indicates that experiential immersion is the best way for students to develop empathy, tolerance, respect, and appreciation for people, languages, and cultures different from their own (Michie, 2003). Noddings (2005) concurs that “social action can and must ‘extend beyond schools walls to the wider world’ where faculty create learning opportunities at an

appropriate developmental level for students that help raise their awareness of social justice by allowing them to experience, to be with the ‘other,’ for whom we must care” (p. 7).

When teacher education programs structure applied learning experiences that allow teacher candidates to interact with people different from themselves, teacher candidates are empowered to construct their knowledge base about diversity from life experience. The assumption is that these teacher candidates, with a richer background of experiences in culturally diverse settings, will be better prepared to teach culturally diverse students than those teacher candidates who have lived insulated, monocultural lifestyles and who have had limited experiences in culturally diverse settings. Modest, and sometimes dramatic, changes can occur in teachers’ attitudes and behaviors regarding diversity (Smith, 1998). Although the role of educating people to be cultural brokers is hardly touched on in the scholarly literature (Michie, 2003), a review of empirical studies concluded that experiences with members of diverse populations are worthwhile for teachers, and positive results can accrue for students and teachers having the contexts and support within which to interpret their experiences (Smith, 1998). Applied learning can provide both the context and the support for both teacher candidates and educators to become cultural brokers.

These applied learning experiences, when structured as service-learning, can help teacher candidates learn about other languages and cultures, to have greater involvement in international affairs, to put their own culture in perspective and see it in a new way, and to simply feel useful and helpful. Pipher (2002) states, “Having a cultural broker can make a tremendous difference in how successfully a new family adapts to America. People come here traumatized, and the trauma doesn’t end with arrival. Without guidance and support, it’s difficult to survive” (p. 85). Pipher’s suggestions for cultural brokering lend themselves well to service-learning applications in teacher preparation courses. She advocates visiting with newcomers and refugees whenever possible, on the streets or in the stores, and especially when seeing someone looking lost or confused. Helping when and where a need is identified is at the heart of service-learning, such as tutoring in after-school programs or for GED and ELL classes and volunteering at agencies that serve immigrants and refugees. Following is one such service-learning opportunity that took place in central Nebraska as the result of a coordinated effort between the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) and Educational Service Unit (ESU) 10 in Kearney, Nebraska.

FLAME: SERVICE-LEARNERS AS CULTURAL BROKERS

The UNK College of Education requires teacher candidates to complete a service-learning experience as a prerequisite for admission into

the teacher education program. Students who enroll in the entry-level course in the professional education course sequence are required to complete their service-learning experience during the semester they take the course; logistics for student placements are coordinated by the director of the Office for Service-Learning in collaboration with the faculty of the course (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2009).

Teacher candidates were first given the opportunity to put cultural brokering skills to use in a service-learning setting in a program initiated by ESU 10, the local educational resource agency. ESU 10 is a regional education agency that provides supplementary educational services to K-12 school districts in eleven counties covering nearly 12,000 square miles in central Nebraska, serving about 30,000 students and approximately 2,200 teachers (Educational Service Unit 10, 2009). In 1999 the ELL program of ESU 10 secured a multiyear Title VII Development and Implementation Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop, adapt, and implement the Project FLAME (Family Literacy: Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando) program with eight community sites, involving 663 parents and 910 children 2½ through 12 years of age, 14 teacher education candidates, 26 teachers, 18 paraprofessionals, and 12 school administrators throughout the three year duration of the program. Specific cultural and literacy skills training was provided by the grant to 136 educators within the target communities (ESU 10, 2002). FLAME was the program of choice by the ESU 10 ELL program after an extensive search was conducted on family literacy programs; those with medical models (“something is wrong with you”), military models (“war against illiteracy”), or patronizing tones (“if you were just more like us, you’d be better”) were rejected. The “La Familia” philosophy of FLAME respects Hispanic culture; family is the most important social unit, so the program involves the entire family. FLAME utilizes an asset model that builds on the strengths that families and students already bring: their language and their culture, the connecting points upon which new language and cultural knowledge are built. The FLAME project in central Nebraska has helped families provide circumstances and interactions that support literacy skills, whether in Spanish or English, using culturally-relevant practice and all conducted with the tone of respect.

Project FLAME was first designed by Professors Flora Rodriguez-Brown and Timothy Shanahan of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) College of Education in 1989 as part of a request for funding from the U.S. Department of Education. The original purpose of the program was to support parents of preschoolers and primary grade students by providing information and sharing knowledge about ways to provide a home environment rich in literacy learning opportunities for their children. FLAME is based on the belief, supported by research, that parents

can positively affect their children's learning and school achievement by providing a supportive home environment and serving as confident, successful learner models. Additionally, FLAME believes that successful family literacy is sensitive to the social, linguistic, and cultural contexts of the families served. The FLAME curriculum has twelve family literacy sessions that include topics covering book sharing, book selection, using the library, and creating home literacy centers; helping children learn the alphabet, read, write, do homework, and learn songs and games; and helping parents connect to the community through classroom observations, field trips, and collaboration with other parents. The curriculum is not rigidly structured and is intended to be responsive to participants' needs and concerns. Adoption sites are encouraged to revise, expand, and adapt each lesson to parental needs and community context (UIC College of Education, 2003).

In central Nebraska, the curriculum was adapted to put additional emphasis on increasing access to books and literacy materials. Parents were encouraged to attend ESL and GED classes already offered in their own communities, and literacy activities for children replaced baby-sitting. Instead of using graduate-level students as in the original UIC implementation, ESU 10 collaborated with the UNK College of Education to provide service-learning placements in the FLAME program for teacher candidates who assisted with literacy activities for the children and their parents. Service-learners participated in meet-and-greet with the families upon their arrival; children would go to a separate area to work with UNK students who read books to them and followed up with literacy activities such as helping the children write their own stories in a particular pattern. At the same time parents would meet with FLAME-trained educators from the eight community sites in sessions that covered literacy topics mentioned previously. After the literacy activities were completed in both groups, parents were shown what their children had experienced, and then children shared with their parents what they had done. The children read to their parents, and UNK students modeled for parents how to interact with their children appropriately regarding the readings and engaged with family members regarding their children's work. This was followed by social time with food and raffles for literacy materials that were conducted by the children themselves so they had practice reading numbers. Most of the UNK students did not speak Spanish; they had to figure out how to communicate with ELLs and learn not to be afraid to speak to someone different from themselves. Most students also sang and read in Spanish even if they were not Spanish speakers (ESU 10, 1999).

STUDENT IMPACT

A key outcome for these service-learners was letting go of the fear of communicating. They moved from hanging back with their fellow college students, to being given a job to do and doing it. They were able to develop close relationships with the children; older Hispanic children who spoke English for the most part were able to talk to the UNK students and received encouragement to go to college. Service-learners were surprised at how much they enjoyed participating with the families while developing a deeper understanding of La Familia. Excerpts from their service-learning logs follow (ESU 10, 2002):

“One of the most important things that I learned during my service-learning experience was respect for others, no matter how different they are from me. The groups of children that I worked with were all Hispanic and many were from very low-class families. Before this experience I would not have looked at these children and their families with the same empathy I do now...I have learned that I cannot judge people based on appearances.”

“I interacted with them and could actually tell they understood me even though I was speaking English or not speaking at all because people have an unspoken language that everyone can understand. However, I did start to use some of my Spanish that I learned in high school and thought that I had long time forgotten [sic]. They were simple words and phrases but I think it shows that I cared...I was at first a bit hesitant about working with all these people that spoke a different language than me but now I realize that as I continue with my field experience I can make an impact on them and they will definitely make an impact on me.”

“When teaching I need to use more than just my words to teach . . . I am now excited for any opportunity that may arise for me to work with other languages besides English.”

“I love this program. I think it is a fabulous idea to get the parents involved with their children’s education and to help build confidence in the children . . . when I become a teacher I will have a variety of children and cultures and learning about other cultures helps me to understand my students and what method of teaching works best for them.”

“After being placed with this literacy program for a semester, I was able to put forth my Spanish speaking skills into real life situations. What I learned from both the children and parents was beyond what I anticipated. They taught me so much about their language and it was wonderful being able to share with them by means of communication.”

“Trying to communicate in a language other than my native language is difficult and sometimes frustrating, but also very good for

me. I think it helps me to develop more of a cultural sensitivity and to understand the difficulties these families must have here in the United States.”

“I am very thankful for having the opportunity to work with Project FLAME. As a result of FLAME, I have found myself to [be] a more open-minded and knowledgeable person. This program has also motivated me to pursue an endorsement in the ESL [English as a Second Language] area. I have seen how effective this program has been and I hope that I, as a teacher, will be able to help my students as much as FLAME has helped theirs.”

All of the students completing the service-learning experience, without exception, stated that they experienced a transformation from initial biases about minorities and language learning to greater understanding and acceptance. All students were from small, rural Nebraska towns, with limited exposure to and experience with minority populations of any kind prior to attending UNK. The consistent outcome for these students was an increased sense of confidence as they prepared to teach in classrooms much more diverse than their hometown schools had been for them. Only one student comment reflected a less positive sentiment, that of dislike for some of the necessary “office work” that went into preparing for the sessions. Yet, even this was a valuable learning experience as well: “I now realize how much work planning just one lesson is . . . I will definitely be organized when it comes to me planning and creating my own lessons” (ESU 10, 2002).

Because the service-learning component was not specifically included in the original objectives of the FLAME grant as submitted to the U.S. Department of Education, program evaluations from the UNK service-learners were not a part of the grant reporting process. Therefore, assessment of the service-learning component in future project implementation would certainly benefit from more structured pre-session orientation and post-session debriefing, in addition to the reflective journaling for the UNK service-learning course and the informal preparation and debriefing with ESU 10 staff that took place on the way to and from sessions.

CLIENT IMPACT

Evaluation results of the original piloting of FLAME in Illinois indicate that children of families who participated showed significant gains in cognitive development, pre-literacy and literacy skills, and vocabulary development in both Spanish and English. Results further showed that parents changed their attitudes towards teaching their children and also became more proficient in English, evidenced by significant gains in English proficiency as measured by the Language Assessment Scales

(Rodriguez-Brown, Shanahan, & Wagner, 1999). These claims were validated by the Offices of Bilingual Education, Community Affairs, and Early Childhood of the Illinois State Board of Education, which allowed FLAME to qualify for a dissemination grant from the U.S. Department of Education in order to carry the program nationally as a family literacy adoption model. In 1996, the U.S. Department of Education awarded Project FLAME a five-year Academic Excellence Grant to export the program to train over fifty adoption sites, including the one in central Nebraska (Zygouris-Coe & Smith, 2001).

In Nebraska, the ESU 10 FLAME program mirrored these results; 80% of parents who attended FLAME classes increased the number of home literacy activities with their children and improved their children's access to reading and writing materials as evidenced by self-reports. On an evaluation scale asking parents to rate the degree to which the program accomplished its objectives, the composite score across all sites was ninety out of 100 points (ESU 10, 2002). Although the parents previously felt they were not able to help their children because they could not speak English, now they realized they could help them in Spanish through the transfer of Spanish skills to English in vocabulary, content, and concept development. Additionally, parents participated more in school activities, attended school events more often, and served as representatives of other parents (Bransford, 2002). Following are excerpts from parent evaluations of the ESU 10 FLAME program (ESU 10, 2002) [translated from Spanish to English]:

"It is nice to know that there is someone interested in the Hispanic community, and especially who supports and is interested in our children."

"I like the way that you support our children's education and also the way that you have the children working in school activities and the way that teachers treat us when we are together, and the talks that you give us on how to help our children to read better."

"I learn very many different things so that I can help my daughters with their homework."

"It is a very important help for our children's education. Thank you."

"*Me gustaria que este programa continuara mas anos*" – "I would like this program to continue for more years" was the sentiment consistently expressed by parents who completed program evaluations in the final year, and it was the only concern they raised. In several instances, parents also expressed a desire to continue sessions during the summer and for longer hours "*para aprender mas para ayudar a nuestros hijos*" – "so that we can learn more and help our children." Participating families reported a stronger sense of connection to the communities that

were now their homes and expressed a desire to help to secure future program funding so that their children could continue to benefit. Without exception, their remarks focused on helping their children first (ESU 10, 2002).

Additionally, the Nebraska FLAME program provided scholarships for teacher candidates, paraprofessionals, and educators to pursue ESL teaching endorsements; sixty-nine scholarships were awarded during the 3-year project period. The program was recognized as an outstanding educational program by the Foundation for Educational Funding and the Nebraska Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators in April 2002 (ESU 10, 2002).

POST-FLAME IMPACT

Though the Project FLAME grant concluded in 2002, it served as a catalyst for UNK teacher candidates to seek cultural brokering opportunities with ELLs in subsequent years, and for UNK teacher education faculty to use those opportunities as service-learning experiences for the teacher education program. Project FLAME utilized about 10% of the total number of service-learners from the UNK teacher education program, which averages approximately 150 students per semester. Now the percentage of service-learners participating in cultural brokering-related activity with ELLs, including language and literacy development, has grown to nearly half. In central Nebraska communities where the Hispanic ELL population is significant (20% in Grand Island, Nebraska, for example), and in the same communities where Project FLAME had been conducted, cultural brokering opportunities in service-learning for teacher candidates has taken place in public school outreach centers and cultural welcome centers. Activities have included serving meals for the Salvation Army; sorting, stocking, and distributing food pantry items; participating in coat drives; reading to children and participating in poverty simulations during National Homeless Month; serving needy families through the Christmas drives during the month of December; packing backpacks on Friday mornings for weekend food for children in need; teaching and assisting with citizenship classes; facilitating a moms' group in learning life skills; providing help and advice for families regarding applying to higher education; assisting with the 2010 census and encouraging citizens to vote.

Unfortunately, the number of teacher candidates seeking an actual ESL endorsement plummeted to zero by 2003; the waning of scholarship monies at the end of the ESU 10 grant was a contributing factor. But according to Dr. Glenn Tracy, lead instructor of the ESL endorsement at UNK, the continuation and expansion of service-learning experiences for teacher candidates has helped the number rebound to a steady ten to

twelve in the last several years, and there were thirteen enrolled in the program at the end of the 2008-2009 school year (personal communication, July 9, 2009). Of the sixty majors available to the nearly three hundred teacher candidates enrolled at UNK, the ESL endorsement now ranks as the fifth most chosen endorsement area (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2008).

In addition, educators have access to ongoing training in service-learning as pedagogy for their own K-12 and college classrooms in a graduate level course available from the UNK teacher education department and taught by the director of the Office of Service-Learning. Over sixty faculty members from multiple disciplines outside of the teacher education program have participated in training institutes to learn how to incorporate service-learning into their courses. In this way, the notion of cultural brokering with ELL populations is expanding beyond beginning level teacher education students into classrooms and schools throughout central Nebraska.

Concurrent with the growth of cultural brokering service-learning experiences for teacher candidates, Nebraska's own state Department of Education, in collaboration with the North Central Regional Comprehensive Center and the Nebraska Council of School Administrators, embarked on a professional development plan for educators who were facing changes in classroom and school ELL demographics. In 2007 the Nebraska English Language Learner Leadership Institute (NELLLI) was initiated to increase teachers' and administrators' understanding of research-based instructional strategies with ELLs, to increase participants' understanding of the correlation between leadership practices and student achievement, and increase participants' capacity to lead ELL reform efforts in their respective districts and schools. Representative teams of educators and administrators in 26 school districts across the state, as well as one team representing higher education teacher preparation programs, applied to become part of multi-day quarterly training sessions. The teams have taken ELL best practices for language acquisition and cultural brokering strategies back to their districts and provided leadership for ongoing professional development within their own schools. In addition, a design team was formed from the NELLLI training participants to provide ongoing support to teams, and eventually all schools in Nebraska (though web access will make universal access possible) through the development of an online resource center called the Continuous Improvement Process Toolkit, accessible through the Nebraska Department of Education website (Nebraska Department of Education, 2009).

The first task of the NELLLI design team was the creation of a mission and vision statement (NELLLI, 2009):

THE TEAM MISSION:

We will equip all Nebraska schools to effectively meet the educational needs of English Language Learners by creating readily accessible resources through the Continuous Improvement Process Toolkit.

THE TEAM VISION:

All English Language Learners will receive research-based instruction in the English Language and content areas so that they are empowered to progress toward academic mastery and achieve their fullest potential. All students in Nebraska schools will respect language and cultural differences and communicate effectively with each other in English and conversationally in a second language.

All PreK-16 educators will receive ongoing training in exemplary curriculum and instructional strategies that promote social and academic English development and cultural identity development.

The remaining tasks include the completion of ELL training resources that are user-friendly for educators and administrators in a variety of school contexts, and the completion of a book study to be used as a professional development tool in conjunction with the book *Classroom Instruction That Works With English Language Learners*, by Jane Hill and Kathleen Flynn (2006). The NELLLI design team seeks to complete their work on the toolkit by the end of 2009.

Even more recently, the passage of The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 has provided new funding for addressing the needs of English language learners: "Our recommendations are focused on ELLs because they represent a large proportion of students at risk of underachievement in states and districts across the country" (Stanford University, 2009). The funding guidance for this act states that parents of ELLs are insufficiently engaged in schools and in educational decision-making, so ARRA Title I funds can be used to improve avenues for engaging parents in their children's education, perhaps resulting in a resurgence of programs such as Project FLAME.

CONCLUSION

Teacher candidates and educators are key cultural brokers within their respective communities, and service-learning opportunities provide a powerful pedagogy through which to develop their knowledge and skills. By embracing cultural diversity and language acquisition best practices, teacher candidates and educators can collaborate to support and empower ELLs and their families to connect with the resources they need to attain success in the mainstream culture and to effectively prepare for becoming the majority culture in the very near future. In doing so, they embrace our moral imperative, as global citizens, to care (Noddings, 2005).

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