

# Writing Their Own History: Student Learning Outcomes in a Multilingual University Writing Classroom

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## Abstract

*This paper describes a successful writing project with generation 1.5 college freshmen enrolled in a writing class. Generation 1.5 students may experience difficulties at universities when, despite being multilingual, the language they bring with them to college is often framed as a deficit. Students engaged in writing life histories experienced success using their multilingualism as a necessary strength, and they met specific student learning outcomes.*

Even while acknowledging the need for a more multicultural curriculum, linguistic difference that results in non-standard English is often treated as a problem at many universities. Yet most universities are experiencing increasing numbers of multilingual students, including, generation 1.5 students. Generation 1.5—or the transitional generation—is a label that refers to students who are either children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, who came to the United States as children. While they are often graduates of U.S. public schools, in many cases, generation 1.5 students may not have received enough formal instruction in English specifically geared for non-native speakers to adequately prepare them for the writing and reading they will do in college. Other generation 1.5 students might have started their U.S formal education in later grades, after experiencing a time of interrupted education. Usually, these students have more fluency in English than international students, but their language is not the same as a monolingual (Native English speaking) students. Many of these students end up in basic writing classes because of low test scores or because their English does not seem standard. Often the language they bring with them is seen as deficient – a problem to fix.

Despite this view, students' cultures and languages can be carefully positioned as assets for students, while providing real contexts for language learning. This study explores a life history project with community elders implemented in a freshman writing class that promotes English fluency and positively influences student status. The assignment builds on students' cultural competencies rather than treating them as a problem. Importantly,

generation 1.5 students are in the unique position of speaking the language of their elders and recording their stories in the language of future generations—English. This project uses the students' multilingualism as a strength, putting a new frame on students' multilingualism in the university context. A program for immigrant and refugee students at a large Midwestern university has developed and used such a project with considerable success, challenging the deficit model of student language while meeting academic language and writing goals. This life history project has made a place for students' cultures in the classroom and given a real and meaningful purpose to student writing.

## **Background**

A change in immigration laws in the 1960's promoted the current influx of new refugees and immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Near East with dramatic effects on U.S. education. Many school districts are overwhelmed by the multiplicity of cultures, languages, and challenges that students present. This current immigration has increased the number of school age children and adolescents who immigrate with their families (Harklau, Siegal & Losey, 1999). Between 1975 and 1995, "the number of immigrant children ages 5 to 20 living in the United States more than doubled, from 3.5 to 8.6 million" (Ruiz Velasco & Fix, 2000, p.2). Locally, the Minneapolis Public Schools (2004) reported that 23% of its student body is English Language Learners. Generation 1.5 students face specific and unique challenges in post secondary educational settings, but they also have unique resources which can be drawn upon by educators to help them achieve at the university level. Specifically, English language instructors can use these strengths in writing classrooms to teach generation 1.5 students academic English skills they will need throughout the college experience.

In U.S. high schools, generation 1.5 students can have vastly differing experiences. Often, they are not fully prepared for the rigors of college work because either they have not received any or very little English language instruction. Conversely, students who have been in long-term ESL programs often are not prepared for college because their weaknesses in their writing and reading are masked by a high level of oral proficiency and fluency. These students have not had experience working with academic texts (specifically reading longer passages), creating source-based texts, and practicing critical reading (Murie, Rojas Collins & Detzner, 2004). As such, generation 1.5 students have varied English language abilities and often face challenges when they enter college. Students who have completed most of their education in their native countries might have a high level of academic skills but not language skills. The time spent in U.S. high schools aids in their English proficiency; these students may transition into U.S. schools and colleges with fewer problems (Harklau, Losey & Siegal, 1999). On the other hand, Thomas and Collier's (1997) research shows that students who switch languages during their education often need 5-7 years to catch up to other students in their grade level. Even more difficulties are faced by refugee students who have disrupted educational backgrounds. Murie, Rojas Collins, and Detzner (2004) describe Somali students at the University of Minnesota who typically have experienced a 4-6 year stay in refugee camps with little access to formal education. Similarly, students have, in the past, faced even longer disruption: seven to twelve years in refugee camps with little education.

Because immigrant students entering the university are often the first in their families to attend universities in the United States, they may be under pressure to succeed in the “new world” while maintaining cultural values from their country of origin (Weinstein-Shr & Henkins, 1991). As immigrant students become more educated, they may find themselves in conflict with their families. The knowledge of community and family elders may seem less relevant to them as they become proficient academics (Xiong, Detzner & Rettig 2001; Xiong 2000; Liebkind 1993; Tobin & Friedman, 1984). Ironically, the goals of their immigration — often including education and economic mobility—may simultaneously create conflict and distance in their families. In addition, these students (and those whose families do create significant motivation and support networks that encourage success) face additional challenges: financial limitations, social isolation at the university, and stigma about language or cultural background (Rodby 1999).

Moreover, immigrant students in college may feel that they are being asked to acculturate and give up their identities or that their difference is something they have to “overcome” (Gay 1993; Lu 1992). As is true of other first generation college students, the experience can be described as disruptive. They may not be as prepared as other students to navigate the complex structures at the university, including housing and financial aid. London (as cited in Thayer, 2000) argues that such students “may find themselves ‘on the margins of two cultures’ and must often renegotiate relationships at college and at home to manage the tension between the two” (p. 5). Thayer builds on London’s assessment and adds that there are serious consequences to this outsider status, in that first generation college students are retained by universities at significantly lower levels than non-first generation peers.

For generation 1.5 students, the management of two cultures can be compounded by their multilingualism and by “spoken” English which is not yet fully academic or fluent. Specifically, faculty may view their language as “deficient and inadequate” for the undertaking of college work required in their courses (Zamel, 1998, p.250). While multilingualism is seen as a positive goal for native speakers of English to attain by studying a foreign language, multilingual speakers are seen in a different light. Their multilingualism might carry only negative associations because the English they speak is seen as less than standard. The consequences can be even more damning for the student: teachers may conflate language and intelligence so that errors in language are interpreted as errors in cognitive tasks or signs of lesser intelligence.

Generation 1.5 students need writing classes that address their specific needs and experiences. ESL classes may not develop the academic skills these students so desperately need if they are going to succeed. On the other hand, monolingual basic writing classrooms often do not address the students’ real language needs in a productive way. Zamel (1998) argues that language should not be viewed as “static and fixed” and that students need to develop experience in interacting with texts in ways that are meaningful and significant (p. 251). Multicultural theory contends that students do better when they see their lives and experiences reflected in the curriculum and

when they are not seen as culturally deficient. Teachers interested in helping generation 1.5 students navigate their education are met with challenges to create classrooms and meaningful projects that respect students and their families. Educators can play a critical role in creating curriculum in which collaborative knowledge within students' families can be integrated into the learning experience; elders, therefore, become important sources of knowledge.

Using life histories in the college writing classroom can address student language needs, honor families and cultures, and provide generation 1.5 (both immigrant and refugee) students with a way to connect the college experience to their family experience. It creates a writing context in which the students use their expertise as multilingual and multicultural specialists, and it moves away from a deficit view of second language writing. Students also interact with academic texts and create writing that uses multiple sources. By using a life history assignment, the writing classroom can be transformed from a place which potentially alienates the students from their families to a place where their identities and cultures are given importance in the curriculum. Students' abilities to speak multiple languages become a tool they need to complete the assignment; thus, their language is no longer an obstacle to overcome as they write. They learn not only about writing at the university level but also about their cultures, their families, and themselves.

### **Method**

In this study, a life histories approach in a research writing course was initially created in 2002 to address the need for developing extensive academic writing skills and linguistic fluency, as well as the important goal of developing a voice in writing. This course was created in collaboration between a freshman program for second language college students and the Department of Family Social Science; it was funded by a grant for studies of writing. This course was part of a first year curriculum offered only to multilingual students (international students were served elsewhere on campus) four times in the last six years. Unlike most traditional college ESL programs, students in this freshman program were enrolled in credit-bearing courses during their freshman year. When students entered this program, they had completed two required semesters of basic writing courses. Their first basic writing class introduced them to source-based writing and investigated the topic of education. The second semester course developed more focused research skills and writing. Students were expected to become proficient researchers; they were required to complete a series of assignments using both the internet and library to build a lengthier research paper incorporating a variety of sources. Further, students were expected to become more proficient editors of their own writing; they completed editing drafts guided by their writing instructor, with an emphasis on identifying patterns of error.

In the spring of 2008, this program was expanded to include one research writing section offered to students with a focus on writing the life history of an elder in their community. Students selected this course based on their interest in the topic. Students had choices of two other topics, and a parallel section of the course was offered at the same time to ensure that students

selected the course based on a desire to write life histories rather than a time preference. A total of 21 students registered for and completed the course. Student backgrounds were diverse, with students from Vietnam, Laos, Oromia (Ethiopia), Eritrea, Taiwan, and Somalia. The majority of students were Somali, 15 of 21, reflecting current demographics in the program. Despite their varied backgrounds, students shared some common experiences; many had spent considerable time in refugee camps and had had their educations disrupted and delayed. Almost all had graduated from high schools in the United States.

The life history project provided the foundation of the course and required extensive writing and research. Some of the objectives specifically addressed in the life history project include the following:

- ◆ Reinforcing multilingualism as an asset at University: students use multilingual knowledge to complete the work of interviewing in their home language and recording results in English.
- ◆ Reinforcing acculturation to college while maintaining cultural identity: students' cultures, including community elders, become valuable source for completing academic study.
- ◆ Emphasizing Academic Standards in Research and Writing: students use "Life History" as a lens to narrow sources as part of proficient researching (reading academic texts and using them to support work) and have a meaningful exposure to academic standard writing conventions.

### *Course Design*

The University of Minnesota limited the use of all writing produced through its human subjects review process and required informed consent from all subjects. In addition to the primary interview research, students were required to find library research to support the information they were gathering in their life history interviews. A number of "prewriting" assignments helped students not only to divide the work of the life history project but also to get writing feedback throughout the semester. These included a paper that asked students to define what an elder is based on their individual and cultural definitions; they also received a material culture assignment in which students were asked to identify and bring a meaningful object from their lives and write about it. These assignments developed both interviewing and descriptive writing skills. Some students shared powerful stories from their own experiences as others asked important questions about the objects they brought from their own lives.

Specifically, students were asked to select and interview an elder their community. They were required to interview their subject at least 3 times, with interviews ranging from 1 to 3 hours each. Other sections of the research writing course required students to write 8 to 10 page research papers; however, students completing the life history project were asked to develop a 14 to 17 page paper. Students were required to draft three lengthy summaries of their interviews for the project, broken down by chronological life stages: early life, middle age, and later years; Table 1 provides highlights of the writing assignment, the writing prompt, and some interview questions students used on particular assignments. Students then used these pre-writings and the earlier writing to develop their life history

projects. In students were asked to reflect on the life history project as a final paper. Throughout the course, students read about the aging process and about life histories. They met twice a week with their instructor in a computer classroom. Finally, the writing students produced was evaluated to track specific learning outcomes and student achievement.

Table 1

*Writing assignments and directions*

<b>Writing Assignment</b>	<b>Writing Prompt</b>	<b>Sample interview questions</b>
Defining Elder	Explain and define what an elder means in your community.	—no interview
Biographical Object	Choose one object important in your life, tell the story of the object, and explain the meaning.	—no interview
Pre-writing 1	Focus on the early life of the person you are interviewing. Interview the person about his/her early life, and write a 3-5 page paper telling about the subject's early life. Contextualize the life with library research.	Who lived with you? Describe your home, house, village, city, block, etc. What rules did your family have? What consequences were there for breaking the rules? Were the rules different for boys and girls? What responsibilities did different family members have? What responsibilities did you have? Did you go to school? What was it like? Describe the school? Did you play any games? What kind of celebrations did you have?
Pre-writing 2	Focus on the middle life of the person you are interviewing. Interview the person about his/her middle life, and write a 3-5 page paper telling about the subject's early life. Contextualize the life with library research.	Select a biographical object from your middle years or an important photograph from that period of your life and describe where you were living (the place or places you lived) and what was going on in your village, region, or country at that time. What were some of the important events or experiences of your middle years? Did you face any serious difficulties, obstacles, or barriers at this time in your life? How did you overcome those barriers? Who was in your family during these years? How did you get married? What about children? What was the work you did?
Pre-writing 3	Focus on later life to present. Interview the person about his/her later life, and write a 3-5 page paper telling about the subject's later life. Contextualize the life with library research.	What does it mean to be an elder in their culture and family? How is it different from the old world to the new? What do you miss the most about the old world, and what do you like the most about the new world? What are your hopes for the next generation? What have you learned that you want future generations to know? What values do you believe are most important for the children to remember and practice in the future? What does it mean to be a strong family?
Life History Project	Prompt: Your major project for this course is to write the life history of an elder. This lengthy paper will include information about the entire life of an individual and also research that supplements and adds context to the elder's life story. You will create a document that not only teaches you about writing and research, but that also is a gift to the elder and his or her family.	—no interview
Reflection paper	Prompt: Your paper should purposefully examine these two questions: What did studying the life of this elder teach me? And what did I learn about writing, revision, and research as I put together my final life history paper?	—no interview

After completing each interview, students were required to find library research that supported or explained the information gained in their interviews. For example, if the student found out in the interview that the subject had lived a nomadic lifestyle, s/he might find library research about nomads and incorporate that into the paper. Student research included varied topics such as the Somali Civil War and the Vietnam War, colonial education experiences in Africa, post-colonial nationalism, and immigration to the United States and the United Kingdom. Students also visited the Immigration History Research Center on campus, where they could see primary sources from earlier and current immigrants, as well as records and books documenting the immigrant experience. While students were motivated and excited by the collection of documents about immigrants from the past, they were also impressed by the lack of information available about their own communities, which gave new importance to the research they were conducting. At the end of the semester, students participated in a public reading of their work hosted by the Immigration History Research Center.

In addition, student learning outcomes were evaluated during the 2008 semester, specifically the course goals and student ability to achieve those goals. Course goals were stated on the syllabus as the following:

- ◆ Developing independence in editing and revision
- ◆ Exploring different kinds of writing in academia
- ◆ Finding, analyzing, synthesizing and documenting information from various sources, including the university's library system and the World Wide Web, and especially from interviews with an elder from student's community
- ◆ Developing longer, focused, informative, and meaningful academic writing
- ◆ Constructing a major research paper
- ◆ Gathering primary and secondary data and informational resources
- ◆ Analyzing those data and resources
- ◆ Organizing findings in an interesting and scholarly way
- ◆ Writing an in-depth major paper

Students' work was evaluated based on holistic evaluation theory presented by Charles Cooper and Lee Odell (1977), which describes tensions between looking only at writing as a finished product and respecting the writing process. They believe that the writing process is a valuable part of writing and that evaluation should not interfere with that process. On the other hand, evaluation of writing must be fair to students and must measure what students can do (p. 11). Cooper and Odell suggest a holistic approach to evaluating student writing, arguing that such an approach can mitigate tensions in evaluation of student writing. They write, "We constantly struggle with two problems, making judgments that are reliable, that we can reasonably assume are not idiosyncratic; and making judgments that are valid, that provide significant information about the writing we are dealing with" (p. 14). In an academic setting, readers and writers expect certain features of academic writing to be present. Students acquire these conventions as they become more proficient writers, and these features

can be evaluated in a holistic way. Cooper and Odell suggest that “Holistic evaluation is usually guided by a holistic scoring guide which describes each feature and identifies high, middle and low quality levels for each feature” (p. 14).

A rubric was developed for each student that focused on the writing goals for the class: creating meaningful and extended content, organizing ideas, using quality research, and editing. Language was evaluated not for perfection of use and grammar, but for quality of editing and clarity, a more reasonable goal reflecting the non-static nature of language learning described by Zamel (1995). Each student was evaluated using a number ranging from 1 to 4, with 1 indicating below academic standard and a 4 indicating full use of academic standard. Mid-level assessment of 2 or 3 was given to those approaching standard and demonstrating understanding of standard, but not full use. The evaluation criteria represented by these numbers was selected to represent different ways that students take on new understandings of academic writing in their own papers and to track that development.

## Results

The study indicated that all the students met the course goals and developed an academic voice. All students produced relevant, extended, and descriptive life histories. All students either demonstrated understanding of or full use of academic expectations in creating an extended and meaningful text that was organized logically. This project built significantly on skills gained through their first writing class. Moreover, Table 2 demonstrates the average student success from the beginning of the course to the end, with at least one ranking increase in each category.

Table 2

### *Student Learning Outcomes Data (21 students)*

<b>Selected Criteria</b>	<b>Beginning Course Average</b>	<b>End of Course Average</b>
Extended and relevant content	3	4
Quality of research	3	3.9
Integration of research	2	3.8
Organization	1.68	3.8
Language: use of edited English	2.18	3.2

Grade scale (1=below Academic Standard, 2= approaching academic standard, 3=Some use of academic standard, 4= full use of academic standard)

Further Table 3 demonstrates the total student breakdown in each category. Clearly, students who were evaluated as below standard at the beginning of the course made significant gains in the areas of extending ideas and organization. At the beginning of the semester, most students’ abilities were at the expected level after completing their fall writing classes: most received 2 or 3 for the writing categories of content and organization. Most understood the ideas of extended content, were able to produce relevant answers to essay questions, used paragraphs, and did some editing. Since the first two papers did not require library research, this skill was not evaluated at the beginning of the class. However, it did become clear in their first “prewriting” assignment that most of the students were



not finding strong sources or using them in relevant and meaningful ways in their writing. Students were still not clear about citing sources, integration was awkward, and, in many cases, minimal. Additionally, a change to a more independent editing process also presented challenges to students who were used to a more teacher-directed editing process in their previous writing course. By the final project, the majority of students were writing with some or full use of standard academic conventions.

Table 3

*Use of standard academic conventions comparison frequency of student ranking between Biographical Object and Life History Assignment*

	Below standard		Approaching standard		Some standard		Full use	
<b>Extended and relevant content</b>	0	<b>0</b>	3	<b>0</b>	12	<b>0</b>	6	<b>21</b>
<b>Quality of research</b>	1	<b>0</b>	8	<b>0</b>	8	<b>4</b>	4	<b>17</b>
<b>Integration of research</b>	4	<b>0</b>	14	<b>6</b>	3	<b>6</b>	0	<b>9</b>
<b>Organization</b>	2	<b>0</b>	5	<b>0</b>	8	<b>4</b>	6	<b>17</b>
<b>Language: use of edited English</b>	4	<b>0</b>	8	<b>3</b>	6	<b>11</b>	3	<b>7</b>
<b>Key</b>								
Biographical Object								
Assignment Not shaded								
Life History								
Assignment Shaded								

## Discussion

The life history project was by all measures a successful one, as evaluated by students and instructors. It worked to meet the goals of the writing course and to meet curricular goals of inclusion and multicultural education. Students developed a sense of community as the course progressed, supporting each other in their work and forging bonds as a cohesive group. The project, itself, gave students a real audience and purpose as they wrote because a requirement of the course was to give the interviewee a copy of their final drafts. As such, students were aware that they were creating documents that not only captured their interviewees' life but also provided their written family history. Because they perceived the outcomes of the assignment as real and important, students became concerned with making the paper accurate and finished products. Students said their motivation was the idea that generations to come might read their papers; therefore, they said, they made a sincere effort in developing, organizing, and editing the life stories.

In addition to student writing, in-class activities were designed around these goals. Direct instruction took place in research skills and integration of research. Students were exposed to different libraries on campus. Students practiced strategies for using source material and avoiding

plagiarism. Students were directly instructed in class about academic writing conventions such as organization, support, explanation, and analysis. There was significant discussion about using academic language and about using in-class editing.

The life history interviews were used as a starting point for many of the course goals. In addition to writing an extended life story gained from the interviews, students were exposed to research in multiple disciplines and seemed motivated by the project to do appropriate research. They developed interviewing skills and learned to ask more focused and open-ended questions as they conducted their interviews with elders. In their prewriting assignments, their developing skills as interviewers became apparent. By their third prewriting, they were getting far more detailed and focused information. By using the life history project as a starting point for research, students were able to evaluate the available research and to have a narrow focus as well as a criterion by which to select the most appropriate sources.

Moreover, the approach of the course proved to be an innovative way to teach students to conduct quality research in an academic setting. Beginning writers often have difficulties in all dimensions of research, but especially in making connections between sources and analyzing their sources. In early writing assignments, students' beginning research was evaluated, and they were encouraged to find better, more academic sources. A strength of using the life history as a starting point for research is that students must read the sources carefully to find a source that contextualizes the life. In addition, students were exposed to many sources of research, including different collections on campus, academic web sites, and even county libraries.

Most students made strong gains in the area of research. Based on the final project evaluation, it was clear that all students found relevant sources that demonstrated an understanding of the quality expected by academic research. Students also made progress in integrating their research. This proved to be a difficult process for many students. In the beginning of the course, many students' use of sources was limited to adding a quote, often a long quote, into the life history. The life history project itself and feedback from the instructor encouraged other strategies such as paraphrasing, summarizing, and analyzing sources. The final life history projects showed significant gains made by most students in this area, with all but two students out of twenty demonstrating understanding of the expectation of higher quality integration of secondary sources, with most students showing significant gains and mastery of these skills. In addition, students struggled with use of MLA style throughout the semester, but by the end all showed familiarity with the correct use of citations, and most demonstrated full understanding and mastery of this skill.

Because this project was designed to build students' language proficiency as well as academic writing proficiency, students' language was also evaluated. Lisa Delpit describes the language used in academia as "edited English" or "essentially the English you see in books – English that has been through an editing process" (Miner 1995, p. 139). For students whose English is developing as they complete their college work, a goal of completely error-free English is not realistic. However, students were evaluated on their

ability to sustain mostly error-free text or text where language error does not interfere with understanding. They were also evaluated on their ability to use academic language markers including transitions and formal vocabulary. For many students, this life history was the longest piece of their own writing they had ever edited, and editing the paper proved to be a formidable task. Most students did make gains in the area of editing. These gains began early in the course, as students were producing new text almost constantly during the semester. In addition, most of the responsibility for editing was left in the students' hands, pushing them to become more independent editors. Students received feedback about individual language error patterns on each piece of writing they produced. As demonstrated in Table 2, a majority of students made strides in developing academic English, and even students with lower language proficiency were able to demonstrate improvement and a greater understanding of expectations about language in the college environment.

### *Implications*

#### *Students writing and researching becomes purposeful.*

Students' reflections show that they believed that the life history project worked well as a research project and as a tool to teach academic writing. As students completed their life history projects, they reported a sense of pride in their work, as well as a general agreement that their abilities to write academically had improved. One student reflected, "When the paper was finished, it left a good feeling in me." Another commented, "I developed confidence when I successfully completed a 16 page paper." Students reported improvement in their writing: "Now I know that I'm capable of writing a paper in which I can fully support my opinions." Students' ability to sustain writing also improved through the experience of doing longer writing: "Writing this paper has enhanced my ability to write long papers," one student said.

Finally, the experience of creating a real and meaningful piece of writing allowed students to take risks in writing that paid off for them. One student reflected on his experience in this class by comparing it to previous writing classes: "I always chose only what I have read in other classes. Without choosing what I know very well, I believed I would fail. However with this course I developed confidence." Another student reflected, "In the beginning of the class, I used to just state facts, I never used to be able to pick sides on issues and write critical papers."

The volume of writing encouraged fluency, and students reported feeling a sense of accomplishment about their writing. The initial anxiety about writing a 15-20 page paper gave way to complaints at the end of the semester that the 20 page limit was too short. The page limit forced writers to focus on telling the story. They had to make writing decisions about what information to include, what information to leave out, and how to present that information in a way that made sense. Their final products were successful and impressive in that they sustained 15-20 pages of interesting and relevant content. Students worked with transitions and subheadings to guide the reader through the life history. The very nature of telling one person's story and the meaningful writing context helped students to organize their papers logically and to connect events and stories. They also

had to learn to transition to multiple stories logically. Transitioning from the elder's story to the wider historical material needed to be smooth, and students worked hard to make those transitions.

Students also reported a new understanding of the purpose and scope of doing research. Students commented that researching was difficult because they could not use many broad sources and needed to find focused research. Student comments show the importance of having a real purpose for sifting through written documents. Despite the difficulty, they were motivated to find the best sources. A Vietnamese student stated that ". . . sources were chosen carefully to avoid bias and to find good information which could give strong proof to the personal story." One Somali student wrote, "The most important part is to learn what is acceptable as academic research and what is not." Students reported that they were motivated to seek out the right information.

In written evaluations of the course, student response has been overwhelmingly positive. This, in part, can be explained by the students themselves; they chose the course based on an interest in doing this type of research. But, beyond interest in the topic, students stated that what they learned about writing would help them in their future courses. Student comments show significant learning about college writing from this assignment. A motivated student who wrote a 30-page first draft commented, "As one who took a previous writing course... I had some sense of what writing in college was like and what was expected from me. Even though I was well informed about college life, I did not expect the magnitude of the work load of this course." He concluded his comments, stating, "As a freshman who has a long way to go to finish college, I will look back on this class as one of the best experiential courses I have ever taken."

The Life History Project, then, is a culturally relevant college level assignment that requires students to use their own knowledge as a base to approach the assignment. In this case, students were asked to describe their own and community definitions of "elder," and then to find an elder of their choice to interview. Definitions ranged from age based to having grandchildren, education, or status. They were able to define community as they wished. Students could interview people from a variety of contexts. Most students chose to interview elders from their country of origin - grandparents, neighbors, relatives, or family friends, but one student chose to interview an elder from the United States.

The project was successful in achieving its goals of inclusiveness and respect for students' families and cultures. Indeed, students reported that their understanding of elders had changed as a result of taking the course. One student discussed this change in her reflection paper: "When I heard of an elder, I pictured elders in the Somali community... I doubted their significance since they cannot even drive to the Health Centers or talk to their own doctors, let alone helping others. However, reading articles about them gave me a new perspective and helped me realize their importance." Another student said, "When I started writing about the life history, I asked myself what kind of benefit would I get from the writing and interview. The first interview highlighted the advantages of speaking to an elder."

Other students reported that their respect for the person they interviewed grew greatly as a result of having completed the project: "Even though as a family we share many things, we do not have a habit to ask where we came from. . . .The life history project is a way of knowing these histories that nobody asked about before." Another student described his experience interviewing his mother: "I learned from my mother that she is an experienced person. She is the kind of person who can bring the community together, share ideas, and offer advice to the next generation."

In addition, the life history project answered some of the questions that students have about their own lives. For students who grew up in refugee camps or outside of their countries, there often were gaps in their understanding of their own collective histories, gaps that were filled by completing the interviews and research. In many instances, they learned important information about conflicts in their own countries, their cultures, and the reason for their immigration. One Somali student wrote, "As a Somali boy who feels that the identity of his people is endangered, getting advice and a historical perspective from a Somali elder has great value." Another student said, "I learned about the history of my people, about my family, and about myself."

Surprisingly, one unanticipated effect of the students' work was a new found proficiency in some students' native languages. One student commented at the public reading that for this assignment, he had to "learn Somali" to communicate with the elder. Research shows that many bilingual people use their native language and English in different settings, developing language around use (Laosa 1975). Further research is needed to show if this project is also effective in native language maintenance and development. As one Oromo student said, "The conversations in Oromo were the best thing to do because I rarely speak Oromo. I learned the process of translating and knowing more words of my language. It also reminded me to use it or I might end up forgetting the language soon. Even though I know my language, I am not as good as I used to be and he helped me understand it."

### *The life history project brings students into the curriculum.*

One of the goals of multicultural education is to provide students with opportunities to see themselves in the curriculum (Kutz, Groden and Zamel, 1993). Often times, students from outside of the dominant culture do not find models of their own experience in the college curriculum and lack relevant experience and schemata to use in their analysis and response to college material and assignments (Collins 2001). This can be especially true for immigrant and refugee students for whom the culturally based contexts of readings are often more difficult to understand than the reading itself.

Importantly, the life history project moves away from a deficit model of second language learners. Instead of looking at immigrant students as both linguistically and culturally deficient and thinking of the writing class as a way to "fix" their linguistic errors, the life history project offers students an important context where they are the only people who could successfully accomplish the project because of who they are. Their multilingualism becomes essential as they interview elders in their native language and then become the recorders of their experience in English, the language of

future generations. They are culturally appropriate specialists: they know how to approach their subjects in ways that an outsider would not. Students recognized their important roles in the process of recording these stories. Their identities and differences then became important strengths to draw on, rather than markers of difference to be overcome.

### *Further Study*

The project described here is one approach to working with multilingual students. There are many possible approaches to meeting the needs of generation 1.5 students that are meaningful and push fluency and academic skills. As generation 1.5 students enter college in larger numbers, a variety of assignments and approaches need to be developed to support their success. Other topics that have been successful in some of the same ways have included International Human Rights and Race, Class, and Gender. Comparative research is needed to evaluate qualitatively the success of Life Histories as compared with other engaging topics. Also, further research could look at the strategies developed to support the life history project to see whether they transfer to other areas of student research. Another study could be conducted that could compare the results of the life history writing project with the results of one of the regular classes to see if there is a difference in reaching the learning outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

Designing a course around life histories of elders provides not only a meaningful and real writing context, but it also creates a writing course that is inclusive and respectful of student identities and cultures, especially for generation 1.5 students. Students are able to learn real writing tasks that they will need to succeed in their educational goals while at the same time affirming the importance of the elders in their communities and of the knowledge they have. The life history assignment brings the students' communities into the classroom and creates a real and meaningful context for documenting one person's story for future and current generations to read. In doing so, students' multilingualism and ability to move between two cultures becomes a necessary tool to complete the assignment. Their status as second language learners is not a deficit in this context, but an asset. They are exposed to a variety of research contexts and materials as they write their life history projects, meeting the expectations of the writing classroom as they also learn about who they are.

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