Research Article

An Ethnographic Examination of a Course in Academic Literacy for At-Risk Students

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Abstract This article provides an ethnographic examination of a program initiated at Simon Fraser University, drawing its main text from a series of films that were shot by a documentary filmmaker during the first semester of a new program called “Foundation of Academic Literacy” (FAL). Meetings, student events, classes, and interviews were filmed. The decision was made to use transcripts from these films to reveal the lived experience of all involved in FAL, giving the reader a sense of authenticity to the description of the course from the perspectives of the professor who created it, the Dean of the Faculty, the Director in charge of all undergraduate programs, the instructors teaching it and the students enrolled in the Program. Would this examination reveal the living philosophy, expressed through pedagogy? Would it expose a dialectic between intent and action? In essence, we are asking: Did the implementation of this program enhance a political policy?

Keywords Foundations of Academic Literacy, ethnographic examination, living philosophy, dialectic between intent and action

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Introduction of a New Policy at Simon Fraser University

Universities all over North America have been struggling with globalization. While they are encouraging International students to attend their institutions, they are finding it a challenge to have the students graduate with the level of English acuity expected of graduate students returning to their countries of origin.

In the late 1990’s SFU responded to the perceived need for a more comprehensive educational package in post-secondary education. Critiques of students graduating from universities with poor communication skills (written, in particular) and poor numeracy skills along with narrow worldviews had been heard (Smith, 2006). To address these deficiencies, SFU changed their graduation requirements so that all students would have to successfully complete certain courses addressing writing, mathematical and breadth subject areas in order to graduate. To fulfill the writing component of the graduation requirements, students had to completed six credit hours (3 lower division credit hours; 3 upper division credit hours) in writing intensive coursework.

A writing-intensive course uses writing as a tool for learning and developing understanding
of subject matter. A “W” course teaches communication in a discipline-specific way. Students are shown, rather than simply told, how to write in the genres most valued in the discipline. In a W course, 50% of the final grade is based on writing that has been revised. Students are given opportunities to use skilled feedback in the revision and rewriting of major assignments. It sounded like a great plan. But when the mandate was put into effect, it was found that many of the students were unable to pass the W Intensive courses. A further step had to taken. That step was the creation of a new course, Foundations of Academic Literacy. Simon Fraser University is one of the first institutions in Canada to implement a first year required foundational course in academic literacy across disciplines.

The Faculty of Education housed the cross campus Foundations of Academic Literacy course and the reason for reasons for the development of FAL can best be defined explained by the words of Dr. Shaker, the Dean of the Faculty of Education, in one of the filmed interviews:

We found that we needed to do something in a compensatory fashion so that people with academic talent wouldn’t be hindered by their non-familiarity with at least academic English, but of course the program also extends to native speakers of English because as I say it’s not just a matter of facility in English that dictates success at university, but it’s also competence at academic English or academic language which is the language that is used for instruction and evaluation at a university. (Shaker, 2006)

I was invited to write the curriculum for it. I have to admit to being quite resistant to the whole idea. The demographic consisted of students unable to fulfill the minimum language proficiency requirements for admittance to SFU. The course was compulsory for any student receiving low grades in English in high school or receiving below xx on the Tefol. This group, largely composed of EAL individuals, was required to participate in the Foundations of Academic Literacy (FAL) program as part of their conditional acceptance to the university. Although this was a four-credit course, those credits were not applicable to graduation requirements. The credits were, however, calculated as part of the student’s CGPA and a minimum grade of C+ had to be achieved in order to move forward to the required “writing intensive” coursework, which was part of a new institution-wide curriculum.

From the very onset, the course was earmarked by students as one for losers. For International students whose culture was very sensitive to issues around shame, the stigma of having to take a compulsory, expensive course which afforded you no credits, but which you had to pass at a C level in order to continue studies at the university was acute.

I was determined to change the negative stigma around the course and make it a course people wanted to take even if they didn’t have to. I fashioned the course around some core values I held concerning teaching and learning.

• We learn best when we feel good about ourselves.
• We can all learn to improve our study skills. Study skills are basically habits and we can train our brains to practice better ones.
• There are certain processes and skills that professional writers use when they write. When these processes and skills are broken down into identifiable parts, it is easier to teach and to learn them.
• We learn by doing.
• Writing involves revision.
• We all deserve a quality life and the quality of all our lives is enhanced when we work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and commitment.
• It is useful to focus on now, on what is happening right now – letting go of past successes or failures, refusing to worry about future successes or possible failures. We have the best chance to succeed when we concentrate on engaging fully in what you are doing now.
• Present day students are so visually adept, it is often most successful to teach a concept through film and follow it by text.
• Students can learn best when the material is personally relevant. Personal narrative is personally relevant. It is effective to move from oral narrative to written narrative to exposition and persuasion.
• Crucial to the success of any program is the belief that one can; when the teacher
believes in the student, chances for success increase. (Mamchur, 2006)

Based on these values, four significant decisions were made:

- Find a team of talented, caring instructors.
- Create community.
- Provide opportunity for self-knowledge in students.
- Focus on narrative as a tool for literacy acquisition, for creating community and for providing self-knowledge.

The course passed through Senate and the SFU calendar describes FAL in this way:

The Foundations of Academic Literacy (FAL) course has been designed to support and empower new and returning SFU students who want or need to become more comfortable and confident in their academic literacy skills. Developed in support of the new University Undergraduate Curriculum initiative, FAL X99 will help students become effective writers, problem-solvers, thinkers and learners. (2009, p. 1)

By providing an ethnographic examination of the program initiated at Simon Fraser University, drawing its main text from a series of films that were shot by a documentary filmmaker during the first semester of FAL, this article examines that program providing readers with practical examples of what was done, why these particular choices were made and the affect they had upon the instructors and students attending the course. The decision was made to use transcripts from these films to reveal the lived experience of all involved in FAL, giving the reader a sense of authenticity to the description of the course from the perspectives of the professor who created it, the Dean of the Faculty, the Director in charge of all undergraduate programs, the instructors and the students.

To avoid the use of “I” in a paper written by two people, we will use the names of the writers, Carolyn Mamchur creator and director of the FAL program and Cathi Shaw (Shaw, 2009) who transcribed the tapes and completed her PhD dissertation using the data. Recognition must be given to Peg Campbell, instructor at Emily Carr for producing the interviews and the tapes.

Finding a Team of Instructors

“When it comes to an organization’s scarcest resource—talent—the difference between the best and the rest is enormous” (Mankins, Bird, & Root, 2013, p.74). Carolyn was lucky to know the best of the best. Having worked in the Professional Development Program at SFU for 25 years, she had worked with over 75 practicing teachers who had had been seconded from the district to be team members in the program. She choose from this group of expert teachers who had originally been selected because of their ability to teach, to problem solve and to work well with others. She knew first hand how they performed these tasks and within a week, she had interviewed and selected a dream team of caring, knowledgeable, creative educators.

An important goal was to have the “dream team” of instructors feel that they were supported and were part of a community of teachers dedicated to creating something that had never been done at this university before. They were united in their purpose, and committed to helping one another to be successful and feel valued. If teamwork can be defined as mutually trusting people working together for organizational achievement, sharing a unifying set of values and goals while communicating candidly, caringly, and openly, then this group were engaged in some pretty effective teamwork, based on what Fisher & Fisher (1998) describe as “a distributed mind,” achieving high performance through the collective intelligence of a knowledge work team.

This is a quote from the transcript of a film of their first formal gathering.

We are going to experience this with the greatest intention of enjoyment that we can have. We want to have tremendous pleasure in what we are doing. We want to have tremendous pleasure with ourselves as this group. I'm hoping we'll play together, we'll eat together, we'll celebrate together; that we exchange ideas, we tell one another the story of our successes and if something's not working we help one another out or if somebody has a sick child one day somebody in the team will offer – “I'll come in for you”. It is my deepest hope that we work together as a team – that we aren't isolated, that none of us feel alone, that is my dream of how we will work together. So when I call you the Dream Team, know that you have been
very, very carefully hand selected for this job – you are people who have positive attitudes as well as skill and I think that is what is going to make this such a success. (Mamchur, 2006)

Because the university wanted this program to be up and running in a very short period of time, Mamchur was given a lot of freedom in creating the criteria for selection. She invited applicants whose performance as caring and effective teachers she had witnessed herself. Everyone who applied for the position was interviewed, and key to the ranking of candidates was their articulated value system. What were their beliefs about education? For this program, it was expressed as important that instructors shared values about how students learn.

Also, the perceptions of instructors to self and others were crucial. “There is empirical evidence that suggests that teacher inputs have impact on student outcomes. It is also believed that teacher dispositions are as crucial for student achievement as a teacher’s pedagogical and content knowledge/skills” (Singh & Stoloff, 2008, p. 1169). According to the NCATE (2006), dispositions are values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence a teacher’s behavior toward his/her students, families, colleagues, and communities (p. 1170).

All of the instructors hired had excellent communication skills and were most adept at creating meaningful relationships with others - administrators, colleagues and students. The group met tri-weekly and shared their experiences in the new program. They e-mailed one another on a continual basis. Carolyn Mamchur joined the group as a leader/mentor and as an instructor, teaching FAL students. The group was eager to learn and create a profound experience for their students and themselves.

In determining an assessment of teacher dispositions, Singh and Stoloff (2008) developed a dispositions instrument, Eastern Teacher Dispositions Index (ESTDI). Two items that appeared on the instrument that coincided with the way FAL instructors operated were: “Teachers should cooperate with colleagues in planning instruction” and “Teachers should listen to the ideas and suggestions of their colleagues for improving instruction” (p. 175).

The transcribed tapes revealed repetitive evidence of sharing ideas and learning from one another. Narrative writing was the method used to teach students to find their own voice. This was not a normal practice at the university and to move from narrative to academic presented a challenge for the group for which they were constantly discovering creative solutions. For example, in a group meeting, one of the team members, Instructor J shares her process of moving from narrative to academic writing.

Well, in my FAL class, we talked a lot about valuing process and valuing their own voice. And we talked about passion and I had them share passion with me. I had them bring in a book or movie that was their passion and I asked them to talk about it. And then we talked about how that translates into academic work -that if academic work is just somebody writing what the teacher wants - that can be very boring and I told them what do you think it’s like to be the teacher reading all of those papers that nobody cares about? You have to put your passion into it so that when the teacher reads it they are feeling it. So, yeah, I think that’s what they were referring to - that they got that idea that it’s okay to put themselves into it. And important to consider their audience. (Instructor J, 2006)

The group “checked in” with one another whenever a member wanted to try a new strategy. For example, one instructor, who was used to teaching ESL, felt his students needed a rubric. He sent out a request to Carolyn and the rest of the instructors via a group email. His query started a provocative debate. Carolyn had made it clear she didn’t want to use rubrics that were imposed. She preferred rubrics to be created with the students. She had suggested the group delay assessment. She was all for feedback, but because their at-risk students were so accustomed to being graded and assessed with lots of negative feeling associated with the assessment, she wanted to create positive feelings first, a deep sense of confidence before assessments started. She explained why by sharing the following vignette (it was a method of teaching that she used throughout the mentorship – telling a story).

I had had an experience in Gainesville, Florida at their university lab school, PK Yonge, that had imprinted on me so strongly I used the lesson it had taught in much of my teaching. The school, influenced by the presence of Combs, Soper, Goodling,
Benton, Dickman, & Usher (1969), was governed by a very strong belief in self-concept. When a decision was made, they asked, “Would this increase the self-concept of the student? If the answer were yes, then it was a go, if the answer were no, then the idea had to be rethought.

What a great pair of glasses with which to view the educational world. My daughter and I had the good fortune to experience this philosophy in action in 1978 when she attended PK Yonge as a Grade 9 student. My daughter, Mickey, born with Turner’s Syndrome, had right brain damage which caused math to be very difficult. Her IQ ranged from 80 in the damaged part of her brain to 180 in the rest of her brain. Mickey, and I had told her counselors at PK Yonge of the challenge Mickey she had with math. They listened. They listened to her love of literature and film and music, of how she could read when she was three and read at least a book every three days.

She came home first semester with her course schedule. Library science, film study, choir, philosophy, no math. Second semester. More humanities, higher level literature, acting as librarian coach, no math. I was getting worried. Mickey was ecstatic. Her past experiences with math had been confusion, shame, remediation, testing, remediation, more shame, more testing, ridicule, failure.

Third semester, she came home beaming. “I’m tutoring Henry, he’s in grade five. I’m going to be his teacher this semester. Well, the teacher’s helper.”

“In literature?”
“Nope.” Grinning.
“Drama?”
“Nope.” Still grinning.
“Film study? A shake of the head. “Library science?”
“Math!”

The teachers at P.K. Yonge weren’t big on remediation. It didn’t pass the “self-concept” test. Nor did assessment that resulted in feelings of failure. They, instead, gave my daughter two semesters to gain confidence, to feel good about her abilities, to become used to the climate of P.K. Yonge which was mixed grade (Grade 6 students might study with Grade 10 students) student-centered and research-oriented. They knew that students learn by teaching. Mickey needed to learn math; and so she taught it to another student who was struggling.

Three years later, now in Grade 12, at another marvelous school, a Friends’ School in Argenta, British Columbia, Mickey passed algebra with flying colors. I know we want our students to pass with flying colors.

Can we agree to use the “self concept” glasses in making decisions with our students? (Mamchur, 2006)

The ‘Dream Team’ agreed. Mamchur used perceptual psychology as a mentoring tool with the instructors (Combs et al., 1974).

The group expressed awareness of the commitment they were making to the community of students, not only those who were in their care that semester, but the students who would be taking this program in the years to come. They were creating something different, not the usual competency based, grammar/ form/assessment oriented courses that have their bases in traditional literacy theories. They were committed to a more holistic approach. Others before them, in other countries had already tried this approach. They were determined to find their own unique methods to make it work. There was a feeling of creativity and adventure alive in the group.

Instructor G shares her surprise at what kind of a program it was:

I think a lot of students came in expecting to find maybe some very mechanical writing exercises and probably someone criticizing their writing and formal academic kind of theories about writing. In fact when I first heard about the course I thought, oh, so, you know, maybe it’s going to be kind of helping ESL students to be able to put their ideas into English words. But I was really, really pleasantly surprised to
find that that wasn’t what the course’s intent was. I wasn’t sure how the students would react to a more creative class because I thought they may be hesitant. But the reaction was fantastic. The students absolutely loved being able to share their work, write their own words down, find their own voice and I found the exercise did help their mechanical writing too. (Instructor G, 2006)

An Ontology of Dialogue Creates Community

Dialogue became a cornerstone of how the dream team worked together and how each instructor worked with the class. Ideas were discussed, students were invited to be part of decision making, everyone was regarded with respect and thought of as having something important to say. Students were invited to express opinions, to share feelings, to make inquiries about choices, to speak openly about the challenges they faced in this and other courses. These conversations helped to shape the program as they moved through the semester.

Students felt that they had power in the course and in how they would experience their lives at Simon Fraser University. Every attempt was made to move away from the notion of “remedial”, “at risk”, “minimal skill” to one of “enrichment”, “engagement” and “inclusion”. Real community emerges when its members, in concert with one another, come into being, where each member experiences “… everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the other, a flowing from I to Thou” (Buber, 1947/2002, p. 37). It was the deep intention that the team not remain apart, unknown to one another, but rather come to know and understand one another and create a responsive emergent space where they would not attach too strongly to prescriptive outlines and pre-planned assignments.

In a follow-up questionnaire, administered three years after the course was over, students were asked: In thinking back to the course, what did you like most about it? The most common answer was: The interactions between students and the instructor. One student commented on her level of comfort – “The most thing I like about it was I have never met a professor like XX. We chatted in class so much. (Usually, I won’t talk to professor unless I need to ask question.).” A common descriptor was: “I liked best that it was a close class, we cared about one another. We were like a family.”

Vygotsky (1986) makes the claim that “to understand another’s speech, it is not sufficient to understand his words – we must understand his thought. But even that is not enough – we must also know its motivation” (p. 253). This suggests that we must understand one another on a much deeper, more intimate level. Vygotsky (1986) describes this relationship between thought and words as a “living process” (p. 255). Narrative and structured opportunity provided a climate rich with the need for intense engagement. Because “a living process” it is constantly changing and evolving, the course was carefully planned. This may sound like a contradiction. However, these seasoned instructors knew that to work with this much sensitivity and response to the teaching moment demanded a clear sense of purpose and an array of readily available methods to draw from. It took something else, too. It took courage and attentiveness.

Instructor A’s attentiveness to students is described in a filmed interview:

And so what I try to pay particular attention to in the FAL classes and in the program and in all the encounters I have with the students, be it in the classroom, be it through email, be it through talking one on one, is to confirm the student’s presence as a unique person, as someone valuable, as someone I value. And so they can realize that. And when you do that the student feels comfortable, relaxed, confirmed and begins to think: well, I am somebody valuable and I have something to say and I have a valuable message in my life. And I’ve had students come up to me, literally in tears at the end of a class, and say I’ve never had a class where someone has done this for me. You not only listened, and I think listening is a big part of this process, and they say, not only do you listen to me but you allow us to be present, and we feel heard, we feel recognized. (Instructor A)

Instructor D shares his way to encourage reluctant writers which demonstrated his attentiveness to their needs:

I tried to figure out why, why was that happening and then part of what came to me was that among adolescents in particular a lot of them don’t have a lot of access
to their own experience. I think it just whirls too fast up there for it to come into any kind of focus so I went searching for some way of bringing some clarity to that and came across Ira Progoff’s techniques which I then ripped off entirely and have modified .... and it’s had a fantastic impact on the kind of writing I get from my students ...a lot of searing autobiography stuff that now when I read it brings tears to my eyes because of the depth and the experience that’s being talked about . . . So I did produce an overview of the process I use. I think within this context the key thing that comes to my mind is that there’s that emphasis on the personal voice in writing and that is never out of place no matter what kind of writing whether it’s personal narrative or any other kind and so access to experience includes access to thoughts and critical reaction and all that stuff that would be incorporated in good academic writing as well as narrative so I don’t know much more that I would say here except there is a guide to the process and at some time we might look at that or if you want me to email it to you . . . (Instructor D, 2006)

The dream team were determined that students would not lose the inner voice they had when they arrived at the university (Hirvela & Belcher 2001). Nor did they want students to conform to discourse that is valued in the university setting even if that means surrendering their own voice in the process (Bangeni & Kapp, 2006). They worked hard at having students keep their voice and learn to use that voice in an academic setting. They felt this was especially imperative when students felt vulnerable due to literacy skills challenges and due to being new to a country and culture. We take our responsible roles as the ones who shape, form, and reveal our worlds, taking part in what David Abram (1996) calls a “deeper, more unitary life-world, always already there beneath all our cultural acquisitions” (p. 41).

Two significant tools / psychologies / theories that were used to increase understanding of motivation and to provide plenty of opportunity for dialogue were Jung’s psychological type theory and Glasser’s choice theory. Instructors and students completed the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and learned their favored learning style to enable them to set up ideal conditions for themselves and to develop strategies to persevere when asked to work in their least preferred style (Mamchur, 1996).

All students and instructors created descriptions of their quality worlds where their needs for security, acceptance, power, pleasure and freedom were explored. These tools and the dialogues that emerged out of their study embodied what Freire (1970/2006) calls the “ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (p. 66).

A typical assignment that emerged out of Glasser’s choice theory was to keep a journal in which each student recorded how they were experiencing feelings of safety, of acceptance, of power and of pleasure and freedom each month. The entries were not shared, but were discussed in groups. These are some of their entries:

Safety: What makes you feel safe at SFU? What makes you feel unsafe? Are you feeling more or less safe than you did when you first came a month ago? Explain why.

Thankfully, I was able to feel safe right away but what my next concern was – “will these people accept me?” I was sure of it when the class discussion began about telling about our “shy moment” or perhaps something related to our self that would allow the class to learn about who we are as people, where we came from and some of our life experiences. Once it was my turn I told the class about myself and the way I got everyone’s undivided attention I was discovered that this class was already beginning to accept me. Next, we had an assignment of figuring out our “MBTI Type”, and we were able to determine whether we were extraverts or introverts. After finding out who was what type, we split up into two groups and I felt much closer to them at that point. We were able to figure out who we get along with most easily. We also found out better strategies for studying, for example I figured out that I am better of studying with a group of people instead of individually being an extravert. We went as far as naming each other and the class as “Café Fal”. This will probably be our long lasting memory. Therefore, I feel that I am not unaccepted as a new student at SFU because this class made me feel that way.
Acceptance: What makes you feel accepted at SFU? What makes you feel unaccepted? Are you feeling more or less accepted than you did when you first came a month ago? Explain why.

The first day of class I was worried because I was no longer in my secondary school; I have no friends in the same class or anyone that I can ask questions to. I was very nervous in the first week, but as I started to chat with people around me, about our writing and ideas, the feeling of loneliness started going away. That is when I start feeling being accepted into the big family of FAL at SFU.

I felt unaccepted when I am being ignored. Last week, I was in my Tech 100 courses and we were formed into different teams. I tried to communicate with the girl next to me, but she was only willing to talk to the handsome man beside her. She ignored my question and gave me a gesture as if I am an ugly fly. I felt totally disrespected. Despite that I still feel welcome to the university since I have made many new friends in different classes especially in the Café Fall. I felt warm and welcome here.

Power. What makes you feel in control of your own lives? What makes you feel out of control? Are you feeling more or less in control when you first came a month ago? Explain why.

My first impression of walking in the classroom was so different from what it is like now. At first I feared everyone was going to be ignorant to each other and perhaps more selfish, since that’s the kind of impression I got from my other classes. I thought I was going to be powerless and would not be able to get involved in any group discussions etc. I felt as if I had no control in my hands to be apart of the class. All of my other classes are more about the marks, participating to get marks but this class is more about me wanting to participate. That makes me feel powerful that I want to be there and want to speak. I do not fear anyone in the class because I know no one will make me feel like I am doing or saying the wrong thing. Over the mouth, everyone would quietly listen to my opinion about any topic being discussed in class. That made feel like I was a part of this class and that everyone respects my opinion and my values. They make me want to talk and make comments. In the future I will secure this power and use it to my other classes by having more control over my work and talk more not just for marks but for myself. I could make my own decision based on my own opinion without having the fear of someone else ridiculing me.

Not all students had such positive experiences their first month. Some expressed tremendous fears and these we could talk about together:

I feel in control if everything is going smoothly as I plan and expect. Though, I understand it is something impossible, problems always happen occur when you are not prepared. I want to successfully graduate from SFU and continue earn more degree to provide protection for my future, but many things might occur I might died in the car crush, I don't have enough money to pay for my fees, I fail all my class, or I develop another interest. Future is unpredictable, so I feel insecure when I start to think what lies ahead. I never expect too much, so I don't get too depressed when things don’t go as I wish, but death of my important ones will be something that I feel totally out of my control. I can't prevent myself from dieing by not smoking or do anything that danger my life, but I have no control over other individual's life even though I wish they can live long enough. Honestly, I don't feel in control compare to my first week of class, everything become difficult and I feel that I am not as intelligence as my classmate and can handle to course material as easily. I am trying to strengthen my weakness, but everything takes time, I wish my hard work could prevent me from being kicked out before my second year. (Student 22, 2006)

The group of FAL instructors quickly became a unique community. In one of the videos when asked what it would mean to fail, Mamchur replied: “We’ll have failed if we feel alone. So feel supported, know that we are all here for one another.” Combs et al. (1974) note teachers need to view others as supports rather than as threats to self. This nurturing community that developed
within the instructional team had a direct impact on the community of learners that were created in the FAL classrooms.

I hope that as we work with our students, and together, we speak in the language of welcome, enrichment, joy, pleasure, success. It needs to be positive. One of the most important aspects of what we are doing is this notion of enrichment. Instead of thinking: “here is a remedial thing, here is an intervention strategy”, what we want to say is “here is an enrichment opportunity for people to be welcomed to the university, to feel that they belong to the university, that they are comfortable at the university, and that when they are here working that there are a lot of people, individuals, agencies available to them and that they know where they are and that they feel that they’re part of the university environment.” Not as outsiders. Not as people coming in and feeling frightened but as people feeling strong and bold with their own voices. (Mamchur, 2006)

Bakhtin (1986) suggests that language is always embedded in a socio/historical context that includes both a speaker and an audience, and usually more than one of both. For the speaker is not only the speaker (or writer) – he is also a respondent in that he is responding to all other utterances that have come before him. This heteroglossia of voices exists wherever the utterance takes shape.

A Sense of Community Encourages a Growing Awareness of Self

This group of FAL instructors was aware of the socio/historical content of their stories and of their students’ stories. The focus on personal narrative and on oral presentations promoted an awareness of who they were and where they had come from. This awareness promoted a deep sense of community that went beyond the moments they were experiencing together.

One of the primary objectives of the FAL course was to help students feel that they were contributing members of the university community. The pedagogy behind this goal was grounded in the assumption that there was a positive correlation between a sense of belonging in the academy and success in the academy.

The telling of stories provides voice for who we are and where we’ve come from. It creates a new culture, a new way of being in the society. As we transfer from one culture, whether it is another country, or high school, or a return to school from the world of work, we lose some of our old privileges in order to gain the privilege of our new world, in this case, university. The movement is not simply opening one door and entering a new “room”. There is that dark hallway in between. (Mamchur, 2006)

FAL became that hallway. And story telling providing the light the students needed to open the next door. FAL helped them to keep the essence of who they were in the change process. These comments taken from a taped discussion group about their previous and present experiences with writing.

Well before, like, in high school when I used to write essays I wasn’t really comfortable – it took me like an hour to come up with an introduction and to decide what I wanted to write but FAL helped me. I actually enjoy writing now. I noticed that if I sit in a special place and feel comfortable things come to me. (Student 78)
I didn’t know I had a lot of the things in my head – the instructor just let us write so I find I have a lot of things in my head I didn’t know I had before – just put it down. (Student 4)
I think not all teachers are like the ones we have now because in my high school we wrote a lot about what our teachers wanted us to write so it’s basically they were telling you this is what I want you to write, it’s not the way that we want to write. It’s not about stuff we even care about. I hated writing. I felt stupid. I didn’t want anyone to read it. (Student 14)

Students converse about course as filmmaker asks questions:
Student 1 – And the red rose you wrote – that was great. Student 2 wrote about this red rose.
Interviewer – Tell us about the red rose.

Student 2 – Well he can read it because he likes it a lot. And he has a good voice – lots of expression for it. Basically I just wrote about people in different time periods and what they think of the symbol of the rose - up until now.
Interviewer – And what is your opinion of the rose?

Student 2 – [laugh] My opinion is it depends on the situation you give it to someone.
Interviewer – Have you given to someone?

Student 2 – Yeah
Interviewer – Who did you give your rose to?

Student 2 – Oh – this is personal. Anyway – (passes the binder)
Different student reads the rose poem for him.
Interviewer – Thank you – that’s wonderful.

Applause
Student 3 - We wrote about an uncomfortable moment. I wrote about a time someone told me I couldn’t go in a program. I couldn't get in. I wasn’t good enough.
Interviewer - And how did you deal with that when he said that to you?

Student 3 – Well, I think I was destroyed. Something else, kind of like a beginning of … doubt in myself. So in many ways now I’m beginning to get over that.
Interviewer – And how had this class helped that?

Student 3 – Well, it has because I’m revisiting that, you know, so I’m writing about it whereas it’s always in your mind kind of bugging you and not having an outlet to kind of talk about it because we always pretend that we are courageous but bringing this out kind of helps that more and more real way.

Though they discussed the past, one of the guiding principles of the course was to be in the present.

We’re trying to get the mode of here and now, in this moment in time, together experiencing with pleasure and joy, experiencing with tremendous skill and opportunity, and we are going to embrace the moment to get people to let go of the past and the fears they've had and any baggage they bring. “I wasn’t good in English.” “I didn't know how to write,” to right now we are going to experience this with the greatest intention of enjoyment that we can have. (Mamchur, 2006)

Stories open you up to the stories of others, as common and singular as your own. That remains the best way we storytelling animals have found to overcome loneliness, develop compassion and create community. Indeed, if the unique stories of individual are not cherished, a group of people may become a mass, or a collective, but never a healing community (Keen, 1988, p 46-47). Though the dream team were cautious about any tone of remediation, they were well aware that healing was needed.

Instructors shared their own stories, just as the students did. They shared with one another, with the students in the section they taught, and with the whole 200 students gathered monthly for large group sharing, film study and story telling exchange. This method of exchange and authentic reaching out created an atmosphere of togetherness and erased the feeling that students were here because “they had to be because of a deficit”. As one member of a taped focus group said: “And I really, really liked my professor, she’s absolutely fantastic and she was so much fun that when, later on when people asked me what my favourite course was I actually said my FAL class because it was so easygoing and I felt so comfortable in it, so it was – it was a good environment.”

Advocates of narrative knowledge are against the view of education as an act of depositing established facts in the minds of students or inculcating the values of the given culture (Florence,
They see education as a way to assist humans to critically evaluate and know who they are and develop better knowledge of their world so that they can participate in that world to transform it.

The main method of teaching narrative was based on several key elements of writing process, described by Murray (1969) and further refined by Mamchur (1996). These elements were: discovering a subject, sensing an audience, searching for specifics and creating a design. Because the dialogical intention of the course mandated a responsive, living curriculum, it was the belief of Carolyn Mamchur that a skeletal structure based on sound research and proven methods used by writers should provide the backbone of the course. This presented a solid foundation that invited easy adaptation, a common language and important transferable skill. Students, too, appreciated this approach. In their final evaluations of the course, which they rated so highly, 90% of them said that the writing process method taught them how to write effectively, using methods that real writers use. The emphasis on using the ways of writers impressed itself on them, giving them a real sense of confidence and strategies for revision.

One instructor, during an interview for a doctoral dissertation (Shaw, 2009) commented on this dual nature of structure and organic evolution:

One of the unique things that we do in this FAL program – and I think this comes directly out of Carolyn’s philosophy of writing is that we work on developing the voice of the student. ... Voice can have both content and form. And I think the magic of the program is that it works with both of those in developing voice and so we work with the forms of writing and the different genres of writing. I think that’s critically important. However, equally if not more important is this developing the content of the voice. And so I think one of the prime focuses of the FAL program is in giving the students the tools to develop the content of the voice. That unique content that is uniquely the students’. And I think that is the fact that is sometimes missing from other writing classes and that needs to be there. And the combination of both, the content and the form, is what makes for really effective writing.

So it’s not only confirming the student and allowing that voice then to emerge but it’s also about being able to shape that voice and giving the tools the student can use to shape his or her voice in ways that are appropriate to the subject at hand, to the audience. And so, both allowing the voice to emerge and then giving the students the tools to shape that voice in appropriate ways are the two real strengths, the most important things.

One without the other isn’t sufficient. It’s a wonderful thing to confirm the student’s presence and we can do that regardless of the subject matter, regardless of the curriculum. But in terms of writing, then giving the tools that the student can use to shape the voice is, I think, a really powerful and important part of the program. So it’s the combination of the two. (Instructor G, 2008)

A second instructor spoke of the student’s narrative writing also going through the revision process:

When we do that personal childhood story we will revisit it again and again and again. I get them to do 3 or 4 drafts of that piece of writing and each time, I’m sort of raising the bar so to speak both in content – getting them to explore the ideas and themes more deeply – and it’s that what’s your subject – really explore what the subject is and when you explore the subject more deeply then you begin to see the connections with others. But not only the subject but the form. What techniques of narrative can we use and work on developing to make this a more effective and powerful piece of writing. (Instructor H, 2008)

Using student work as curriculum was another useful strategy for finding voice and creating community as students mastered such common tasks as writing a précis, learning to paraphrase, to summarize, to revise and edit. This focus on emergent curriculum rather than text or teacher made materials provided students with an opportunity to read one another’s work in a different context. For example, students would share their written narratives for the purpose of writing a
précis. The author would be present to respond, with a discussion around intention and clarity and the relationship between reader and writer. Both narrative writing and paraphrasing were evaluated by this process.

This existential approach followed three of the attributes as described by Jeylan Wolyie Hussein (2008). That learning is experiential since it co-emerges with environment, individuals and activity; that understanding is embedded in the conduct and relations among the participants, rather than the minds of individual actors; and it is a continuous process of invention and exploration.

Members of the dream team shared how the curriculum had evolved in her FAL class:

What I've been doing that's been so much fun and so successful is I've been taking their stories and then passing them out to everybody with no name on it and saying paraphrase this. So instead of paraphrasing something foreign they are paraphrasing their own. So then they can talk to the real author and say is that really the proper interpretation? And that seems to be really working because they are very interested in one another's stories and their stories are so remarkably beautiful and poignant that I couldn't find anything on the face of the Earth that would be nicer. (Mamchur, 2006)

I didn't bring anything from the outside everything has to grow from within. I believe in that so much, the organic. When somebody has a paragraph that's exquisite we put it up on the overhead and then we say is this exactly the word? Isn't there another word that would be better in this gorgeous thing? And we might spend 20 minutes finding one word because it's the right word. (Instructor E, 2006)

Students, in filmed focus groups discussed the impact of using their own words as a basis for learning:

At first I was kind of disappointed because I was sure it was a remedial class. I went to an adviser and asked if I should take the class or write the LPI and they recommended this class. So I went with the suggestion and I would recommend it at this point now. It's a very fun class. You know, it's a very friendly atmosphere. The writing assignments are very relevant to whoever is writing them since they are “write a story about yourself” and then later on even you don’t just throw those away when you are done with them you revise them. You do other assignments that are inspired by other things- people's own work - in the class. We learn by reading our stories and doing the stuff with them we'd usually do with work out of a book. So I mean the class is very much about the people that are in it. So I've enjoyed my FAL experience. (Student 35, 2006)

I've learned things that I wouldn't have considered to be taught in a remedial class. What I mean is that I don't consider it a remedial class. I wrote my own story that the story teller told and people in the audience cried. My story told to over two hundred people. Would you believe it? (Student 19, 2006)

The Power of Narrative

Though tools such as psychological type and Glasser’s quality world and choice theory were very helpful for dialogue that resulted in both a sense of community and a growing awareness of self, the most powerful and personal way to gain-self knowledge was through narrative, which was the most significant agency of the program. “Stories and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging to our lives. They attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, character, and even advice on what we might do with our lives. The story fabric offers us image, myths, and metaphors that are morally resonant and contribute both to our knowing and being known” (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1).

The sharing of stories in class resulted in a sense of community and promoted an atmosphere of intimacy and playfulness. Many of the students used two sets of names, the names given in their countries of origin and what they called their “Canadian” names which they picked at
random, very common names such as Jane, Susan, Mary. This led to some confusion as lists had the formal names, yet they preferred to use their chosen names as their real names were often hard to pronounce. And hard to remember, even for the student who had picked the name, as there was no attachment to it.

A natural phenomenon grew out of the stories – the selection of nicknames that represented an important aspect of their stories. Names such as “love letter”, “shy girl”, “Warrior” became were selected. Carolyn complained that she had no nickname. They named her “Too Much”. Students used the names outside of class, branding themselves as the FAL group. No longer embarrassed at being members of FAL, they wore the brand names with pride.

The administrators who controlled FAL funds and were the link between Carolyn Mamchur and the senior administration in the Vice President’s office understood the power of narrative. They agreed to the hiring of a professional story teller to re-tell the students stories to the whole student body of 200 students, to work with individual instructors and FAL classes to help them use their written narratives to become a culture of oral story tellers.

With Claire Murray coming in and telling stories from different cultures and also stories from the students themselves there was a great deal of acceptance and bonding. Well this is an example of the kind of skill that Mamchur as a humanities educator has brought to the curriculum development of the course. Stories are more than just stories – stories are narratives that grip people emotionally and start a cycle of motivation for the students that isn’t easily achieved otherwise so with her particular gifts, Dr. Mamchur has seen this and she reached out to people in the community who can express this and bring it to life in the classroom but you know ultimately the commonest way probably that we understand life is through narrative, through stories and by connecting that impulse we have to thread a narrative line through our experiences. She’s also threading a kind of motivation to the experience of the classroom. (Shaker, 2006)

Claire, the story-teller, introduced herself to the whole group by telling a story. The story was about an uncomfortable moment, selected because that had been the first writing assignment instructors had assigned to FAL students. This is how Claire, the beautiful woman of Jamaican and English heritage, introduced her story and her ideas about “stumbling” (as transcribed from the film of her introduction and storytelling):

I’ll just speak a couple of minutes here. Well, what I would love to be able to do for all of you and for myself is to allow uncomfortable moments to unfold anyway throughout this whole process in a certain way. One thing as a storyteller that’s really wonderful is that no matter how bad it gets in your own life it’s fantastic material for storytelling. So I’m guaranteed really good material from my life because things go wrong and one of the things that you said earlier about success and we want to speak to success in our classrooms and with our students but I think we also want to talk about something that happens. I find in monologues often it is the mistakes, the stumbling that happens, that allows the monologue to go deeper and it’s a very exciting thing and it’s a wonderful thing to pass on to students. I feel that part of my role is to fumble around in the telling of stories and get students thinking about where does this story really wants to go? Why am I stumbling in this particular place? What more could be said here? And in terms of the subject, for instance, this story that I sent out to you. Well, I would never in the storytelling say that whole thing that is on the page the way that I have written it - but it tells about a journey in Boston with my own personal cultural background and then an attack that happened on the street and I found out - yes there is an uncomfortable moment there. Oh, yeah, absolutely. But there are other subjects involved and they’re all vying for my attention. So I could tell that story maybe six different ways, easily, six different ways. And end on a different note. And for instance one of the topics is the interface between cultures and the last time that I told this story was in our graduate class, it was the clash between cultures, which was my moment. That was my subject when I told the story in that situation. (Murray, 2006)

Grumet (1991) speaks of the same notion of the politics of personal knowledge. “When
we work with life history, the autobiographical act is not complete until the writer of the story becomes its reader and the temporal fissure that opened between the writing and the reading invites negation as well as affirmation. But in this case I am trying to elicit, not accounts that will reveal the psych-logical of the self, but narratives that will display what Freire calls the object to be known in the profiles it assumes in the writer’s consciousness (p. 73).

That this group understood what narrative was all about, its value, its complexity, its possibility becomes clear in the words of one of the instructors:

I think you want to make sure that the narrative is not an isolated narrative. That it connects with the narrative of others. And then you can explore the techniques, the technologies that good writers use to make narrative powerful and effective. And one of the things that I think students realize is that what makes narrative very powerful is if it does connect with others people’s experience. And to do that you have to be conscious of other people. You can’t just be self-absorbed. (Instructor N, 2006)

Instructor C speaks about narrative and sharing in class:

We were talking about what it is to share your writing with somebody, I wanted everybody to feel like we were going to honor what they were sharing. That what they were sharing was a gift for us. In order to facilitate that, we talked about what it had been like to share your writing and have it criticized or even have people telling you you’re not a writer. I shared with them that I’ve been in a lot of classes, in creative writing situations and everybody I’ve talked to has had a negative experience about the writing. I wanted to let them know that everybody’s had that experience. And so we wrote a monster hall of fame and we wrote to three people who had not supported us in our writing and then we ‘sent’ them letters and we did pictures of them and ‘told’ them they were wrong. I think a lot of people have been carrying this little hurt around with them and it was a secret. SWAs soon as you talk about it and let it out, you find that everybody has had that experience and even people you have admired as writers have had that experience or students you think are better than you have had that experience and so it kind of levels the playing field. Picks them up. (Instructor C, 2006)

The responses to the power of narrative varied from complex to simple, but all felt profound. Instructor B spoke of the lack of opportunity her students had previously had to write about their own lives.

One of the things that I’ve noticed that I’ve been absolutely overwhelmed with is the unbelievable need for this course. I just was absolutely astounded in the first few weeks how little opportunity these young people have had to tell their stories; to just speak to another adult and talk about their stories. (Instructor B, 2006)

**Recommendations for Improvement**

The tapes and interviews quoted in this paper were coded for a doctorate dissertation and the following twelve themes had emerged: institutional influences, value judgments, transition to university, community, student/instructor relationship, individual gains, curricular goals, temporality, storytelling & narrative, pedagogical concerns, diversity, and academic literacy.

This coding revealed two major requests. The students felt that there was a problem associated with the ESL students’ poor English skill. They felt that the class had to “teach down” to students who had to look up so many words in an English/Chinese dictionary. That was interesting, because the university reported that only 25 of the 220 students enrolled in FAL that semester were international students. Though they were domestic students, the majority were from Asia and even those who had been born in Canada spoke their native language at home and with one another and were not that fluent in English. It gave FAL the “look” of an ESL program. Those students who spoke fluent English suggested that there be separate classes for those for whom English was a challenge, even if they were not international or recently located students. Despite any fear of appearing to discriminate, the instructors also recommended that this might be a good idea. Both students and instructors felt discomfort around this topic; with instructors
wanting to avoid any segregation; the students wanting to get the best education they could. Yet some previously non-disclosed discomfort around “segregated according to English ability” was apparent in students. The non-visible minority students identified the course as ESL in individual interviews with the documentary filmmaker; however, in the larger focus group interviews, which included both non-visible minority and visible minority students in a group setting, ESL was not mentioned.

A second recommendation, not so political and sensitive, was that there be a second part to FAL. Instructors, more than students, reported that there was not enough time to accomplish both the self-efficacy component, with its emphasis on community, self-knowledge and narrative; and the turning away from the personal to the more objective analytical expository literacy that was expected.

It quickly became apparent to both the creator and instructors of FAL that another course, which would be taken before or after FAL depending upon the focus, was needed. If a pre-requisite course to FAL were created that could concentrate on self-efficacy, then the FAL could concentrate more on literacy. Despite course development freezes and budget restraints, that course, “Finding Place and Voice in Academia” was developed by Carolyn Mamchur, passed senate and is being taught three times a year in both face-to-face and e-learning. Students clamor to attend this pre-FAL class with its focus on self-efficacy, leaving FAL free to focus more on the structured aspects of literacy.

Was the first run of the FAL experience successful?

At the end of their first meeting as a group, Carolyn Mamchur had talked about what success would look like.

She was full of optimism and hope. These were her words: With all of the experiences and all of the intelligence that this room houses – it will be amazing what we will accomplish. . . . we can set the bar very, very high and I think we can be a model of how things can happen. So you take a bunch of kids who are feeling marginalized who feel that they didn't succeed in this area in the past and they haven't got all the skills they need but are still trying to enter a new world and then they have to take this mandatory course – but instead of being this negative experience that they are going to dread, it becomes an enrichment, a pleasure, a positive experience. We'll be successful if people who don't have to take this course clamber to get in. We'll be successful if they find out they don't have to stay; but do. We'll be successful when they gain entrance to the university. We'll be successful if they graduate (Mamchur, 2006).

And be accepted, they did. Of that first intake, only two of the 200 students did not earn the required C+ necessary to continue as students at SFU.

Would they continue to enroll in FAL? Would our gates be flooded? To date, 1768 students over 2 1/2 years have enrolled in FAL classes. To date, only 37 of those FAL students have dropped from their program. The normal attrition rate for Undergraduate Students is 25% (SFU, 2009, p. 6). We feel confident those who stayed will pass their Writing Intensive courses.

Even after three years, the FAL students still keep in touch with many of their instructors, sharing both their triumphs and challenges as they navigate through the labyrinth of the university, succeeding because they know they are supported by a wide network of friends and mentors.

In a follow-up questionnaire to their present progress, very promising responses emerged: In response to: “On a scale of 1 - 10 (10 being best) how much to do you think FAL helped you?” The average was 8/10. In response to “How are you doing in your W courses?” typical answers were: “I'm doing well. I've managed a B+ in my criminology elective which was VERY writing intensive, 4 papers ranging from 1500-4000 words. I have at least an A- in my W-engineering courses but they consist of more technical papers”. “I am applying for graduate school. Please tell Carolyn. She'll want to know.”

What was very touching was that in answering this formal questionnaire about a course that occurred three years ago, there was a mixing the formal with the personal, as one would when responding to somebody who cares about them, as a friend. Words of “I miss this course so much.” And “Please say hi to Dr. Mamchur. I think of her a lot.” And “I wish there were
more classes for me to take like FAl. We were so close.” Were sprinkled throughout student responses. The group still felt like a family. All looked forward to celebrating their graduation ceremony in 2010!

Several of the students in Carolyn’s class have gone on to earn Masters and Doctors degrees. They write to her on special days, Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day, and send their love and talk of their accomplishments, signing both their real and nick names. It is in those moments that Carolyn is certain the program was a success.

In this particular case, a policy mandate offered an opportunity to create a totally unique course in an open humanistic style that promoted emergent curriculum and narrative in a community of dialogic ontology.

References


