English 391ml: Multilingualism and Literacy in Western Mass

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Course Description

College students continue to navigate powerful literacy myths that impact their writing education, especially the belief systems that uphold standard, monolingual uses of language (Shapiro and Watson; Watson). The course we describe here, "English 391ml: Multilingualism and Literacy in Western Mass," raises students' critical awareness of language by engaging them in the lived experience of writing among languages. This course combines several strands of innovation in composition studies: an upper-division writing-about-writing (WAW) course, a WAW course focused on multilingual writing, and a community literacy partnership with a local language school that serves immigrants and international students.

English 391ml is an upper-division elective that introduces undergraduates to literacy studies through the lens of language diversity, examining what literacy and multilingualism mean in theory and in the communities surrounding the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.[1] Taught by Rebecca Lorimer Leonard with assistance from graduate students Danielle Pappo and Kyle Piscioniere, English 391ml asks students to make meaning not only *through* literacy but also *of* literacy, exploring the social significance of literacy in all of its routines, values, and belief systems (Brandt). By thinking across classroom and community contexts, students especially encounter the tension between academic theories (for example, English as hegemonic global language) and urgent expressed community needs (English as workplace necessity). English 391ml aims to be functional, providing writing support for a local school and community experience for UMass students, but also important, complicating commonplace assumptions about literacy's problems and promises for all participants.

Institutional Context

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is the flagship of the University of Massachusetts system. Founded in 1863 as a land-grant agricultural school, "Mass Aggie" evolved into Massachusetts State College in 1931 to reflect its broadening curriculum. Soon afterward it became the University of Mas-

1. You can find the syllabi and course calendars for each Course Design essay on the *Composition Studies* website at https://compstudiesjournal.com/.

sachusetts, a major research university with a current student population of 28,000 and commitments to the liberal arts, STEM, numerous professional schools, and community outreach ("Our History"). English 391ml is a designated service learning course and fulfills a requirement for UMass' interdisciplinary Certificate in Civic Engagement & Public Service. In addition to English majors, the course has drawn majors from biology, economics, education, linguistics, political science, psychology, Spanish, and theater and attracted students with a more diverse language background than is the UMass norm, with nearly half of students identifying as multilingual or fluent in a language other than English.

The UMass Amherst English Department has a diverse 43-member faculty teaching primarily literature but also in areas such as American studies, creative writing, and composition and rhetoric. English 391ml is an upper-division elective for the English major and counts for the undergraduate specialization in the study and practice of writing (SPOW), which offers undergraduate courses in composition and rhetoric. English 391ml's course content, from the fields of composition, literacy, education, and TESOL, remains unusual to most of the course's English majors and to all of the students from outside the department. Thus, students react to the course as a rare find, and evaluations show their requests for more courses like this in the department.

The course's community partner, the International Language Institute of Western Massachusetts (ILI), is a non-profit community language school in Northampton whose mission is to promote intercultural understanding and strong, diverse communities through language instruction and teacher training. ILI runs a variety of programs using a two-part funding model wherein they offer TESOL certification and world language courses to fund free English programs for immigrants and refugees. ILI is well known and highly respected in the local area, but as a nonprofit community organization, it remains subject to unreliable funding streams. Therefore, the years-long relationship between Rebecca Lorimer Leonard and ILI's Executive Director Caroline Gear aims for mutually productive symbiosis in English 391ml's community writing projects.

Theoretical Rationale

English 391ml's content, structure, and activities are informed by a theoretical framework at the intersection of sociocultural approaches to literacy (Gee; Street), post-structural approaches to language diversity (Canagarajah; Garcia; Makoni and Pennycook; You), and critical approaches to community engagement (Crookes; Mitchell; Rice and Pollack; Rosenberger). This theoretical framework is designed to prepare students for the instability of the course's two operational terms—literacy and multilingualism—as students encounter them in community settings. For good reason, community members often

want and need the cognitive and economic promises that cling to literacy and the English language, even if such promises are "debunked" in scholarship. Thus, UMass students experience a multi-stage unveiling of course content: first, that literacy and language are always social and rarely stable (students are surprised); second, that neither theoretical notion is easily legible in settings where multilingual literacies are lived (students are humbled); and third, that community definitions of literacy and language are as true as academic ones, and that these truths can co-exist.

This inevitable (and planned) student experience of dissonance equips students to grapple with the "unquestioned belief systems" around literacy and multilingualism that are in wide circulation (Watson 165). The course frequently revisits the observation that although composition has deepened its concepts of literacy, it often does so at the expense of literacy as it is lived (Brandt 460). In readings, discussions, assigned and informal writing, and community projects, English 391ml students are asked not to reconcile these tensions but to look at them as their family members would, and as their community partners must.

Course Content and Structure

Course reading includes scholarly pieces introducing students to transnational and multilingual writing (Lam and Rosario-Ramos; Lippi-Green; Lorimer Leonard; Marko), and critical approaches to community literacy (Auerbach et al.; Perry). Students begin with Deborah Brandt and James Paul Gee to become conversant in approaches to literacy as made up of "words, deeds, and things" (Gee), and then approach literacy as a site of power (Freire; Scribner) that is simultaneously subjugatory and liberatory (Brandt and Clinton).

This groundwork prepares students to discuss three focal ethnographies that examine multilingual literacies in diverse and often troubling contexts. Students rely on the essential premise of each study, that literacy is socio-material matter "coursing through institutions, places, and history," to explore ethnographic narratives of multilingualism as it is lived (Vieira 4). Each offers a different angle on literacy's ideologies: Tomás Mario Kalmar's *Illegal Alphabets* demonstrates an asset-based approach to emergent bilingualism, showing that bilingual migrants are already and uniquely equipped with the means for collaboratively and creatively self-educating; Kate Vieira's *American by Paper* clarifies the tangibly hard material of immigrants' literacies: the borders, papers, and money they navigate as their national status fluctuates; Catherine Prendergast's *Buying into English* reveals the ethnic, economic, political components that allow English language literacies to count only sometimes and only for some. Each book exposes the careful balancing act of its subjects' hope and fear, liberation and subordination, desires, imaginaries, and realities. At each turn, the three books

are animated by and invigorate the course's writing activities and community engagement in important ways.

For example, the writing projects chosen by the community partner impact what students see in their course reading. In the course's first semester, when ILI asked UMass students to develop a curriculum to help their immigrant students earn driver's licenses, UMass students noticed that driving was a powerful theme across the ethnographies. In discussion, they traced the literate activities and knowledge demanded by being in a car in the U.S.: the migrants in *Illegal Alphabets* initiate their literacy learning after the hit-and-run death of a fellow farmworker. Driver's licenses are powerful materials that "promote and constrain movement" among Azorean and Brazilian communities in *American by Paper*. In *Buying into English*, the commodification of English is symbolized in luxury cars that carry (empty) promises for language learners. In each study, driving is a sign, symptom, and response to communities' access to literacy. Therefore, as students designed the ILI driving curriculum, their conversations were informed by vivid ethnographic depictions of literacy's interconnected opportunities and constraints. As the driving curriculum evolved over multiple semesters, students revised its content and structure to 1) recognize the material and social "rhetorical blockages" ILI students might encounter on the road (Marko et al.), and 2) negotiate and transform those blockages with a curriculum based in storytelling and locally collected narratives.

Writing Assignments and Activities

In this way, all course writing leads students to challenge and extend the literacy and language theories they read. This happens in several categories of writing activities: eight 250-word informal reflections; three formal 4-6 page analyses; and a community project of their choice.

Following the centrality of reflection writing in much community engaged pedagogy, students compose informal reflections throughout the semester to respond to course reading or community experiences. Students have used these reflections to articulate their personal response to course readings; synthesize the reading's claims or concepts; make connections between reading and their own life, the lives they engage with at ILI, or lives they see represented in media; and generally lay the developmental groundwork for their formal writing assignments. Students post reflections on the course management site, and Rebecca Lorimer Leonard synthesizes and echoes back their major points in class to begin discussion. Course evaluations point to the low-stakes nature of the reflections as an essential space for students to work out the complexities not only of the readings but of the way the readings conflict with what they see in their community work.

The first formal assignment is an analysis of the concept of literacy, which students write prior to beginning their community project. The paper asks students to develop a scholarly definition of literacy based on course reading and then analyze that definition in one context of their choosing: in an ongoing news story about immigration, in their own family (as gathered through a family literacy history interview), or on the website of a literacy organization. To practice this analytic genre once again, the second paper asks students to apply their developing definition of literacy to one community experience. The paper aims to facilitate students' continued negotiation of the desires and needs of the community site in light of the hierarchies of multilingual literacies. The final writing assignment for the course asks students to articulate a philosophy of literacy that reflects upon their position among the competing social and academic understandings of literacy explored in the course. Akin to Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak's personal "theory of writing," the assignment gives students an opportunity to fully explore their values and beliefs around literacy and multilingualism and show how those values are supported with examples from their writing, thinking, and community work over the course of the semester (110).

Community Writing and Activities

A month into the semester, students begin working at ILI alongside the ILI's students, teachers, and staff. Community activities have so far included four projects, all proposed by ILI: 1) an editorial revision of ILI's host family guidebook; 2) individual, long-term tutoring for immigrants taking courses in ILI's free evening English program (FEEP); 3) developing a driving curriculum for ILI students who need to get their driver's licenses in the U.S. (supporting the literacies needed to take the online and road test); and 4) a weekly pop-up writing center to support the academic writing of ILI's international students studying in their Intensive English Program (IEP). The two tutoring projects are distinct in population, content, and timing. With FEEP, tutors support immigrants and refugees with a wide range of language and literacy levels while the pop-up writing center tutors work with the IEP's students and scholars; the content for FEEP students is primarily English conversation, while the IEP students ask for support in academic writing; and FEEP tutors commit to at least one year in order to develop long-term relationships, while IEP tutors support students depending on enrollment session. So, the FEEP tutoring is designed to be sustained and based in long-term relationships, while the pop-up writing center is designed to respond to the IEP's always-shifting needs with spatial and chronological flexibility.

All of these activities are guided by Gerald Campano, Maria Paula Ghiso, and Bethany J. Welch's "coalitional" approach to community literacy whereby

project members are reflective with respect to social location and aim to build coalitional energy at the community site, investigate and center community members' experiences, and work toward a shared vision of social change. Thus, the second half of the semester pushes students to consider why they signed up to offer "service" to multilingual immigrants in the first place. Students read Keith Morton's "Paradigms of Service Learning" to articulate their own service values and Auerbach et al.'s guidebook on participatory learning, *From the Community to the Community*, as a model of community literacy that decenters universities as the locus of expertise.

To find expertise in lived experience and cultivate it there is to begin *elsewhere* than students often imagine. Thus, throughout their community collaboration, students cycle through reflection/action, education/identification, provocation/reaction, and distance/closeness, each necessarily shaped through emotion. These cycles are supported by the course structure and prompted by formal and informal writing: at least half of reflection posts and formal assignments begin by asking students to identify a "personal concern," anguish, anger, or grief, in pursuit of public action and deeper learning (Marko et al. 20). The feelings of others, too—in course readings, among the lives of students, and students and staff at the ILI—are revealed not as mere instances but as indicators of social and structural positioning, emotion as embedded in the work of community engagement and activism more broadly.

While the stated goals of English 391ml include guiding students, teachers, and community members to reflect on their relationship to literacy and grapple with persistent myths about monolingualism, multilingualism, and the English language, feedback from all project participants has shown that other surprising learning outcomes have resulted from the activities above. For example, UMass students and ILI staff, after discussing Auerbach et al.'s and Marko et al.'s projects, question the social and political disconnects between academic and community versions of literacy practice and research. UMass students express continual pleasure that ethnographic narrative accounts count as meaningful support for academic arguments. And project leaders, including the authors of this article as well as ILI staff, are often surprised how the course draws out the multilingual life experiences and skills of a UMass student population often assumed to be monolingual. English 391ml students, throughout a semester of writing and discussing their own literate repertoires and those of their families and community partners, show themselves to be composing from highly diverse language repertoires, shaped by their multilingual immigrant families; their personal language pursuits for travel, work, or self-enrichment; or the multilingual communities they participate in online.

Critical Reflection

Two characteristics of English 391ml have emerged as potentially interesting for composition studies. First, the course destabilizes the relationship between academic, personal, and community knowledge by exploring the legitimacy of language and literacy hierarchies (Lippi-Green). Second, the course's community partnership foregrounds relationships as one basis of democratic participation.

Language and Literacy Hierarchies

English 391ml leads students to question what counts as literacy and language knowledge and who counts as knowledgeable language users. Students experience their community work as a validity check for academic readings and thinking; at the same time, their academic theory sculpts their community work with critical lenses on service learning and language ideology. The results are not only intellectually rigorous, but rooted in generous, empathetic thinking grown from personal connection. For example, after reading Rosina Lippi-Green's section on the "Standard Language Myth," students analyze how standard language ideology circulates in the community partner site. One student observed in a reflection that ILI deployed standard language ideology pragmatically, not "because it believes that there is one standard form of English…but rather because it aims to equip students with the language skills that have been found necessary to succeed in a society that focuses on the use of one standard English." Firsthand relationships with the community partner steer students away from bad faith criticism. Instead, they investigate how standard language might be combatted, ethically or strategically deployed, and how its omnipresence seeps into even the most progressive missions.

Building on these firsthand relationships at ILI, students explicitly rethink the sites of knowledge production. In the words of one student, collaboration with ILI helps blur "seemingly arbitrary bureaucratic borders" to resituate "which academic spaces are 'real' or 'not real.'" Research sheds some of its aloof authority. Students bridge connections from classroom knowledge to personal knowledge, rethinking their home literacies and coming to see themselves as research instruments. Following course readings that carefully attend to the people whose literacies are studied, students build their literacy knowledge laterally, communally, and reciprocally. Students carry this active knowledge-building into their writing and thinking, especially when composing their literacy philosophy, which asks them to imagine a model of literacy that bridges emotionally resonant personal experiences and robust academic inquiry.

This line of questioning also leads students to reconsider the university's responsibilities and obligations. In one class conversation, a pre-med student

vented about the lack of opportunities for STEM students to learn through community engagement, let alone critically reflect on the impulse to serve others. Another student responded with visions of what a community-engaged university should prioritize, both in its mission and activities. By the end of English 391ml, students begin to imagine not just what the university could do next, but what the university might next come to be.

Relationships as Democratic Participation

The course's community work also fosters collaborative composition as a means of democratic action imbued with the acts of listening, understanding, and writing. During one pop-up writing center session, a group of ILI students—from across the world, with literacies emerging from such diverse experiences as motherhood, PhD programs, poetry, and international NGO work—were tasked with writing an essay about local Western Massachusetts politics. The instructor asked the UMass tutors if ILI students could interview them for a "local's perspective" on local issues. The conversations that followed became a site of reflection and analysis for the rest of the semester.

The activity demanded a rethinking of UMass and ILI student subjectivities. UMass students initially felt uncomfortable being called "locals." In fact, UMass students felt distinctly un-local, despite growing up in New England. Their temporary status in Western Mass clashed with the ILI students' status as new, but in some cases hopefully permanent, members of the Northampton community. The negotiation over the term "local" was not just a semantic argument. It was the mapping of a community relationship, read as a question of writing methodology and civic governance. As participants and students shared their experiences, they began the messy work of thinking across axes of difference to explore complex political questions. The process was not designed to *solve* those political questions. Rather, participants sought to write about them: ILI students for their papers on American politics, UMass students for their literacy philosophies.

That testing of the term "local" is representative of the course's restorative political frame; that the term was tested in service to a writing assignment is representative of literacy's primacy to this frame. The course takes up calls by Nancy Welch, Steve Parks, Mary Ann Cain, and others to foster community-based, civic participation in classrooms. But the course's model of civic action is not rooted in agonistic rhetoric, the public circulation of texts, or deliberative consensus-building. While contemporary conversations around national politics can stray easily into despair, the course instead offers a viable model of democratic engagement that goes beyond lament or critique. At ILI, the functions of the state, while always present, recede. The forging of relationships, the immediate focus on a *task at hand* emerges as a powerful and restorative

engagement with the ethos of democracy. That English 391ml invites students to explore engagement in this mode feels especially meaningful in our moment of foreclosed politics, when students recognize the call to political action but face a multi-decade neoliberal assault on the channels of their participation (Fox and Eidman-Aadahl; Welch 13).

Course Challenges and Future Revisions

Even with these strengths, English 391ml can benefit from pushing the critical capacity of all participants' learning as the course and its relationship with ILI evolves. For example, the focus of course content demands that the instructor pay careful attention to students' full literacy repertoires. Because both university and community students bring full literacy lives to the partnership, which are then examined and complicated as the course content, future iterations of English 391ml could build in earlier and more intentional discussion and assignment space to draw out students' language backgrounds and goals, especially when they enter the partnership with anachronistic beliefs surrounding literacy, multilingualism, and service initiatives.

There also is room to further develop their critical understanding of language ideologies, particularly in terms of existing theories of critical literacy (Janks) or critical language awareness (Fairclough). By incorporating readings on literacy from applied linguistics or social justice education, students would be exposed to scholarly conversations relevant to their community collaborations and not always taught to undergraduates in English departments. In this way, the course reading list should continue to evolve based on the community partner and adapt to the nature of each proposed community project. For instance, Prendergast's *Buying into English* gave pop-up writing center tutors necessary examples of transnational language ideologies that shaped ILI students' acquisition of academic English, helping UMass tutors navigate those ideologies alongside ILI students. Similarly, Tamera Marko et al.'s "Proyecto Carrito" offered English 391ml students who were working on the driving curriculum another way to connect the act of driving to literacy and activism. As future community projects or partners shift so will the course reading need to shift in turn. In other words, the course structure and rationale can stay constant as community partners or needs evolve, while the content will need to remain flexible for the most responsive version of the course.

Further, the number and type of community projects may need to change in pursuit of a more focused UMass/ILI relationship. So far, UMass students have worked in small groups, some to tutor, some to work on curriculum, some to redesign ILI materials. However, future versions of the course may consolidate projects to give students a more common touchstone and to accomplish fewer but more quickly completed projects. As is well-charted by

Elsa Auerbach, Thomas Deans, Morton and many other community engaged scholars, community engaged courses provide rigorous and unpredictable instructional experiences. All participants must balance a suite of expectations in light of project timelines that may stretch or shrink depending on student interest or community partner communication. To maintain sustainability in the partnership, Rebecca Lorimer Leonard has used the flexibility of independent studies (sometimes leading six at a time) to keep students involved beyond the confines of a one-semester course. Therefore, the future of each project, like the pop-up writing center, also will be subject to future funding and administrative interest as Rebecca Lorimer Leonard's teaching duties shift.

Finally, the course's spatial split between community and classroom can lead to the perennial shorthand between the community "out there" and the class "in here." Such in/out mentality risks positioning the community partner as a group to be studied, rather than to be collaboratively joined in pursuit of common questions. Perhaps UMass students should meet only at the community site and only alongside their community partners. At its best the course provides all students new critical frames to "drive their own narrative" about literacy and multilingualism (Marko et al. 32). Optimally, future versions of the course will help drive these narratives into further social change.

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