Perceptions Of Hispanic Female ESL Students Toward First-Year College Writing Courses: A Phenomenological Examination Of Cultural Influences

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Perceptions of Female Hispanic ESL Students Toward First-Year College Writing Courses: A Phenomenological Examination of Cultural Influences

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Keywords: Composition, Latinas, Non-Native Speakers, Culture, Community College

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, David L. Booker, who, a long time ago, asked me about my dreams and then helped make those dreams come true. Without his unwavering love and support, none of this would have been possible. He has all my love, always.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my family members—my mother, my children, my grandchildren— with thanks for their patience over the past few years. There were many times when I was so involved with this dissertation that I neglected them, and while I regret that, I am deeply appreciative of their understanding.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Frank J. Buonocore, a good man with a good heart whom I loved whole world big.
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In thinking about the many people who should be acknowledged here, I am reminded of Isaac Newton who talked about how new discoveries and new knowledge are possible when we are “standing on the shoulders of giants.” There were many times over the past few years when I despaired of ever finishing this dissertation. However, with the help and support of my committee, here I am. I owe everything to the “giants” who helped me get to this point.

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ABSTRACT

The role of culture as a phenomenon guided this qualitative study, which examined the influence of diverse Hispanic cultures on the attitudes and perceptions towards college writing courses of female Hispanic students who are non-native speakers of English. With the increasing number of Hispanic immigrants coming to the U.S., the minority student population at our nation’s colleges and universities has also risen. Community colleges have become the means through which many of these Hispanic immigrants obtain a college education.

The eight women who participated in this study self-identified as Hispanic. All were first generation college students who had been born outside of the United States. Three were born in Puerto Rico, two were born in Cuba, and the remaining three came from Uruguay, Colombia, and Mexico, respectively. The eight participants were students at a Florida community college, and all had already completed at least one college writing course.

The data were collected through the use of individual interviews (Patton, 1987) and responses to journal prompts (Owens, 2007). The journal prompts and interview questions were designed to elicit the participants’ descriptions of their experiences in their college writing courses and their attitudes towards their
college writing coursework. These eight women provided insight into how their
culture as Hispanic females affects their learning experiences in college writing
courses.

This study was based on three exploratory questions:

- What are the cultural influences that shape the experiences of
  female Hispanic ESL learners in college writing courses?
- How do these cultural influences affect student learning, specifically
  those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using
  correct grammar, format, and citation?
- Have these cultural influences produced a learning experience that
  is transformative? If so, how?

The data were analyzed using qualitative analysis software. The findings were
triangulated through this analysis of the responses, by having the participants
check the transcripts for accuracy, and through the use of a researcher reflective
journal (Creswell, 1998). Five emergent themes were extracted from the data:

1. The frustrations and struggles ESL students experience in their
   college writing courses;
2. The desire to succeed in school and in their prospective
   careers;
3. The influence of teachers on their academic experiences;
4. The importance family for emotional support; and
5. The necessity of cultural assimilation without compromising
   one’s own cultural identity.
From these themes, descriptive statements (Creswell, 2007) were developed that suggest answers to the exploratory questions. These descriptive statements are:

- Female Hispanic ESL learners are influenced by several elements of their culture, specifically in their relationships with their families and their instructors.
- Female Hispanic ESL learners consider English language acquisition an integral element of cultural assimilation.
- Female Hispanic ESL learners see the transformative aspect of their English writing courses as requiring them to change on both a personal and a societal level.

These descriptive statements formed the basis for a discussion of implications in both teaching and curriculum development, and recommendations for future research. These recommendations include promoting awareness of the cultural and institutional barriers that are the result of a lack of personal connections between students and teachers, such as the limited availability of tutors and other learning center staff; the limited availability of instructors whose native language is the same as that of the ESL student; family and child care responsibilities; problems related to full- or part-time employment; transportation issues; and the lack of college writing courses designed specifically for non-native speakers.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

John Locke claimed that we are “blank slates” at birth, empty tablets waiting to be written upon. Indeed, as we acquire knowledge, we do so through our experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and values. Hence, it is our culture -- the “ways of being, knowing, and doing” -- that shapes our identities, especially in how we make sense of the world around us (Johnson & Protheroe, 2003, p. 4). In fact, human growth and development cannot be separated from these influences, which are based within one’s culture. An individual's culture, “the particular ways in which a social group lives out and makes sense of its given circumstances and conditions in life” (McLaren 1998, p. 175), has a profound effect on his or her worldview, particularly when it comes to acquiring knowledge. Since learning is rooted in the “social relationships and the actions of individuals that take place within particular sociopolitical contexts” (Nieto, 1999, p. 2), culture “should be considered as the source rather than the result [italics added] of human thought and behavior” (Crotty, 1998, as cited in Turgut, 2006, p.47). The effect of learning a new culture on the individual’s sense of self suggests that people with different self-identities experience the world in different ways (Jacobson, 1996). Indeed, if “culture and cognition cannot be separated,” (Nieto,
2002, p. 144), we are acquiring knowledge and creating meaning “through lenses bestowed upon us by our culture” (Crotty, 1998, as cited in Turgut, 2006, p. 47).

This study examines the relationship between culture and learning using adult learners as participants. I decided to focus on Hispanic, non-native speakers of English (English as a Second Language, or ESL students) because, according to the U. S. Census Bureau, this ethnic group is the fastest growing minority in our nation (Elsibai, 2008). I also chose to gather participants from the Florida community college where I teach English because two-year colleges have more Hispanic students than any other ethnic group (Fry, 2002). Thus, an examination of this population at the two-year college level could provide some insight into their experiences as learners in a culture other than their native culture.

The decision was made early on to include only females in this study. Research into various Hispanic cultures supports the cultural norm that in a Hispanic household, a woman’s first duty is to home and family; that a man is the provider, and therefore, the head of the family; and that to be socially acceptable, Hispanic women must conform to these standards (Muller & Rowell, 1997). Despite evidence of some advances in the area of equitable opportunity for Hispanic females, these gender-based restrictions continue to influence Hispanic females outside of the home. Therefore, only female Hispanic students will be examined in this study as there is evidence of gender’s profound cultural influence on the academic success of these women.
Background: Personal Perspective

I have been teaching English at a community college in Florida since 2003. For the last nine years, I have been a full-time faculty member, teaching five to seven sections of English Composition each semester. This means that over 200 students pass through my classroom each term. At our college, approximately 10% of the student population is Hispanic (Student Enrollment Demographics, 2008). Since I teach such a large number of students each term, I often have several students in my English Composition classes who are Hispanic and non-native speakers of English. These Hispanic ESL students -- students who are non-native speakers of English -- arrive in the college classroom having come from a cultural background that may be markedly different from that of their native-speaking classmates. These differences can produce anxiety that results in low self-esteem, which has been suggested to be an impediment to learning (Bedran, 2001; Rahilly, 2004, as cited in Armendaris, 2009, p. 4).

Rationale

There are several studies that focus on the effects of culture on learning using K-12 students as participants. For example, one study examined cultural diversity among elementary school-age children and its impact on reading and writing (Kong & Pearson, 2003). At the post-secondary level, existing research has explored ESL freshman writers at universities (Correa, 2008; Hasson, 2001;
Matzen, 2001; Singer, 2008; Stegemoller, 2009; Varley, 2009). Relatively little research has focused on this group at the community college.

Since the community college, with its traditional, “open door policy,” is often the place where many non-native speakers of English begin their college educations, a study of the perceptions and expectations of ESL students in first-year writing courses at the two-year college is warranted. The existing literature supports this assertion: previous studies have tended to focus more on the perceptions of faculty who teach ESL students rather than that of ESL students themselves (Rix, 2007). Also, most research in this area has examined students at four-year universities, where faculty members tend to be more research-oriented. Therefore, there is a deficit in the research on Hispanic ESL students in writing courses at two-year community colleges. This problem is exacerbated by the promotion of an “English Only” approach that ignores language differences among learners who do not fit the “dominant image of composition students” (Matsuda, 2006, p.638). This trend marginalizes ESL students by neglecting to take into account their linguistic and cultural differences.

Research into the study of ESL writers began in the 1960s, and since then has grown into “an interdisciplinary field of inquiry with its own disciplinary infrastructure” (Matsuda et al., 2003, p. 151). However, much of the earliest research considered writing instruction of ESL learners to be merely an extension of second-language acquisition, and not as a separate discipline meritng its own research protocol (Brooks, 1960; Lado, 1964; Pincas, 1962; Rivers, 1968). More recently, other researchers focused their attention on the impact of linguistic and
cultural differences and their potentially negative effects on acquiring academic writing skills (Matsuda, 2006, 1999). Still other studies suggest that differences in writing style, culture, religion, and ethnicity can have an effect on writing (Benson et al., 1992; Hinkel, 1994; Moragne & Silva, 1989, 1991; Silva, 1990a, 1993; Zamel, 1997).

Globalization has turned the college classroom, and especially the composition classroom, into an international cultural space (You, 2010, p. 177). Thus, the acquisition of a foreign culture can create obstacles to learning for ESL students since this acquisition process may involve alternating between their native language and English in their college speaking, reading, and writing activities. Since students who are new to college writing need to acquire the “academic culture” of higher learning and of academic writing (Larsen, 2003, p. 22), this puts an additional responsibility on ESL students who may already be struggling to assimilate into the culture of their adopted country. Not only must these students learn to navigate the cultural norms of everyday life, they must also conform to the academic culture of college-level courses. This academic culture is one that has traditionally stressed adherence to a “unidirectional English monolingualism” (Horner & Trimbur, 2002, p. 594). Therefore, the cultural assimilation process for ESL students underscores the need for developing “an internationalist perspective capable of understanding the study and teaching of written English in relation to other languages and to the dynamics of globalization” (Horner & Trimbur, 2002, pp. 623-624). In other words, the cultural background and experiences an individual brings to the classroom cannot be
ignored and must be taken into consideration at every step of the learning process.

I chose to ask my participants about their college writing courses because students in these classes have an opportunity to reflect, explore, and analyze their ideas and opinions through the writing assignments they receive. As a college writing instructor, I have the privilege of reading student texts and gaining insight into some of their most personal observations and perceptions. Thus, I believe that asking the participants in my study to recall and reflect upon their experiences in their writing courses provided them with a strong basis for formulating meaningful responses.

Usefulness of the Study

How Hispanic ESL learners make meaning of academic texts and use this knowledge to develop their writing skills needs further investigation. An additional benefit of this study might be to identify problems and develop strategies for effecting curricula that are better suited to the specific needs of the students in question. This qualitative study “draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 15). A thematic qualitative analysis identified themes that are significant for ESL students.
Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this interpretive study, which is both exploratory and descriptive in nature, is to examine and analyze how the native culture of ESL students affects their experiences in their first-year college writing courses. The objectives of this project include gaining a better understanding of the learning needs of the nation’s largest minority, namely Hispanics. An additional goal is to identify problems and develop strategies for effecting curricula that are better suited to the specific needs of the students in question. The phenomenon that was explored is the role of culture on Hispanic ESL students’ acquisition of college-level writing skills, specifically those writing skills that involve the development of thinking skills, writing a research paper, and using correct grammar, format, and citation. I was particularly concerned with how the native culture of ESL students shapes their perceptions of their college writing courses.

For the purposes of this study, the term “college-level academic writing skills” was defined by drawing upon the research of Lee Ann Carroll (2002), a professor at Pepperdine University (California), who states, “What are usually called ‘writing assignments’ in college might more accurately be called ‘literacy tasks’ because they require much more than the ability to construct correct sentences or compose neatly organized paragraphs with topic sentences” (pp. 3-4). Thus, “literacy tasks” that involve retrieving specific information, following a set of directions, writing to share or record information, and transferring information from one source to another can be an integral part of the learning experience for students in college composition courses (U. S. Department of...
Education, n. d.). Therefore, this study investigated the perceptions of the participants as they pertain to the acquisition and development of literacy skills through the lens of their native cultures. In particular, this study examined how culture affects a student’s ability to acquire “the knowledge of research skills, the ability to read complex texts, an understanding of key disciplinary concepts, and strategies for synthesizing, analyzing, and responding critically to new information, usually within a limited time frame” (Carroll, 2002, pp. 3–4). To make these objectives readily understandable for my participants, I re-worded them as follows:

- Thinking skills
- Writing a research paper
- Using correct grammar, format, and citation

Hispanic Students at Community Colleges

The objectives of this project include gaining a richer and deeper understanding of the learning needs of what the U.S. Census Bureau has described as the nation’s largest minority, namely Hispanics. An average of 16% of the community college student population in the United States is Hispanic (American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts, 2011). The percentages of Hispanic students in community colleges are higher in the southernmost regions of the country, with border states such as Arizona indicating a 2007 Hispanic student population of 17.5% (AMEPAC, 2009), and Texas reporting that Hispanic students comprised about 28% of the average
2006 enrollment (Jauregui, Slate & Brown, 2008). In the years 2003 through 2006, roughly 30% of the student population in the California community college system was Hispanic (Sengupta & Jepsen, 2006). New Mexico reported that in 2004, 39.7% of its community college student population was Hispanic (American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts, 2011). By comparison, northern states such as New York (12.6%), Nebraska (7%), Idaho (4.1%), and Ohio (2%) indicate lower numbers of Hispanic students in their community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts, 2011).

While Florida is not a border state, its proximity to Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Central America has resulted in an increased Hispanic population. Florida has the second highest Hispanic population in the eastern part of the United States outside of New York State (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). As of 2007, Hispanics represented 23% of Florida’s school-age population and 22% of high school graduates (Hispanic Research Center). According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2010), nationally, fewer Hispanics earn bachelor degrees (less than one-tenth of the population) than Asian Americans (just over half) and whites (about one-third). Nationally, among 18- to 24-year-olds, 44% of Hispanic undergraduates attend a two-year school, as opposed to about 30% of both white and black undergraduates. Furthermore, Hispanic college students over the age of 24 years are more likely than their peers of any other racial/ethnic group to be enrolled at two-year institutions. More than 55% of Hispanic
undergraduates in the U.S. over the age of 35 years old attend two-year colleges (Fry, 2002).

There were 384,503 students enrolled in Florida’s community colleges in 2004 (American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts, 2011). Of these, 19.3% were Hispanic, about 3% more than the national average (American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts, 2011). At PHCC, approximately 10% of the 2008 student population self-identified as Hispanic (Pasco-Hernando Community College, 2009). Of these, approximately 65% were female (Pasco-Hernando Community College Fact Book, 2008). That is, in 2008, out of a total enrollment of 7,065 students, 754 were Hispanic, 483 of which were female (Pasco-Hernando Community College Fact Book, 2008). This percentage indicates the importance of a study such as the one I proposed. Attachment to family and community as well as economic need appear to be factors in the exceptionally high rate of female Hispanic students' enrollment in two-year colleges. Using their native culture as the lens through which their experiences in college writing courses are examined can provide an understanding and appreciation of how this culture shapes their learning experiences.

**Exploratory Questions**

This qualitative research project explored attitudes and perceptions about the learning experiences of Hispanic ESL student writers. The purpose of this study was to provide these students the opportunity to voice their opinions on their learning experiences in first-year English Composition courses at the
community college level, particularly as these experiences relate to their native cultures. The central exploratory questions of this study are

- What are the cultural influences that shape the experiences of female Hispanic ESL learners in college writing courses?
- How do these cultural influences affect student learning, specifically those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using correct grammar, format, and citation?
- Have these cultural influences produced a learning experience that is transformative? If so, how?

Research Design

The research method for this study is based on the description of empirical phenomenological research as described by Moustakas (1994). The data were obtained through participant journaling and individual interviews. The use of two different types of data is advantageous because it provided different perspectives and therefore a richer and deeper understanding of the findings (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The interview and journal responses were examined to determine the structure of the participants' lived experiences based on reflection and interpretation of the data through thematic coding of the journal responses and the interview transcripts. The study used a phenomenological framework in which these participants described in their own words their journey through their first-year college writing courses. This qualitative study “draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation”
A phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). The research method is described in detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Preliminary Research

I began my inquiry with a discussion with an ESL student whom I will call Marta. Marta was a student in one of my English Composition I classes, and she agreed to help me by answering a few questions about her background. The interview questions I developed as a result of these conversations with Marta were further refined through a formal pretesting conducted in August 2011. This pretesting process is described in Chapter Three.

I first asked Marta to tell me about herself. She said she is a native of Argentina, and she has been in the U. S. for approximately nine years; her native language is Spanish. Although she had a few years of English language education in her native country at the secondary school level, she had often expressed concerns to me about her writing skills in our class. During one of our conversations, I asked Marta if she believed that her Hispanic culture may have influenced her as a student. When she replied that she did indeed feel that there was such an influence, I asked her to describe this influence. Her response surprised me: “Back home, friends are very important. We help each other,” she said, “But here – I do not feel that connection.” She went on to say this “lack of connection” makes it difficult for her to feel comfortable asking questions in class,
or asking a classmate to share notes. She also said that she is embarrassed by her accent, which adds to her sense of isolation in the classroom. Since we do a fair amount of group work in class (peer editing and response, for example) and oral presentations of student essays, I realized that Marta may have been struggling without my being aware of it.

During another meeting, I asked Marta why she left Argentina. She explained that her husband had received a lucrative job offer in the U.S. which would provide financial stability for her family (she has two young children). She is homesick, even after all these years, she says, and feels more comfortable when she is around family, or with friends who are Hispanic. She spoke again of the “lack of roots” she senses among American people and how her “heart is in two places.” She longs to assimilate into American culture, but also feels the need to retain her native culture. As she struggles to write in English, she sometimes feels as if she chipping away at what is left of her native culture, making her feel as if she is “living in a movie.” This sense of detachment makes it difficult for Marta to express herself in her writing assignments because in trying to belong to two cultures, she sometimes feels as if she “belongs in neither one.” These “substantial personal, emotional, and learning barriers” (King, 2009, p. xix) are the challenges that Marta, and other students like her, must overcome to lead productive and fulfilling lives.

I next asked Marta some questions about her home life. In response, Marta mentioned yet another cultural factor that affects her academic success; this involves her responsibilities as a mother. As a Hispanic woman, she said that her
traditional role has been that of mother and caregiver. Marta described difficulties she experiences in finding the time to do her writing assignments, and how her husband and extended family sometimes are “not very helpful” in giving her the time and space she needs to complete her schoolwork.

Participant Selection

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to describe the meaning of the phenomenon in question for a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the phenomenon that will be explored is culture, specifically the various Hispanic cultures. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I selected participants that represent the various countries that are considered Hispanic: Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Central America, and South America (Hispanic Research Center, 2006). Volunteers who are students at the college where I teach and who have self-identified as Hispanic; as non-native speakers of English; as female; as over the age of eighteen; and as first-generation, first-time college students, comprised the participants of this study. These students have completed English Composition I so they have had at least an entire semester of experiences in a college writing course on which to base their reactions. For seven of the eight participants, this course had been conducted in a traditional classroom setting; only one participant took the course on-line. The rationale for including her in the study is explained in Chapter four of this dissertation.
At this point, it is useful to understand how English Composition is defined and taught at the college where the study took place. English Composition I (ENC 1101) focuses on developing the student’s ability to write academic papers at the college level. English Composition I uses Bullock, Goggin, and Weinberg (2010) as the required textbook.

Students are required to compose several brief (2-3 pages), reflective essays in which they will demonstrate correct use of organization, development, focus, grammar, and mechanics. In addition, they must research a controversial issue and write a position paper on the topic (typically 6-8 pages long). This paper will include proper documentation according to the guidelines of the Modern Language Association (MLA). Students are also required to do an oral presentation of their research papers. The major learning outcomes of English Composition I are described in the syllabus, a copy of which appears in Appendix F. Participant selection is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using my exploratory questions as guidelines, I collected data through the use of participant journaling and individual interviews. The data were analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software program. The data collection and analysis processes are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.
Operational Definitions of Terms

In identifying themes and analyzing outcomes, it is important to clarify the operational definitions of the various terms used in this study. One of the first considerations I needed to address in designing this study is the definition of the term *Hispanic*, since this term can include “different national, sociopolitical and generational influences” (Martin, 2010, p.24). While I realized that I must avoid perpetuating stereotypes by assuming that all Hispanic cultures share the same values and norms, I found that there are some common cultural elements among the various ethnicities that fall under the general heading *Hispanic*. This is especially true among Mexican and Puerto Rican populations and the norms that pertain to family life (Martin, 2010). The definitions I chose to use for *Hispanic* and other terms mentioned throughout my study are listed here, but I must note that there are many alternative definitions for each of these terms. The definitions I selected are those I feel are the most appropriate for the focus of this study.

- **College Composition**: called here “academic writing” or “college writing,” and defined as “any writing that fulfills a purpose of education in a college or university in the United States” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 4).
- **Culture**: “the particular ways in which a social group lives out and makes sense of its given circumstances and conditions in life” (McLaren 1998, p. 175). Also, “Culture is first and foremost a shared way of making sense of experience, based on a shared history” (Jacobson, 1996).
- **ESL (English as a Second Language) students**: those students who “speak a native, first, home, or primary language other than standard
English (SE) and are not fluent in SE. Immigrant students come to the United States either to reside for an extended or indefinite period of time and/or for political or economic refuge” (Leki, 1992).

• Hispanic: according to The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “The term ‘Hispanic’ refers to persons who trace their origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central and South America, and other Spanish cultures” (U. S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997). In this study, the term “Hispanic” will be used in place of “Latino/a.” The U.S. Census Bureau makes no distinction between the two terms, but I prefer to use “Hispanic,” which is the more commonly used word in the Eastern United States to describe this population.

• Respeto: a cultural value among Hispanic people that represents power within the family unit, based on gender (Padilla, 1981). Males have greater independence and more opportunity for achievement outside of the home than do females. Also, females receive a great deal of pressure to become wives and mothers (Cardoza, 1991).

Delimitations of the Study

This study did not include students with special needs or disabilities. Acceptance into the study was based in part on the student’s self-identification as ESL and status as enrolled at least part-time in a degree-seeking program. I excluded gender as a variable since I selected only female participants. Similarly, age was not a factor since only students who self-identified as adults (i.e., 18
years of age or older) were considered for participation. Most students at the community college are adult learners, with the exception of dual enrollment students who are still in high school; the latter were not considered for participation. Finally, from the pool of qualified respondents, I excluded those who had emigrated from their native countries when they were infants or children, because language acquisition is more readily attainable during early childhood. Therefore, I selected participants who had come to the U. S. in their teens or later in life.

Because of its qualitative and interpretative methodology, this study did not produce results that are transferrable; however, the study may have provided insight into these students’ own observations and experiences, and perhaps assist educators in determining how they can best serve the needs of similar ESL students in first-year writing courses at similar institutions of higher education.

Furthermore, since this is a qualitative study and researcher bias is inevitable, at least to some extent, I acknowledged that possibility; the role of the researcher as the primary instrument of qualitative studies is discussed in Chapter Three.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on learning as a socially constructed and transformative process. Among these models is the premise that an individual’s culture has an impact on his or her learning experiences. Brazilian educator and reformist Paulo Freire (1970) suggested that learning can
foster democracy through the recognition of cultural oppression and by taking action to address these oppressive elements – what Freire called “conscientization,” the beginning of critical awareness (1970). Freire saw learning as the instrument for social change, and as the means to foster democracy and equality, especially among historically oppressed populations. For Freire, “The teaching process must use the knowledge the adults bring to the learning situation” (Stromquist, 1997, p. 59). This knowledge is based in the culture -- the experiences, the beliefs, the practices and customs -- of the individual; therefore, culture can be said to shape learning. In turn, it should also influence curricula. If we define curriculum as “All the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school” (Kerr, as cited in Kelly, 1983), we can infer that a curriculum is composed of the overt or intentional practices used by educators to teach students. But a curriculum is also based on the external forces found in the student’s culture. This “hidden curriculum” refers to those “unstated norms, values, and beliefs transmitted to students through the underlying structure of schooling, as opposed to the recognized and sanctioned dimensions of the schooling experience” (Giroux, 1978, p. 148). This implies that educators must recognize the fundamental cultural influences that help shape student learning.

Historically, Dewey (1916) grappled with this concept of a hidden curriculum in his research on democracy and learning. Freire and other education theorists (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991; Jackson, 1990; Meighan, 1981) offered other definitions of this term. These definitions have in common the
idea that there is a type of learning that is covert and unintended. Hence, it is vital that pedagogy and curriculum development take into account the many cultural factors that influence student learning.

Similarly, the transformative learning theories of Mezirow (1978; 1991; 2000) suggest that for social change to take place, learning must first transform the individual. This is accomplished through a critical examination of the individual’s beliefs, customs, and norms (which is one definition of culture). Other education theorists believe that learning is a transformative process, first for the individual learner, and ultimately for society at large. Papert (1982) considered learning to be part of a process that involves the construction of meaning as it is shared by a group. This constructionist theory holds, in part, that it is the interaction of the group that creates authentic meaning. Thus, the cultural background of each individual learner becomes a part of what he or she brings to the learning experience. Other researchers who have developed transformative learning theories as they relate to culture are discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

Institution Approval/Permission

In 2010, the CITI certification process was completed; this certification was renewed in April, 2011. I also obtained approval from USF’s Institutional Review Board in August, 2011; this approval was renewed in August, 2012. I was also approved by the community college in question to use its students as participants in the study.
Presentation of Results

The presentation of the data is described in further detail in Chapter Four of this dissertation, along with the analysis of the results. In addition, implications for curriculum development and suggestions for further research are discussed in Chapter Five.

Budget

Participants were offered a $50.00 Visa gift card in return for their cooperation. Since the interviews were recorded using a digital recording device, I employed a professional transcription service to translate the audio tapes into text. Avalon Transcription Service (Tampa, Florida) provided me with an estimate of approximately $3.00 per page of text created in Microsoft Word. This was most likely the greatest expense of the study, although I was aware of the additional costs of travel, supplies, printing, and compensation. I made financial provisions to cover these expenses; also, student loans were used in part to help defray the expenses of the dissertation process. My estimate will be in keeping with the average cost of qualitative dissertations (Janesick, 2004).

Conclusion

The primary goal of this study is to identify key issues, themes, and patterns in the experiences of a small group of female Hispanic ESL students in first-year college writing courses at the community college level. This was
accomplished through the use of interpretative methodology, which is in accordance with the open-ended nature of qualitative research. Furthermore, qualitative methodology is appropriate for a study of this type because the acquisition of academic writing skills is in itself subjective and interpretative. Obtaining insight into what the participants are experiencing through an examination of their own words can provide the basis for a greater understanding of the problems these students face.

The next chapter is a review of the literature relevant to the topic, followed by a chapter about the research methods used. The final two chapters of this dissertation contain the results of the study, including the findings, the summary, and the implications for future practice and research. By using a qualitative research approach with in-depth interviews, I hoped to learn from the participants themselves how they perceive their academic experiences through the lens of their native culture.
CHAPTER 2
Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature relating to the main theoretical constructs on which this study is based and their relationship to culture. This chapter is divided into three parts: Hispanic ESL learners, transformative learning, and college composition. The review process I describe here includes an examination of the principle publications and databases in the appropriate areas of higher education, along with a discussion of each of the main theoretical constructs.

Culture and Hispanic ESL Learners

I began my research into the role of culture in the learning experiences of Hispanic ESL learners with March 2000 edition of The American Educational Researcher Journal. I reviewed the table of contents for issues through August 2011. I looked for articles that discussed culture, Hispanic ESL students, community colleges, and college composition. I found several articles that examined issues related to
• ESL learners at the elementary-school level (Crosnoe, 2005; Greenleaf, Litman, Hanson, Rosen, Boscardin, Herman, Schneider, Madden, & Jones, 2011; Park, 2011; Reardon & Galindo, 2009; Reese, Garnier, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 2000; Vaughn, Cirino, Linan-Thompson, Mathes, Carlson, Hagan, Pollard-Durodola, Fletcher, & Francis, 2006)
• Literacy and language proficiency among Latino/a students (Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, & Páez, 2008; Enright, 2011; Jiménez, 2000)
• Parental expectations and parental involvement among Hispanic families (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Gustavo, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Kiyama, 2010)
• Generation differences in achievement among Mexican or Mexican-American high school students (Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001)
• Culture and academic achievement (Levinson, 2007; Pearce, 2006; Porat, 2004; Valadez, 2008; Zwick, & Sklar, 2005)
• Teachers' perspectives toward cultural diversity (Silverman, 2010; van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010)
• Race and ethnicity in educational experiences (Rolón-Dow, 2005)
• First-year college students and perspectives on learning (Bowman, 2010)

Thus, there were several articles that are related in some ways to the focus of my study, but I saw none that discussed Hispanic female ESL students at the community college level.
Since my initial review of this journal extended only through August 2011 (in order to prepare my proposal for defense), I decided when finalizing this chapter to go back and begin with the October 2011 issue (the journal is published every other month). I found that the October 2011 issue had one article about language-minority learners at the elementary school level (Kieffer, 2011). The December 2011 issue had one article about enrollment in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (Núñez and Bowers, 2011). The February 2012 issue contained one article about the shortage of Latino/a teachers (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). The April 2012 issue contained no articles that examined any issues relating to ESL learners.

Since I had reviewed the archives of The Chronicle of Higher Education up to the end of July 2011 when I finalized my literature review last year, I went back to the website to see if there were any new articles that relate to the subject of this dissertation. I began searching the archives for August 2011, and I found a few articles that concern Hispanic college students. There were three articles that addressed the role of Latino families in higher education, and what these Latino students need to be successful in college. Other articles from August and September 2011 focus on the jump in Hispanic enrollment in the nation’s colleges and universities, and what is being done to meet this demand. As I moved through 2011 into 2012, I found one article about Armstrong Atlantic State University in Georgia, an institution that is positioning itself as “a destination for Latino students, a segment of the nation's population projected to grow rapidly in the next decade and beyond “(Gonzalez, 2012). Another article discussed a
research and advocacy organization called *Excelencia in Education*, which tracks the college-completion levels of Latino students (State-by-State, 2012). Finally, the drop in Hispanic enrollment at the University of Texas at Austin and by Texas A&M University after a class-rank-based admission guarantee replaced race- or ethnicity-conscious admissions was discussed in another article (Under Top-10%, 2012).

I took this to mean that while the needs of ESL students at community colleges were starting to be recognized at the beginning of the 1990s, attention to these concerns waned after a few years. There appears to have been a renewed interest in the topic as the new millennium began, especially in the past few years. Of course, a journal such as *The Chronicle* (or any other journal or website, for that matter) is not the bellwether for research on ESL learners at community colleges. Still, it is noteworthy that there are comparatively so few articles on the topic, and that these articles do not specifically address the phenomenon I am examining (i.e., the role of culture in learning).

An examination of *College Composition and Communication* turned up many articles on each of the keywords (“ESL” alone produced 1000 hits), but relatively few when I combined the terms. For example, “ESL” and “culture and learning” produced only three results, none of which pertained to Hispanic students. The search could not be limited by date, nor could the dates be sorted to locate the most current information; the website did not offer those options. Nonetheless, it was evident that there was little examination of the topic in question.
Next, a similar search was conducted on the archives of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*. It was not necessary to use “community college” when searching journals that are dedicated to issues in the two-year college. Thus, the terms “culture” and “ESL” produced one article in 2010 and one in 2009 that discussed ESL students in composition classes at community colleges; however, they did not focus specifically on native culture. The search gave me results going back as far as 1997, and I saw no mention of the role of culture in any of the articles. However, the most recent issue of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* does have an article about ESL students at community colleges and the writing assignments they are given. Still, the focus is not on culture, or Hispanic students in particular, but rather on curriculum development. The authors claim that while the increasing complexity and difficulty of writing assignment at community colleges can prove challenging for native speakers, non-native speakers may have an even more difficult time as they “grapple with achieving linguistic accuracy . . . while they develop critical thinking skills” (Carroll & Dunkelblau, 2011, p. 278). While this does not directly relate to the focus of my study, I believe that the article indicates that more attention must be paid to this population of learners.

I then looked at the website for *Inside Higher Education*, an on-line news source that examines issues in higher education. The archives went back only as far as 2005 because the website was not created until 2004. I was surprised that my search yielded no results that related to my terms (I had expected at least a few hits). There were many articles that discussed non-native speakers of
English, or accessibility, or curriculum development, but I saw nothing that mentioned the effects of native culture on learning, Hispanic or otherwise.

I continued this part of my search by looking at a few other journals relating to higher education and the community college. These included Community College Journal (published by the Association of Community Colleges), Community College Review, and Community College Week. The results were similar to what I found in the better-known publications: that is, there are many articles about learning, curriculum, enrollment, budgeting, and ESL students, but none that explicitly examine culture and learning (specifically, Hispanic cultures and female ESL students).

Finally, I searched the ProQuest database through The University of South Florida Library. Using the same three search terms (“ESL,” “community college,” and “culture”), I found 18 dissertations and studies. Of these, one 2010 dissertation in particular seemed to address the same concerns I am researching: Mexican “generation 1.5” students in an Illinois community college. However, the participants in this qualitative study were in developmental English courses, not the English composition courses I wish to examine, and the researcher’s primary focus was not culture (although it is a part of his study). This study did not employ female participants exclusively; students of both genders were included. The remaining 17 studies examined issues relating to ESL learners and technology; faculty perceptions; placement in courses; English language development; and semantic/lexical issues. Again, I saw little to no research about the specific population in which I am interested.
I looked at the *ProQuest* database again when I was finalizing this literature review, this time looking at studies published in 2011 and 2012. In 2011, there were six studies included in *ProQuest*, four of which focused on elementary and high school Hispanic ESL students; only two of these studies focused on adult Hispanic ESL learners. In 2012, there was one study that explored the perceptions of ESL teachers on adolescent Latino English-language learners (Ferlis, 2012). While these articles focus on the concerns of Hispanic students in our nation’s colleges and universities, I saw no articles that addressed Hispanic females in particular, nor any articles that examined the role of the community college in meeting their educational needs. Nor were there any studies that examined the phenomenon in question through the perspectives of the students themselves.

I concluded this part of my literature review by searching for studies that focused on female Hispanic students. Some of the earlier research on Hispanic women students (Cardoza, 1991; Gándara, 1982; Phinney, 1991; Quintana, 1991; Solberg, 1994; Texidor del Portillo, 1987; Tienda, 1984; Vazquez, 1982) studied the effects of culture upon learning, but not at the community college and not necessarily focusing on college writing courses. Other studies described traditional Hispanic cultural characteristics that affect female Hispanic learners. These include communication style, family structure, and language.

Padilla’s (1981) research on communication style reported two factors that characterize Hispanic cultures: use of the Spanish language and *personalismo*. Although many Hispanic students use English as their primary language at
school, approximately half of them report using Spanish at home (Padilla, 1981). The term *personalismo* refers to the preference for face-to-face communication, a hallmark of Hispanic cultures. This desire for a more personal method of communication has implications for institutions of learning because of the interactions that occur there.

Gándara (1982) described how family structure and interpersonal relationships are developed and maintained within Hispanic family culture. The Hispanic family is usually hierarchical, with most of the authority held by elder members, parents, and males (*respeto* is a very important cultural value among Hispanic people (Padilla, 1981). Respeto represents power within the family unit and gender roles often determine who holds that power. Males have greater independence and more opportunity for achievement outside of the home than do females. Also, females receive a great deal of pressure to become wives and mothers (Cardoza, 1991). Similarly, males are more likely to be encouraged to attend college than are females (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986). Females also face challenges involving acculturation, or the “behavioral or attitudinal changes in response to cultural, social, and interpersonal demands” (Bernal, 1991, p. 36). Hispanic families often promote a strong work ethic, and set high standards for excellence at school and at work (Gándara, 1982).

Literacy can be the means through which women are empowered (Miller & King, 2009, p. xii). This is an especially important factor for historically marginalized groups such as Hispanic females. Thus, it is vital that educators understand how the cultural background of these learners shapes their learning.
experiences, both as individuals and as members of a community. Through inclusive strategies that foster empowerment, Hispanic females can “gain positive benefits from creative, accessible, and meaningful basic literary materials” (Miller & King, 2009, p. xv).

Culture and Transformative Learning

For the next section of the literature review, I researched transformative learning and its connection to native culture. To give myself a starting point for my research into transformative learning, I conducted a Google Scholar search using the term “transformative learning.” I noted the names of seminal researchers such as Mezirow, King, and Cranton, and after locating a list of their publications, I found many of their articles and studies using the ProQuest database through the USF library. I was then able to purchase copies of some of their books via Amazon.com or Barnes and Nobles online; others, I found in the USF library. From my reading of these texts, I was able to learn the names of other prominent researchers in transformative learning theory, and to examine their publications, too.

It should be noted that this chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive review of every transformative learning theorist; rather, I will discuss the background of the relevant theories and offer an overview of some of the more prominent researchers in the field.

Transformative learning can be defined as “a way to think about how adults question and reintegrate new perspectives of understanding into their
Transformative learning can be described as having three dimensions: the psychological dimension, which occurs when an individual gains a new understanding of his or her sense of self; the convictional dimension, when an individual revises his or her belief system; and the behavioral dimension, in which an individual enacts changes in his or her lifestyle (Clark, 1991).

Since the classroom can be the first place where students realize that there are cultural differences between themselves and others (Posnick-Goodwin, 2006), any examination of the role that culture plays in learning should first consider how classroom learning takes place. Therefore, Transformative Learning Theory is especially appropriate for ESL learners because it can help them to experience “life-changing perspective transformations” (King, 2005, p. 63). Furthermore, a transformative methodology (Carr, 1995; Giroux, 1988) focuses on “raising consciousness” about those who have been “oppressed because of historically situated structures tied to race, gender, and class” (Hatch, 2002, p. 17). This type of research can produce “social change that transforms the lives of participants in positive ways” (Hatch, 2002, p. 17). The research of Paulo Freire, Jack Mezirow, and other transformative learning theorists is used here as the basis for this examination.

Education reformist Paulo Freire (1970) used the term “conscientization” to describe the process of becoming aware of and taking action against oppressive elements of one’s culture. For Freire, who worked with impoverished populations in his native Brazil, this is a necessary part of developing an
understanding of the ways socio-cultural structures shape the way learners see the world. Learning, therefore, can lead to liberation from oppression by providing adults with the tools to recognize socio-cultural differences and the ability to act upon them. Thus, learning can transform both the individual learner and the society in which he or she exists.

Education theorist Jack Mezirow (1978) held similar views to Freire, but while Freire’s focus is on transformative learning as the impetus for social change, Mezirow applies transformative learning theory to adult education. Mezirow determined that there was a connection between learning and the transformation of learners as individuals (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow suggested that the making of meaning is something that should not be separated from the experiences of the learner. Further, the impact of these experiences must be discerned by the learner himself, and not by an authority figure such as a teacher. Transformative learning, therefore, with its focus on the experiences of the learner, is especially appropriate for an examination of adult education.

Over thirty years ago, Mezirow claimed that the experiences of all students are valuable, and that students learn best through an examination of these experiences. In addition, students must incorporate inquiry, critical thinking, and interaction with other learners into the learning process. In a diverse society, it is not always preferable for learners to accept the interpretation and transmission of knowledge by experts or authorities; rather, learners create a more substantive meaning by filtering information through the lens of their own experiences and beliefs (Mezirow 1997, p. 5). This transformative learning can
help learners do more than assimilate information; it can help them understand how this information changes their perspectives and assumptions (and therefore, changes them as individuals). In fact, the learner’s own life experiences serve as the starting point for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). The transformative process requires learners to “change their ‘meaning schemes’ (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions)” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). According to Mezirow, transformative learning is defined as "the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow, 1994, pp. 222-223). Within this theory, the process of making meaning is shaped by psychocultural assumptions that frame an individual's world view. Therefore, a transformative learning process involves "becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 4). Changes in life experience and critical reflection trigger this transformative process, and are an essential part of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Indeed, for Mezirow, the learner's experiences form the basis for the making of meaning.

For transformative learning to take place, Mezirow proposed a process that includes a “disorienting dilemma” on the part of students. This dilemma sets the stage for self-examination and assessment of personal role assumptions, and the potential for “alienation” in assuming new roles. Finally, learners must "reintegrate into society with a new perspective" (Mezirow, 2000). Participants in my study are most likely feeling “disoriented” in their college writing courses,
based on their prior experiences as non-native speakers, first-generation college students, and female members of a predominately patriarchal society. Therefore, for their learning to be transformative, these students must have the opportunity for self-examination and self-reflection, both individually and in contact with others like themselves. Further, their courses should be designed to foster this type of intellectual and emotional development, and provide the skills needed to transfer this new knowledge to their real-world situations.

Learners must recognize the fact that not only has their individual culture shaped who they are, but that it will also shape who they will become as learners (Mezirow et al., 2000). Without this recognition, students are merely assimilating information, similar to what Paulo Freire derisively labeled “banking,” where students are seen as “empty accounts” with no identity, no sense of self, no individuality (Freire, 1970, p. 77). Indeed, for Mezirow, “perspective transformation” (1975; 1978) is similar to Freire’s "conscientization." As Mezirow explains,

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (Cranton, 1994, p. 22)

For Cranton (2002), authenticity is at the core of transformative learning. For learning to be authentic, learners must be able to articulate their prior
assumptions. This might be a difficult process, claims Cranton, because “our assumptions are deeply embedded in our childhood, community, and culture” (p. 67). Critical self-reflection, therefore, is necessary for students “to examine what they think and how they feel and consider the consequences of holding certain assumptions” (pp. 67-68). Cranton goes on to suggest that this self-reflection may take place in the classroom, but it is perhaps more likely to take place outside it. What we do in the classroom is set the stage for what may take place when our students are driving home, cooking supper, going for a walk, or telling someone about their day. (p. 68)

Therefore, in acknowledging that we are individuals with “important differences among us in the way we live, learn, work, and develop” (2002, p. 79), Cranton reflects Mezirow’s (1975; 1978) contention that learners must not merely assimilate information, but situate that learning into their own cultural contexts. Learners are empowered, states Cranton, when educators assume the role of facilitators in the learning process. This facilitation takes into account the individual’s cultural background, thus creating an environment in which authentic learning can occur. Ultimately, this means that transformative learning can result in action that promotes beneficial change for both the individual and the society in which he or she loves.

In addition to exploring the role of technology in education and how it can be a transformative experience for both students and teachers, King began her research into transformative learning by questioning how classroom learning
experiences contribute to perspective transformation (King, 1997). Recognizing that much of the extant research to date on this topic used qualitative methods, King developed a mixed method study using what she called the “Learning Activities Survey,” which was based on Mezirow’s ten stages of perspective transformation. This survey was designed to help educators facilitate transformative learning opportunities in their classrooms (King, 2005). By including the teacher in the transformative process, not just as a facilitator, but also as a learner himself or herself, King extends Mezirow’s theories and claims that experience can lead to transformative learning, particularly those experiences which present the learner with some sort of challenge or dilemma. In responding to these “disorienting” experiences, learners are transformed at a personal level, and as members of a society.

Daloz developed Mezirow’s theories on transformative learning to include four essential factors: the presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action which contribute to the common good (2000). This need for learning to be beneficial for society is “an unending process that requires one to take a stance of openness to dialogue” with “those who differ” (Hendershot, 2010, p. 35). The importance of how learners “engage with difference makes all the difference” (Daloz, 2000, p.112), thus making clear the need for the recognition and understanding of cultural differences in the classroom.

Boyd and his fellow researchers took Mezirow’s transformative learning theories a step further. While Mezirow suggests that students must assume new
roles for transformative learning to take place, Boyd adds that there must be a willingness on the part of the learner to take risks and be challenged: an individual must be open to receiving "alternative expressions of meaning" (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 277). Participants in my study may not feel ready to abandon their comfort zones; as non-native speakers, they may already feel the pressures to conform to cultural norms that are different from what they have previously experienced. Thus, for their learning to be truly transformative, students must be willing to change elements of their identities at the most fundamental level. This requires "the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (Boyd, 1989, p. 459, as cited in Taylor 1998, p. 13). For ESL students, this presents an additional pressure to assimilate into a foreign culture.

One of the major differences between the transformative learning theories of Boyd and Mezirow involves the outcomes of the process. While Mezirow saw transformative learning as the means for an individual to gain greater autonomy (Mezirow, 1997), Boyd saw improved interrelationships between and among people as the primary goal (Boyd, as cited in Imel, 1998). The participants in my study are students who may have felt unable to form relationships with their classmates, possibly because of cultural differences. Thus, transformative learning that incorporates "integration" might help ESL learners adapt to different cultural settings (Boyd, 1989, p. 459, as cited in Taylor 1998, p. 13).

The work of several other researchers who have examined Transformative Learning Theory warrants discussion. Taylor, for example, addresses the role of
relationships in transformative learning. Like Mezirow, Taylor argues that learners make sense of new experiences as they move through these disorienting dilemmas (Taylor, 1994). Students, as a part of a community of knowers, share the responsibility for constructing and creating the conditions under which transformative learning can occur; that is, learners must use their cultural and contextual experiences to interpret and make sense of events (Taylor, 1998). Thus, the transformative process involves the use of a “frame of reference,” those “structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual's tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs, and actions” (Taylor, 2008). While Taylor specifically discusses the role of culture in transformative learning, his focus is more on the culture of the teacher. Still, Taylor does not ignore the importance of the cultural experiences of the student. Teachers, he claims, must recognize the “wealth of personal knowledge [that] students bring to the classroom experience,” and use this frame of reference to create a classroom atmosphere that is “safe, inclusive, and open learning environment” (2006, pp. 93-94). Indeed, an inclusive environment, in which the needs of every learner are addressed, is essential for transformative learning to occur.

O'Sullivan (2003) gives us another definition of transformative learning. He describes it as learning that involves a profound change in the basic foundation of the learner's behavior. Like Boyd, O'Sullivan places this shift within relationships between people and between their environments. He notes that issues of empowerment result from interconnected structures such as
socioeconomic class, gender, and ethnicity. Hence, a person’s cultural environment, and his or her relationships within that environment, contribute to a transformative learning process that can lead to more equitable power distributions. O’Sullivan (2001) also warns of the dangers of the “grand narratives” that are shaping the direction of education in our country. He claims that the appropriate educational framework for today’s society must go beyond the ethnocentric “conventional educational outlooks that we have cultivated for centuries” (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 319). However, he also cautions against the mere substitution of one grand narrative for another. Rather, O’Sullivan suggests that there must a transformative process in any narrative that purports to define educational practices (O’Sullivan, 2001, p. 320). That is, narratives must reflect the unique and varied experiences each learner brings to the classroom, and represent the changing nature of culture-based narratives.

Similarly, Merriam, Cafarella, and Baumgartner (2007), agree that, in transformative learning, educators must function as facilitators, and not as the authority figures Mezirow’s warns about. They ask, “what right do adult educators have to tamper with the world view (mental set, perspective, paradigm, or state of consciousness) of the learner…?” (p. 154). Indeed, transformative learning is a uniquely adult type of learning since it forms its basis in the experiences of the learner. Intellectual growth occurs as the adult learner "integrates new information into meaning resulting in change and further development" (p.149).

Dirkx also tackles this idea of the world view of the learner and how it is an integral part of transformative learning. He claims that adult education in the
United States has been based on an “instrumental” approach to learning, in which “adaptation” to the “needs and demands of the broader, sociocultural context” is emphasized (1998, pp. 1-2). In contrast, Dirkx continues, transformative learning can be the means through which the “actualization” of the learner lessens the “coercive forces or factors” that inhibit “liberation and freedom” (p. 8). Like Freire, Dirkx (1998) believes that adult learners must be “active, engaged participants in the learning process, and therefore not “passively” fed information without situating it into their own life contexts (p. 9).

Culture and College Composition

For my next step, I researched college composition. I found many articles and studies when I used just one or two of my search terms, but searching with the words “culture” and “college composition” kept giving me studies about multicultural literature. It was the specific combination of the terms “ESL,” “culture,” and “community colleges” that is missing. I began my review of the existing research on the role of culture in learning, particularly among female Hispanic students in writing courses at the two-year college, by examining some of the prominent journals that focus on college composition and the community college. These include The Chronicle of Higher Education, College Composition and Communication, Teaching English in the Two-Year College, and Inside Higher Education. I also looked at some lesser-known publications about community colleges. Using the keyword search terms “ESL,” “culture,” and “community college” in various combinations, I looked at the table of contents in
electronic copies of each of these journals, beginning with the current issues (2011) and going back as far as 1990. A review of the archives gave me a reasonable account of what has taken place in research on this topic.

The search began with a review the archives of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (again, through the USF library) and limited to around the years 1990-2012). I found articles that focused on several related issues, such as funding, faculty development, open enrollment, and curriculum design. Of these 48 articles, eight appeared in the early-to-mid 1990s (there was one from 1989); the remaining 39 articles were written after the year 2003. Curiously, the bulk of the more recent articles (I counted 22) were written in the years 2010 or 2011. One article in particular caught my eye; I found it when I changed the search terms to “college composition” and “ESL.” This article, from 2008, discussed the future of college composition. The article was written with an interesting approach: the author looked at the schedule of the 2006 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and noted the number of sessions that discussed composition issues (Bauerlein, 2008). Topics included basic writing (six sessions), students with disabilities (12 sessions), feminist and gender-related issues (30 sessions), and something called political rhetoric (also 30 sessions). What was really noteworthy was the fact that there were 71 sessions dedicated to composition issues involving race, ethnicity, and culture. This is an indication that more attention is being paid to the role of culture in college writing programs, but again, there was no mention of the specific population that I am proposing to study.
Development of College Composition as a Discipline

College composition as we know it today began to develop in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and stabilized as a discipline in the 1920s (Brereton, 1995). In 1874, when composition first became part of the academic curriculum at Harvard University, it was designed primarily as a service course (Valensky, 2010, p. 1). Its function was to prepare students to write academic papers in other disciplines. In 1917, a professor of rhetoric at Columbia University named Charles Sears Baldwin published his seminal work on college composition. While this book, with its heavy emphasis on grammar and rhetoric in the most classic Greek sense, seems archaic to our modern eyes, Baldwin does lay the groundwork for future composition curriculum development. For instance, he cites the need for flexibility in the schedule of freshman writers (Baldwin, 1917, p. 278). This is necessary, he claims, because “the teaching of composition is the teaching of individuals” (Baldwin, 1917, p. 278).

Baldwin’s theories foreshadow the philosophies of linguist Noam Chomsky, who saw language acquisition and application as a uniquely individual experience (Chomsky, 1959). It presages other notable scholars in composition studies, such as Peter Elbow and Stanley Fish. What Elbow (1994) calls high stakes and low stakes writing is described by Baldwin as the “looser essay” or the “stricter essay” (Baldwin, 1917, pp. 90-91). Baldwin also heralds the theories of scholar and philosopher Stanley Fish (1980) about reader response and the emergence of the individual in writing.
Still, Baldwin’s book is distressingly Eurocentric, and its promotion of writing standards marginalized anyone who was not white and male. In fact, Baldwin was simply articulating the zeitgeist of education practices at that time. The historical and social uses of standards served as a primary instrument of exclusion in the "troubled history" of the development of college composition (Fox,1999, p.18). These standards were seen as essential parts of nationalistic unity; literacy, whose purpose was based on the development of an emancipatory practice, was being diverted toward the "academic manners of the elite" (Fox, 1999, p. 39).

Composition theorist James Berlin provides a historical background of the development of college composition in the United States from the late 19th century through the early to mid-1980s. According to Berlin, the purpose of a college education became more egalitarian and less elitist with the development of writing courses at Harvard University in the second half of the 19th century (Berlin, 1987, p. 22). At that time, the core curricula began to move away from the traditional emphasis on classical studies (Greek and Latin), and toward English courses that were designed to prepare students from lower socioeconomic classes for the new professions: agriculture, education, social work, journalism, engineering, and others (p. 22). However, the establishment of an entrance examination for colleges and universities tended to exclude members of the new wave of non-English speaking immigrants, effectively keeping the gates of the academy closed to those people (p. 24). Thus, early on in the development of college composition, we see evidence of marginalization.
based on one’s ability to write in English. In response to these reading lists, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), established in 1911, sought to improve teaching methods and increase student learning by challenging the Uniform Readings Lists. Created in 1894, these lists were intended to standardize the texts used in English classes in American high schools to prepare high school students for college-level work. The NCTE argued that some of these texts were inappropriate for students who were immigrants, or who came from homes with immigrant parents who spoke little or no English (Berlin, 1987, p. 34).

It was not until after the end of World War II that significant changes to the writing curriculum began to emerge. For one thing, composition theorists began to recognize the importance of diversity in composition curricula. It became the foundation for liberal education of a broad swath of American students who were often encountering for the first time the liberating effect of intellectual cultivation – the mental excitement of mastering intellectually difficult books, handling ideas with discernment, and realizing their thoughts in clear, coherent language. (Young, 2010)

While this should not be taken to mean that this period in the evolution of composition studies was without its challenges and problems, it did lead to the development of current practices in college composition. This includes the articulation of three essential criteria: students should demonstrate evidence of persistence, open-mindedness, and discipline in their writing; they should strive to promote the use of reason over emotion; and they should anticipate an
audience of readers who will be seeking information (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). These criteria suggest that a new approach toward composition instruction was beginning. However, our nation has been a diverse country for many years, yet it is only recently that this diversity has been recognized and celebrated. This brief summary of the development of college composition illustrates the fact that while we have made progress in providing equitable opportunity for people of all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes, there is still much work to be done.

Conclusion

This literature review has revealed that there are relatively few studies that examined the phenomenon in question using this unique combination of factors: ESL learners, Hispanic females, culture and learning, writing courses, transformative learning, and community colleges. While there were many studies and articles that discuss each of these individually (or in some sort of combination), I was not able to locate an existing study that replicates exactly the one described in this dissertation. Thus, the necessity for the study discussed in this dissertation is clear.
CHAPTER 3
Methods

Introduction

In this chapter, the data collection and analysis methods used in this study are described. These strategies include the use of journal entries and semi-structured individual interviews with purposively selected participants. The eight participants in this study responded to three journal prompts each, and participated in one individual interview with me.

This study concerns the cultural backgrounds of the participants and how their cultural experiences shape their learning. My research was purposeful and appropriate for an investigation of the exploratory questions; furthermore, this study was useful in obtaining a deeper understanding of the experiences of Hispanic females and how institutions of higher education can better serve their needs.

Also included here is an explication of my reasons for choosing the qualitative method; for the selection of my participants; for the operational definitions used; and for the study’s design for data collection, storage, and analysis. This chapter explores the epistemological basis of the research paradigms used in the study, and suggest that a qualitative approach will
address gaps in the existing literature concerning native culture as a phenomenon that influences learning.

Phenomenology and Qualitative Research

A phenomenological study describes the meaning of an experience for several individuals (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). A study of this type can incorporate data gathered through interviews and participant journaling. Since a systematic approach to data collection is necessary in examining a phenomenon, (Moustakas, 1994), participant journaling and individual interviews were used to gather data that is relevant to the phenomenon being investigated (i.e., culture). Permission was obtained from each of the participants; in addition, participants were made fully aware of the purpose of the study and the motivation of the researcher. Data collection began in the Fall 2011 semester at PHCC, after my proposal was successfully defended.

This study used participant journaling and individual interviews to obtain as many descriptive details as possible. The journal prompts were designed to encourage reflection on the part of the participants and to allow them time to think about their responses without interference from me. The interviews included both open-ended interview questions and questions related to demographic information. Such questions allowed the participants to formulate their responses based on their individual frames of reference, and not as the result of rigidly structured pre-arranged questions (Bogdan & Biklqd, 1982). Similarly, the journal
prompts provided participants with the opportunity for self-reflection (Owens, 2007).

The focus of this study is on the lived experiences of the participants; therefore, an examination of the “life context” of each individual (King, 2000) is an appropriate platform for exploring the phenomenon of culture and its effects on these experiences. Furthermore, individual interviews and participant journaling are the most effective methods for describing and analyzing these experiences. A phenomenological examination is especially appropriate in this qualitative study because such an approach strives to “understand the meaning of events to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Bilqor, 1982, pg. 4). Furthermore, the inductive nature of a qualitative study, which is not driven by a hypothesis, provided the opportunity to identify theories as “art that is yet to be created,” and not as something that is already known (Bogdan & Bilqor, 1982, p. 2).

Quality assurance was maintained in this study through the use of purposeful sampling. Participants identified through purposeful sampling are appropriate for a study of this nature because they are “information rich” and offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon being investigated (Patton, 2002, p. 40). In addition, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) was used to help identify subjects who were known to have experience with the particular phenomenon under study. These criteria were presented to potential participants in the form of a questionnaire (Appendix A).
Qualitative studies usually take place in uncontrolled, naturalistic settings where the significance of emergent variables may be understood through various inductive techniques such as triangulation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Triangulation is defined as the use of “multiple and different [data] sources, methods, investigators and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). Inductive data analysis with its “bottoms up” approach may involve collaborative interaction between researcher and participants, providing participants the opportunity to help “shape the themes or abstractions” that may emerge (Creswell, 2007, pp. 38-39). In this study, triangulation was achieved through the analyses of the interview transcripts and the journal entries, and by emailing the interview transcripts to the respective participants for confirmation of accuracy. This use of member checking for the “essential meanings” served as a part of the triangulation process (Burg, 2010, p. 73). Also, I also made use of hand-written field notes during the individual interviews. These notes include descriptions of body language and facial expressions. Further, they provide an account of events, how the participants behaved and reacted, what was said in conversation, and all other details and observations necessary to make the story of the participant observation experience complete (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005, p. 21). Triangulation was further supported through my own reflections on my experiences as a college composition teacher, and as the researcher in this study. These reflections were recorded in the form of a researcher journal.
In quantitative research, the criteria used to establish trustworthiness are reliability, validity, and objectivity. Similarly, qualitative research has four parallel criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These criteria are defined as follows:

- **Credibility** - establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the perspective of the participant in the research.
- **Transferability** - the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings.
- **Dependability** - emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs.
- **Confirmability** - the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others.

(Guba & Lincoln, 1985)

These criteria can be verified through the rich descriptions obtained by the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Credibility was established through my confirming with my participants that I have recorded and interpreted their interview responses accurately. Further, during the interviews, I frequently stopped and paraphrased what the participant said to see if anything needed to be clarified. Since the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results.

While the findings of this study are not generalizable to other contexts, transferability was established through the descriptive details that were provided
in my analyses. These details may assist readers in determining if the findings are applicable in other contexts.

Dependability, the means through which readers can track the data collection and analysis methods, was achieved through the keeping of detailed records of the data collected and of the analysis procedures. I was aware of the need to describe any changes that occur in the setting and how these changes affected the way I approached my study.

Confirmability, or the objectivity of the study, can be difficult to establish in qualitative studies because the researcher’s biases inevitably influence both the structure of the data collection process, and the interpretation of the findings. However, I did strive to remain neutral and not lead my interviewees to any particular conclusions through the careful and thoughtful wording of my interview questions and of my journal prompts. Also, by asking questions designed to clarify my understanding of my participants’ responses, both in the interviews and the journals, I was better prepared to recognize and monitor my own contributions to the data being collected (Jorgenson, 1991).

Why Qualitative Methods

When one is conducting a study that involves looking at the lived experiences of the participants, and how these experiences shape and are shaped by the individual’s personal story, the appropriateness of the qualitative method is clear. Rather than reducing the human experience to a number that can be reviewed quantitatively, qualitative research enables the researcher “to
make meaning of [these] experiences, and to share understanding with readers” (Pepper & Wildy, 2009, p. 20).

Furthermore, the absence of a previously identified theory helps to focus qualitative research on the phenomenon being examined, rather than on the traditional quantitative causal analysis of variables and their effects. Rather than attempting to establish generalizability among the findings, qualitative research strives to identify transferability, which is the “degree of similarity between the situation studied and the situation being compared” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, as cited in Pepper & Wildy, 2009, p. 22). Therefore, the inductive approach of qualitative studies provides researchers with the opportunity to conduct their analyses of themes and patterns in a way that quantitative, deductive research cannot (Pepper & Wildy, 2009). Qualitative methods that include open-ended questions can foster a stronger interaction between researcher and participant. For example, researchers can respond to participant responses immediately and thereby tailor subsequent questions to elicit more detail (Mack et al, 2005).

While relatively more expensive and exploratory than quantitative methods, qualitative research can generate information that is more useful in understanding human experience (Lieber, 2009). That is, qualitative methods can “take researchers closer to the phenomenon of interest than can be achieved with broader surveys” (Lieber, 2009, p. 219). While quantitative methods that focus on generalizable understandings of population distributions are usually less expensive, these methods are relatively distant from experiences lived by individuals (Lieber, 2009).
Exploratory Questions

The gaps in the research examining the role of culture on learning from the perspective of the student were described earlier in this dissertation. Many previous studies examine the phenomenon of the relationship between culture and learning from the teachers’ perspective. For example, Byrd (2010) focuses on the impact of the ESL learning experience on teaching method. Ferris (2010) focuses on developing more effective teacher feedback for ESL students. In addition, the majority of existing research focuses the learning experiences of ESL students at four-year colleges and universities, with comparatively little research at the two-year college. Researchers such as Leki (1991), examined issues relating to grammar and mechanics, and locating and using source material, among university-level ESL students. This led to the articulation of my exploratory questions:

- What are the cultural influences that shape the experiences of female Hispanic ESL learners in college writing courses?
- How do these cultural influences affect student learning, specifically those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using correct grammar, format, and citation?
- Have these cultural influences produced a learning experience that is transformative? If so, how?
Participant Selection

In a qualitative study, the number of participants may range from one to several hundred; however, a smaller number of participants is appropriate when all participants have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). To ensure that I would have at least five participants, and to allow for attrition, I selected eight students from the pool of respondents (Dukes, 1984). Ultimately, all eight of these students completed the study, thereby providing me with additional data for my analysis. It should be noted that one of these eight participants did not meet one of my criteria (she had taken English Composition I on-line instead of in a traditional classroom setting). However, I consulted my major professor about this student’s circumstances, and then made the decision to include her in the study. I included her in my study because she was very excited about this opportunity, and I believed that her enthusiasm would make her an excellent participant.

At the beginning of the Fall 2011 academic term at PHCC, an email was sent to my colleagues at PHCC explaining who I am and what I was doing. This email (Appendix B) described my study, explaining my purpose in investigating issues that may concern female Hispanic ESL students. The criteria for selection in the study were included, and the significance of the data to be collected was described, stressing this study as an opportunity for female Hispanic ESL students to express their opinions of their writing courses. My colleagues were asked for their permission for me to visit their classrooms and distribute an informed consent form (Appendix C) and a short questionnaire to any female
students who expressed an interest in my study. A copy of this questionnaire was included in the email so my colleagues could see what I was asking. Participants were advised that their participation can be the means through which they can gain personal insight into how their native cultures affect their learning, specifically in their language acquisition courses. I also assured prospective participants that their anonymity would be protected (they were told that their real names would not be used), and that there would be no repercussions as a result of their involvement in the study. The journaling and interview processes were explained, and care was taken to include all necessary details, such as location for the interviews, time requirements, and materials. The questionnaire also mentioned that a $50.00 Visa gift card would be given to participants who are selected for the study and who complete all of the required components. In the questionnaire, I asked any student who was interested in participating, and who met the criteria, to hand back the completed consent form and questionnaire to me with her contact information on it.

Several classrooms were visited in September 2011 and many responses were received from the PHCC student population. However, relatively few students met all of the criteria. After three weeks of visiting classrooms, only three participants had been identified. I then decided to post fliers around the various college campuses (with the permission of the appropriate administrators at PHCC) to locate more potential participants. As a result, two more students met my criteria and signed on as participants. PHCC Student Services were able to provide me with a list of female students who self-identified as Hispanic; this
list included contact information, and I was able to email several potential participants. Of these students, two qualified for my study. Their written consent was obtained and they completed the questionnaire. Another participant was obtained through a type of “snowball” sampling (Goodman, 1961). One of my participants told me about a friend of hers who was also a PHCC student who met my criteria. I was able to meet with this student and obtain her written consent and the completed questionnaire. This process continued until the eight participants who were previously described in this study were identified. This procedure began in September 2011 and concluded in October 2011.

Data Collection

Using my exploratory questions as guidelines, I designed three journal prompts and 13 interview questions. Data was collected through the use of participant journaling and individual interviews. This data was triangulated through my analyses of the responses, by having my participants check the transcripts for accuracy, and through the use of my own reflective journaling.

Participant Journaling

The personal student’s journal, also known as a diary, allows writers to “regularly enter descriptive information about what is happening in [their] lives, including feelings, beliefs, opinions, gossip” (Wauchope, 1990, p. 2). Deford (1981) suggests that writers are free to explore and make their own discoveries
in a personal journal. Metacognitive skills are strengthened as students write to themselves about what they are learning, and how they are learning it (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). The use of journal writing as a research tool enabled me to become more fully acquainted with my participants on an individual basis; it also gave participants the opportunity “to write uninterrupted and to be totally focused on the point at hand” (Janesick, 2004, p. 155).

Participants were asked to complete three journal entries each: two journal entries at the beginning of the study, and one journal entry after the interviews were completed. The first two journal prompts were designed to elicit thoughtful, reflective, and candid responses from participants about their learning experiences as Hispanic females. The third journal prompt was intended to provide participants with the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences in this study, and to offer insight or advice to their peers. This was also their opportunity to add any final thoughts or make any comments they wished to include. The first two journal prompts were distributed beginning in early October 2011, and continued until all participants had emailed me their responses. The third journal prompt was distributed after the interview process, starting around the end of November 2011 and continuing into December 2011.

Participants sent their journal entries to me through the email account provided to them. They had approximately one week to complete their entries and send them to me. If a response was not received from a participant after one week, I emailed a reminder, asking if there was anything for which she might need clarification. Eventually, all of the journal responses were received in a
timely manner, with no one taking longer than two weeks to send me her responses.

The following general instructions for the journals were provided to participants:

- Please write thoughtfully and openly, and do not feel intimidated by any errors you might make.
- Provide examples when possible.
- When describing your feelings and thoughts about your writing courses, don’t be afraid to include both positive and negative experiences.
- Write as much as you please.

I include here the list of journal prompts I used. These journal prompts are also listed in Appendix D.

- Journal entry 1: Reflect on your experiences in acquiring English writing skills, particularly the role that others (such as family, friends, or other members of your culture) play in this process. Do you think these others support your efforts to acquire college-level writing skills? If so, how?
- Journal entry 2: Think about your own English learning activities after class, and your purposes for these activities. Are you involved in any clubs or organizations that are designed for Hispanic non-native speakers who are trying to improve their English speaking and writing skills? If so, how do these organizations help you with
your learning? If you are not involved in any of these types of organizations, can you explain why? How do you feel about organizations of this type?

- Journal entry 3: What advice do you believe would help other Hispanic females who are trying to acquire college-level English writing skills? What do you see as the greatest obstacle facing students like yourself?

In Chapter four, the journal responses are reported exactly as the participants wrote them, including any grammatical or mechanical errors they may have made. This is due to the fact that I felt it was important to report their responses as the participants wrote them since the focus of this study is, in part, on the English language skills of the participants.

Individual Interviews

To obtain the information that is necessary to compose narrative portraits of the participants, I used Patton’s (1987) interview guide as a starting point in creating my interview questions. Patton, an organizational and evaluation consultant, developed his theories about interview questions to affect improvement in areas such as leadership development, education, and human services. His interview guide --- a list of questions or issues to be explored with each participant --- can help ensure that each participant is given the same opportunities to express herself on the same topics. It should be noted that Patton’s interview guide is not meant to limit the interview to a fixed set of
questions; rather, the guide is intended as a “basic checklist” to make sure that the same material is covered in each interview (Patton, 1987, p. 111).

Furthermore, Patton notes that an interview guide can help the researcher make the best use of limited time periods. Finally, an interview guide can help to maintain focus during the interview without compromising individuality among the interviewees (Patton, 1987, p. 111).

Patton is careful to remind us that there are drawbacks to using interview guides. For one thing, the guide does not allow for the pursuit of any topics that may arise during the interview that were not a part of the original guide. Therefore, Patton suggests incorporating a type of mixed-methods approach, combining an informal, conversational interview protocol with an interview guide (Patton, 1987, p. 114). This is the type of “style combination” (p. 114) I endeavored to use in designing my own interview questions.

Next, I reviewed the research of Irving Seidman, a professor of education who has developed an interesting theory about the role of stories in qualitative research. Seidman believes that interviewing works well when there are stories to be told, and it is through these stories that the lived experiences of the participants can best be illuminated (Seidman, 2006, p. 11). Seidman also offers suggestions for interviewers, such as the need to listen closely to what is being said, as well as taking care to watch for non-verbal clues (Seidman, 2006, p. 78). An interviewer must control the interview, but not to the extent that the participant’s ability to respond is adversely affected. Rather, participants should
be encouraged to give examples and recount experiences; the interviewer should listen and not make any attempt to fill in the silences (Seidman, 2006, pp. 81-93).

Since I liked the idea of combining a comparatively informal interview protocol with a more structured one, I examined the empirical interview process described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). This process suggests that a revealing and insightful interview “comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and involves a specific approach and technique; it is semi-structured – it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27).

In addition to the interview models discussed in Chapter Two (Patton, 1987; Seidman, 1991; Kvale, 1996; Kvale, & Brinkmann, 2009), I used Lynch and Hanson’s Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: a Guide for Working with Children and Their Families (1998) as the basis for developing some of these questions.

Interview Questions: Pretesting

A pretesting of the interview protocol was conducted in August 2011. During these pretesting sessions, I learned which types of questions elicited the richest descriptions, and subsequently, the wording of some of the questions was modified. Two of my current students who met the criteria for my study helped me test my interview questions. During two formal, private sessions lasting approximately one hour each, I tested my questions with these two students. It was determined that the use of closed-ended questions needed to be avoided,
and that I needed to be aware of making assumptions that might influence my participants’ responses. For example, one of my original interview questions asked about any “difficulties” the participant may have experienced in her writing course. When I saw how this type of question affected the interviewee (she seemed to be trying to think of a difficulty she had experienced, when she may not have had any real difficulty at all), the question was re-worded to lessen its influence on the interviewee’s response. I also found that I needed to add follow-up questions that allowed me to probe more deeply into the responses. For example, when I asked about how my participants typically prepared for their college writing assignments, I added questions that asked specifically about certain types of assignments (those involving research, grammar, or critical thinking). My seven original interview questions became the 13 final questions I used in the actual interviews. Table 1 contains the original questions and the revisions I made to them after the pretesting. The final interview protocol appears in Appendix E.

Table 1: Modifications Made to Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original Questions</th>
<th>Modified Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your Hispanic culture influence you as a student?</td>
<td>Can you describe any influence that your Hispanic culture had on you as a student in a college writing course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Was there a time in your college writing courses when you realized that your values, beliefs, opinions, or expectations had changed? If, so, please describe what happened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What types of difficulties do you encounter in your schoolwork that you think may inhibit your success academically?</td>
<td>Think about the writing assignments you had in your college writing course. Did any of these assignments cause you to question the way you normally act?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you please describe for me how you</td>
<td>Would you please describe for me how you</td>
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typically prepared for your college assignments at PHCC?

What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your thinking skills?

What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your research skills?

What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your grammatical, formatting, and citation skills?

As a student in a college writing course, how important was it to you to get emotional support from others? Are these “others” family members? Friends? Teachers? Please describe.

Did you have enough time from your other responsibilities, such as work and family, to devote to your assignments in your college writing courses? Did others help you with your other responsibilities when you had assignments to work on for these courses?

Why do you think some Hispanic women students are more successful in their college writing courses than other Hispanic women students?

Can you describe your impressions about learning from your college writing instructor over the early weeks of the semester? That is, what do you think of the way the instructor presented the course material? How was it explained? Did the instructor make you feel confident about your ability to learn, or nervous, or something else?

Did you have an experience in your writing course at PHCC that you found to be especially challenging? If so, please describe.

Now that you have completed a college writing course, what stood out the most for you as far as your learning experience?

Did you have an experience in your writing course at PHCC that had a significant impact on your attitudes and perceptions toward your culture? If so, please describe.
Types of Interview Questions

A great deal of qualitative material can come from talking with participants through interviews. If interviews are going to probe the depths of reality of the situation and discover subjects’ meanings and understandings, it is essential for the researcher to develop empathy with interviewees and win their confidence. Further, the researcher must endeavor to be as unobtrusive as possible, in order not to impose his or her own influence on the interviewee. I endeavored to provide interview questions for my participants that encouraged them to reflect on their experiences as learners in a foreign culture. The general headings of my interview questions are listed here. These headings are intended only to aid the understanding of the reader of this dissertation; participants were not made aware of these categories during the interviews.

- Questions concerning the student’s culture
- Questions concerning the student’s learning experiences
- Questions relating to transformative learning

I also included questions about demographics to complete the profile of each participant. Since this is a phenomenological study, the interview questions were structured to provide flexibility and allow the participants to direct the interview to some extent. These questions provided the participants with the opportunity to think more closely about the influence of their native cultures on their college writing, specifically in the areas of prior knowledge, expectations, and experiences. Furthermore, these questions helped illustrate themes such as student feelings and perceptions about first-year college writing courses.
Conducting the participant journaling part of the data collection process first helped me revise the interview questions so that they were more productive and insightful.

**Interview Questions**

The interview questions listed here are based in part on the LAS Format (Learning Activities Survey) developed by King (2009). The questions have been modified from the LAS format to include the phenomena examined in this study.

**Questions Concerning the Student’s Culture**

1. Can you describe any influence that your Hispanic culture had on you as a student in a college writing course?

2. Think about the writing assignments you had in your college writing course. Did any of these assignments cause you, as a member of a Hispanic culture, to question the way you normally act?

3. Why do you think some Hispanic women students are more successful in their college writing courses than other Hispanic women students?

4. As a Hispanic student in a college writing course, how important was it to you to get emotional support from others? Are these “others” family members? Friends? Teachers? Please describe.

5. Did you have enough time from your other responsibilities, such as work and family, to devote to your assignments in your college writing courses? Did others help you with your other responsibilities when you had assignments to work on for these courses?
Questions Concerning the Student’s Learning Experiences

6. Would you please describe for me how you typically prepared for your college writing course at PHCC?

7. Can you describe your impressions about learning from your college writing instructor over the early weeks of the semester? That is, what do you think of the way the instructor presented the course material? How was it explained? Did the instructor make you feel confident about your ability to learn, or nervous, or something else?

8. Now that you have completed a college writing course, what stood out the most for you as far as your learning experience?

9. What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your thinking skills?

10. What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your research skills?

11. What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your grammatical, formatting, and citation skills?

Questions Relating to Transformative Learning

12. Did you have an experience in your writing course at PHCC that had a significant impact on your attitudes and perceptions toward your culture? If so, please describe.

13. Was there a time in your college writing courses when you realized that your values, beliefs, opinions, or expectations had changed? If so, please describe what happened.
Demographic Questions

The following questions were used only to elicit information that was not provided by the participants in their other responses:

14. Where were you born? How old were you when you came to the United States?

15. How long have you been speaking English? How long have you been reading and writing in English?

16. How did you learn to use English? Where and when did you learn to use English? Did you take any classes to learn English? If so, please describe them for me.

17. What is the primary language spoken in your home? How many members of your household can speak English? How many can read and write English?

18. How would you describe your English skills? Do you feel that you are pretty good at using English? Or do you feel that your English skills need improvement? Something else? Please explain.

19. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about yourself?

Interview Process

The individual interviews for my study took place after I received and reviewed the first set of journal responses from my participants (at the end of September, early October, 2011). As my own attitudes and perspectives toward my participants changed (King, 2009, p. xxi), I used these journal responses to
help me modify the interview questions. Each participant was interviewed once. These interviews provided me with the opportunity to “probe” in a way that questionnaires do not provide (Johnson & Turner, 2003, p. 305). The participants responded to questions in which they were asked to describe how their Hispanic cultures shaped their attitudes and perceptions toward their coursework in English writing classes; the questions were also designed to encourage participants to consider the role their Hispanic culture played in their academic performance in their college writing courses.

Some of the questions were designed to help me create a portrait of each participant by encouraging her to describe how her culture shapes her learning experiences. Other questions were designed to help me establish a context for the demographic background of each participant. I used this last type of question as needed for clarity and understanding. As I was recording the interviews, I was also taking field notes. These field notes helped me capture affective data, such as body language and facial expressions that would be missing from the tape recordings.

I used a Sony microcassette tape recorder to record the interviews. Each cassette had 30 minutes of recording time per side. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. I also took field notes during the interviews, and reviewed the tapes and my notes immediately after each interview was completed. The interviews took place in my office at PHCC’s West Campus; in the library at PHCC’s Spring Hill Campus; or in the library at PHCC’s North Campus. I drove to the most convenient location for each participant, and
scheduled the interviews at times that were also the most convenient for my participants. Using narrative descriptions, participants were heard in their own words describing their reactions to the questions they were asked to consider.

The open-ended interview questions I asked my participants were designed to help them consider the cultural influences that shaped their experiences in college writing courses. Participants were asked to describe how these influences affected their learning, specifically those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using correct grammar, format, and citation. Finally, participants were asked if they felt that their experiences had changed them in any way, or had any effect on the way they normally act.

The demographic interview questions were used to obtain information on the student’s personal and educational background. These included questions that focus on the participants’ family background, their socio-economic situation, and their career/educational objectives. All of the interview questions were worded to encourage participants to answer freely without the effect of researcher bias. The interview also used Seidman’s (1991) model to provide the basis for the participant’s perspectives by focusing on the person’s life history.

In Chapter Four of this study, the responses to the interview questions are quoted based on the transcripts typed by the professional transcription service I employed. Since the transcriptionist used her best judgment in interpreting what she heard, I have made some corrections and adjustments (indicated by the word *sic*) as needed for clarity.
Data Analysis

The analysis method I used in this study is inductive in nature. That is, “existing theoretical concepts will not *a priori* over-define the analysis,” therefore allowing for the development of new concepts as the analysis proceeds (Lewins & Silver, 2007, as cited in Boeije, 2010, p. 100). Data were analyzed by grouping responses to the journal prompts and the interviews according to common and unusual responses, with special needs and circumstances of some students noted. This data analysis also included identification of complementarities, trends, and general features of the responses. I analyzed the data until saturation was reached.

The journal responses were emailed to me and subsequently saved as Word documents. The data I collected in the individual interviews were professionally transcribed; I feel that this expense was warranted because I am not the most efficient typist, and as a full-time faculty member at PHCC, time is a factor. The journal responses and the interview transcripts were first coded by hand using colored highlighters and pens. I then referred to these comments in creating my codes. Finally, the data was coded using a coding program called *ATLAS.ti* (qualitative analysis software) after I identified the initial meaning units from the transcripts in my phenomenological analysis. The coding process is also discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that an interviewer should follow a series of steps in interpreting the information obtained during an interview. The researcher should
1. Read through the whole interview to get a sense of the whole;
2. Determine the natural meaning units;
3. Restate the natural meaning unit as simply as possible; and
4. Interrogate the meaning units in terms of the specific purpose of the study.

A phenomenological description of each participant must be obtained to condense the expressed meanings into “more essential meanings of the experience” (Kvale, 1996, p. 194). To see how these steps can be used to analyze data obtained from the journal responses and the interviews, I created a diagram for identifying “significant statements” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) and emergent themes within and between participants’ responses (Figure 1). This model helped me group the significant statements into larger units of information called meaning units (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). These meaning units were transformed into expressions (themes) that elucidate what the participant said in the journal responses and the interviews. From these themes, I then identified the emergent themes, those “themes emerge from the data during analysis, capturing the essence of meaning or experience drawn from varied situations and contexts” (Bowen, 2006). Finally, redundant themes were grouped together (what Creswell [2007] calls “clustering”), resulting in descriptive statements that attempt to answer the exploratory questions and illustrate the structure of the phenomenon being explored.
Figure 1: Steps in the Data Collection and Analysis Process

1. Obtain appropriate permission and IRB approval to begin study
2. Select potential participants from classroom visitations and demographic lists
3. Contact potential participants
4. Identify qualified participants and obtain signed consent
5. Email journal prompts one and two
6. Locate significant statements in journal prompts one and two and create codes
7. Conduct and transcribe interviews
8. Locate significant statements in transcripts of interviews and create codes
9. Identify emergent themes from expressions
10. Use emergent themes to create descriptive statements
11. Cluster codes into meaning units/categories
12. Locate significant statements in journal prompt three and create codes
13. Email journal prompt three
14. Transform meaning units/categories into expressions (themes)
15. Locate significant statements in journal prompt three and create codes
16. Identify emergent themes from expressions
17. Use emergent themes to create descriptive statements
18. Answer the exploratory questions using descriptive statements
Presentation of Results

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative phenomenological study of this nature, the researcher functions as the main instrument of inquiry (Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996; Janesick, 2004; Merriam, 1998). Therefore, as a college composition instructor, I bring to this study my personal insight in working with ESL students in writing courses. However, since I am a woman, and all my participants were women, I am not a neutral participant in the research project. Therefore, to address this bias and other biases that are inherent in all of us that may color my interpretation of my participants' learning experiences, I included a personal reflective journal at the conclusion of this dissertation. In that reflection, I provided a transparency (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) that elucidated my role as researcher and observer and provide a data set of my reflections on the research act (Janesick, 2004, p. 143). I also employed the process of bracketing (revealing and setting aside of my personal prejudgments) as part of the phenomenological analysis process (Creswell, 2007, p. 59). However, attempting to control my values by bracketing these assumptions is not enough; I also strove to consciously acknowledge those values through the reflective journal I mentioned earlier. These journals can help the researcher identify “personal assumptions and goals” and clarify “individual belief systems and subjectivities” (Ahern, as cited in Russell & Kelly, 2002, p. 2). Thus, the problem of bias in qualitative research may be controlled through the transparency created by reflective journaling.
As I began reading other qualitative dissertations as part of my research process, I noted that several of them included reflective journals in which the researchers recorded their thoughts, feelings, and observations about their studies. I saw how these journal entries provided transparency and bracketing, and gave the researchers a chance to “step outside” of their studies and evaluate their progress and direction. Janesick (1999) suggests reflective journaling can provide several benefits for qualitative studies:

1. Reflective journal writing allows for the refining the understanding of the role of the researchers through reflection and writing, much like an artist might do. (p. 506)

2. Reflective journal writing can be an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and participants in the study, as a type of interdisciplinary triangulation of data. (p. 506)

3. Reflective journal writing allows for deepening knowledge of whatever subject matter the researcher takes part in. (p. 522)

4. Reflective journal writing allows participants in a research project an active voice. (p. 522)

5. Reflective journal writing provides an additional data set to outline, describe, and explain the exact role of the researcher in any given project. (p. 523)

Furthermore, reflective journaling is a “way of getting feedback from ourselves” (Progoff, 1992, as cited in Janesick, 1999, p. 507), an especially important component in creating transparency and acknowledging biases. I decided that
reflective journaling would be a useful tool for my own study, so I began keeping my own reflective journal in March of 2011. At that point, I was working on my dissertation proposal, and already I was encountering problems, most of which I had not anticipated. For instance, the sheer volume of information that I needed to sift through was almost overwhelming. I found that taking a few minutes to write in my journal helped to clear my mind and re-focus on my topic.

In Appendix G, I provide my reflective journal entries beginning on March 16, 2011, and continuing up to the time of the submission of my proposal to my committee. I continued to write in this journal as I moved on to the data collection and analyses stages of this dissertation. Whenever interviews are used as part of the data collection method in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as interviewer should be made visible (Ortlipp, 2008). The reflective journal was a part of creating that transparency.

It is also important to remember that the data collected in any qualitative study is intended to be “thick, rich, and deep,” which are characteristics that can “override the preconceived attitudes of the researcher” (Bogdan & Bikleq, 1982, p. 7). Thus, any concerns about what is called the “researcher effect,” while worthy of acknowledgement, did not compromise the rigorous and systematical empirical inquiry process of qualitative research.

Conclusion

In the first three chapters of this dissertation, I discussed the theoretical foundations for my study, and the rationale for using qualitative methods to
examine the phenomenon of culture’s effect on learning. My objective is that this study provides a significant and productive contribution to the research literature of higher education, specifically concerning the needs of Hispanic women as college students. Chapter Four includes the presentation of the data, and the analysis of the findings. Chapter Five discusses the implications of this study and offers suggestions for future research into this topic.
CHAPTER 4
Presentation and Analysis of the Journal Responses and Interview Data

Introduction

This chapter includes a discussion of the journal entries and interviews, as well as phenomenological descriptions of the lived experiences for each participant as drawn from the data sources. The data collection, data analysis, and coding processes are also described, along with the thematic analysis and the descriptive statements created in response to the exploratory questions.

The purpose of this study was to describe and explain the attitudes and perceptions of selected female Hispanic students, specifically toward the effect of their native culture on their learning experiences in their college writing courses. The exploratory questions that guided this study were

- What are the cultural influences that shape the experiences of female Hispanic ESL learners in college writing courses?
- How do these cultural influences affect student learning, specifically those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using correct grammar, format, and citation?
- Have these cultural influences produced a learning experience that is transformative? If so, how?
Five emergent themes were extracted from the data and used to articulate descriptive statements that suggest answers to the exploratory questions. It should be noted that the experiences of every participant were not directly illustrative of each theme; some participants spoke more openly and freely on some subjects than on others. Factors such as personality differences, prior experiences, English language facility, and the instructor each participant had for her writing course influenced the length, content, and focus of her responses. Therefore, while some themes are applicable to all of the participants, some are unique to only a few. The illustrative quotations that are used in the thematic analysis section of this chapter include the name of the respondent making the comment.

Data Collection

After the signed informed consent forms from my participants were obtained, the first two journal prompts were emailed to them (approximately one week later). As soon as their responses were received via email, the interviews were scheduled. After each interview was completed, I emailed the participants the third (final) journal prompt. Upon receipt via email of each participant’s final journal response, arrangements were made for her to receive her VISA gift card. Participants either came by my office at PHCC to pick up their cards, or they asked me to send them by mail to their home addresses.

Since the journal responses were typed and emailed to me by the participants, I left all spelling, grammatical, and syntactical errors as they
originally appeared whenever I used a quotation from a journal response in my discussion. I used brackets only when necessary for clarification. For example, one participant wrote "coma" instead of "comma," so I placed brackets and *sic* after this mistake, and others like it, when I used direct quotation.

The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service; therefore, I needed to listen to the tapes and compare them with the typed transcripts for accuracy. As I read, I saw that there were times when the transcriptionist made a decision about which word or words she thought were being spoken. In a small number of instances, after listening to the tapes myself, I made a decision to make changes and corrections to her interpretations as I saw fit. I made the changes only when I felt they were necessary for accuracy and clarity. For example, in response to a question about her children’s bilingual status, one participant apparently began to say the word “people,” but it was transcribed as “peep.” I finished the word in the sentence I quoted. Also, there were times in the transcripts when the transcriptionist wrote “inaudible.” This inability to understand what was said may be due to either the participant or me speaking too quickly or not clearly enough; it may also have resulted from our moving away from the microphone. In those cases (which were relatively infrequent), I substituted the word or words I recalled were the ones that were being said.

The participants are presented in the order in which they were accepted into the study because this seemed to be the most logical way to illustrate the findings. With eight participants responding to interview questions and journal
prompts, it was important to keep their comments separate to avoid confusion. I then present my discussion of each participant in the temporal sequence of the data collection process; that is, I begin with the first two journal responses for each participant, followed by her interview, and concluding with her response to the third journal prompt. I included each of the questions being asked and a selection of illustrative responses made by the participants, sometimes as a paraphrase, and sometimes as a direct quotation. I then present a general summary of the findings and a description of the emergent themes. I conclude the chapter with descriptive statements that attempt to answer the three exploratory questions.

Data Analysis: Journal Prompt Responses

Having participants email their journal responses to me was especially appropriate for a study of this nature because it encouraged participants to reflect upon their responses; it also reduced “pressure and stress” on the participants (Owens, 2007, pp. 54-55). Furthermore, having students respond to journal prompts via e-mail encouraged “reflexivity in communication, enabling reflection and consideration” (Morgan & Symon, 2004, as cited in Owens, 2007, p. 54). The use of e-journaling produced “a richer research” through the use of “students’ self-reflection” (Owens, 2007, p. 55).

The journal responses were read as soon as they were received from the participants. A file was created in Microsoft Word for each of the eight participants, and each participant’s email was saved in her own file. I also
printed each response so I could highlight the text by hand. I read each journal response several times, looking for significant statements to highlight. I also made notes to myself regarding anything I thought might be especially significant or insightful. As I read through the responses of several participants, patterns and commonalities began to emerge. I also noted anything unusual or unique to any one response that appeared. This was my initial step in the coding process. From these significant statements, a list of codes, based upon what I had read so far and on the literature related to the phenomenon in question, was created. However, I was careful to remain open to additional codes that might emerge during my analysis (Creswell, 2007).

Data Analysis: Interview Transcripts

As soon as each interview was completed, I immediately listened to the tapes and reviewed my field notes to insure contextual detail. I wrote down anything significant that I recalled, and that was not previously recorded. Next, I sent the interview tapes to a professional transcription service in Tampa, Florida. Within a week, I began receiving the typed transcripts by email. I also retrieved my original tapes (I picked them up in person at the transcription office as soon as the transcriptionist finished with them). I saved each interview transcript as a document in the Microsoft Word file I had created for each participant. As a means of supporting triangulation, I emailed each participant a copy of her interview transcript so she could review it for accuracy. All of the participants said they were satisfied with their transcripts.
I began the analysis of the interview transcripts by listening to my tapes and comparing the transcripts for accuracy; I also wanted to get a more holistic sense of each participant. My field notes were very helpful in beginning my exploration of this data (Creswell, 2007). For instance, seeing a notation in the margins such as paused to think, smiled, or descriptions of other physical reactions, helped me understand what the participant may have been thinking as she prepared to answer the question. Once I had read the complete set of interview responses for each participant, I was able to highlight significant statements, which I used to create additional codes.

Coding

Software coding programs are limited in that “making sense of multiple interview transcripts and pages of field notes cannot be reduced to a formula or even a standard series of steps” (Patton, 2002, p. 57). A more holistic approach would allow the researcher to give “greater attention” to “nuance, setting, interdependencies, complexities, idiosyncrasies, and context” (p. 60). I chose to use a combination of these two approaches when coding my data. The coding program *Atlas.ti* was used to identify the emergent themes contained within the data; my field notes and member checks were used to provide me with a more holistic sense of each participant’s experiences. According to Creswell (2007, p. 153), codes can

- Represent information that researchers can expect to find in the study;
- Represent information that researchers did not expect to find; and
• Represent information that is interesting or unusual to researchers. Furthermore, Creswell states that “lean coding” with “five or six categories with shorthand labels or codes” is an effective and efficient way to begin the coding process (p. 152).

I began by looking for significant statements—“words, phrases, sentences that have particular meaning to the participants or have direct relevance to the phenomenon being studied” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 367). I used two separate approaches: first, I examined each participant and her responses to the interview questions and the journal prompts, highlighting the significant statements I saw in the text. I then went over the data again, using a cross-analysis method. That is, I took each interview question and journal prompt and looked at all of the participant responses to that particular question. I looked for any significant statements that had not been previously identified in the first analysis. However, no new significant statements emerged.

Next, I uploaded the interview transcripts and journal responses for each participant into Atlas.ti as individual documents, and used the highlighted paper copies to help me locate the significant statements I had previously identified. Once the significant statements were marked in Atlas.ti, I was able to use them to create codes. Atlas.ti was very useful in managing new codes, and tracking when (and if) the various codes appeared in the texts. If a code occurred in the transcripts and responses that were reviewed toward the end of the process, I was able to see if the newest codes appeared anywhere else in the data. Some of the codes I used included the words struggle, frustration, success, respect,
instructors, family, support, male, female, and responsibility. I sometimes entered a variation of a code word (substituting succeed for success, e.g.) in order to identify frequency and location.

By noting how often a code appeared in the data (a function Atlas.ti does automatically), I was able to cluster the codes into larger units of information called meaning units (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). These meaning units, or categories, were transformed into expressions (themes) that elucidate what the participants said in the journal responses and the interviews. Finally, I identified the emergent themes, those themes that “emerge from the data during analysis, capturing the essence of meaning or experience drawn from varied situations and contexts” (Bowen, 2006, p. 2). However, merely naming themes and providing quotations from the data to illustrate each theme does not provide a sufficient basis for describing the relationships between themes and exploratory questions (Bazeley, 2009). While the participants’ words must lie at the basis of any conclusions that are reached, rarely will a participant make the argument in a few words. Bazeley (2009) states that one way to avoid this sort of superficial analysis is to write a draft of the results without including any quotations from the data. One may then review this draft and include appropriate supporting quotations (Bazeley, 2009). Therefore, the themes that are described in this chapter were formulated after I had written a brief summary of each participant’s responses and then reviewed the data for the appropriate quotations to support emergent themes. I had used Atlas.ti to help me keep track of quotations as I
read through the data, but I also remained open to the possibility that other significant quotations may become useful as I wrote the drafts.

This phenomenological study is descriptive in nature - that is, “it attempts to describe systematically a situation, problem, phenomenon, service or programme, or provides information about, say, living condition of a community, or describes attitudes towards an issue” (Research Methodology, n. d.). Therefore, the final step in the analysis process was to use the themes to formulate descriptive statements that attempt to answer the three exploratory questions.

The Participants

The eight women who participated in this study self-identified as Hispanic. All were first generation college students who had been born outside of the United States. Three were born in Puerto Rico, two were born in Cuba, and the remaining three came from Uruguay, Colombia, and Mexico, respectively. These eight women provided insight into how their culture as Hispanic females affects their learning experiences in college writing courses. In order to introduce the participants, I began with some basic demographic information about each one. This demographic information was collected primarily from either the journal entries, or from the interviews. Each participant was also assigned a pseudonym.
The First Participant: Ramira

Introduction

Ramira is a Hispanic woman who is 20 years old. She was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and came to the U.S. about five years ago. Ramira studied English in Puerto Rico for a few years, in a private Catholic school. However, all she learned was the most basic English: the names of colors, for example. Ramira currently lives with her family (parents and siblings). She and her family usually speak English at home, although they sometimes revert back to Spanish. Ramira would like to have a career in medicine, perhaps as a doctor or as an audiologist.

I chose to call this participant Ramira. She was very thoughtful in her responses, often taking several moments to think about her answers before she spoke. She also requested clarification of certain questions, and sometimes asked me to repeat the question. I appreciated how seriously she took this opportunity, and that she was happy to be included in the study. I also sensed a strong determination in Ramira to be a successful and productive member of American society.

Ramira’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and Two

The first journal prompt concerned the role that others (such as family, friends, or other members of a culture) play in the acquisition of English writing skills, and whether these others support her efforts in this area. Ramira wrote that acquiring English writing skills “was and still is the hardest task in my
academic schedule.” Furthermore, her family and Hispanic friends were “the last people I would think of when it came to helping me pass a writing course.” Even her English professor had very little impact on her writing skills because “she couldn’t realize that the reason I was struggling wasn’t because I didn’t understand it but it’s not my native language.” Ramira explained that this instructor wrote comments on her papers that were “helpless” [sic], and had the class do a peer response activity in which Ramira (and many of her classmates) wrote comments that were “basic” just to get the grade for the assignment. Lots of people, Ramira continued, struggle with writing, but her struggle was exacerbated by the language issue.

However, her boyfriend has been very helpful. He “is so great at writing papers,” and his mother is an English teacher. Whenever Ramira “freak[ed] out” over a writing assignment, her boyfriend would explain how to begin a paper and develop ideas. In fact, Ramira still asks her boyfriend for help with “those run-on sentences, comas [sic], semi colons, etc.” She concluded by stating that English “is the worst subject I encounter.”

For the second prompt, which asked if she was involved in any clubs or organizations designed for Hispanic non-native speakers, Ramira replied that she did not belong to any organization of this kind. But she did say that when she first came to the U. S. five years ago, she was not put into an ESOL program. In fact, she and her family were not aware that such programs existed. Ramira feels strongly that her “struggles would be lesser” if she had been placed in such a program. Hispanics, she said, “should be given special attention because we are
trying our hardest to have a better future and we cannot do it alone.” Finally, she stated that she does not “learn the same way her boyfriend does or any other native speaker would.”

Ramira’s Interview

Ramira and I met in my office at PHCC at 2PM on November 2, 2011. Ramira sat at an angle to my left, next to my desk. I kept my office door closed as the hallway was noisy with students and faculty talking and walking by. As I began to set up the recorder, Ramira began to talk to me about the interview. I had to ask her (with a smile) to hold on to her thoughts until I starting recording. She was leaning forward as we began, sitting closer to the edge of her chair and not touching it with her back.

Ramira’s Perceptions of Her Culture

I began the interview by asking Ramira to describe any influence that her Hispanic culture has had on her as a student in a college writing course. She responded by asking me if I meant the “positives.” I explained that her perceptions could be positive, or negative, or something else, and she seemed to understand. She went on to say that her Hispanic culture had “influenced me more negatively than positively.” She referred back to her middle school English classes, and how she was taught only “the basics,” instruction which she found to be insufficient and lacking “detail in depth.” This was especially true concerning
grammar, “Because, you know, what’s a noun? What’s an adjective?” She continued,

So when I came and I began my college course writing classes, I’d never seen other than I think it was; writing was so important. You need it in college. You need it in your work. You need it for the rest of your life. So I didn’t know; I mean I was; and especially the terminology and, you know, run on sentences and all kinds of stuff. And where I come from, I would never use; we barely used commas, we barely used semicolons and stuff, and I was just; it was very overwhelming that they didn’t prepare us for that.

When I asked Ramira if she felt that her writing assignments had caused her to change the way she normally acts, she first stated, no. However, after reflecting for a few moments, she added that she had become “more hard working” and had to “put [in] a lot of time.” She used words like “frustrating” and “pressuring” to describe her experiences of working very hard on her papers only to receive a low grade:

I felt that I was working hard. I said maybe you’ll get, you know; I feel this is going to be a good grade, for example, and then when I got back, you know, low Cs and I was just like as long as I get passing grades, you know.

For a time, Ramira was content to settle for a passing grade; later, she realized that she needed better grades because “I want to go to a university, and they say
you have to get As and Bs in college classes." She was pleasantly surprised when her hard work began to pay off:

And I passed with a B and I was actually very impressed that I passed with a B. I was like thank God I passed with a B, you know, because I want to go to a university and they say you have to get As and Bs in college classes, and when I passed with my B, I was like thank God . . . because I was expecting a C in that class actually.

I next asked Ramira what she thought about the fact that some Hispanic women students are more successful than others in their college writing classes. She again asked me to repeat the question, and after I did, she replied,

Well, it depends on their past, I believe. Well, it depends on; for me, I tried; I tried very hard. I was very ambitious all the time. I'm an A and B student and I was; I was hard working, so I tried; you know, I tried to get good grades. I tried to do better. I tried to learn.

I wondered what Ramira meant by their past," and she answered: "Others that don't do as good and, you know, they just; I believe they just give up and maybe they just don't care as much." She continued, without my prompting her,

And maybe because they don't know the language, so why; if they don't know the language; because I'm; I never learned the language pretty well. I grew up with it. And maybe they just don't learn the language, so why would they, you know, try to learn how to write it if they do not speak it?

When I said that this appears to be a direct influence of the culture, Ramira added, “I know the language. I know it. I just need to know how to write it.” This
was one of several occasions when Ramira made a distinction between speaking English and writing it.

The fourth question was about getting emotional support from others, such as family or friends. Ramira explained that her family “was never really emotionally supportive.” They are “not really involved in what I do, whether I’m struggling or not.” She added, “I was just like okay, no big deal. It didn’t really affect me if they didn’t [offer emotional support].” Nor was her writing instructor, who “wasn’t a very personal teacher,” especially supportive. Ramira thought that this might have been due to the instructor’s workload, and therefore did not take this lack of interaction “personally.” However, she repeated that “it would have been nice if she would of [sic] been a more personal, emotional” teacher.

Ramira did mention again that her boyfriend (who is not Hispanic) helped her with her writing assignments. She had mentioned him in her journal responses, and she repeated that he was her main source of emotional support. I asked Ramira if any of her Hispanic friends or classmates offered emotional support concerning her schoolwork, and she said no, “We didn’t really talk about you know, papers and stuff.”

I moved on to question five, and asked Ramira if she felt that she had enough time away from her other responsibilities (such as work or family) to devote to her assignments in her writing classes. She explained that she works, and that she played sports during the semester she took English Composition. She added, “To be completely honest with you, I did not have time to put [in] the amount of effort.” If she had not been working or playing a sport, she would have
“put a lot more effort and a lot more dedication to understanding.” She now
knows the “basics,” but feels as if she should “go back and, you know, learn
more.” I asked Ramira if she had gotten any help from anyone with all of her
responsibilities; she paused for a few moments, then answered,

Well, in general whenever I’d tell my mom like mom, I have a lot of
homework, could you do the dishes for me because I can’t … she would
complain. She’d go okay, I guess I’ll do it tonight but, you know, tomorrow
you have to do; you have to do the dishes. So it wasn’t; it wasn’t uh for
support that I got from my parents; from my family . . .

Again, Ramira stated that she relied on her boyfriend for help, not just in writing
her papers, but also for emotional support. I then asked Ramira to elaborate on
why her mother was reluctant to help her. She replied,

Uh she just; you know, I don’t think she understands that; that I have to
focus on my; on my school. I just; she doesn’t take it seriously. I take it
very seriously. I mean I knew I needed time to study and she just; she
didn’t take it as seriously as I did.

I asked Ramira if her mother’s attitude had anything to do with her Hispanic
culture; her first response was that she “never really made that connection,” but
after thinking for a few moments, she said that perhaps her mother’s attitude was
based in part on her Hispanic culture. This may be because in Puerto Rico, “we
went to a private institution because public education in my Hispanic culture is
not good at all.” She explained that in these private institutions (they were
Catholic schools), students received a great deal of attention and support from
the nuns who taught there. Ramira’s mother, who attended these schools, probably expected her daughter to get whatever support she needed at school, and did not perceive this to be her responsibility as a parent:

So maybe she just; she grew up over there, so she just didn’t see the connection that I’m; you know, I’m by myself; you know, you should at least help me. But she grew up, you know, in a private institution; a Catholic institution was well, so they had the nuns; they had like everybody that; you know what I mean?

However, Ramira concluded by saying that she thought this was more of an “educational” issue rather than a cultural one; she again mentioned her boyfriend, whose mother is an English teacher, and is very supportive of her son: “My mom is not as educated; maybe it’s because she’s not as educate[d] as his mom.”

Ramira went on to explain that while some Hispanic women “are known for their attitude,” and can be “crafty,” she believed that her mother really did want her to have an education. The problem was that her mother “doesn’t understand” what that involves. She repeated that this is “not a cultural thing. I think it’s a more educational thing.”

Ramira’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

I next asked Ramira to tell me how she usually prepares for a writing assignment. She explained that she would not start until the teacher explained the assignment in class. She also said that starting a paper is the hardest part of
the process; once she gets “that first paragraph,” it becomes much easier. Still, Ramira would not begin to write her papers until just a few days before the due dates. She was taking other classes at the same time:

It’s not just my writing course, but I was taking like all these classes like within a year and; and knowing that I wouldn’t be able to get; no matter if I started two weeks ago or the day before, I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to acquire the same grade . . .so, or either a higher grade, you know. I was still gonna get, you know, a low C, high B. So I just started two or three days before. I would research it. I would try to get started.

Ramira felt that starting earlier would not have helped her get a higher grade. I asked her if she asked questions of the teacher during the explanation of the assignment, and she replied, “Uh, no. I don’t do like asking questions.” Rather, Ramira would remain silent and hope that someone else would ask questions; in this way, she was able to get ideas from her classmates about how to begin her papers. One of the problems with generating ideas, she continued, was the language issue: “whenever I write my papers I translate it in my head and then I write it down. That’s how I do it. Honestly, obviously English being your first language you don’t have to do that.”

Ramira believed that generating ideas in her native Spanish was easier than trying to do this using English. Furthermore, her English teacher “was big on using, you know good; not good words, just like intellectual words.” In her Hispanic culture, Ramira explained, “we know the basics, you know, we don’t
know that sophisticated language.” By listening to her classmates’ ideas and
reading their drafts, Ramira was able to “change the words around.”

I asked Ramira to describe her impressions of her English instructor. She
repeated her statements about the teacher not being “very personal at all.”
Compounding this problem was the fact that most of her classmates (native
speakers) felt that the teacher was doing a good job and they were learning a
great deal. Ramira was reluctant to ask questions because when she did, often
the teacher would not understand the question:

Well, actually uh I just feel; maybe I did ask questions once or twice and
she would be like what are you trying to ask? I just; maybe I just wasn’t
clear enough, you know. Maybe I just wasn’t; and she was like does that
answer your question? Like somebody would ask a question and she’d
struggle answering and she would be like does that answer your question,
and I would say yeah, sure, just forget it.

She added that most of her classmates were not struggling because “maybe I
was the only Hispanic there,” and this added to her difficulties: everyone else
seemed to understand what the teacher was doing: “Everybody is understanding
them [the lectures] and I’m like I don’t understand it.” I then asked Ramira what
stood out for her as far as her college writing assignments were concerned. She
replied that during the first weeks of class, the instructor went over some basic
grammatical concepts. At first, it didn’t “make sense” to Ramira, but eventually
Ramira began to comprehend what it all meant and she was able to apply what
she had learned to her papers: “And now whenever I have a question; whenever
I have a new paper, like I remember what she was talking about. I can relate what she said."

The next three questions asked Ramira to think about what activities or assignments helped her develop her thinking skills, her research skills, and her grammar skills. Ramira said that her instructor’s requiring more "sophisticated" vocabulary was a factor in helping Ramira write at the college level. Writing a research paper helped her learn how to use the college’s academic databases (“I had never heard of databases before”). Her instructor also taught her how to cite information correctly. Ramira’s grammar skills were improved through the use of exercises on the board in which the basic rules were explained: “But yeah; because my English is I believe pretty good. But especially when everything; the actual grammar, she helped me understand; realize how basic it was.”

Ramira’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

I wanted to know if Ramira experienced anything in her college writing course that may have caused her to change the way she thinks or feels about her culture. Again, she asked for clarification of the term “culture,” and I explained that I was still referring to her Hispanic culture. She then replied that she had “definitely” changed “because in the class; just the writing class in general, it made me realize how difficult it is to be an Hispanic knowing this language is my second language.” She added, “It’s one thing to speak it and it’s another thing to write it.” Further, the class made her realize, “That I need this writing class, especially as an Hispanic.”
The last question I asked Ramira was if there was anything else she would like to say. Without hesitation, she replied

I’m just; just that being Hispanic is a privilege. It’s a privilege. And unfortunately when I came here four or five years ago I was like I’m gonna be Hispanic and in America so I’m gonna have a whole bunch of scholarship money and I’m gonna get all this stuff, but in reality it’s not even; there’s so many Hispanics; and especially for somebody like my English teacher, she didn’t; like you’re not really that different. It’s a privilege, but I thought I was going to get into all of these universities I wanted to.

Further, her mother’s boyfriend said that if Ramira was struggling with English, she should take her classes in Spanish. Ramira replied that, “I’m not going to go to school and speak Spanish.” I told her I admired her conviction, especially when she mentioned the difficulty she was having trouble getting into a university because of her English skills. These skills have improved over the last few years, but she still feels as if her inability to master English grammar is holding her back. She referred again to not having been placed in an ESOL class in middle and high school as part of the problem. However, the last remark Ramira left with me illustrated her hope for a successful future: “It’s America. It’s like the land of the American dream.”
Ramira’s Response to Journal Prompt Three

Ramira responded to this prompt about giving advice to other Hispanic female students in college writing courses by encouraging these students “not to be afraid to ask questions.” She explained that she had become “overwhelmed” with self-doubt, not only in her English classes, but also in her math and science classes, due to the “language barrier.” Now, she regrets not having asked her instructors for help, and would encourage students like herself to ask questions and to ask for help when it is needed. She later realized that her “main struggles would be a lot easier if English wasn’t my second language.” Her advice to students like herself would be “not give up.” and to believe in themselves. She concluded by stating that they can be successful “if we believe we can do it.”

The Second Participant: Graciela

Introduction

Graciela is a 37-year-old woman who was born in Montevideo, Uruguay. She came to the U.S. at the age of 12 with her mother and father, and her grandparents. She is the mother of two teenagers, a 13-year-old son and a 16-year-old daughter. In addition to taking college classes and caring for her children, she helps to care for her parents and for her fiancé (who is blind). She is a full-time student and does not work outside the home.

From the start, I sensed in this participant, whom I called Graciela, a very strong desire to do just that: to please people, including her family, her teachers, and even me. I noted that Graciela tended to apologize for herself: for her errors in speaking and writing English; for her early, somewhat reckless behavior as a
young woman; and for her perceived deficiencies as a mother and a daughter. In our conversations, Graciela seemed very eager to understand the purpose of my study, and to want to help me as best she could. While she did not have a specific career goal in mind, she talked about how hard she was working to make something of her life, and be a positive role model for her children.

Graciela’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and Two

In response to the first prompt, which asked Graciela to reflect upon the role that family, friends, or other members of her culture played in her acquisition of college-level English writing skills, Graciela explained that when she first came to the U.S., she learned from “people on the streets, not my teachers.” She described sitting on the front steps of her apartment and asking “Spanish speaking passer byers [sic] to help me translate my schoolwork." Her parents, who were her only family with her at the time, could not help her as they did not (and to some extent, still do not) speak English very well. In fact, Graciela stated that she now helps her parents with English language issues “since I learned how to.” I sensed Graciela’s need to help her family even as she was trying to help herself.

Graciela continued to describe what she saw as the greatest challenges in acquiring English skills. Among these was what she called “the terminology,” meaning the names of the various parts of speech. She wrote that she was “ashamed to say, I still don’t know what any of it means.”
For the second journal response, Graciela wrote that she was not involved in any extracurricular activities or clubs at PHCC because such organizations are good only if one is “unwilling to assimilate into the culture you are now a part of.” She called herself “very much a Latina, and proud of it,” but she wants to become a part of her new, American culture. In fact, she sees herself now as “part of a different culture,” and trying hard to “immerse” herself into it.

Graciela’s Interview

My interview with Graciela took place on November 22, 2011, in the library of the PHCC Spring Hill Campus. I arrived a little before our appointment time of 3PM so I could locate a suitable place for our interview. I identified myself as a PHCC faculty member to the librarian, and she very kindly showed me a study room where Graciela and I could talk privately and without disturbing others. Graciela arrived promptly at three, and we settled ourselves in the study room. The room contained a table and a few chairs, and we sat at right angles to each other with the tape recorder on the table between us. Graciela appeared excited, and even a little anxious: she kept lacing and unlacing her fingers and looking around the room. I finished set up the tape recorder, and got my blank field notes and pen ready.

Graciela’s Perceptions of Her Culture

When I asked Graciela the first question about her perceptions of her Hispanic culture, and if she felt that it had influenced her as a first-year college
writer, she stopped to think for a few moments before answering. Then she stated that “probably my views are a little different.” When I asked her to explain what this meant, she replied that she saw herself as “old-fashioned,” and “more family-oriented” than some other Hispanic women. I asked her how this relates to her writing course and she replied, “It made me realize that…I’m not the only Latina who thinks that way.”

I asked Graciela if any of the assignments she had had in her writing class had caused her to change the way she normally acts. She said she really did not feel as if she had behaved any differently, so we went on to the next question: why are some Hispanic female students more successful in their writing courses than others? Graciela attributed student success to the acquisition of both speaking and writing skills:

I think it has a lot to do, uh, uh, personally, I think it has a lot of to do with the amount of time that they’ve been in the country and how good their English skills are, speaking-wise and writing.

I next asked Graciela about getting emotional support from family, friends, or others, and she replied that this was “extremely” important to her. In particular, getting this type of support from her family was especially important to her: “Um, um, just I guess patting me on the back, letting me know it’s not too hard. I can do it. Things, you know, I get discouraged at times."

I wanted to know which family members offered their support, and Graciela said that it came primarily from her fiancé and her children; however,
her parents also supported her emotionally. Graciela said, with laugh, “They’re extremely proud.”

Graciela’s children are ages 16 and 13, so I questioned her about her responsibilities outside the classroom, and if she felt that she had enough time to handle everything. She stated: “Everybody tried to help and they did, did help, but it, it just seemed like I never had enough time.” Graciela does not work outside of her home, but her teenaged children and her fiancé require a great deal of her time and attention. She also helps her parents, who live nearby. Overall, she felt that she had a responsibility for her family members in return for the emotional support she received from them.

Graciela’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

We moved on to the next set of questions concerning Graciela’s learning experiences. I wanted to know how she typically prepared for her college writing class. Laughing, she answered,

I, I’m bad. I um, I’m a crammer (laughs). I’m, I’m, because of my time management, I guess my time management skills aren’t what they should be at the moment, with this being my first semester. so, I’m, I’m a last-minute type.

We discussed the reasons why Graciela procrastinated starting her assignments, and the main problem seemed to be time management. Graciela saw herself as just staying one step ahead of her schoolwork: “I really just try to get done what needs, what needs to get done. Like if I have an assignment due tomorrow. I’ll
organize, that’s what I’ll work on today. “

I asked Graciela what the very first thing she did when she was given an assignment. She said, “I lock myself in my room.” Graciela looked abashed when she said this, covering her mouth with her hand as if to hide her embarrassment. I found it interesting that she actually spoke quite well; the grammatical errors she made were no more numerous than those of many native speakers I have had in my classroom.

Next, I asked Graciela about her college writing instructor, in particular what Graciela thought about her teacher’s presentation of the course material. Graciela replied that her teacher explained everything clearly, and went over the syllabus with the class; but she sensed that the teacher was not addressing the needs of students who “aren’t right out of high school,” which was Graciela’s status. I then asked Graciela if her background as a non-native speaker might have had anything to do with this, and she replied,

Uh, um, well, I think maybe their terminology and I, I think I wrote that in my um writing prompt. I, I, I obviously I tested high enough to go into English Comp I. Um, so my vocabulary and my writing skills are good, but I don’t think that I know the, the English language well enough to understand the terminology in the class.

When I suggested that perhaps this was because Graciela was now trying to write at the college level, she agreed, and added that she believed that the problem was compounded by her ESL status. Next, I wanted to know what, if anything, stood out for Graciela as a learning experience in her writing course.
Graciela responded without hesitation that it was “a reading.” She explained that she had been assigned a story by a Hispanic woman who had come to the U. S. as a child. This woman became a published author, a fact which had a strong impact on Graciela, especially because the author had written and published her work in Spanish: “And I’ve always, was under the assumption that I guess in order to be successful that you had to do it in English.”

I prompted Graciela to tell me more about her writing assignments, especially ones that helped her develop her critical thinking skills. She said that the research paper assignment, with which she had “an awful hard time,” required her to exercise her thinking skills. I asked her to explain what part she found the most challenging, and she stated, “For me, it was the understanding the concept of how to put together from different sources, one paper with the same view.” I asked Graciela how she typically started the research paper assignment, and what her first steps would be. She explained that the instructor took the class to the college library where a librarian showed them how to use the various resources. However, Graciela had to ask for some additional help with the electronic databases: “I’m a little slow I think so I had to come down and have her go over that with me again, because I just, I didn’t grasp the concept in, in class.” She did add that once she understood the way the databases worked, she was very glad to be able to do her research at home. As she put it, “I don’t have time to come to a library. I have to cram it in at home.” I went on to question 11, which asked Graciela about any assignments that were especially helpful to her as far as grammar and formatting were concerned. She mentioned that her
class had been given some grammar quizzes, and that she believed that she had done very well on them. She did not feel that she had learned anything new, except for some information about “plural, nouns, and stuff.” She was also taken “a little aback” by “some stuff about agreement verbs,” something she had not thought about before: “I don’t, I didn’t think about it, that way, before.” She said she was fairly confident about using good grammar in her spoken English, but felt that perhaps her written English was not up to the same standard.

Graciela’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

When I asked Graciela about any assignments that may have influenced her perceptions of her Hispanic culture, she again mentioned the reading assignment she had been given. Graciela’s class read an English translation of a story that had been originally published in Spanish.

Graciela described how impressed she was that the author (a Hispanic woman) could write a book in Spanish and have it be successful in the U. S. She was “shocked” that the author’s work was not only accepted, but also widely acclaimed:

Yeah, because I, like I really, I don’t know. I don’t want to say that I’m, I’m prejudice. I’m not, but I, I’ve always been real strong-willed about the fact that if you’re here you need to be like the people from here. You speak in English and you do, you know, do you… I’ve always, I don’t know personally I’ve always felt like I, I’m no longer that Spanish person. I wanted to know how Graciela learned about the author’s background, and she explained that the biography appeared in the introduction to the story. Graciela
could not recall the author’s name or the name of the story; she said it was something like "Augsin," and she thought the first name was Marjorie. Graciela made a point of telling me that the author’s ethnic background as a Hispanic woman made her memorable and remarkable. This was the sort of person Graciela saw as a role model for herself and for others like her.

The final interview question concerned any events in Graciela’s writing course that may have caused her to change her values, beliefs, opinions, or expectations. She replied

Um, that’s where I’ve, the uh, about hmm, the amount of work that it would take to pass this course. I, I guess. You know coming to college for the first time and having been out of school for so long I’d forgotten what kind of a commitment it was, but then this class was particularly difficult for me because, because of the amount of work into it.

I asked her if she were referring specifically to her writing course, and she said yes, adding that she “probably should have” expected the work to be so hard. She attributed her attitude to the fact that she dropped out of school in the 11th grade because “obviously, I didn’t want to do the work.” Graciela went on to explain how that attitude affected her experiences at PHCC, and she replied “So, I didn’t, I don’t believe that I ever really applied myself or any, in high school. So coming into college after 20 something years. I was…a little shell shocked.”

I explained to Graciela what the term “non-traditional student” meant, and told her that she and I both fit into that category. We talked about how attitudes like the one she described can develop with any non-traditional student who has
been out of school for a number of years. She seemed to understand this, but she also wanted me to appreciate her status as an ESL learner: “It took me a while, but I got there.” She concluded her remarks by saying that college “is definitely something I want to do well.” She reiterated her strong feelings about being a positive role model for her children.

We finished the interview with some follow-up questions about Graciela’s background, and her childhood in Uruguay, particularly how she learned English. She described the private tutoring classes in English her parents had arranged for her, in which she learned how to pronounce the alphabet in English. That, along with learning the names of the months and the names of the colors, was the extent of her English instruction at that time. She did not receive much practice into the use of conversational English, a deficit that affected her greatly when she arrived in the U. S. The only English words she knew were “Help me. I am lost.”

Since Graciela had mentioned her parents again at the end of the interview, we continued talking about her family life. I asked her what language was spoken at home and she explained that in her own home, English was the primary language used. However, in her parents’ and grandparents’ homes, Spanish is used more frequently. She is very conscientious about helping her children to become bilingual, especially her son (her younger child), who resembles his non-Hispanic father in looks. Graciela saw the benefits of being bilingual in our society, but she also felt that her children, especially her son, needed to be reminded of their Hispanic background:
You know and I always tell him, you know, you need to try to make an effort to learn. It's, you know, it's your heritage. He says, he tells me, I try to tell the people, because he has blonde hair and blue eyes... And he says you know, I tell people I'm Spanish but they don't believe me (laughs). You know?

Graciela's last remarks in our interview were in response to my question about anything else she wanted to say that we had not covered. She replied that for her, the “biggest barrier” to learning was not the coursework. It was the responsibilities she has as a mother, daughter, and fiancé that present the greatest challenges. She also described her fear of becoming “a statistic,” another example of the negative views society has of some Hispanics:

Like I don't want to be, for the most part I think society in general view, views Latinos as non-educated and um, you know...lower income and you know. I want to go above that. I think up to now in my life. I've, I've always said I, I am a walking stereotype. You know, but um, I don't want to be that anymore. I want to be better than that.

She described some of the poor choices she had made as a young woman, such as having children when she was very young and unmarried, and her problems with drug addiction and the law. She was finally able to turn her life around when her situation was the most dire:

But I, you know, I got to a point where it's like wow, look at me. I've done this wrong and this wrong, this, wrong and that's what started it. I said you know, I'm not going to do that anymore.”
She finished the interview with a comment about Hispanic people and the profound impact that negative stereotypes can have on them:

A lot of Hispanics do have the potential to better themselves, and they have the inner strength and the ability, but I think they don’t make the effort because of the way they think society perceives them and they just fit that mold, you know? It’s there. And I just think that’s wrong, you know?

Graciela’s Response to Journal Prompt Three

In response to the prompt about obstacles facing female Hispanic students, Graciela wrote that she felt the biggest challenge was, “a lack of self-assurance, or faith in our capability to succeed.” Graciela described this challenge as being the result of negative stereotypes about Hispanic women, victims of what she called “the stigmatism for Latina women in this society.” Society, stated Graciela, views Latinas as “not meant or expected to make anything of ourselves. We are the unwed mothers, non-English speaking servants of others, or generally not important productive members of society.” Graciela went on to describe the negative influence of these stereotypes on the expectations Hispanic women have for themselves. Society’s views are compounded with the belief in our own culture that women are to be “barefoot and pregnant.” This, claims Graciela, is “crippling” to Latinas, and may render them “incapable of doing anything other than that with herself or her life because
it's not only accepted, but expected.” Graciela responded to the second part of the prompt by saying

The only advice that I can give to Latina women in a college level writing course is to not give in to anybody’s expectations. Do your best, as that’s all anybody can really do, and don’t be afraid to ask for help. You’ll be amazed at how much your professors are willing to help you outside of class time. They are there to teach and teach you they will. Believe in yourself and succeed in everything you do as you will one day be some other Latina's inspiration.”

The Third Participant: Verónica

Introduction

Verónica is a 24-year old Hispanic woman who came to the U.S. from Mexico approximately seven years ago. When she first arrived in the U. S., Verónica lived with both her parents, who later divorced. Her mother returned to Mexico, and Verónica lived with her father until she got married. Verónica and her husband became parents for the first time in December 2011.

I chose the name Verónica for this participant. In her responses to both the journal prompts and the interview questions, she revealed a strong determination to succeed despite significant obstacles. These obstacles included a family that was not always entirely supportive of her desire to attend college, and serious financial constraints that threatened her ability to concentrate on her schoolwork. However, Verónica worked hard to overcome
these challenges and has become a very successful student. I thought the name was most appropriate as a representation of her courage and hard work.

Verónica’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and Two

The first journal prompt asked Verónica to reflect upon the role that others (such as family, friends, or other members of her culture) played in her acquisition of English writing skills. She explained that while neither of her parents could speak English, they recognized the importance of learning English while the family still lived in Mexico. Her parents, therefore, sent her at age six to a bilingual school to learn English. There, she said, some of her “worst grades” were in her English composition classes because, as she put it, “I wasn’t doing right.” In addition, Verónica stated that when she came to the U.S. at age 16, she had no Hispanic friends, a fact she viewed as an advantage since she was “forced” to speak English. Practice, she believed, was the key to improving her English skills.

The second journal prompt concerned clubs or organizations (either in school or outside of school) that are designed specifically for Hispanic students. When asked if she had ever belonged to such organizations, Verónica said no, the activities in which she was involved (the PHCC soccer team and the film club) were not designed for Hispanic students alone. She went on to say that she was "not aware of any clubs created to help students with their English speaking and writing skills, not at Gulf High, PHCC or USF." She also pointed out that she would not have joined this type of club even if they had existed.
because she felt that her English skills were good enough at that point. In addition, she felt that organizations of this type “seem ineffective.” Since most of the members would want to use their native language (a difficult “urge” to overcome), the chance to practice English would be lost. More effective, Verónica believes, would be finding

one person who has the skills and is willing to tutor you, a friend that helps you out and gives you tips on how to successfully write a college paper. And the speaking and listening skills will develop when you are surrounded by native speakers.

Verónica’s Interview

Verónica and I met in my office at PHCC at 3PM on October 27, 2011. She sat in the chair to my left, so that the corner of my desk made a right angle between us. This arrangement enabled me to lean in to hear her voice (she is soft-spoken); I noticed that Verónica also tended to lean in toward me as we began to talk. I turned on the recorder and had my notepaper and pencil ready to write down Verónica’s gestures, facial expressions, and body language. As I was getting ready for the interview, positioning our chairs and the tape recorder, Verónica appeared to be a bit nervous, so I tried to put her at ease by making small talk about the warm weather we’d been having. I think it worked, although she continued to lean forward in her chair.
Verónica’s Perceptions of Her Culture

I began the interview by asking Verónica about her Hispanic culture, and if she believed it had any influence on her learning experience during her college writing course. At first, she did not seem to understand the question fully, so I asked her a few questions about her background; this helped me rephrase the question so that she understood what I meant by the word *culture*. I asked her how long she had been in the U. S., and how old she was when she came here; I then asked her about how it felt to be a member of a minority in her writing classes, and she seemed to understand what I meant. At this point, Verónica looked a bit more relaxed and began to talk more freely. She began by saying that in Mexico, her mother stressed the importance of education, even when Verónica was a small child. Verónica also talked about the concept of respect, saying “that Hispanic thing that you were asking about is, you know, the importance of school as respecting your teachers and wanting to impress your teachers as much, you know.” She found that some of her classmates in the U.S. did not demonstrate this same sort of respect for authority: “When I came here, I saw very little of that unless it was some people wasn’t from this country; like a lot of students was disrespectful and uncooperative in class.” This idea of respect for one’s instructor sometimes prevented Verónica from asking her teacher questions about her grades. She said that she would look at the instructor’s comments and try to do better on the next assignment, but she did not question the instructor because, as she put it, “I guess I thought they knew what they were doing.”
We next discussed why some female Hispanic students are more successful than others in college writing courses. Verónica’s response actually led into my next question, which was about the importance of emotional support. She said that her mother always encouraged her to do well in school, even though her father had never been “school inclined.” The support she received from her mother motivated her to do well in school, especially in her writing courses, because her mother “knew the importance of a second language.”

Verónica also counted on emotional support from her friends, especially the ones she considered “really good writers.” This support is important for success in school, said Verónica, and the lack of it is one reason why some Hispanic females do better than others.

We moved on to the next question, which concerned responsibilities other than schoolwork. Verónica frowned and explained that financial problems at home required her to work two jobs, in addition to taking three or sometimes four courses a semester. At that time, she was living here with only her father (her parents had divorced and her mother moved back home). Verónica repeated that her father had never been especially supportive of her going to school and had always insisted that she work. Once he realized that she could hold down a job (or two) and still work hard in school, he became a little more supportive: “He knew I was doing well, you know, so after a while he just started asking me how’s school?” Her father, she thought, was a little surprised that Verónica was doing so well in school, and she believes that this may have led to his increased support of her academic endeavors.
Verónica’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

I next asked Verónica to describe for me how she typically prepared for her college writing assignments. I asked her to talk specifically about the research paper assignment that all composition students at PHCC must write. She admitted that she is a procrastinator: “I knew what … I would need to be researching and I wouldn't budge.” I asked Verónica to tell me more about this, and she continued

I don’t know if it’s I work better under pressure...I remember doing all that hurry up research paper in one night, which was an all nighter. And I got 100 in that. So I don’t know. But I am never prepared.

Verónica added that she was unwilling to discuss her writing assignments with her Hispanic friends who were also taking writing courses because of “how much more they had done in English.” Indeed, she felt “limited” by her ability to write and speak English, to the point that she was concerned about how this would affect her academically, socially, and professionally. She added that her career goal of becoming a translator could be compromised if her English skills were not strong enough.

We moved on to a discussion of Verónica’s impressions of her writing instructor. I asked Verónica to consider the way the course material was presented, and how it was explained by the instructor. Verónica felt that the instructor she had in a developmental writing course was “very approachable,” and she felt “very comfortable” about his expectations for his students. She found that she was able to ask questions about the assignments without
compromising her sense of respect for the teacher. However, when I guided Verónica back to a discussion of her English Composition instructor, she said that this teacher “basically, she would tell us to do our own research.” At first, Verónica found this to be very hard; nonetheless, she persevered and eventually grasped the concept of what it means to conduct research. She was pleasantly surprised to get an A on her paper, and respected her instructor for making her learn the research process on her own.

I asked Verónica to describe for me what she considered to be her most memorable experience in her writing course. She mentioned the research paper assignment again, for which she received a very good grade. It was “a big deal” because it took so much time, and was such hard work. Nonetheless, the outcome “made me feel good,” she said. She added, “Mediocrity is something I’ve always been afraid of.” Verónica then mentioned another paper she wrote in English Composition I, a paper that also received an A: “And that’s satisfaction, you know; doing the work, doing your paper and then reading it later on and realizing; like yeah.”

I wanted to know if there were any specific assignments or activities that helped Verónica develop her thinking skills. She described classroom discussions of controversial issues, which helped her critical thinking skills because she could hear “viewpoints from others completely opposite” to her own. She would, however, participate in the discussions only when she “had something good to say.” When I asked her the same question about developing her research skills, she was quick to point out the college’s academic databases,
which she called “a great tool.” As far as developing her grammatical skills, Verónica smiled and said that reading her papers out loud helped her tremendously. Also, she read as much as she could in English, all sorts of texts including newspapers, grammar books, and even dictionaries. In fact, she felt that her English grammar skills had “surpassed” that of her Hispanic friends. Having written so many papers, she saw this “process” as one that improves with practice.

Verónica’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

When I asked Verónica the final two questions about her learning experiences, and if they had changed her perceptions of her culture, she told me about a panel discussion in her writing class. For this assignment, she spoke about her native country, Mexico:

We had to talk about; but it didn’t really give me an insight into what anybody thought, you know, because I think; I know a lot of people want to be polite once they find out you’re from a certain county. You know, they want to limit their comments on certain things . . . and not tell you how they really feel about a certain issue.

As the only Hispanic person on the panel, she felt that her classmates were holding back and “trying to be polite.” Nonetheless, they were interested to learn that Verónica was from another country, and were “eager to know about it.” This discussion made Verónica more aware of the negative stereotypes that are associated with some Hispanic populations, even though she appreciated the
fact that her classmates were respectful of her as an individual. It is unfortunate, she added, that “Other people are like just misinformed.”

The final question I asked Verónica concerned a time when she felt that her values, beliefs, opinions, or expectations had changed. She replied that upon moving to the U.S. from Mexico, she found that her writing courses had become “the most important thing.” When I asked her to elaborate on that statement, she described the importance of being able to communicate in English:

It’s dangerous, you know, if you don’t make it, ’cause what are you going to do? That’s the reason I was here with my dad. And I saw; and, you know, I had friends in high school and I would see them going out; see how they lived, and I used to have no worries like them. But now it’s not like that.

This transformative experience created some conflict with Verónica’s father, based in part on her culture’s views on the roles of males and females. Her father, she explained, was “controlling in some ways because I am a woman.” Her father would have given a son more freedom, while trying to keep his daughter at home, perhaps working, and raising a family. This, stated Verónica, is “just the Mexican thing,” and her transformation included the need to make her father accept the changes that were taking place in her life.

Verónica’s Response to Journal Prompt Three

The third journal prompt asked Verónica to offer advice to other Hispanic females who are trying to acquire college-level English writing skills. Again, she
reiterated her belief that “practice makes perfect.” The way to improve one’s writing, she claimed, is to write more and more. Revise past papers where you have gotten an A, look at sample papers on line; if you have friends who are talented writers, request an old paper or even ask them to revise something you must turn in soon. Read more to expand your vocabulary, and ask your writing teacher for tips on how to improve your writing.

For Verónica, practicing English helped her develop the skill of translating her thoughts from one language to another without really having to think about it. Verónica also described the importance of a thesaurus, which she called “a precious thing to have.” She especially liked the fact that free versions are available on line.

The Fourth Participant: Leticia

Introduction

Leticia is a 21-year-old woman who came to the U.S. from Cuba three years ago. She lived in Miami for a while before moving to New Port Richey. At the time of her arrival in the U. S., she spoke no English. She enrolled at PHCC and taught herself English while taking classes. She listened to music and watched cartoons on television to help her master English idioms. She is a full-time student who lives with her parents and does not work outside the home. Leticia, who excels at mathematics, would like to attend a university and become a mechanical engineer.
I called this participant Leticia. Despite her often stressful situation, she radiated an inner joy and a love of life that was truly inspirational. She laughed and smiled frequently during our interview, even when she was discussing issues that were troubling for her.

Leticia’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and Two

When asked to reflect on her experiences in acquiring English writing skills, and to consider any influence her family, friends, or other members of her culture may have had on these experiences, Leticia said that before she came to the U. S., she didn’t realize there was anything strange about me.” She was unaware of differences in skin color, and believed that her skin “could have been covered in purple sparkles” for all that skin color mattered to her. However, once she arrived in this country, she was disappointed to realize that the “country of the possibilities” was not “like they painted.” Thus, for Leticia, her skin color became the source of her greatest obstacles. She often felt “invisible” in the eyes of others, at work, at school, even when out shopping with her family (she described an incident when they walked into a car dealership and were ignored by the salespeople). She stressed that she did not want anything “given” to her. Rather, she wanted the opportunity to have “something I have earned with my own sacrifice.”

From this, Leticia went on to describe what she considered her most significant academic challenge, which was “not having somebody to guide and help me comprehend my academic classes.” Her family wanted her to succeed,
but “they did not know how” to help her. Nonetheless, she persevered and became a very successful college student. She was the president of one of the college’s honor societies, a position which required her to promote the organization. She worried that “people will not understand” when she spoke, as she believes that she doesn’t “speak English well.” Mathematics are Leticia’s strength, and she worked as a math tutor at the college. She felt more and more confident when she realized that despite the language issues, she could “still help others.”

The second journal prompt asked Leticia if she belonged to any clubs or organizations designed for Hispanic non-native speakers. She did not belong to any organizations of this type, but she referred back to her experiences working as a tutor for the college (helping other students with math, chemistry, Spanish, and computer applications) and how this helped her improve her English skills. Interacting with these students (who were primarily non-Hispanic students) gave Leticia a sense of achievement because she had “the opportunity to make a profound influence in their careers.” She felt as if she were serving her community and being “a good example” for other students. In particular, Leticia strives to be a positive role model for her younger sister, “who is going through the same struggles I am.” Leticia concluded her response by stating that despite the adversities that minorities face in the United States, “everything is possible through hard work and dedication.”
Leticia’s Interview

Leticia and I met in my office at PHCC on November 21, 2011 at 4PM. She arrived wearing a big smile, stating that she was glad to be offered an opportunity to participate in my study. We sat at my desk, at right angles to each other, with the tape recorder on the desk between us. After I did a brief test to be sure the recorder was picking up our voices, I got my field notes ready and began the interview. Leticia appeared to be relaxed and ready to answer my questions.

Leticia’s Perceptions of Her Culture

The first question I asked Leticia concerned her Hispanic culture and if it had had any effect on her acquisition of English writing skills. She quickly replied, “Absolutely.” In responding, she referenced her English Composition class and two other English classes she had taken at PHCC (developmental reading and writing). She had been placed in these developmental classes because she was a non-native speaker of English. She took advantage of the college’s resources to help her learn English, which led to her desire to help others in turn. Leticia feels strongly about “help[ing] people in the future,” and it was her reading instructor who inspired her to become a teacher. Later on, however, she changed her mind, partly because her instructor told her that the best way to help others is “to do what you love.” Hence, she decided on mechanical engineering as a career goal.
Next, I directed Leticia to discuss her experiences as a Hispanic female in her composition class. She replied that in Cuba, she did not have access to the internet, and when she arrived in the U. S. and began trying to use Google, it was not "making sense." She relied on her classmates in her composition class to help her learn how to navigate the internet.

I next asked Leticia to reflect upon her writing assignments and whether or not any of these assignments had caused her to think or act differently. She told me that when she received a writing assignment, she was surprised to realize that in order to write even a simple paragraph, she was going to have to work "very hard." She also discovered that when she used the college’s academic databases, she tended to copy the information "word by word," so she began to rely on her thesaurus to help her use her own words.

I wanted to know how Leticia felt about the fact that some Hispanic females are more successful in school than others. She explained that when she first arrived in the U. S., she knew other Hispanic girls, but they had been born in this country, or they had moved here when they were very young (and had become “Americanized”). Thus, “they didn’t go through what I went through.” These girls, said Leticia, “have everything there for them and they don’t appreciate” what they have. These students may do well in school, but their lack of appreciation bothers Leticia; she has always tried to take advantage of every opportunity that comes her way. She also said that the emotional support she received from her family helped her succeed. However, her parents’ English skills were very limited, so even though they wanted Leticia to succeed, they
were unable to help her in any concrete ways. She relied, therefore, on herself and overcame her feelings of low self-esteem:

I was like feeling really bad and I cry all night. I said you know what? If I stay under my bed nobody is gonna be anything to me. I’m just gonna go ahead and do it. If I don’t do well, I can try again and again, you know, as many times as it takes, you know.

Leticia again mentioned one of her instructors at PHCC, and how this instructor became her mentor:

And she was like so proud of me, and I’m so proud what I achieve in so little time. And she gave me so much inspiration and said oh, you can do this, you can do that. These were all positive things that made me feel more confident and more like; you know, like oh, yes, you can do it; well, I can do it.

Even though her parents were emotionally supportive, it was this instructor, “the most influential person that I had in college,” who “understand [sic] me better.” The emotional support the instructor provided was critical in helping Leticia succeed.

I wanted to know if Leticia felt if she had had enough time away from responsibilities such as work or family to concentrate on her writing assignments. Leticia was happy to say that she did not have to work because her parents paid all her expenses. She spent all her time at school, doing “school work every day or afternoon.” She often “spent hours in the library,” staying up late at night to complete her assignments. Even after her schoolwork was completed, she would
continue studying (particularly English grammar). Being successful in school, she felt, was the way to give something back to her parents for allowing her to make her schoolwork a priority:

I want to some day; not pay back; I can’t pay back what they're doing now, you know, but even sometimes they were; you know, like getting; you know, getting my degree; I think that’s the payment, you know to them.

Leticia did, however, help out with her younger sister. This was not because her parents required her to do so; rather, Leticia felt a strong desire to nurture her sister and be a good role model for her. She explained to her sister the importance of a college education and was hopeful that she could make the road ahead a little easier for her sister:

I’m gonna do something for my sister. Like if I can do something; she has more choices and I think she should take advantage of that. So I’m helping her make decisions to be in college, but she needs to make it herself.

Leticia’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

I asked Leticia how she typically prepared for her college writing assignments. She told me she would begin by determining what the teacher wanted from her. After as the teacher, about the assignment, Leticia would write down every detail – including which font to use. Once she was confident that she understood the assignment, she would go to the college’s learning
center to conduct her research. The “difficult part” was “translating the product into English.” The learning center was helpful, but Leticia also used a dictionary to help her with her translations. It was a very large one; Leticia held up two fingers about three inches apart – and said it was “like this thick…so heavy I couldn’t put it in my backpack.” Leticia pointed out that she “never procrastinated; never.” She knew English Composition was her “weakest” subject, so she always started her papers immediately after receiving the assignments (sometimes as much as two weeks ahead).

I asked Leticia about her impressions of her writing instructor, and she shrugged her shoulders. She said that at first, she felt as if the instructor did not care about her because English was not her first language: “Like since I have an accent or since they don’t know me, since they didn’t have the opportunity to know how smart I am maybe…They just don’t trust my ability.”

As the semester continued, however, and Leticia was able to demonstrate her intelligence, the instructor seemed more willing to help her. In fact, by the end of the semester, Leticia felt that her instructor was “so proud of me somehow.” Despite her difficulties with English grammar, Leticia earned points for the content of her writing, and felt gratified that her intelligence was being recognized: “So it’s not the English, you know. It’s like how smart you are. They’re not smart because they speak English.” Leticia mentioned the time she lived in Miami, and how there, she did not stand out as a Hispanic person. After she moved to New Port Richey, however, things were different. As a non-native speaker, she felt that she had to “prove myself every time.” Some people would
“start looking at my face and I was like different; you know, just not smart, just not worth it.” This led her to see her language issues and her accent as a “barrier,” one that any non-native speaker of English experiences: “So it’s not just for Latinos. It’s for anybody, like you said, who does not have the English mastered.” Leticia then mentioned a friend of hers who is from Iran, and who also is “treat[ed] bad,” despite having a 4.0 GPA. Leticia said she and this other student often “communicate experiences and she’s going through the same thing.”

Having completed a college composition course, Leticia felt that the assignment that stood out the most for her was completing her first paper: “I love doing English papers now. I don’t know why...It was like English was my first language because I; I was really good at it.” She mentioned how she came to love the “mechanic” and the rigidness” of English grammar, which appealed to the part of her that wants to become an engineer: “Sometimes you do what you want, but at the same time there’s formulas to follow.” She especially enjoyed the research process because you’re learning something new. Otherwise, you would; you know, you would go for what you already know and you’re not learning. You have to be all about it; well, even though it’s difficult to do researching.

I asked her to discuss any assignments that she believed her to develop her thinking skills. I used the term “critical thinking,” and Leticia knew what I meant. She became very animated, gesturing with her hands, and said that the group activities in which each person had to speak to the other group members, and
then to the class as a whole, were initially unnerving for her. She found that was thinking about her English skills in a new way:

because nobody is listening to you when you write it. But when you speak, you’re looking at them and it’s so different when you’re writing it. It’s like you’re behind it; they don’t know it’s you. But when you put your face in front of them, it’s like you have to say it so they understand it.

We returned to the topic of conducting research. Since Leticia had mentioned her difficulties with using the Internet, I asked her where she found the sources she used. She said that she uses the library at the college, and on occasion, when she visits Miami, she visits a local bookstore and purchases some books. Her English composition class had made her want to read, so she carries her books with her almost all the time:

Before I did not read much at all. I did not enjoy it at all. But after English Comp I, they said that your vocabulary would grow if you would read, so that’s what I want. So every time I go somewhere, I buy a book.

When I asked Leticia about any activities that helped her develop her grammar skills, she laughed, and said, “Quizzes!” Leticia told me that there many quizzes her writing class, and they helped her learn how to use “professional words and beautiful words.” Furthermore, she came to see these quizzes as a way to measure what she had learned: “I like to test my knowledge a lot,” she said.
Leticia’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

The final two questions concerned learning as a transformative experience. I asked Leticia to describe for me any experiences she may have had in her writing class that might have caused her to change her perceptions of her Hispanic culture. She mentioned a story she read about a “foreign girl and she was learning English, and I was seeing myself in the story.” The story was written by an Hispanic author, so it was like reading “my personal story.” However, a classmate made a negative remark about the story, and Leticia tried not to “take it personal.” But the remark did make her aware of the fact that her reaction to this story was different from that of her classmate; she was seeing it from the perspective of a different culture.

I asked Leticia if her values, beliefs, or expectations had changed, now that she had completed a college writing course. While she initially stated that no, she did not think she had changed in this way, she thought for a few moments and then added, “Well, I got a lot of knowledge.” She went on to discuss her language acquisition issues, and told me that when she is out with her friends (all of whom are Hispanic), everyone speaks Spanish. This has become something that bothers Leticia because

They always speak Spanish around me, but sometimes I say, you know, you speak English well. So why don’t you speak English to me so I can learn? I don’t want them to speak Spanish around me. Sometimes the conversations will involve the use of “Spanglish,” that combination of English and Spanish words that many non-native speakers utilize
when, as Leticia explained it, “a word “is easier to say in English than it is in Spanish.” While this may make having conversations easier, Leticia still wished her friends would speak English more often.

We ended the interview with a brief discussion of how Leticia rated her English writing and speaking skills. She felt that her writing skills were reasonably good, as long as she took her time and wrote “with delicacy.” As far as speaking English, she referred to her role as president of the college’s honor society:

I have to speak in the induction ceremony, I have to go to events and I have to tell them what to do. You know, I have to talk so much, and sometimes I get frustrated and I don’t know how to say it. I use gestures for some things, but I communicate it. I am funny about it. I don’t; you know, I just feel uncomfortable.

I asked her if the problem was the language itself, or perhaps just a fear of public speaking in general. She answered that it was indeed the language, as she is “not afraid of public speaking.”

Leticia wanted to add one more thing to the interview. She made it clear that she believes anyone who is not successful is being “less positive.” She said “You have to like love yourself.” It is essential to believe in one’s self, and to “be the best in what you do and it with like honesty and with a good heart.” But, she cautioned, it is also important not to forget one’s roots:

Now you can’t just get like really high; you can’t forget from where you started, because it’s a lot of people down there that you help. And when I started college, I received help from so many people that now I see people
in need, I don’t just kind of, you know, stop there and let them, you know, behind. I want to help them too. So every time I see someone who is going through, you know, what I went through I just want to go back and help.

I told Leticia that I thought her “pay it forward” attitude was an indication of her own good heart, and we ended the interview on a happy note.

Leticia’s Responses to Journal Prompt Three

The advice Leticia offered to other Hispanic females who are trying to acquire college-level English writing skills was that they must “educate themselves and become independent.” She quoted one of her instructors, who often told her students to “put your shoulders back, head up, and keep looking forward.” She believes that one should try “to be better every day,” and “face each barrier with a huge smile.” She stresses the importance of networking, and reaching out for help when it is needed. Leticia encourages other Hispanic women to “let yourself be heard,” and reminds them that language does not have to be an “impediment.” She suggests that everyone should “Ride the life roller-coaster with your hands up and enjoy [the] challenge.” Leticia ended this repose with a quotation from René Descartes: “It is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to use it well.”
The Fifth Participant: Abella

Introduction

Abella’s mother was born in the U. S. and moved to Puerto Rico where she met and married Abella’s father. Abella, who is now 22-years-old, came to the U. S. with her family from Puerto Rico at the age of eleven. Abella currently lives with her mother and her father, with extended family living nearby. Her grandmother was a teacher in Puerto Rico, and she spoke English fluently. Abella had been working full-time and taking classes as a full-time student; however, she was laid off last year, and since then, she has not been working. She still attends school at PHCC full-time.

I called this participant Abella. She described herself as “the Energizer bunny” when we first met. Abella truly was an energetic, enthusiastic individual, and her spirited response to my request for participants was, from the start, genuinely refreshing. Her attitude was one of the most positive and optimistic of all the women who participated in this study.

Abella’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and Two

In response to the first journal prompt, which asked Abella to reflect on her experiences in acquiring English writing skills and what role others (family, friends) played in this process, Abella wrote that she went into her English Composition I class, she had expected to do well since she had friends who had passed the course “with excellent scores.” However, she had not taken into consideration the fact that these friends were native speakers of English, and as
a non-native speaker, she found herself “in tense circumstances.” In attempting to address her concerns with “writing skills and putting proper sentences structure together,” the first people Abella turned to were her parents. However, even though her mother “can speak it extremely great and write it,” her skills were not at the college level. Abella’s father, in fact, was still learning English at this point, so neither parent was able to offer Abella any real assistance with grammar and mechanics. Abella’s friends were not able to help her because “they had their own classes and life to worry about. And I really do not like taking anyone’s time.” The college’s learning lab became the focus of Abella’s efforts, and she was able, through hard work, to bring her grade up. Abella went out and bought myself balloons and a cake since I knew how hard I had work to bring my grade up from and D to an 89.3 B. I must had been one of the most proudest student from that class knowing that I had learn so and achieve so much by the end of the semester.

Thus, Abella realized that she needed to rely on her own ability to succeed in her writing course. The second writing prompt asked Abella to think about any clubs or organizations that are designed for Hispanic non-native speakers who are trying to improve their English speaking and writing skills, and if she belonged to any organizations of this type. She replied that she belonged to the Phi Theta Kappa and Psi Beta Honor Psychology Society at the PHCC Brooksville Campus. However, she did not attend nor participate in the activities and meetings of these organizations because they conflicted with her work schedule
and class schedule. She added that she “had not seen any clubs or organization for any culture in the North [Brooksville] Campus.”

Abella’s Interview

My interview with Abella took place on November 8, 2011, in the library of the PHCC Spring Hill campus. I arrived a few minutes before our scheduled meeting time of 7PM, and arranged with the librarian to use a conference room for the interview. When Abella arrived, we went up to the 2nd floor of the library where we could talk without disturbing other people in the library. We sat at a conference table, at right angles to each other with the tape recorder on the table between us. I tested the recorder for volume, got my field notes ready, and began the interview.

Abella’s Perceptions of her Culture

When I asked Abella the first question, which was about her cultural background and its influences on her as student in a college writing class, she answered quickly, replying that her writing experiences “certainly did have a culture involved, meaning that we write everything backwards, that’s number one.” I asked her how realizing that English does not work the same way as Spanish made her feel. She answered

It made me feel kind of bad. It made me feel; you know, learning a new language and it was a whole different atmosphere and it made me feel less superior than everybody else around me because everybody knew
the correct way to speak and talk and it sounded all pretty and nice and when I would try to communicate, you know, nobody would understand what I was trying to say.

I wondered if Abella had been used to feeling “superior” as a student, and she replied

Oh, yeah. Especially in; I was in honors and getting little parties for honorship and stuff like that and coming home with a little pin and a medal and stuff, you know. And over here it was totally the opposite.

Abella had been is a few ESL classes in elementary school when she first came to the U. S., but these classes her teacher did not speak Spanish. Abella found this to be an issue with her development of communication skills, so she turned to her mother (who spoke English) for additional help: “So what my mom would do, since my mom knows English, she would volunteer at the school and sit down with me in class to translate stuff to me.” Abella felt that she was able to “pull it off,” meaning to do reasonably well in her writing classes at the middle and high school levels; however, when she reached college, she realized that “people expect you to be a professional.” Sometimes, stated Abella, “they [college instructors] lose patience, you know?” We next discussed Abella’s college writing assignments, particularly the research paper assignment. I wondered if this assignment had caused Abella to change the way she normally acted. She replied very quickly,

Oh, yes. Starting with research papers. The golden rule [sic] at PHCC was the research paper had me going. I mean to me they were like an
upside down world. I worried, oh my gosh, day and night and suffering at the learning lab, looking for desperate help and in how to do everything. Abella also mentioned the activity books that were used to teach grammar. She referred to these books as “my enemies,” because she thought she was doing fine and then “I would get ‘em all wrong.” Abella told me that prior coming to the U.S., her writing and grammar skills in her native Spanish had been “perfectly fine.” When I asked her if she had changed in any way because of the language difficulties she encountered in this country, she answered that she became “Shy. Quiet.” She felt that she did not want to get involved in any of the college’s clubs or organizations “because you know, how do I know; everywhere I go they’re correcting my language.” Whereas she had been a person who “loved being around people,” and being “the center of attention,” suddenly “you come over here and you’re not the center of attention. You know, you’re the Ugly Duckling in the pond trying to get through, you know.

I asked Abella to think about why some Hispanic females are more successful than others in their college writing classes. She answered that perhaps they are “self-defeated.” I asked her to elaborate, and she continued:

I mean why wouldn’t they feel defeated? I mean, you know, you coming into a class and you’re surrounded by all these smart people; people who know how to speak the proper language; and then, you know . . . Problems with English (especially involving grammar and mechanics) might make students like her feel less capable or intelligent than their classmates:
they’re not as dumb as they sound, but when you start talking and communicating and writing, you realize, you know, this is; this really is a lot, you know.

The next question concerned the importance of receiving emotional support from others, including family and friends. Abella became very animated when she answered, explaining how important her mother’s support was to her:

I needed it. I, I definitely needed; my mom when I’d come home crying, I failed this test again or, you know, I, I’m done. I just don’t understand this language. You know, let’s go back where we came from.

Her mother would then offer encouragement and tell Abella not to give up. Abella also relied on her boyfriend for support. He had taken English Composition I with her, and she said his help with her assignments was essential. I asked her if he was a non-native speaker, too, and she told me that he was. He came from Puerto Rico at the age of two, but when “you’re two years old, you pick up very quickly, you know.” Finally, Abella mentioned the support she received from her father, even though he cannot speak English very well:

So when I would come home all devastated, you know; oh, guess what happened to me in class today. I got this wrong. I did this, I did this, you know; my dad would be like so more than comforting. He will relate to me because he’s like look at me, I don’t know the language and I’m out here looking for a job, you know.
Abella’s family and boyfriend encouraged her to believe in herself, an idea she viewed as a sort of “brainwashing.” I thought that was an interesting way to think about it, but Abella saw it as a positive thing:

There’s people that come from all Latin places and they come here and they become doctors and this and that. And you start thinking about it and I mean you’re like it’s totally true…And that’s part of the thing; they really do brainwash me… You just needed, I guess, somebody to tell you it’s okay.

The final source of emotional support Abella mentioned was her psychology teacher. This instructor was Hispanic, and she sat down with Abella and helped her with her psychology papers. Abella would write what she wanted to say in Spanish, and the instructor would help her use a thesaurus to find the correct words to use. Her help was “a miracle come true,” because Abella felt that having someone who spoke Spanish was so important in learning “the basics, because “It would make a bridge, you know.”

I noted that Abella’s face changed when she mentioned the help she received from this instructor; she became even more animated, but in a positive way. She went on to say

Oh, yeah. She a blessing from God, in all honesty. Because do you know how good it feels for somebody to understand what you’re trying to say? Because, you know, even though I don’t know it in English, but in my language I’m more capable of putting it in a more professional way.
Abella was also impressed that this instructor helped her for “no pay, no nothing.” Interestingly, at this point of the interview, Abella received a text message from this instructor who was calling her “just to chat.” She said they often did this, and this instructor continues to be a mentor for Abella.

Abella and I next discussed her schedule, and whether she felt that she had enough help to meet all of her responsibilities. She told me that she when she took English Composition I, she also took five other courses. This was in addition to working a full-time job. However, she was laid off from her job, and even though she “called home crying,” her mother told her they did not need the money, and she should not worry. Once she was able to concentrate on her studies, Abella found that her grades improved; so she felt that losing her job “happen[ed] for a reason. Fortunately, her parents felt the same way: “They had; they were actually pretty happy that I got laid off. I never seen my parents so happy. “

Abella wanted to make it clear that while she did not have to work, she wanted to; she had a very strong desire to help her family:

Both of my parents work full time jobs. My mom has two jobs. My dad works shifts of over ten hours long. I feel like I’m responsible; it’s not that I’m not; I have; how do I say it? I have; I don’t know.

I wondered if this type of dedication to helping one’s family was typical of Hispanic households, and Abella agreed that it was:

I feel it is. It all comes down to the same stuff then, you know. You know, we’re here to support each other. You know what I’m saying? You need
a hand? I’m gonna give you a hand. You know what I’m saying? You don’t even have to ask for the hand; I give it to you, you know.

She also said that her extended family members supported their children in the same way. She referenced her aunt, who lived nearby:

They don’t want the kids working, just to go to school, you know. And believe it or not, her daughter; doing the same thing; don’t work, focus on school; she’s got grades like a four point something and she’s done an amazing job.

Abella’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

Next, I wanted to know how Abella typically prepared for her writing classes. She said that the very first thing she would do was “Go on Yahoo.com and find an example.” Usually, Abella would look at two or three examples in order to get an idea of where to begin. I asked her why she would go to the Internet, and not refer to the examples in her textbook. Her answer was very firm:

I do not like textbooks. I find them outdated. I find them; you know, like sometimes I’m just trying to find something, and for me to go into the index and try to figure out what the index is trying to say, to go find it on the page and when I read it, I go this is not what I wanted.

Was this related to her status as a non-native speaker? Abella shrugged, and replied that the textbook simply did not contain “What I’m really looking for.” I asked her if plainer language in the textbook would help. She said,
If they had it for like, you know, for everybody out there, you know. I, I could type in how to do a research paper and instead of a book, you know it’s just, just more ways to do it.

Abella then explained her next step in the writing process, which was to use the examples she found on-line and model her own paper on them. She paid particular attention to the structure of these examples, and tied to emulate that. I wondered why Abella felt that she needed to go to the internet for help instead of asking her instructor for help. She replied that, “In all honesty, the only time that I felt good in the classroom was the last day of class.”

I was very surprised to hear this, and asked her to explain why she felt this way:

Two times my teacher actually pointed out on me in class and made me feel bad...And sometimes she would read like a paragraph from my essay or whatever and she’d be like this is not what you do. And, you know, like...she would really do that.

Abella also mentioned a painful incident in the college’s learning lab that she recalled “like it was only yesterday. “ I asked her to describe the incident for me:

I walked up to her, and so I asked her for help, and she said she did not have the time for me. So at that time I feel like not frustrated; but really angry at that time, not even frustrated.

I wanted to know if Abella had any idea why her papers were the ones that were singled out for negative criticism in front of the class, and whether it had anything to do with her status as a non-native speaker. Abella said that she was not the
only non-native speaker in the class, but “She [the instructor] was just picking on a few essays and stuff like that, but it always had to be my essay that falls into that category. “

I thought this was a good time to move on to question seven, which asked Abella about her impressions of her English instructor. While Abella had already given me a good idea of her perceptions, I asked her if there was anything else she wanted to add. She said she wished the instructor had been

More understanding maybe of; I, I’m trying to be successful here, you know. I’m not trying to be pointing down. I’m trying to be as successful as she might have been, you know, or maybe even a little bit higher.

Happily, Abella’s hard work and persistence paid off: she was the only student in her class to get a 100 on the research paper. As she put it, she became determined “to prove her wrong.” I got the sense that Abella worked even harder to succeed in spite of her instructor’s indifference. Abella knew that she had done well in school in Puerto Rico, so “if I did it in Puerto Rico and I have the spirit inside me, she cannot take that spirit away from me. She really can’t.”

Abella was becoming agitated and a little emotional at this point. She mentioned that despite the instructor’s perceived “superiority,” at the end of the semester, the instructor was a little surprised that Abella had done so well: “Because at the end of the class she actually came up to me and, you know, I guess it might have taken her a lot to come up to me.” Abella at last felt some respect for the instructor for recognizing that she had succeeded.
Next, I asked Abella if any assignment or activity in her writing class stood out to her as a learning experience. She explained that for her, the most outstanding experience was not really any particular instance, but rather the writing course as a whole. Having felt that she had “got the help on my own,” and not from her instructor, Abella believed that she had gone from writing “baby sentences to writing “college structured, educational, professional sentences.” She found it “fascinating” that her language had changed so much, and that others were surprised to learn that she was from Puerto Rico because “And I was like that’s what I wanted.”

I asked Abella if there were any assignments or activities that helped her develop her thinking skills, her research skills, and her grammar and formatting skills. She replied that it was the creative writing assignments that helped her with her thinking skills. For instance, in writing stories, she had to use her imagination to “transfer a person from one atmosphere to another world. That takes a lot of thinking and a lot of brain work.”

As far as research skills, Abella mentioned that the internet, encyclopedias, and the learning lab were important factors in her learning experience. In particular, the people in the learning lab were especially important. In fact, Abella said, they “knew me by my first name, last name and everything.” I was surprised that Abella claimed she did not find the college’s academic databases useful; she preferred using search engines such as Google. When I asked her if she were concerned about unreliability with some internet sources, and whether that worried her, she replied, “You really gotta just take the
risk.” I pressed her to explain what it was about the academic databases that she did not like, and she pointed out that the sheer volume of information on any given topic was overwhelming:

You know, ‘cause you; you, research water and get maybe two or three thousand resources or something like that, and, and you don’t even know what you want. You don’t want to browse and keep looking and then it’s on the internet. It’s not like you could find a book and scan through it at least, you know. I really don’t prefer books, but when you’re on the internet you have to wait till it all downloads.

I went back to the issue of accuracy and reliability. When I asked Abella if the only real objection she had to the databases was the overwhelming number of hits her searches were producing, she said

I mean it’s not like you had a button that said at least find this type of sentence or something like that. That would narrow it down to like about at least a hundred, and you could browse through like a hundred, you know, like nothing.

We moved on to the next question about grammar and formatting, and if there were any activities that had helped her with these skills. Without hesitation, Abella said, “Absolutely. Microsoft Word… You know how they have that part; the reference part where you can just plug it in?” I realized that Abella was referring to the citation function in Word, and I asked her if it were up-to-date with the changes in MLA documentation that occurred in 2009. Abella replied that, “So far, it’s not the same.” I then asked her if she had the MLA book, the seventh
edition, and she responded that she did; I pointed out that the book was the best resource to use for documentation.

Abella’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

The final two questions concerned learning as a transformative experience. I asked Abella if she felt as if her perceptions of her Hispanic culture had changed as a result of her college writing course. She smiled at this question, and happily described her attitude toward writing now:

And, you know, I feel good more when I write it because I can dedicate so much time to it that, you know, sometimes I write stuff and people will be like you wrote this? And I said yes, I wrote it, but since I have to concentrate, I can make it so beautiful. I love it, because these are my own words.

I asked her if her perception of culture was shaped by this change.

Yes, because it made me feel like a proud Puerto Rican, you know… because people automatically know; they say oh, you’re Puerto Rican; I’d like to become somebody and to do something better, you know. Yeah. And now you look around you see so many more Hispanic and other cultures coming into; into school, you know? It’s unbelievable.

Abella had also become aware of the increasing cultural diversity she was seeing at the college. She found this “unbelievable,” and stated that the “way I view things now is completely different.” Abella described some class discussions in which she disagreed with others’ opinions (including her instructor’s). She
realized that she could respect these opinions without compromising her own values: “I wouldn’t break where I didn’t need to break. You know what I’m saying? I would give her [instructor] the most I could and that was it, you know.” Abella went on to say that her views about her culture had changed since she was a child in Puerto Rico. We talked about the lack of tolerance, and she said, “But as you become more mature, you’re like oh; you know, like put a stop to it, you know.”

We concluded the interview by talking a little more about Abella’s life back in Puerto Rico. She said that when she came to the U. S., she knew two words in English: washing machine and chicken (the former was her favorite). Her English lessons were mostly comprised of learning a few odd words or phrases. It was her American-born mother who helped Abella the most (she was born in New York and moved to Puerto Rico to marry and raise a family). Since Abella’s Cuban father still speaks very little English at home, the family tends to use Spanglish.

Abella’s Response to Journal Prompt Three

The third journal prompt asked Abella to offer advice to other students who are female, Hispanic, non-native speakers of English in college writing courses. She responded by stating that these students should remember

One vital advice is to always keep your head up no matter what the people surrounding you might think of you or say about you. We are here in America for a reason and that is to succeed and get a good education.
She continued to say that these students should “be strong, have courage,” and not let her classmates’ or professors’ “ignorance [sic] comments or gestures get to you.” Abella then referenced her native culture, saying that these people should learn more about our culture and why we want to thrive for achievement so much. By them knowing and learning of our culture that might allow them to have a more clear understanding on why we sit in English class and struggle to pass or even just to learn the language.

Abella also said that is very important for students like herself to be willing to ask for help:

- ask someone for advice, look for assistance, go to the dean’s office and ask to get a translator, do not allow our gift of speaking a second language hold you from been successful in life. There are many alternatives out there we just have to take advantage of them and make use of them.

She concluded that these students should overcome “the greatest obstacle” of being different, but “no obstacle should stand in your way.” They must believe that they can “move the mountains if you just believe you can do it no matter what!

The Sixth Participant: Sarita

Introduction

Sarita is 19 years old and came to this country from Cuba at the age of thirteen. Sarita was very young when she first began learning English in Cuban schools, and at the time, she remembered thinking, “What’s the point?” She did
not pay much attention to her lessons because her family never thought they would be able to leave Cuba. Thus, Sarita arrived in the U. S. at the age of thirteen knowing very little English. She picked it up as best she could.

Sarita lives with her mother and her stepfather. Her mother can write English reasonably well but has trouble speaking it. Her stepfather speaks no English at all. Sarita has an older sister who does not live at home. Her sister speaks and writes English, and Sarita and her sister use English in most of their conversations. However, the primary language spoken at home is Spanish.

I called this participant Sarita. She struck me as noble, in the way she expressed herself and in her views toward herself as a Hispanic woman.

Sarita’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and two

The first journal prompt I emailed to Sarita asked her to reflect on her experiences in acquiring English language skills, and the role her family, friends, or others played in that process. She wrote that acquiring English skills has probably been one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do. Learning a new language is not easy; usually people start by learning how to speak it, just like a new born. Then it gets complicated because we need to read it and write it.

Finding which word to use was especially “frustrating,” even after six years in the U. S. She found English homographs and homonyms especially troubling. As far as her family was concerned, Sarita’s parents were unable to be of much help. While her mother can read, speak, and write some English, her skills were not
sufficient to help Sarita with her schoolwork. Her stepfather speaks no English, so both of her parents felt “frustration and sadness” because of their inability to help their daughter. However, they continued to offer their strength and encouragement. Other family members who live nearby were in the same situation: they were supportive and encouraging, but unable to help with the language.

Sarita felt that her language issues had actually increased as she continued to learn English. Instead of speaking Spanish exclusively at home, she now found herself using “Spanglish” because she was forgetting some Spanish words. Her family was not happy about this, as they wished she would speak Spanish at home. But Sarita was beginning to feel more comfortable using English, and she found that the more she practiced it, the better she became. She concluded her response by saying that she was grateful to God and to her family for their (“at least”) emotional support.

The second prompt asked Sarita to think about clubs or organizations designed for Hispanic students. I wanted to know if she had ever belonged to any of these organizations. She wrote that she would love to get involved in clubs or organizations for Hispanic non-native speakers or any other club or organization that could be relate to non-native speakers I can’t. Unfortunately I’ve always lived in parts of the country where the Spanish population is little. The small Hispanic populations in the middle and high schools she attended made no attempt to “put us together and work with us.” Her ESOL classes
helped a little, but for the most part, they were “a waste of time.” Sarita learned more from watching television, talking to her English-speaking friends, or listening to music. She believes that clubs designed for Spanish-speaking students are “an excellent help,” not just for facilitating their acquisition of English skills, but also to “help the Hispanics socialize and they teach us not to be afraid of the new changes and especially the language.” If her schools had had any such organizations, she would gladly have been a part of them.

Sarita’s Interview

For Sarita’s interview, we met at 4PM on November 2, 2011, in my office at PHCC. We sat at my desk, in the same right angle position I have used for all of the interviews I conducted in my office. I turned on the tape recorder and we began chatting rather informally, mostly about our hometowns and life in Florida. After a few minutes, I gave Sarita the first question and the interview began.

Sarita’s Perceptions of Her Culture

Our interview began with a question about Sarita’s Hispanic culture and its influence on her as a student in a college writing course. She explained that back home in Cuba, she had been taught that everything she wrote had to be “perfect.” She carried that idea of perfectionism into her writing class at PHCC, saying that her culture was
a big influence on me because now when I write a paper I want it to be perfect and not use the same words twice in a sentence because then that will be wrong.

Part of being “perfect” also meant using “words, like you’re supposed to use in college.” I then asked Sarita to think about some of the writing assignments she had completed, and if any of these assignments had caused her to think or act differently. She needed me to explain the question, so I re-worded it to include something about changing the way she behaved after having completed a particular assignment. She seemed to understand that better, and after a few moments, she replied (with a sigh) that there were assignments that she felt had influenced her in this way:

Like one time we have to write about um the world’s a stage. And, and write about that. So I have to like think about it and think what I really, what my world really is about when people are not looking, you know? That’s not something that I usually think about. Usually I just do stuff.

I wanted to know if Sarita had any thoughts as to why some Hispanic female students are more successful than others in their college writing courses, and Sarita explained that, for her, it was her family and her background in Cuba that have helped her succeed:

When I was little my parents raised me that you have to do good in school and that is your main goal. You have to be good at school. So that was my background. That was the way they raised me. They started with me on time when I was in Cuba. You know, like everyday do your homework.
Sarita felt that the support and encouragement she received from her parents was a critical factor in her success, and a person’s background can make all the difference. This flowed nicely into the next question, about getting emotional support from family, friends, or others. Sarita replied that

It doesn’t have to be just your parents. It can be like your older sister or your oldest brother or, or a teacher in school, you know, that was always there with you.

Her parents do not speak English very well, but Sarita felt that they were always there for me. You know? Every single time I break down and I cannot do this anymore. Yes you can. So, if you need to write a paper? Yes you can do it, you know? And sometimes I ask them for ideas. Like what do you think I should write about? They tell me in Spanish and then of course I have to translate, but you know.

She added that she received emotional support from her teachers, as well. She said she has “always loved my teachers,” and appreciated the fact that some of these teachers were especially proud of her because she is from another country:

And usually they tell me that they’re proud to see young women like me you know go forward and you know…

As far as Sarita’s responsibilities outside of school, she said that she said that, “my parents have always said that school comes first.” She continued,
So school first. You don’t need to get a job if you don’t want to. You don’t need to do anything at home. School goes first. So do whatever you have to do with school first and then…You can do the rest later.

Sarita’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

I next asked Sarita how she typically prepared for her college writing assignments. She had to think for a moment before answering, and then replied, The first thing will brainstorm like crazy. You know exactly what to write about. Then usually um, usually what I do is I write a poem…About what I have to write or I just write stuff down and use the poem. Or I draw something. She also said that sometimes she would ask her parents for suggestions on what to write about, or “look at nature.” Sarita found that “look[ing] at clouds or just people walking by” was inspirational. I asked Sarita about her impressions of her English instructor, and what role he played in this process. Sarita laughed and said that, at first, she thought he was “crazy,” because all he would do was “talk and talk and talk.” Eventually, however, she came to like him:

Because he’d give us the freedom to write about whatever we want and that’s what I like. You know freedom. I can write about a tree. I can write about a person. I can write about what I feel, what you know, I can express myself, which is a good thing because usually you don’t get that in English classes. Usually you get an assignment and that’s what you…Have to do.
For Sarita, it was important that the instructor gave her the opportunity to choose her topics and to “be yourself and write.” This improved her self-esteem, she said, and encouraged her to write more, and write better: “I’m good at what I’m doing because I can do whatever I want.”

Question eight asked Sarita to if there was an experience or event in her writing course that stood out for her. Without hesitation, Sarita said that some of her essays were very good, and

the teacher reads [sic] them out loud. I didn’t know I was that good. Because I mean for the teacher to read your paper out loud in the class and especially me coming from another country, I, I wasn’t here for that long. My English, sometimes I think is not really that good and for a teacher to read my paper out loud? I was like, wow. You know, I’m actually good at something.

I commented that in my experience as a composition instructor, I have found that some non-native speakers are better at grammar than some of the native speakers. Sarita seemed surprised to hear that, and called it “sad.”

The last questions for this section concerned activities or assignments that might have helped Sarita develop her thinking, research, and grammar skills. For critical thinking, Sarita referred to a story she had read a story by Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Laughing, she said this story was “kind of weird,” but it “helped me think.” She had read the story in both Spanish and in English, and in comparing the two versions, she got a greater understanding of the differences between the two languages, especially in grammar and word
choice. In particular, Sarita described how Spanish sentences tend to be longer than sentences written in English; she had to think a little harder about punctuation:

It doesn’t happen in Spanish. You know? If you have a long sentence that’s the way the sentence is. You know, don’t, don’t ruin it. So it was hard for me, you know, sometimes to see where to put the point.

I asked her if this idea of longer sentences was true for formal writing in Spanish, and Sarita said yes, sentences are as long as they need to be:

Like I mean if you read books in Spanish, a sentence can be like a whole paragraph. Of course you have your comma and you have your semicolons and you have whatever you need, but you just don’t break the sentence into five words because then that’s not what you want to be.

That’s not being the writer you want to be. You know?

We next talked about the research process and what activities helped Sarita in this area. She replied that she did not “really like research” because “There’s nothing new about it.” She saw the process as “just talking about what somebody else says.” Still, she would try her best, and she usually received good grades on her research papers. When I pointed out that getting a college degree involves doing a great deal of research, Sarita said she understood that, but it was important for her to be researching a topic that she liked: “Well, I mean at a point you have to do research because you know but it’s just not something I enjoy doing. The topic has to be interesting for me to research something. “
Sarita repeated that choice is very important to her as a part of her learning experiences, and it is necessary for her to be her own person.

Sarita’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

During the last part of the interview, I asked Sarita if anything occurred in her writing course that may have caused her to think about her Hispanic culture in a different way. She paused for a few moments, and then said, at first, she saw her challenges with English as a second language as a “barrier.” She also felt singled out by the instructor:

Well um, in Comp I, I remember this teacher saying that for students that are Hispanic or from another country that we should take um help from somebody, you know in the student lab, to help us with the grammar and stuff like that.

She felt that the instructor’s perception was that Sarita would not be able to write a good paper, “because of what I am.” She was “frustrated” by this attitude:

Yeah, like, I’m like well because you know I’m not, I’m not good enough for, for school maybe you know at that moment. That was the first thing that came into my mind because I come from a different background. That background is limiting me. It’s not letting me get where I want to go, but then I redid the assignment and he gave me an A.

Having successfully completed the assignment, Sarita understood that her language issues did not have to be an impediment. Her perceptions of her culture had changed, and she was now cultivating a deeper sense of pride about
her Hispanic heritage. This led to the final question, which was about any changes to Sarita’s beliefs, values, or expectations. Sarita thought hard, and said, yes, there were changes:

I mean in a way they have changed, but I don’t feel very Cuban. You know, I was born and raised over there, and came here when I was 13. So whatever I learned there, that stayed. Some stuff had to change and um when I was writing about something I would have to think about it.

Sarita described her life in Cuba, and how speech was limited by the government. The degree of freedom of speech in the U. S. required her to think carefully about what she said and what she wrote, something she was not used to doing. She had lacked that autonomy and had to learn to approach her assignments differently:

I’m not in Cuba. In Cuba I couldn’t say anything about the government. You know here I can say whatever, I, I don’t like the president. Well, I don’t like the president, you know? So my, the way I used to think about government stuff for example, it had changed. Now you can believe that.

Sarita enjoyed this new freedom, even though it was sometimes difficult to change her mindset. Nevertheless, a part of her was still loyal to her native country: “Sometimes it is very confusing because I want to keep being the Cuban. I want to keep my culture. I want to keep where I’m from.” Her desire to “keep being Cuban” was at odds with her need to “adapt to the new society.” She found herself trying to understand, “how, how would an American think
about this?” I finished the interview by double-checking a few facts about Sarita’s background, and turned off the tape recorder.

Sarita’s Response to Journal Prompt Three

I asked Sarita what advice she would offer to other Hispanic females in college writing courses. She said that one of the “most important” pieces of advice she would give these students is to “keep their heads in the game.” She wants them to believe that “nothing is impossible,” and that “learning English and accomplishing their dreams could change their life forever.” She added that they could also change the lives of others, and help improve their communities.

Sarita would also tell these students to “read books, as many as they can.” This is the way to acquire new words, words that, “they might use in class turn them into sentences, and who knows, if they like writing, into books as well.” Sarita also encouraged these students to talks to their teachers and classmates, and with anyone who speaks English; this is a good way to practice their pronunciation. She also recommended watching television and listening to music as an “easy” way to improve their English skills.

This prompt also asked Sarita what she considered to be her greatest challenge or obstacle in learning English. She said that defining her greatest obstacle was “complicated” because all of us have our stories, all of our lives are different and we all come different places. But we might all have some in common. One of them would be the language. Learning a new language is not easy, and if we
attend college things can be a lot more difficult. Our new language skills should be deeper and we should try to perfect it more as we go.

She continued that financial constraints present another challenge, especially when there is more than one child in a family; sometimes parents can afford to send only one child to school (college). Also, legal status can be problematic, because then “it’s almost impossible to attend college.”

The Seventh Participant: Suelo

Introduction

Suelo is 43 years old and a native of Medellin, Colombia. She came to the U. S. in 1997, when she was 28, and lived in Alaska for a few years before settling in Florida. She took some English-language classes while she was living in Colombia, prior to her emigration to the U. S. She still has some problems with English, despite the number of years she has lived here. Nevertheless, she is a dedicated student who has achieved a 3.9 GPA. Suelo strives to be a positive role model for her daughter, a college student who attends Saint Leo University in Dade City, Florida. Suelo encourages her daughter (who was also born in Colombia) to maintain her bilingual skills, but when she speaks with her daughter (on the phone or in person), they always speak English.

The word Suelo means “consolation,” an appropriate name for a woman who works in a nursing home and describes herself as someone who cares a great deal about the patients there. The nursing home is in Tampa, and Suelo works there full-time on the day shift. She takes her college classes at PHCC in the evening, driving directly to school from work. She does not yet have a
specific career goal in mind; her immediate ambition is to graduate with her associate’s degree.

Suelo’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and Two

The first journal prompt asked Suelo to reflect on her experiences in acquiring English writing skills, and to think about her family, friends, or other members of her Hispanic culture. She began by writing about an experience she had when she was still living in Colombia. She joined an international pen-pal organization and began exchanging letters with people who wrote in English. Suelo knew no English at the time, so she purchased an English-Spanish dictionary to help her translate the letters. This turned out to be very challenging; as Suelo described it, “I managed to read and understand maybe three letters but it started getting complicated when my pen pals used idiomatic expressions.” She was also embarrassed by her accent when her pen pals wanted to talk on the phone: “Are they going to understand my strong accent and pronunciation?” This inspired Suelo to sign up for a basic English grammar course. But even after completing the course, Suelo still did not feel confident about her English skills. The problem was exacerbated when she relocated to the U.S., arriving in Alaska with her young daughter: “Oh wow it was a risky adventure but getting there it was only a start, I was trying to understand Eskimals [sic] and American people talking, it was not anyone who could speak Spanish.” Eventually, she was able to work with an ESL tutor at the University of Fairbanks who spent “five hours a day helping me to learn the basic grammar, pronunciation, slang words and
idiomatic expressions.” Even though Suelo often felt “overwhelmed,” she was able to earn an ESL certificate.

For the second prompt, Suelo wrote about how she is not now, nor ever was, involved in any clubs or organizations designed especially for Hispanic students. Instead, she wrote about her experiences when she first applied for admittance to PHCC:

I took a placement test and I have to take Writing I and Basic Reading. I thought this classes will dedicate some time to help the English as a second language students to practice the words pronunciation but how to speak English was not their goal.

She often felt “lost” in class because the instructor “did not have the time to dedicate part of the class to practice loud the reading.” For Suelo, practice in pronunciation was essential, and she believed she was not getting sufficient opportunities to do that: “I was not taught how to read in front of my classmates, I was afraid the classmate will laugh at me and I still have that fear.” Nonetheless, Suelo managed to pass the course and move on to English Composition, but she still felt that her English skills were weak. In addition to her issues with reading and writing English, Suelo is very self-conscious about her accent:

Today I am taking public speaking class, I got so nervous go in front of my class because I speak broken English and it was not because I live around English population I was not able to pronounce a English word.
Thus, Suelo feels very strongly about the need for a course that is designed to help ESL students with idiomatic English. She concluded this journal entry with her recommendation:

I wish Pasco Hernando Community College will open a section called “Conversational English Language” for students with English as a second language. I wish every English Comp. Instructor will dedicate part of their class to teach how to pronounce English words adding a better lecture understanding for those who speak a different Language.

Suelo’s Interview

Suelo and I met on November 28, 2011, in the library of the Dade City campus of PHCC. Suelo takes her classes at this campus, so it was more convenient for her to meet me there. She arrived in the scrubs she wears to work and appeared to be a bit out of breath. I sensed there was a nervous tension around her, so we sat down in a conference room and chatted for a bit before I began the actual interview. This seemed to help Suelo compose herself.

There was a large conference table in the room, so we sat at one end, at right angles to each other, with the tape recorder on the table between us. I did the usual preliminary testing to be sure we could both be heard on the recorder, and began asking my questions.
Suelo’s Perceptions of Her Culture

Our interview began with a question about Suelo’s Hispanic culture and its influence on her as a student in a college writing course. Suelo hesitated before she answered, looking as if she were trying to find the right words. She then began to describe her experiences with learning English, and the confusion she felt right from the start. The first English classes she took in Colombia were not “very good,” and “not really fun.” This was due to the fact that students like her were placed in “regular English classes,” where she learned “only the basics.” This included some instruction about sentence structure. Suelo explained that sentences in English usually have the subject at the beginning, but in Spanish, “we don’t use the subject to begin sentences.” She was shocked when she came to PHCC and discovered that some of what she had been taught about English back in Colombia was wrong: “But when I took an English class in my country, they teach us how to make sentences but not really like in a correct way.” The “correct way,” creating sentences at the college level, was something her classes in Colombia had not provided for her. Thus, she felt that her Hispanic educational background was not enough to prepare her for college writing courses in the U. S.

In answering the next questions, Suelo thought about the writing assignments she had completed in her writing class at PHCC, and if any of these assignments had caused her to think or act differently. This time, she answered right away: “When I started taking English classes, I had to think twice because really I had to first to translate from my language to English and it took me
awhile.” Suelo described her feelings of not having “enough time” in class to do this two-step process, and how she needed “a little more help.” She wished that someone would have made an effort to understand “how Hispanic students would feel when they start English classes in the United States.”

Making the distinction between conversational English and formal, academic English was a struggle for Suelo, one she worked hard to overcome. Since she is a successful student with a GPA of 3.8, I wanted to know what Suelo thought was necessary for students like her to be successful in their college writing classes. She began by explaining the reasons for her own success:

I feel that I tried my best and I just don’t go only by what is explained to me during the class. I like to do a lot of research. I also like to do practice on my own at home.

The desire for success was a powerful motivating force for Suelo, and it should be the same for all Hispanic women. But this drive to succeed was not always foremost for some of these women, and Suelo commented on their unwillingness to ask for help: “They don’t find any help, so they just feel so isolated and they fail some classes.” Suelo mentioned the college’s tutoring program, a service which she herself had used, and which was extremely helpful to her in her writing classes. But so many female Hispanic students were not using resources like this: “They just fail or quit because they don’t do that. They don’t want no tutors; they don’t want no help.” Suelo stressed that their unwillingness to “find help” may be attributed to their attitudes about their roles as Hispanic women: “They
were probably moms that would just stay at home with the kids.” As a mother, Suelo felt that she was doing a positive thing for her daughter by going to school and getting good grades, something she would encourage all Hispanic women to do.

We moved on to the issue of emotional support and its importance. I asked Suelo if she received this type of support from her family, friends, and teachers. While Suelo felt that her family gave her emotional support “for anything I try to do,” they could not help her with her understanding and pronunciation of English. She expected to receive emotional support in this regard from her instructors, but she found there was a lack of interaction between the instructor and the students: “There is not really like any class conversations during the class. We just are there to listen to the teacher. You have to follow that.” In particular, Suelo was concerned about her accent, and her difficulties with pronouncing words correctly. She felt that she was not receiving the attention or support from her instructors that was critical to the development of these skills:

they don’t take the time, and I really need more support from the instructors because sometimes I feel that I don’t want to talk in front of the class because all of them are going to laugh around my accent or I don’t pronounce the words; and to take the time and try to make a research for a writing paper; take one hour of the class and dedicate it to pronunciation.
I noticed that pronunciation seemed to be an especially important subject for Suelo, so I asked her to elaborate on her concerns. She told me about an experience that had occurred at work that day in which she mispronounced the name of a candy bar and was laughed at by her co-workers:

I was saying I like to eat a Snicker, but none of my coworkers; were just laughing. She said eat what? So really; okay, tell me what is the reason how do you say the candy . . .

Suelo continued to describe this sense of isolation, and I asked her to comment on her relationship with her family. She talked about her daughter, who is a student at Saint Leo University, and how she herself works very hard to make time to do her own schoolwork: “So that's something that you just; we feel that we are quiet in front of a bunch of people; because really we have not been taught at the school, you know, how to pronounce the words.”

I then asked Suelo what sort of courses she would like to see added to the regular college writing courses, and she replied:

It just came to my mind right now, for example, if you had an English composition class and you had like three credits; okay, why you just don’t do like three studies and have maybe on extra credit for class conversation; English conversation or something like that? I think that would help a lot of people and would make more people more spoken and not isolated because they are Hispanic and they don’t know how to pronounce a new word.
Next, we talked about Suelo’s occupation and her responsibilities outside of school. She commented that her job sometimes prevented her from getting to the college’s learning lab because she works during the day; she is only on campus in the evenings. Thus, when she was able to get there, there might not have been a tutor available to help her:

you know, when I need a little bit help, so that’s why I come to the learning lab. But sometimes when I come to the learning lab, they don’t have a lot of tutors available to do it. And when I come sometimes she is helping another student, so at the time I have to start class I don’t have any help.

Suelo mentioned her daughter again, and how her daughter is also a working student. Suelo would sometimes ask her daughter for help with her writing assignments, but her daughter usually claimed she was too busy with her own work to help Suelo. Suelo recognized the fact that she did indeed need help, but because of her accent, Suelo was reluctant to approach her English Composition teacher:

The instructor usually gives you a handout to tell you how to do it; how to do the paper; some do it. Some, they just say read the book and follow it. And I feel; for example, let me tell you for the English Composition I it was hard for me to sometimes, okay, try to understand what the instructor was saying how to do the paper; it’s because I didn’t have the skills and sometimes I miss a lot of words when they are telling me what to do. And sometimes I was afraid to ask; or I was nervous to ask, because of my accent and I had to get some help in that situation.
So intense was this perception of her accent as an obstacle that Suelo believed her pronunciation would never improve in school; rather, she felt that her best opportunities for improving her pronunciation would come from informal conversations with English-speaking people, outside of school:

I’m going to graduate, but still I feel; I feel my pronunciation is not better and it’s because really I don’t have someone in class to say you do not pronounce the word like that. You pronounce it like this. You are supposed to say complete sentences. Sometimes I feel by myself and I just don’t try to improve. I don’t have really any class conversation or any group to go in and get it; get better. I wish they had a class to help you pronounce the, for example, this is common; how to sing one of the songs with the right pronunciation.

I asked Suelo to tell me more about her English Composition instructor. She replied that, right from the start of the semester, she (Suelo) realized that she needed help. However, she did not mention her concerns to her instructor, Because he was teaching other courses and I felt that he wasn’t really; I guess he was feeling, like okay, if you are in college and you are taking English classes, you’re supposed to know what you are doing. But, like I said, if you didn’t do very good in your reading or in your writing skills, you cannot take this course.

Suelo continued to talk about her perception of Hispanics as “different,” and her belief that when it comes to learning English, “Hispanics need a lot of help.”

When I asked her to describe some of the areas in which she especially needs
help, she replied

I think it was the challenge to try to do my papers by myself and I had to do a lot of research in the computer and I had to read a lot of different websites and say okay, you gotta do the paper like this; like that.

Suelo’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

I next asked Suelo what assignments or activities required her to think on a level that was much harder than she had been used to, and she referred to her reading assignments in her English course:

Probably to; for example, when you’re not allowed to; and it’s up to you that you read; how to really analyze a sentence one by one and you had to do something that is helping you think. It’s just sometimes it takes a little more than three or four times to figure it out.

This idea of needing help but not receiving it was one Suelo seemed to dwell upon. We next discussed her grammar lessons and the assignments (if any) that had helped Suelo with her grammatical skills. I asked her if she had received the assistance she needed:

Well, no. In the English composition classes, they, they really don’t want to teach you about that. If you miss it, okay, they don’t go over that because you’re supposed to do these; you’re supposed to learn all this before.

She stated that her instructor would simply mark any errors as incorrect without offering any explanation of why they were wrong. Once, when Suelo did speak
up and ask for assistance, she was told to use the grammar and spell-check functions on the computer. Of course, Suelo soon realized the inadequacies of these functions, and once again, she felt that there was no help available to her. I encouraged Suelo to explain to me why she simply did not ask the instructor to explain what she had done wrong in her papers.

I did it one time and one of my classmates do it too; but like I say, they just say you were supposed to learn that before and look in the book. That is going to give you the way; the right way how to write a sentence. So there’s not really a good feedback in that.

Suelo’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

The final questions concerned any writing assignments or activities that may have caused Suelo to change her perceptions of her native culture. She asked for clarification --- “Maybe in a good way or a bad way?” -- and I told her either way, or something else in between. She smiled rather wistfully and answered:

Sometimes like my; like I said before, I feel in a good way; I had a good attitude about my culture. I always like to read about how we celebrate Christmas in our country because; I don’t know; in our country we celebrate with more religion and I wrote about how to celebrate Christmas in Colombia and I couldn’t just convey that experience in class; people from another country, what we do in our culture.

I remarked that Suelo sounded a little homesick, and she greed; writing about her
country reminded her that she was losing some elements of her culture.

Nevertheless, when I asked her if she still wanted to assimilate into American culture, she answered, "I sometimes feel the culture; our culture is not really coming forward in America. I just feel sometimes like that. But I want to and I would say I want to get assimilated." I wanted to know if Suelo’s expectations or values relating to her culture had changed as a result of her experiences in her composition class. She replied, in a rather excited voice:

Okay, I’m going to be honest and a lot of writing language that I did is because I practiced at home and I tried to write the way; made sentences and like that. But I really didn’t feel that I could handle that writing course. It didn’t meet my expectations about the extent of the language that I’m going to be better because I take that because I pay a lot of attention when I’m reading the newspaper; how people put words together; how they write sentences. So I take a lot from what I learned outside the class.

Suelo stressed the idea that at least some of her education concerning English speaking and writing skills took place outside of a formal college classroom. I sensed a growing agitation when she was speaking, so as a conclusion to the interview, I wanted to end on a positive note. I asked Suelo to sum up what she saw as her greatest strength:

Even though I have a little bit of a barrier with the language, I will take my classes and if you could see all my grades, I have very good grades. I have a grade point of 3.9. So I’d say . . .my motivation, I have gone through all these classes and I have to follow some kind of rules. I’m
comfortable speaking. I’m comfortable talking outside the college. But those who do not have motivation, they’re just going to go to school and never learn and just go to another class.

Suelo appeared relieved to have had the chance to make those statements. I thanked her for her time turned off the tape recorder.

Suelo’s Response to Journal Prompt Three

The final journal prompt asked Suelo to offer advice to other Hispanic females who are trying to acquire college-level English writing skills. She responded by describing what she sees as the necessary steps for the successful completion of their English courses, at every level. She provided an itemized list of suggestions:

My best advice for Hispanic students or students with another native language to improve in writing classes is:

1. Ask questions every time the lecture is not clear or confusing.
2. Do not feel embarrassed to be criticized [sic] by others in class because pronunciation [sic].
3. Ask the instructor feedback after she or he returned the homework assignments.
4. Do a lot practice at home, at work or with ask friends for help.
5. Request help to a tutor.
Speaking English with a pronounced foreign accent seems to be a sensitive area for Suelo, and it is noteworthy that she encourages other ESL students not to be inhibited by their accents and to ask for help.

The third prompt also asked Suelo to describe what she viewed as the greatest obstacle facing students like herself. She reiterated her earlier statements about the need for more courses that teach conversational, idiomatic English:

I wish PHCC develop classes for students with English barriers such "Club Conversation classes", "Club reading classes" to provide every culture the opportunity to be successful in college. Also, I wish the board of PHCC remember the instructors the attendance in the writing or reading classes are mostly with students from another countries.

The Eighth Participant: Doncia

Introduction

Doncia is 18 years old. She came to the U. S. from Puerto Rico with her mother, father, and younger brother approximately four years ago. Her parents own restaurant franchises, and while Spanish is usually spoken at home, their English-speaking skills are acceptable. Doncia had taken several English classes when she was a student in Puerto Rico and now considers her spoken English to be quite good. However, she is working on refining her writing skills and use of correct English grammar.

This participant, whom I called Doncia, still lives with her family and is devoted to helping care for her brother, who is autistic. Her brother’s condition
has inspired Doncia to become a developmental pediatrician so she can help other children with disorders like her brother’s. In addition to taking classes at PHCC, Doncia works full-time as a certified nursing assistant.

From the time of our first meeting, when I was recruiting participants, Doncia (who is rather shy) expressed an eagerness to be of assistance to me in my study. However, when she completed my questionnaire, I saw that she had taken English Composition I as an on-line course at PHCC. Since I was looking for participants who had taken the course in a traditional classroom setting, I thought I was going to have to exclude Doncia from the study. However, after talking to her and seeing how much she wanted to be a participant, I decided to include her. I already had seven other participants who met all of my criteria, so Doncia’s responses are used here as additional data.

Doncia’s Responses to Journal Prompts One and Two

The first prompt asked Doncia to reflect on her experiences in acquiring English writing skills, and the role that family, friends, and other members of her culture may have played in the process. She wrote that English had always been “second nature” to her because in her native country of Puerto Rico, English was widely spoken. Living in a U. S. territory was “fortunate” because the schools offered English language classes with teachers who were “always very supportive and helpful.” Doncia was never afraid to ask the teachers for help. She also described feeling as if she never had “to learn [English], like you have to learn to add and subtract in math class.” She also wrote that her family
speaks and writes English “without difficulty,” and were, in fact, business owners in the U.S. Thus, Doncia was always surrounded by English-speaking people. Her parents encouraged her to practice reading and writing English constantly and taught her to watch television programs like *The Discovery Chanel* to learn even more. The house was always full of newspapers written in English, and Doncia learned from those as well.

Doncia continued to say that her family, friends, and community all played an important role in the development of her English skills. She described her parents as great cheerleaders when it comes to my education. They have always provided me with the necessary tools to teach me great skills in writing English. Everything and anything from books, movies, conversations, letters, etcetera. She and her friends often used “Spanglish” in their informal conversations, and that helped Doncia increase her confidence with her use of English; she learned about the more conversational applications of English, including the use of idioms.

But of all the influences surrounding her, Doncia said that school was “the best way for me to acquire English writing skills.” Her earliest essays came back to her “with red ink all over them,” and this was “frustrating.” However, she soon realized that in making the necessary corrections to her writing, she was learning from her mistakes. Doncia concluded her response by stating that
my overall environment was and still is a positive influence when it comes
to my English writing skills. I have always had the support, practice, and
learning from my parents, teachers, and friends. They encourage me and
give me the confidence that I can do a great job in a college-level writing
course.
The second prompt was about extracurricular activities designed especially for
Hispanic non-native speakers of English. I wanted to know if Doncia belonged to
any such organizations, and if so, how they helped her with her English skills.
Doncia wrote that she had never belonged to any clubs of this type because
It has never been necessary for me to be a part of any of those clubs or
organizations because English has never been a challenge for me. Do not
get me wrong, I struggle with some grammar issues and I am certainly not
the best writer in the world but it is just not necessary for me to get extra
help with English.
She went on to say that while she grew up surrounded by people speaking
English, other Hispanics may not have been so fortunate. For these people,
clubs and organizations designed especially for them might be very helpful in the
development of their English skills. For Doncia, associating with English-
speaking friends outside of school; spending time with her English-speaking
family; and watching television programs and movies in English have helped her
refine her English skills to her own satisfaction.
Doncia’s Interview

Doncia and I met at 2PM on November 16, 2011, in my office at PHCC. We sat in at right angles to each other at my desk. I turned on the tape recorder and we began the interview. Doncia was quiet at first, answering my questions with very brief responses, but after a few minutes, she seemed to relax and open up a bit more.

Doncia’s Perceptions of Her Culture

I began with a question about Doncia’s Hispanic culture and its influence on her as a student in a college writing course. I wanted to know if her cultural background had had any effect on her as a student in a college writing course. Doncia hesitated a little, then said that no, she really did not feel as if her culture had had any real influence on her as a college writer:

Personally to me I would say no simply because I was, I was, I was brought up as an individual, and my culture never really influenced…the way I wrote except that maybe sometimes I did have to write about like my beliefs and all that, but I, I don’t think so because I was surrounded around a lot of English and a lot of Spanish in my family.

I went on to the next question about her writing assignments, and whether or not any of them had caused Doncia to question the way she normally acted. Doncia simply said no, she did not think she had changed her behavior, but I prompted her to elaborate on her answer. She commented that she had “always been a hardworking student,” and that had not changed. Next I wanted to know what
Doncia thought about other female Hispanic college students, and why some of them are more successful than others. This time, there was no hesitation on her part, and she answered very quickly:

Honestly I think because some, in our Hispanic communities it is true that um the education is not as good as it could be. And I think that if you’re not as lucky as I have been or fortunate as I have been to have been placed in a school where I was provided all the good education that everybody should have. And I think that some people are not um, don’t get that opportunity and they just don’t have the drive for it.

Doncia went on to say that “motivation and support” from one’s family are important factors in becoming successful. She remarked that some older members of her culture sometimes believe that people --- women, in particular – simply cannot succeed: "And if you wire that into a child’s brain I think that it's going to make impact." Doncia added that she felt that this attitude was not directed solely at women; men, too, can be held back by this lack of support from family members. As a culture, she said, Hispanics may be perceived as being “not as smart as other people.” Unfortunately, “we ourselves sometimes believe that.” However, Doncia was quick to add that this had not been her experience; she had been brought up in a loving and supportive environment, and she attributed her academic success to that support.

We next talked about Doncia’s experiences after she arrived in the U. S., and if this idea of inferiority had affected her development as a non-native speaker of English. She replied that there is “prejudice…against Hispanics
because we are what do you call it, we’re immigrants.” This “misconception” may lead some Hispanics to feel as if they “are not as good as most Americans.” She did mention that she did not feel this way, again attributing this to her supportive family.

I wanted Doncia to comment further about these perceived prejudices, so I brought up the issue of language. I asked her if some of these problems are caused by the language differences, and she replied that she did think language plays a role. Often, Hispanic immigrants do not anticipate how problematic the language differences will be:

I think that when you come to a place that I mean you don’t, you know, have no idea what you’re going into. You, you just know that it’s supposed to be…like a better lifestyle. So you go. You go.

We went on to the next question, about support from family, friends, and others. Without hesitation, Doncia explained that this support was very important to her:

Well I was brought up with a lot of support from my mom, my dad and my brother, so I think that it is important because it’s just, I think that, that it’s helped me become the student that I am. And I think that I’m a very responsible student. I get my jobs…done on time and…and I like good grades. I don’t accept anything lower than a B.

I asked Doncia if she received this sort of support from her friends. She was very firm in her response, saying,” I’ve never counted on their support.” Nonetheless, their support could be “important to an extent,” but Doncia does not rely on it:
They are as important as I make them. And to me they’re not that important because they might not like what I’m doing and some, and some of them might, and I, I don’t know. I just don’t count on it.

I wondered how Doncia felt about getting support from her teachers or counselors at the college. The question was especially significant because Doncia was the only participant who took English Composition I as an on-line course. She immediately replied that, “All my teachers have always been supportive.” In particular, her writing teacher (with whom she communicated through the internet) gave her “either negative or positive feedback,” but it was all “constructive criticism.” Doncia’s facial expression told me that this honest feedback was the type of support that mattered to Doncia the most as it was “the only way she could move forward.” She was very animated and smiling as she described how useful it was to hear what was good and what was not so good about her papers. As she put it, it made her a “solid writer.”

I next asked Doncia if she felt she had enough time from her other responsibilities to devote to her writing courses. In particular, I wanted to know about any responsibilities she may have had concerning her family, or a job outside the home. She explained that she usually managed to find the time to meet all of her responsibilities, and that this was something she had been taught to do all her life:

That’s, that’s another thing that I was brought up with. If I, if, if it’s too much and I just simply can’t do everything that I’m supposed to do, then
yes, but it rarely happens. I’ve learned to be good with time management.

I asked her to explain how she had developed this time-management skill and she described what a “crazy” and “rebellious” child she had been. However, her parents provided a great deal of structure in her life, and this enabled her to become more focused as a student:

I just, after I broke out a lot after I was like in third grade, I just, I just want something that is for myself. So I just always had that drive and I just always. My mom whenever I need something, I need help or anything and she is so supportive. She’s, I always have a planner. Have to have a planner.

Doncia went on to explain the importance of using a planner to help her keep track of everything she needed to do. She wrote it all down, including a financial budget; this would help her “calculate” how she used her time and spent her money. Maintaining control over her life was important because in addition to working full-time, going to school, and helping with household chores, she was dedicated to helping care for her younger brother. She and her brother, who is autistic, “communicate well,” so Doncia felt especially responsible for his well being. She also saw herself as being the most patient family member, and described a typical scene between her brother and herself:

We take from two to three or so hours a day. Um, I spend every day I have; I take out maybe two or three hours a day and I do little quizzes on words and if I have extra time I’ll get ahead on something else.
I asked Doncia if her brother’s condition was a factor in her decision to pursue a career in medicine. Without hesitation, she replied

Well, I want to be a doctor, hopefully a developmental pediatrician. Um, which is for children like my brother who are autistic or have Down’s Syndrome and things like that. They’re just special developmental.

Doncia’s Perceptions of Her Learning Experiences

We went on to question six, and I asked Doncia how she typically prepared for her college writing assignments. She again mentioned her planner, and how she would review the syllabus and record the various due dates and other details in the planner. This was helpful in maintaining a sense of control over her assignments. I asked Doncia about the research paper, in particular; I wanted to know how she prepared for that assignment. She explained that she was given a list of topics from which to choose, and once she had made her choice, she would begin creating an outline of the paper. The outline was useful in getting started, but she did not allow herself to be constrained by it. Once Doncia began drafting her paper, new ideas sometimes occurred “in the process of me writing it.” As these new ideas came to her, she would usually “follow them,” and the drafts would change accordingly. This did not always happen, only “sometimes.”

Doncia next described the research process itself, in which she used both the physical library and the on-line academic databases provided by the college. This led her to begin talking about her instructor, and I prompted her to tell me
about her impressions of him. During the first few classes, she described him as “intimidating” and a “tough teacher.” His negative criticisms initially made Doncia feel bad, but soon she realized that his comments were actually helpful. He turned out to be “approachable,” and Doncia began to feel as if she could ask him anything. As she put it, she “likes a challenge,” and good teachers have to be “the authority in the classroom.”

I wanted to know if Doncia considered any assignments in her writing course especially noteworthy, or perhaps outstanding as a learning experience. She answered that learning how to use outlines was critical to her success in writing a college-level research paper:

I was okay with writing. I, I think I got out as a strong writer. Um, I had no idea how to correctly make an outline. I thought I knew, but I didn’t. So I think, but I think that making outlines for me is, is, makes, makes my research 100 times easier because it helps me structure everything.

She also felt that learning how to use the library and databases was essential for her future classes, and for finding sources that are reliable and scholarly.

We next discussed the writing process, and I asked Doncia if there were any assignments in her writing class that helped her develop her skills with grammar and formatting. She answered quickly, “reading, reading, reading.” I asked her if she were referring to assigned readings, and she laughed, “Yes, but after I started the class, I started to gain interest in reading, so I started my independent reading. And after that I said get on the books.” I wondered what sort of “independent” reading Doncia enjoyed, and she said, “Everything.”
However, she did add that she did not really care for “the bloody, scary stuff,” preferring history or other types of nonfiction. She smiled when she added “romantics” to her list, because “I’m a girl.” I commented that I was pleased to hear that she liked to read for recreation, and she replied that it was her English Composition I class that had gotten her to think that way.

Doncia’s Perceptions of Learning as Transformative

This led us into the final questions, which concerned any writing assignments or activities that may have caused Doncia to change her perceptions of her native culture. She began by stating that, “Education is not how it should be.” I asked for clarification about which education system she meant, and she explained that she was referring to Puerto Rico, where she attended a private school:

I think, when I lived there I thought it was, you know, the greatest thing in the world because I had, I didn’t know better. And compared to, to the public schools in Puerto Rico which were horrible, I thought that I was, you know, in the best schools in the world. Where out here, I’m in a public school, which I have, I have no problem with that at all. And I thought, I said, oh but the difference…is completely, is ridiculous.

I asked her if her dissatisfaction with the educational system in Puerto Rico had developed after she arrived in the U. S., and she replied,

Well no. I always wanted to move out of Puerto Rico. Actually I was, after I graduated high school I was planning on moving here, to Florida.
Probably to go to either FAU or USF. So no, I was never completely satisfied.

While Doncia described herself as being very happy to have the opportunity to come to this country and attend college, Doncia said the experience was “bittersweet.” Her parents and brother had emigrated with her, but there were still many family members back in Puerto Rico. Still, she was encouraged by what she saw as the advantages to education in the U. S., especially with the level of engagement she saw between students and instructors. In Puerto Rico, stated Doncia,

Most of them were just like oh I don’t care. I take home a paycheck and I want to go home. And some of them just said, most of them actually, just said read the chapter do the chapter work. We’re done. And then take the test at the end of the week and that was it.

In fact, she continued, “There really was no teaching.” Furthermore, asking questions “wasn’t common,” although Doncia was one of the few students who did raise questions in class. I wondered if Doncia felt more comfortable asking questions now that she was in school in the U. S., and she replied that she had never really been afraid of asking questions in the first place because, “My mom always told me it’s your right to ask those questions.” I wanted to hear more about these perceived differences, so I asked Doncia to think about her values, beliefs, and opinions. When I asked her if there were any events that may have caused her to change her perceptions of these things, she replied,
Yeah, I think so. I learned to love the English language more than I did before, simply because I just appreciated more. I don’t know why, I just did. Like I said I, I got more engaged in English. And I like to write. I have a diary now. Um, things like that. You know and I take pride in saying that.

Doncia continued to talk about learning English in Puerto Rico, remarking that she “needed more than what they were teaching.” Since her family spoke both Spanish and English at home, she was “a little more advanced than everybody else” in her classes. She continued to feel confident in her English skills until she arrived in the U.S. There, in her college writing courses, she discovered that it was, “a little bit more of a challenge. There were other things involved that I didn’t know about. The language rules and all that.” Still, Doncia felt fairly confident about her writing skills, and attributes her skill to her English Composition course:

I do not regret taking, I love that I took the Comp I. I see some students saying oh my god. I have this essay and I don’t know how to write this. And I’m like this is so easy. You know? Another A or things like that and I just feel like to me it’s not that it’s easy. I still have…my competitions and things but I know I can do it. And I know how to do it.

I asked her what activity she thought had helped her the most, and once again she said reading:

A lot of the reading helps me. I had no idea about the um rules like um, and all the structure. Like how to write a paper. I had no idea that you were supposed to double space or use a specific font and all that and so.
We got on the subject of speaking English, and Doncia commented that she believed her English speaking skills were quite good. She found that living in the U. S. had helped her with this skill because people would correct her mispronunciation of certain words: “But out here some people say no, that’s not how you say a word or…and I don’t mind.” Back home, she said, no one could correct her English because “no one knew the words.” She also described visiting Puerto Rico and noticing that her English skills started to diminish when she was around members of her native culture:

I, I hated that actually. Because when I was back home I, I sort of did that and I thought if I know if I’m fluent in English, so why, why do I have to bring myself down like that?

Doncia commented that she had been in speech therapy as a child in Puerto Rico because she did not speak. There was nothing wrong; she simply did not want to speak, so her parents sent her to a therapist. This led her to describe the differences among various Hispanic populations, such as Mexicans and Colombians, and the accents they have when they speak English. She noted that these accents become more pronounced when people are talking with others of the same nationality. However, she taught herself not to do that “automatic thing” when she was among other Hispanic people. I asked her why she thought it was necessary to avoid this habit, and she replied, “I just wanted to speak like me.”

I ended the interview by asking Doncia what she did for recreation. She laughed and replied, “I don’t have a lot of time for fun right now.” She then described what she would do if she did have free time:
I like the beach. I like the beach a lot. I like movies. I like adventure. By adventure I don’t mean crazy, that stuff. I’m not a partier. I would rather stay home probably then go out to um a club. I’ve never been to a club, don’t plan on it either. It’s just not…It’s not my thing. I just think that a lot of bad things come out of there.

We continued to talk about Doncia’s social life, and I asked her if most of her friends were Hispanic. She said, “It’s a mix,” but she did qualify her interpretation of the word *friend*. Doncia felt that it was “a big word,” and she did not think of everyone she knew as a friend. She counted four people she would consider true friends, and these were back home in Puerto Rico; Doncia described them as people she could “count on a lot.” She also mentioned two of her classmates at PHCC with whom she was friendly. One is a Hispanic female, the other an Asian male; but Doncia was careful to remind me that she really did not choose her friends based on their ethnicity or culture: “I really don’t look at that. I don’t really pay attention.” Doncia told me that when she is around other Hispanic people, she tends to use the mixture of English and Spanish called *Spanglish*. However, this is only in social settings; in school, she tries to “keep it in English, because just out of respect.” I mentioned that I had heard Spanglish mentioned several times in the interviews I was conducting, and I asked Doncia to give me her definition of the term:

“It’s not really a language. It’s what I call it. My family and I call it that because we mix Spanish and English in one conversation. It’s just what you’re thinking. You just blurt it out. You don’t really, because for example
me. Sometimes I have to think about what I’m going to say, most of the time. It’s easier now. Like right now I don’t really have to think about it, but um situations I just stood back and I have to think before I say something. When I have to be very specific or I when I have to…sometimes I say I don’t know how to explain it because it’s just in Spanish and I don’t know how to translate it in my head.

I was surprised to hear that Doncia was still thinking in Spanish even though she had been speaking English almost all of her life. She explained that while “It’s easier now” to think in English, she sometimes finds that the Spanish word comes to her more readily than the English word. This usually happens when she has to be “very specific,” as is often the case when she is in school.

**Doncia’s Responses to Journal Prompt Three**

The final journal prompt asked Doncia what advice she could offer to other female Hispanic college students in writing classes. She replied,

First and foremost attitude is everything. If you have a positive attitude towards trying to acquire college-level English writing skills you are more likely to succeed, in my opinion anyways. There will be ‘bumps in the road’ that will have to be overcome. Learn from them and use them to your advantage.

She would also caution these students to remember that they “are not alone.” There are, she stated, “many Hispanic females as well as males” facing similar challenges. She advised them to join clubs and organizations such as the ones
described in her previous responses because these organizations have members who
have difficulty with the English language and that have the knowledge to help you with any questions and confusion that you might have.
Remember, the older members of the clubs and/or organizations have already been through what you are trying to achieve so they can provide emotional support also.

She noted that, in her opinion, perhaps the biggest obstacle facing students like herself is their fear of the unknown. They may be experiencing “the insecurity of moving from what they have called home all their lives into an alien environment to face the unknown. It creates a sense of insecurity in that you are a stranger.” This insecurity must not cause them to be afraid, or to avoid asking for help.
Doncia said they must use the resources that are available to them, and if they “read a lot, study hard,” and hold their heads high, “there will be no room for failure.”

Thematic Analysis of the Data

The word *theme* has many definitions, but for qualitative researchers, it can refer to “fundamental concepts we are trying to describe” (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Noting the repetition of words and phrases is one of the easiest ways to identify themes, as is the participants' use of analogies or metaphors to describe their experiences. Finally, noting transitions, similarities and differences, and theory-related material can also be very useful in identifying themes (Ryan and
Bernard, 2003). The thematic analysis process used in this study was based on six steps that were conducted sequentially as shown here:

1. Locating significant statements;
2. Notating codes from these statements;
3. Clustering codes into meaning units/categories;
4. Identifying themes based on the meaning units/categories;
5. Creating descriptive statements from these themes; and
6. Using descriptive statements to answer the exploratory questions.

These steps helped me suggest possible answers for the three exploratory questions which form the basis of this study:

- What are the cultural influences that shape the experiences of female Hispanic ESL learners in college writing courses?
- How do these cultural influences affect student learning, specifically those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using correct grammar, format, and citation?
- Have these cultural influences produced a learning experience that is transformative? If so, how?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I assembled relevant information from the data and organized it into categories derived from the thematic elements of each question. These categories were identified through the coding process described here.
Using what Ryan and Bernard (2003) call “interviewing the text,” I used a highlighter to physically mark key words that appeared in the printed transcripts of each participant’s responses, and in the responses of other participants. Words that occurred frequently may be seen as significant indicators of the respondents’ intentions. These words were then entered into Atlas.ti so that illustrative quotations could be identified. Using these quotations, the various experiences described in Chapter Four were clustered into three meaning units or categories: a strong desire to succeed despite various obstacles; the need for emotional support; and the importance of assimilating into American culture without compromising one’s native culture.

Next, five emergent themes were identified from these categories. The following five themes were identified:

1. The frustrations and struggles ESL students experience in their college writing courses;
2. The desire to succeed in school and in their prospective careers;
3. The influence of teachers on their academic experiences;
4. The importance family for emotional support; and
5. The necessity of cultural assimilation without compromising one’s own cultural identity.

In the following section, I discuss these themes and how each one provides a description of the role of the phenomenon being examined (i.e., culture) and its effects on learning experiences. I begin each section by describing the
appropriate theoretical framework, and then providing illustrative quotations to support each theory.

Themes

According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), *themes* are “abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs that link not only expressions found in texts but also expressions found in images, sounds, and objects” (p. 87). Further, the contextual background each individual participant brings to a study creates a unique setting for the development of themes. In this study, the participants’ responses to interview questions and journal prompts, along with the recorded field notes of their body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice, formed the basis for the discovery of themes. The themes that are described below are indicators of how these expressions can be linked to abstract constructs that are unique to the individuals who participated in this study.

Theme One

*The frustrations and struggles ESL students experience in their college writing courses.*

Issues related to perceived frustrations and struggles are illustrated in the responses the eight participants made to the interview questions and journal prompts. They described their experiences as ESL students in a college writing program as sometimes frustrating and challenging. Some of these frustrations were directly attributed to their status as ESL students. For example, they
commented on the lack of programs designed specifically for ESL students. The participant I called Ramira stated that she believed her “struggles would be lesser” if she had been placed in a program that was designed especially to meet the needs of students like herself. Ramira also remarked that “my main struggles would be a lot easier if English wasn’t my second language.” Another participant, the one I called Suelo, expressed her wish that her college “would open a section called ‘Conversational English Language’ for students with English as a second language.” All eight participants made statements that were similar to the comment made by Doncia: “I struggle with some grammar issues and I am certainly not the best writer in the world.” Ramira described feeling “held back” by the mistakes she made in English grammar. Suelo mentioned being told by her instructor to use the grammar-check function in her computer when she needed help (“it did not,” she added, “help her at all”).

Negative cultural stereotypes also pose problems for some Hispanic students. Doncia said that, “Hispanics may be perceived as being not as smart as other people,” and unfortunately, “we ourselves sometimes believe that.” Abella described her experiences in learning English as making her feel “less superior than everybody else…because everybody knew the correct way to speak and talk and it sounded all pretty and nice and when I would try to communicate, you know, nobody would understand what I was trying to say.” Verónica described her classmates as holding back and “trying to be polite” in a class discussion about cultural differences. The discussion made her more aware of the negative stereotypes that are associated with some Hispanic populations,
even though she appreciated the fact that her classmates were respectful of her as an individual. It is unfortunate, she added, that “Other people are like just misinformed.”

Other negative stereotypes associated with gender were also described. Verónica called her father “controlling in some ways because I am a woman,” something she saw as “a Mexican thing.” Graciela described “the stigmatism for Latina women in this society,” and how Latinas are “not meant or expected to make anything of ourselves.” In fact, Graciela stated that Hispanic women are to be "barefoot and pregnant," an attitude that can be “crippling” to Latinas, and may render them “incapable of doing anything other than that with herself or her life because it's not only accepted, but expected.” Sometimes, however, their gender can be a source of strength. As Ramira stated, some Hispanic women “are known for their attitude,” and can be “crafty.” Graciela wanted Hispanic women to know that if “you believe in yourself, you will succeed in everything you do as you will one day be some other Latina’s inspiration.” The concept of respect, or the hierarchy of power within some Hispanic families, was also described by the participants in this study as being an important facet of their culture.

Earlier studies indicate that many Hispanic ESL adult learners struggle with developing competency in English language skills, especially with the mechanics of the language: grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. However, the literature also states that these students do not perceive themselves as inferior to their native-speaker counterparts, and do not want to be
perceived as deficient in any way. While they desire their struggles to be acknowledged, they wish to be perceived as students who "grapple with these difficulties" and are not defined by them (Zamel, 1995, p. 512). Indeed, they see their task as doubly challenging: they are learning their college subject matter while learning English at the same time. Apart from the challenges of learning a new language, these students struggle to contextualize their instruction “around real, meaningful usage centered on content that is significant” in their lives” (Auerbach, 1993, p. 26). In addition, female Hispanic students face challenges involving acculturation, or the “behavioral or attitudinal changes in response to cultural, social, and interpersonal demands” (Bernal, 1991, p. 36). Hispanic males have greater independence and more opportunity for achievement outside of the home than do females. Also, females are often under a great deal of pressure to become wives and mothers (Cardoza, 1991). Similarly, males are more likely to be encouraged to attend college than are females (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986). Figure Two illustrates this theme and its sub-headings. The figure also indicates which of the participants in this study described the sub-heading in her journal and interview responses.
In describing the frustrations and struggles ESL students experience in their college writing courses, Ramira, Doncia, and Suelo stated that the lack of programs designed specifically for ESL learners was a problem. Also, negative stereotypes were associated with difficulties in succeeding in college writing courses by Graciela and Doncia. Ramira felt that gender roles had a negative impact on female Hispanic ESL college students, and Ramira, Leticia, and Abella felt that issues with grammar and mechanics represented their greatest challenges.
Theme Two

The desire to succeed in school and in their prospective careers.

The participants described their desire to be successful in their chosen careers, and saw a college education as critical to that success. Abella stated, “We are here in America for a reason and that is to succeed and get a good education.” Graciela described her experiences in finding herself, “always, was under the assumption that I guess in order to be successful that you had to do it in English.” Leticia described her attitude towards her schoolwork as a challenge: “If I don’t do well, I can try again and again, you know, as many times as it takes, you know.” Graciela stated that she felt her biggest challenge to success was, “a lack of self-assurance, or faith in our capability to succeed.”

This low self-esteem represented another type of frustration, one Leticia described as “feeling really bad and I cry all night. If I don’t do well, I can try again and again, you know, as many times as it takes, you know.” Thus, the power to succeed can be in the hands of these students; as Doncia put it, “attitude is everything. If you have a positive attitude towards trying to acquire college-level English writing skills you are more likely to succeed.” What Doncia called the “bumps in the road” that they may encounter can be turned into opportunities to overcome challenges.

The idea that language is essential to succeed in American culture was echoed by Abella who stated, “Do not allow our gift of speaking a second language hold you from being successful in life.” She added, “We are here in
America for a reason and that is to succeed and get a good education.” For Ramira, “It’s America. It’s like the land of the American dream.”

English language acquisition is perceived as an essential component in achieving economic mobility; postsecondary education becomes the means through which the appropriate level of English language skills may be acquired (Robles, 2009). Hispanic families often promote a strong work ethic, and set high standards for excellence at school and at work (Gándara, 1982). Thus, higher education becomes the means through which Hispanic immigrants can successfully assimilate into American culture and become productive members of society. However, while approximately 90% of young Hispanics believe that a college education is important to be successful, about half of these adults are not able to finish college; this is often attributed to their need to help support their families (Lopez, 2009). Figure Three illustrates this theme and its sub-headings. The figure also indicates which of the participants in this study described the sub-heading in her journal and interview responses.
Figure 3: Theme Two

In describing their desire to succeed in school and in their prospective careers, Suelo, Doncia, Leticia, Sarita, Graciela, and Verónica felt that the need for strong English skills was especially important. Doncia, Graciela, Leticia, Abella, Sarita, and Ramira described how a strong work ethic was critical for success. Doncia and Leticia believed that self-confidence and high self-esteem were essential for success, and Abella stated that the drive to be successful is the main reason Hispanics come to the U. S.
Theme Three

The influence of teachers on their academic experiences.

The participants in this study reinforced this concept of the critical role instructors play in second language acquisition. There were positive comments: Abella described her writing teacher as “a blessing from God, in all honesty.” Abella went on to say that the help she received from her instructor was “a miracle come true.” Doncia said her instructor was “always very supportive and helpful.” For Verónica, the teacher was perceived as someone who “gives you tips on how to successfully write a college paper,” an important part of learning English for these students.

While studies indicate the importance of personal connections between teachers and students, this is not always the case. Some participants described the lack of a personal connection with their instructors; Ramira thought that her instructor, who “wasn’t a very personal teacher,” might have been that way because of her teaching workload, and therefore did not take this lack of interaction “personally.” However, she repeated that “it would have been nice if she would of [sic] been a more personal, emotional” teacher. Suelo remarked about the lack of interaction between her instructor and the students: “There is not really like any class conversations during the class. We just are there to listen to the teacher.”

Abella also remarked that students like herself should “be strong, have courage,” and not let [their] classmates’ or professors’ “ignorance comments [sic] or gestures get to you.” The student is also responsible for her own success,
and failure may be due to the fact that, as Suelo commented, some students “don’t find any help, so they just feel so isolated and they fail some classes.”

Most of the participants felt that it was important to have respect for their instructors; Leticia described her English teacher as “the most influential person that I had in college who understood me better.” However, this idea of respect for one’s instructor sometimes prevented Verónica from asking her teacher questions about her grades. She said that she would look at the instructor’s comments and try to do better on the next assignment, but she did not question the instructor because, as she put it, “I guess I thought they knew what they were doing.”

Abella described the importance of having a teacher who is a non-native speaker like herself: “By them knowing and learning of our culture that might allow them to have a more clear understanding on why we sit in English class and struggle to pass or even just to learn the language.” Still, the various ethnicities present among Hispanic populations present a new set of challenges. Abella continued: “The teacher, she’s, she was Colombian. But I mean a lot of teachers, um teachers, students in the class were from El Salvador, from Mexico, I was the only Cuban of course. We didn’t have any Puerto Ricans and all of our Spanish was different.” She added, “I’m trying to be successful here, you know. I’m not trying to be pointing down. I’m trying to be as successful as she [the instructor] might have been, you know, or maybe even a little bit higher.” The role of language instructors involves how they bring their “beliefs about language learning and teaching to the classroom” (Allen, 2002; Woods, 1996,
cited in Ferguson, 2005). ESL teachers “should continuously strive to provide that instruction which best meets the real needs and abilities of individual students” (Zamel, 1976, p. 74). Some ESL learners believe that their instructors are positioned to play a critical role in the development of positive learning experiences, and the need for “clarity, accessible language, careful explanation, and effort” on the part of English faculty is essential for successful learning (Zamel, 1995, p. 512). According to a Pew Research Center survey, most “current and former Latino college students say they strongly agree that their professors help or helped with their success” (Lopez, 2009). The role of the instructor, therefore, has a profound influence on whether or not ESL students can be successful in college English courses. In addition, cultivating a “concrete teacher-student relationship seems to be especially important for students from underrepresented racial backgrounds… as such relationships can often serve as a buffer to many of the other obstacles that such students face” (Serdar, 2005). Figure Four illustrates this theme and its sub-headings. The figure also indicates which of the participants in this study described the sub-heading in her journal and interview responses.
Figure 4: Theme Three

In describing the influence of teachers on academic experiences, Graciela, Leticia, Abella, Sarita, Verónica, Suelo, and Doncia agreed that teachers play a critical role in student success. Suelo, Doncia, Ramira, Graciela, Sarita, and Verónica believed that instructors must recognize the needs of ESL learners. Suelo and Ramira commented on the negative effect of the lack of personal connections with their instructors, and Doncia, Suelo, and Verónica felt that students must show respect for their instructors by not questioning them.
Theme Four

The importance of family for emotional support.

Several participants in this study stated that emotional support from their families was “extremely” important to them. As Graciela stated, “Um, um, just I guess patting me on the back, letting me know it’s not too hard. I can do it. Things, you know, I get discouraged at times.” Verónica credited her mother with offering support, something she did not receive from her father, who had never been “school inclined.” The support she received from her mother motivated her to do well in school, especially in her writing courses, because Verónica said her mother “knew the importance of a second language.”

While several of the participants described their desire for emotional support from their families, not everyone received it. Some of the participants described their families as willing to support them in their educations, while others had families who either would not or could not support them. Sarita described the “frustration and sadness” her parents felt because of their inability to help their daughter with her English coursework. Ramira said that her mother did not understand “that I have to focus on my; on my school. I just; she doesn’t take it seriously.” Ramira also said that her family were “the last people I would think of when it came to helping me pass a writing course.” She stated that her family “was never really emotionally supportive,” and they are “not really involved in what I do, whether I’m struggling or not.” She added, “I was just like okay, no big deal. It didn’t really affect me if they didn’t offer emotional support.”
The participants also mentioned the responsibilities and obligations that accompany this support. Leticia saw herself as bearing the heavy responsibility of being a positive role model for her younger sister, “who is going through the same struggles I am.” Leticia wants her younger sister “to have more choices,” and that she herself is going to “do something for my sister.” In fact, Graciela said that the “biggest barrier” to academic success was not always the college coursework; it was very often the burden of responsibility for other family members.

Studies suggest that the need for emotional support from their families can be important for some Hispanic adult learners. In addition, some Hispanic female adults feel an obligation to nurture their parents in return for the care they received as children (Razin, O’Dowd, Nathan, Rodriguez, Goldfield, Martin, Goulet, Scheftel, Mezan, & Mosca, 1991). Furthermore, some Hispanics describe their parents as authoritarian, and as exhibiting a strong emphasis on obedience and conformity (Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987). In particular, the mothers of female Hispanics may expect their daughters to “adhere to the traditional Hispanic culture sex roles and cannot adequately support or mentor their daughters in adapting to the demands of balancing traditional and acculturated roles” (Zayas, Kaplan, Turner, Romano, & Gonzalez-Ramos, 2000). The role of women in most traditional Hispanic cultures, in which the women are responsible for all of the housework, has been viewed as another deterrent to academic opportunity (Irias, 2011). Figure Five illustrates this theme.
and its sub-headings. The figure also indicates which of the participants in this study described the sub-heading in her journal and interview responses.

Figure 5: Theme Four

In describing the importance of one’s family as a source of emotional support, all eight of the participants felt that their families were essential for providing them with emotional support. Abella and Leticia remarked that they felt an especially strong desire to give back to their families, and Suelo and Verónica noted that the male-dominated hierarchy in their families sometimes represented a challenge to their learning experiences. Verónica, Ramira, Doncia, Sarita, Suelo, and Abella described the conflict that resulted between their responsibilities to their families and their academic and employment obligations.
Theme Five

The necessity of cultural assimilation without compromising one’s own cultural identity.

The need to assimilate into American culture was an issue that recurred throughout the data. The participants in this study believed it was important to become a part of their adopted culture in the U. S. However, the participants also made it clear that their Hispanic culture would always be a part of them and was not something they wished to eliminate from their lives. This pride towards their native culture was expressed by several participants, including Abella, who described her joy over her successful completion of her English class as follows: “It made me feel like a proud Puerto Rican, you know.” Graciela described herself as “very much a Latina, and proud of it.” For Ramira, “Being Hispanic is a privilege. It’s a privilege.” Nevertheless, these participants went on to say that they want to become a part of their new, American culture. In fact, Graciela saw herself now as becoming “part of a different culture,” and as someone who is trying hard to “immerse” herself into it. Doncia described her efforts to speak only English in school, even when she was among her Spanish-speaking friends, saying she tries to “keep it in English, because just out of respect.” According to Suelo, “I sometimes feel the culture; our culture is not really coming forward in America. I just feel sometimes like that. But I want to and I would say I want to get assimilated.”

Attempting to assimilate into a new culture produced experiences that could be considered transformative for these women. This transformation often
occurred on a personal level; for example, Doncia described how she had never enjoyed reading, but “after I started the [English] class, I started to gain interest in reading, so I started my independent reading. And after that I said get on the books.” Ramira explained that she had always been content to receive passing grades in her native country, stating, “you know, low Cs and I was just like as long as I get passing grades, you know.” However, this changed and she became less willing to settle for low grades after she successfully completed her college writing course. Ramira felt that she had “definitely” changed “because “the writing class in general, it made me realize how difficult it is to be an Hispanic knowing this language is my second language.” Graciela claimed that her attitude toward schoolwork had changed because of the writing course, adding that she “probably should have” expected the work to be so hard. Leticia mentioned a story she read in her English class about a “foreign girl and she was learning English, and I was seeing myself in the story.” The story was written by an Hispanic author, so it was like reading what Leticia called “my personal story.” Her reaction, she realized, was different from those of her classmates, and she understood that she was seeing the story from the perspective of a different culture. A new sense of pride was developing for some participants, such as when Abella’s family complimented her essay: "And I said yes, I wrote it, but since I have to concentrate, I can make it so beautiful. I love it, because these are my own words.”

Other changes were larger in scope and transformed the way these
women perceive themselves as members of American society. For example, Graciela described herself as becoming “real strong-willed about the fact that if you’re here you need to be like the people from here.” Suelo explained that her willingness to succeed had improved as a result of her writing course: “My motivation, I have gone through all these classes and I have to follow some kind of rules. I’m comfortable speaking. I’m comfortable talking outside the college.” Verónica was pleased to discover that once her classmates learned she was from another country, they were “eager to know about it.” Verónica said she became more aware of the negative stereotypes that are associated with some Hispanic populations, even though she appreciated the fact that her classmates were respectful of her as an individual. It was unfortunate, she added, that “Other people are like just misinformed,” and she was glad to have the opportunity to correct the misconceptions.

Since language is considered the primary cultural identifier, immigrants must move “from a linguistically-isolated existence to one of a shared language” (Ignash, 1995). Language acquisition is an important step in the assimilation process, through which immigrants merge their native cultural traits with those of the adopted country. For some immigrants, a lack of English-language skills creates “a barrier to assimilation into American culture” (Huntington, 2004). A lack of English skills may prevent immigrants from obtaining U. S. citizenship; it may also prevent them from obtaining the skills and education necessary for higher-paying jobs (Irias, 2011). This lack of English language skills is especially problematic for Hispanic immigrants because it creates a “cultural division
between Hispanics and Anglos [that] could replace the racial division between blacks and whites as the most serious cleavage in U.S. society” (Huntington, 2004, p. 32). Figure Six illustrates this theme and its sub-headings. The figure also indicates which of the participants in this study described the sub-heading in her journal and interview responses.

Figure 6: Theme Five

The necessity of cultural assimilation without compromising one’s own cultural identity was perceived as problematic by all of the participants. All eight participants saw assimilation into American culture as necessary for success, but Sarita, Abella, Graciela, and Ramira also worried about losing their identities as
members of Hispanic cultures. Sarita, Abella, Graciela, and Suelo stated that they felt it was a privilege to be an American, and all eight perceived the assimilation to be transformative for them both a personal and a societal level. All eight participants saw the acquisition of English language skills as essential for cultural assimilation.

Interrelatedness of Themes with in the Cultural Domain

These five themes are related to one another and to the phenomenon of culture. Indeed, the themes are shaped by the cultural norms described in the interview responses and journal responses. This relevance may be summed up as follows. First, while the need to be successful and productive members of American society is a desire expressed by all eight of the participants, the attainment of this goal is influenced by Hispanic cultural norms such as responsibility to family. Having personal objectives that are outside the scope of the family unit may create tension within the family. Next, the realization that assimilation into American society is necessary for success creates a conflict with the participants’ desire to maintain their Hispanic cultures. This is also true for the participants’ dependency on their families for emotional support. When this support is not present or is insufficient, they turned to friends or instructors to fill the void. This is not in keeping with the Hispanic cultural norms described by the participants where the role of family is paramount in their lives. Nonetheless, the participants understood that their instructors, not their families, were their strongest resource in the English language acquisition process. Yet the
participants were often held back from asserting themselves and making their needs known because of the Hispanic concept of *respeto*. That is, they felt that it might be perceived as disrespectful to ask the instructor for additional explanations. Finally, the assimilation process is directly related to language acquisition. The participants understood that they needed to learn to read, write, and speak English at the college-level in order to succeed. Yet because language is one of the primary cultural markers, the participants experienced a sense of disloyalty to their native culture.

The descriptive statements that follow were developed through the consideration of the interrelatedness of the themes. In addition, these descriptive statements resulted from two types of analysis: first, I looked at each participant’s responses to the questions in the interviews and journals. Second, I looked across the responses of the participants to each group of interviews and journals. The second analysis produced no themes that had not already been identified during the first analysis.

Descriptive Statements in Response to the Exploratory Questions

The steps used to analyze data obtained from the journal responses and the interviews are illustrated in a diagram I created for identifying “significant statements” (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). This diagram appears on page 79 of this dissertation and explains the progression of the data analysis through the creation of descriptive statements as answers to the exploratory questions.
The words used by the participants in responding to the questions in this study serve as illustrations of the lived experiences of these Hispanic female college students. The illustrative quotations presented in this chapter suggest that the experiences of these female Hispanic ESL students in college writing courses cover a broad range of perceptions, yet they contain several commonalities. The interrelatedness of themes derived from these commonalities form the basis for possible answers for the exploratory questions.

Exploratory Question One -- What are the cultural influences that shape the experiences of female Hispanic ESL learners in college writing courses?

The following descriptive statement emerges from the analysis of the data: the female Hispanic ESL learners in this study are influenced by several elements of their culture, specifically in their relationships with their families and their instructors.

The cultural influences that the participants described included their dependency upon their families for support and encouragement. They saw this dependency as an element of their Hispanic cultures; they also felt an obligation to succeed as a way of giving something back to their families. The participants talked about their pride as members of the Hispanic community, and the difficulties of assimilating into American culture without losing their native cultural identity. Furthermore, *respeto*, or power within the family unit, is often determined by gender. This is a very important cultural value among Hispanic people (Padilla, 1981).
Figure seven illustrates the similarities and differences in the responses of the eight participants to the interview questions and journal prompts based on exploratory question one. The check marks indicate which relationship(s) had the strongest influence on their learning experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parents/children/spouses</th>
<th>Instructors</th>
<th>Friends (native speakers of English)</th>
<th>Friends (Hispanic ESL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramira</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verónica</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abella</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarita</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suelo</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7: Descriptive Statement for Exploratory Question One

Figure seven indicates that six out of the eight participants believe that they are influenced by their culture in their relationships with their families, including parents, children, and spouses. Seven out of the eight participants believe that they are influenced by their culture in their relationships with their instructors. Two participants think that they are influenced by their culture in their relationships with their native English-speaking friends, and two others felt the same way about their Hispanic ESL friends.
Exploratory Question Two-- How do these cultural influences affect student learning, specifically those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using correct grammar, format, and citation?

The following descriptive statements emerge from the analysis of the data: the female Hispanic ESL learners in this study view language acquisition as an integral element of cultural assimilation. Also, female Hispanic ESL learners view language acquisition as an integral element of cultural assimilation. They are also concerned with acquiring pronunciation and writing skills.

While most of the participants believed that they spoke English well enough to be understood, many were concerned about mastering college-writing skills. The connection between speaking and writing grammatically correct English was seen as pivotal in becoming a successful member of U. S. society. Participants also felt that they were often stereotyped as unintelligent or lazy because of their mispronunciation of words and because of grammatical mistakes.

Figure eight illustrates the similarities and differences in the responses of the eight participants to the interview questions and journal prompts based on exploratory question two. The check marks indicate which skills are more likely to be influenced by culture.
Descriptive statements: the female Hispanic ESL learners in this study view language acquisition as an integral element of cultural assimilation. They are also concerned with acquiring pronunciation and writing skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language acquisition</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>Grammar</th>
<th>Citation/format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramira</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verónica</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abella</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarita</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suelo</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncia</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8: Descriptive Statements for Exploratory Question Two

Figure eight indicates that all of the eight participants believe that English language acquisition is an integral element of cultural assimilation. Also, five participants view pronunciation as important for successful cultural assimilation, six participants believe that using correct grammar is important. Only one participant saw learning the correct way to format and cite her writing as important for cultural assimilation.

Exploratory Question Three -- Have these cultural influences produced a learning experience that is transformative? If so, how?

The following descriptive statement emerges from the analysis of the data: the female Hispanic ESL learners in this study see the transformative aspect of their English writing courses as required them to change on a personal, and sometimes on a societal, level.
For a learning experience to be transformative, a learner should develop “intercultural awareness and tolerance, perspectives of language learning, and [sense of] personal change” (King, 2000). Transformative learning can be described as having three dimensions: the psychological dimension, which occurs when an individual gains a new understanding of his or her sense of self; the convictional dimension, when an individual revises his or her belief system; and the behavioral dimension, in which an individual enacts changes in his or her lifestyle (Clark, 1991). The experiences described in this study illustrate how the participants have been transformed in each of these dimensions.

Statements such as, “Personally I’ve always felt like I, I’m no longer that Spanish person,” or “just the writing class in general, it made me realize how difficult it is to be an Hispanic knowing this language is my second language” illustrate the psychological dimension of this transformative process. Some participants talked about their new-found respect for the importance of learning English, stating “I need this writing class, especially as an Hispanic.” Another was happy to say that “I got a lot of knowledge” from her writing course.

Several participants described experiences that exemplify the convictional dimension of transformative learning. One participant said that after she completed her composition class, she realized that her writing courses had become “the most important thing.” Another talked about her writing teacher who inspired her “to do what you love.” These words helped the participant decide to pursue her passion for mathematics and engineering.

Transformation that occurred in the behavioral dimension is illustrated by
Verónica who described how her behavior changed when she saw her Hispanic classmates not taking their studies seriously. This made her realize that she needed to work very hard in school because “it’s dangerous, you know, if you don’t make it, ‘cause what are you going to do?“

Figure nine illustrates the similarities and differences in the responses of the eight participants to the interview questions and journal prompts based on exploratory question three. The check marks indicate where the transformative learning experiences of the participants occurred.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personal level</th>
<th>Societal level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramira</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verónica</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leticia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abella</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarita</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suelo</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncia</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Descriptive Statement for Exploratory Question Three

Figure nine indicates that all of the eight participants believe that their English writing courses were transformative experiences on a personal level. Five of the eight participants believe that their English writing courses were transformative experiences on a societal level.
Conclusion

While qualitative analysis typically does not use a linear model, focusing instead on a more intuitive approach, the data in this study were first analyzed by examining each participant and her responses to the interview questions and journal prompts. Five themes were identified during this process. The data were then triangulated using a cross analysis method based on Patton’s (2002) cross-case analysis model. The responses of each participant to each question and journal prompt were examined and compared to the initial analysis. The five themes that emerged from the two methods of analysis were consistent and introduced the same results. That is, no themes emerged from the cross analysis method that had not been previously identified from the initial linear model.

The responses to the exploratory questions described in this chapter are not intended to be representative of Hispanic ESL learners in general. Rather, the themes that emerged from the data are suggestive of what is true only for the participants in this study. While some of these conclusions may be transferable to other Hispanic learners, a qualitative study of this nature attempts to describe only the lived experiences of the students who participated in this study. This dissertation is not meant to be an overstatement or generalization of all Hispanic women; nevertheless, some things can be learned that might be transferrable to others in similar situations. Thus, implications for practice and research are discussed in Chapter Five of this study.
CHAPTER 5
Analysis and Implications

Introduction

The experiences of Hispanic ESL females who are first generation students in college writing courses are described in this study. The objective of this study was to understand the role of native culture in the learning experiences of the eight women who participated. To avoid excessive redundancy, this chapter will begin with a brief synopsis of the data analysis as presented in Chapter Four. In addition, important implications for the practice of teaching Hispanic ESL students in college composition courses are identified in this chapter. Finally, since the design of this study was only one of many that are possible for this topic, and since I became aware of several noteworthy design issues in the course of this study, I will make suggestions for further research into the experiences of female Hispanic ESL college students.

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the influence a learner’s native culture has on learning in college-level academic writing courses. This interpretive study, which is both exploratory and descriptive in nature, examined and analyzed how the native culture of ESL students affects their experiences in their first-year college writing courses. The
phenomenon that was explored is the role of culture on Hispanic ESL students’ acquisition of college-level writing skills, specifically those writing skills that involve the development of thinking skills, writing a research paper, and using correct grammar, format, and citation. I was particularly concerned with how the native culture of ESL students shapes their perceptions of their college writing courses. Because of its qualitative and interpretative methodology, this study did not produce results that are transferrable; however, the study provided insight into these students’ own observations and experiences, and perhaps will assist educators in determining how they can best serve the needs of similar ESL students in first-year writing courses at similar institutions of higher education. The stories related in this study represent the experiences of only this small pool of participants, yet these accounts shed light on how the American school system and the dominant culture are failing to meet the needs of Hispanic ESL learners (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004). The stress factors involved in second-language acquisition, combined with the need for assimilation into American culture and the pressures represented by family and financial obligations, result in less than satisfactory experiences for non-native Hispanics in our colleges.

Synopsis of the Data from Chapter 4

This study was based upon the following exploratory questions:

- What are the cultural influences that shape the experiences of female Hispanic ESL learners in college writing courses?
• How do these cultural influences affect student learning, specifically those skills involving thinking, conducting research, and using correct grammar, format, and citation?

• Have these cultural influences produced a learning experience that is transformative? If so, how?

While the participants in this study described different experiences and provided different interpretations of what it means to be a Hispanic female in a college writing course, convergent themes occurred throughout the data. The five themes I identified helped me develop responses to the exploratory questions in the form of descriptive statements and to suggest new directions for the development of curricula in the teaching of college-level English as a second language.

The words used by the participants in responding to the questions in this study serve as illustrations of the lived experiences of these Hispanic female college students. The illustrative quotations presented in Chapter Four suggest that the experiences of female Hispanic ESL students in college writing courses cover a broad range of perceptions, yet they contain common elements. These commonalities illustrate the participants’ perceptions of the relationship between culture and learning:

• The need for emotional support from family and friends;
• Their relationships with their instructors;
• The importance of respect;
• The desire to assimilate into American culture;
• The dangers of stereotypes;
• The motivation to work hard to be successful.

The Importance of Emotional Support from Family and Friends.

The concept of relying on one’s family for emotional support while one is a college student was mentioned many times in the data. The participants also described their dependency on their families for help in developing confidence in acquiring English writing and speaking skills. The family represented the primary source of emotional support for these students, even if a participant’s family had a limited command of English. The family usually offered the emotional support that several participants claimed is a staple of most Hispanic cultures.

Graciela, Abella, Sarita, and Suelo all described how important the support of their families is to them. Graciela explained how good she felt when her parents praised her for her good grades. Abella said her parents were the first people she turned to when she realized how difficult her English classes were going to be. Sarita’s non-English speaking parents were frustrated over their inability to help her with her school work, but Sarita appreciated the loving support they showed for her. Suelo’s situation was similar to Sarita’s. Her family did not have the skills to help her with her English, but they were steadfast in their support of her desire to learn English.

For the most part, family represented the most important source of emotional support. However, the family unit could also represent challenges for Hispanic female learners, challenges that are rooted in their various Hispanic
cultures. The participants in this study described their many responsibilities as mothers, daughter, and wives. Graciela, Verónica, and Suelo have babies or children to care for; Doncia helps her family care for her autistic brother; and Graciela assists her sight-impaired fiancé. Abella, Ramira, Sarita, and Leticia live with their parents but are still expected to help with household chores.

As part of their responsibilities to their families, there is sometimes the need to work outside of the home. Of the eight participants in this study, five work outside the home: Ramira, Sarita, Doncia, Verónica, and Suelo (Suelo sometimes worked two, even three, jobs at a time). Abella did work full-time until she was laid off in 2010; she now lives with her parents who support her while she attends school. The five participants who do work felt very strongly that their education expenses should not become a burden for their families.

While family and financial responsibilities are not unique to Hispanic ESL learners, they do add another dimension to their learning experiences. The participants each expressed a strong desire to do their best in meeting all of these responsibilities; indeed, these roles are seen as duties which must be honored. However, occasionally these responsibilities presented challenges to learning. Often, there was not enough time or energy to fulfill all of their obligations. Still, they described a profound sense of obligation to help their families, especially their parents, in every way possible, as the means of repaying them for giving them life. They also believe that everyone has a responsibility to give back to the community, a cultural trait the participants attribute to their Hispanic background. This idea of reciprocation is one of the
threads that ran through the responses. It is evident in the various career objectives the participants described: doctors, health care personnel, and translators. It is also evident in their desire to be positive role models for siblings.

Participants who received little emotional support from their families, or who wanted more external support, sometimes turned to their friends for help. While the emotional support that friends may provide is shaped by their ethnicity, academic ability, and time constraints, the participants agree that their friends do indeed play a role in the participants’ English language acquisition. As Ramira stated, her family “was never really emotionally supportive,” so she came to rely on her boyfriend, a native speaker of English. He was especially helpful to her, providing both emotional support and help with English grammar. Leticia, who felt that her family was very supportive, still relied on a friend of hers who is from Iran. This friend, who has a 4.0 GPA, has a background as an ESL learner that is similar to Leticia’s. They provide each other with emotional support based on shared experiences. Sarita improved her English skills by talking to her English-speaking friends, and Suelo joined an international pen-pal organization and began exchanging letters with people who wrote in English. Doncia’s discussions with her friends increased her confidence with the conversational applications of English, including the use of idioms.

On the other hand, some of the participants stated that their friends were not always the best source for emotional support. For example, when Ramira was asked if any of her Hispanic friends or classmates offered emotional support concerning her schoolwork, she said, “We didn’t really talk about, you know,
papers and stuff.” Verónica stated that when she came to the U.S. at age 16, she had no Hispanic friends, a fact she viewed as an advantage at the time since she was “forced” to speak English. However, Verónica said that her speaking and listening skills improved when she was surrounded by native speakers. She also came to rely on her friends who were what she considered “really good writers.” Leticia felt that having friends who speak English is important. When she is out with her Hispanic friends, everyone speaks Spanish. This bothers Leticia because she sees it as a missed opportunity to practice her English skills. Some participants, such as Abella, said that while they wanted to have friends they could count on for support, this was not always possible. Abella’s friends were not able to help her because they were busy with their own classes, and Abella did not feel comfortable asking for their help.

Participants’ Expectations of Their Instructors

ESL students must learn the unique, culture-based pedagogical approaches of their instructors to achieve academic success (Armendaris, 2009, p. 4). Some of the participants, such as Leticia, said that their instructors were even more influential than their parents. Doncia appreciated the fact that her instructors seemed happy to be in the classroom, as compared to her teachers in Puerto Rico whom she felt were just “there for the paycheck.” Another issue concerned the perception among some of the participants that their English instructors came across as not caring, and not willing to take the time to help them when they asked for assistance with their assignments. Suelo had
expected her instructor to be more forthcoming with help. Unfortunately, she found that this was not the case. Her instructor did not seem to be paying much attention to the needs of individual learners; Suelo, whose main concern is her pronunciation, felt that her instructor should have recognized that she needed more help in this area and taken steps to address the issue. Other participants experienced a sense of isolation because they thought that their English instructors had certain expectations about the ability levels of their students; the women saw themselves as falling short on many of these levels (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation).

The Significance of Respect in Family and Instructor Relationships

In describing their relationships with their families and with their instructors, the participants mentioned the need to show respect (*respeto*). This is important for all authority figures, but especially for parents and teachers. This idea of respect was emphasized throughout the responses and can be directly attributed to originating in the various Hispanic cultures. Parents deserved respect and obedience, which sometimes caused difficulties in making schoolwork a priority. Similarly, maintaining an attitude of respect toward teachers made some participants feel uncomfortable in questioning their instructors, especially their English writing teachers. Many of the participants reported that they had been taught that questioning an instructor could be seen as a sign of disrespect. Added to their insecurities with English as a second
language, this fear of appearing disrespectful limited the participants in their willingness to ask for help when they needed it.

The Desire to Assimilate into American Culture

Throughout the data, it was stated by most of participants several times that it is important that they remain true to their individual Hispanic cultures. Some of the participants (e.g., Sarita, Abella, and Graciela) expressed this desire to remain loyal to their native countries and continue being proud of their cultural heritage. They also believed that life in the U. S. was an improvement over life back in their native countries, and they were determined to take advantage of every opportunity that came their way. They also felt that assimilation was an essential step in this process. Graciela stated that for Hispanic people in particular, learning to speak and write English is an important step in the assimilation process. Suelo explained that she felt that her Hispanic culture was “not really coming forward in America.” Thus, she saw assimilation as especially significant in fulfilling the need for a cultural identity.

Attempting to assimilate into a new culture produced experiences that could be considered transformative for these women. This transformation often occurred on a personal level. Other changes were larger in scope and transformed the way these women perceive themselves as members of American society.

While maintaining their cultural identity is important to the participants, assimilation into American culture and becoming successful was the goal of
every participant. Thus, they felt that Hispanics should seek out opportunities to practice speaking and writing English, and avoid clubs or organizations designed solely for Hispanic people because such organizations can be detrimental to the goal of assimilation. For the women in this study, developing English skills is essential in order to become a successful member of American society.

The Awareness of Stereotypes

The diversity that was present in the ethnic backgrounds of my participants was a concern because grouping all the ethnicities under the one term *Hispanic* suggested a bias that bordered on stereotyping. Indeed, stereotypes, especially negative ones, were another concern illustrated in the data. The participants described their feelings of inadequacy because of their status as immigrants and because of the negative stereotypes that are sometimes associated with Hispanic people. As Doncia put it, the stereotype that Hispanics are “not as good as most Americans” is rampant. She also stated that it was not until she came to the U. S. that she realized that people are sometimes labeled as different because of their race or ethnicity, and that she was one of these people. Once she became aware of negative stereotypes concerning her status as a minority, she realized that she needed additional support as she struggled with learning English in school.

Other participants expressed similar sentiments, saying it is critical to disavow the negative stereotypes associated with some Hispanic cultures, such as the perception that Hispanic immigrants do not wish to learn English and
would rather continue to speak Spanish. Graciela noted that she did not want to be a stereotype of the “non-educated Latino,” and spoke with tremendous candor about the poor choices she had made. However, she was quick to emphasize that poor choices or negative stereotypes should not be used as an excuse for failing to reach one’s potential, and she wanted very much to be an example of a Hispanic person who was successful despite the many barriers that were in place in her life. In fact, society’s perceptions of females, in particular, were seen as an especially disturbing challenge. Hispanic females experience a unique stereotyping based on their gender and have been held back by cultural stereotypes.

The Motivation to Work Hard to Be Successful

For non-native speakers of English, English language acquisition is perceived as an essential component in achieving economic mobility; postsecondary education becomes the means through which the appropriate level of English language skills may be acquired (Robles, 2009). Hispanic families often promote a strong work ethic and set high standards for excellence at school and at work (Gándara, 1982). Thus, higher education becomes the means through which Hispanic immigrants can successfully assimilate into American culture and become productive members of society. Unfortunately, while approximately 90% of young Hispanics believe that a college education is important to be successful, about half of these adults are not able to finish
college; this is often attributed to their need to help support their families (Lopez, 2009).

For the participants in this study, the acquisition of English writing and speaking skills is an essential component for success in their adopted culture. Being successful in school can be a way to give something back to the family, as Leticia explained. She saw the need to succeed as the means to “repay” her parents for allowing her to make her schoolwork a priority. Abella stated that the primary reason for most immigrants to come to America was to get a good education and succeed. Sarita attributed her drive to succeed to her Cuban heritage because success is just a part of her background. Suelo added that success is important for all Hispanics but is important for Hispanic women in particular. She described the drive to succeed as a powerful motivating force that can be liberating for minority women. This is especially significant in light of Doncia’s remarks that some members of her culture believe that women cannot be successful. Doncia cautioned these women to remember that they “are not alone.” She advised them to join clubs and organizations designed for students like themselves.

In describing some of the frustrations and struggles they face in learning to communicate in English, several of the participants remarked that they believed they spoke English rather well. Ramira attributed her success as a student to her ability to speak and write English reasonably well before she came to college. However, she also used words such as “negative,” “frustrating,” “pressuring,” and “struggling” to describe her efforts to improve the level of her
English skills. Leticia had lived in Miami for a number of years before moving to New Port Richey and attributed her strong English skills to having lived in an environment where English was frequently spoken. Still, experiences of this type were often insufficient. Suelo explained that while she had taken English classes in her native Colombia, she was not taught what she called “conversational English.” Doncia stated that she learned English in Puerto Rico, but that she “needed more than what they were teaching.” Nonetheless, some participants talked about their new-found respect for the importance of learning English, especially as members of various Hispanic cultures.

Problems with pronunciation were also described, problems that caused these women to sometimes feel isolated. At times, they were even objects of derision, as in the case of Suelo, whose co-workers made fun of her because she mispronounced the name of a candy bar. The accents of the Hispanic women in this study represented an obstacle to their learning because they were embarrassed to ask questions in class when they did not understand something. Several participants, including Suelo, Doncia, and Ramira, expressed a desire for a course in which ESL students could concentrate on pronunciation. Some of the participants, such as Ramira, Abella, and Suelo, referred to the “basics” of English grammar as especially problematic. Ramira described her earlier experiences with basic English instruction to be insufficient and lacking “detail in depth.” Abella believed that a strong understanding of basic English grammar would form “a bridge” between Spanish and English for her. Motivation to succeed is essential: Ramira stated that she feels that she now speaks and
writes English at a more “sophisticated” level than she did before; this is due, at least in part, to her perseverance and hard work in her college writing course.

Suggestions for Classroom Practice in College Composition

In considering the challenges facing the participants in this study and other students in the similar situations, we must first recognize the complexity of the problem. This discussion begins by looking at how access to higher education is provided, but we must also consider the significance of the curricula and of the instructors. Thus, where the course is taught – what is taught – who teaches it – and how it is taught – are all important factors in creating solutions to the problems described in this study.

Instructors must devote more attention to the development of courses designed to meet the needs of adult Hispanic ESL learners. There is a strong need for courses that address cultural barriers such as a lack of personal connections between students and teachers. Institutional barriers, such as the limited availability of tutors and other learning center staff, and the limited availability of instructors whose native language is the same as that of the ESL student, should also be considered in the development of curricula. Family and child care responsibilities, full- or part-time employment, and transportation issues are not unique to ESL learners, but these issues are exacerbated by the language barriers that ESL students experience. There is also the lack of college writing courses designed specifically for non-native speakers. Thus, the role of instructors, access to college courses, and curricula design must be re-examined
with any eye toward meeting the specific learning needs of Hispanic ESL learners.

The Need to Define the Role of the Instructor

The participants in this study agree that positive relationships with their instructors are important for successful learning experiences. One way to help develop positive student-instructor relationships might be to hire qualified native language speakers to teach ESL courses. In this study, Abella described what she saw as the potential benefits to having a teacher who is a non-native speaker like herself: “By them knowing and learning of our culture that might allow them to have a more clear understanding on why we sit in English class and struggle to pass or even just to learn the language.” Sarita said she felt singled out by her (native-speaker) instructor who said that Hispanic students should be sure to ask (during class time) for help with grammar and other basic components of English. Miscommunications like this might be avoided by pairing non-native instructors with non-native learners. This concept of “matching” – that is, minority students being taught by minority teachers -- may improve student-teacher relationships and contribute to raising the teachers’ expectations of ESL students (Jamar & Pitts, 2005, cited in Stroter, 2008, p. 2). Recruiting teachers who are members of ethnic minorities to work with ESL students of the same ethnicity may help to foster that connection and bridge the gap between culture and learning.

Teachers of writing “need coherent perspectives, principles, models - tools for thinking about second language writing in general and ESL composition in
particular, and for analyzing and evaluating competing views” (Silva, 1990b, p. 11). Unfortunately, there has been comparatively little attempt to examine the role of culture in the learning process, particularly as seen from the students’ own vantage points. This is a key point because “culture is central to student learning, and every student brings a unique culture [italics added] to the classroom” (Mayo, 2010). Thus, instructors must understand the dynamics of what it means to be a Hispanic female and how cultural influences shape learning experiences.

The Need for Greater Access to Higher Education

While issues relating to access in higher education are not unique to ESL students, this study suggests that these participants -- as Hispanic females -- might face specific obstacles to learning at the college level. The data have illustrated the importance of family obligations to these women, as well as their strong desire to learn English and become successful and productive members of American society. Yet, issues such as the need for transportation to and from their classes, as well as the limited availability of night and weekend classes, and of Internet courses, might inhibit their chances to succeed. For students who are responsible for child care, there is an urgent need for additional and more affordable on-campus day-care.

Offering additional evening and Saturday classes could provide more opportunities for working students and students who are responsible for child care. Currently at PHCC, only 16 of the 42 traditional classroom setting courses
for English Composition I are held in the evening (classes beginning at 5:30 PM or later). Out of the 20 English Composition II sections, only seven evening sections are available. There are no sections of either Composition I or II offered on Saturdays. The Hispanic student population is currently about 10% of the total student enrollment at PHCC. This means that roughly 750 students are Hispanic, and this number is likely to increase (Pasco-Hernando Community College Fact Book, 2008). The 30 seats that are available in each existing evening class may not be enough to meet the requirements of students who work and may be responsible for child care. In this study alone, Doncia, Suelo, Ramira, Leticia, Verónica, and Graciela (all of whom work or care for children, or do both) indicated that they would benefit from the availability of more evening or weekend classes.

Students such as these would also benefit by taking advantage of their college's child care services. PHCC’s child care center, TodayCare, is part of a company by the same name that operates six centers in the states of Alabama, California, Florida, North Carolina, and Tennessee. TodayCare Children’s Center at PHCC was the company’s first center in Florida. The facility, located on PHCC’s West Campus (New Port Richey), has space available for 100 children, ages infant through 11 years old (fifth grade) during the day, and ages two through 11 for evenings. All PHCC students are informed about this service during the mandatory new-student orientation.

There are some drawbacks with this service, however. The college’s website states that the rates are comparable to other day care centers in the
area, and while PHCC students do receive a discount, the fees may still be more than some of these students can afford. Also, the center operates on a holiday calendar that is different from that of the college, and space is limited. Further, the center’s location would not help students taking classes at PHCC’s other campuses in Pasco and Hernando counties, or who live some distance from the West Campus. This is another area where expansion of the existing facility and the building of new ones should be considered. Perhaps rates could be prorated based on income, and adjustments could be made to accommodate students who are caring for children older than 11 years of age.

Increasing the availability of college courses through the Internet and the use of satellite campuses would help to meet the needs of students with limited transportation options. For the Fall 2012 semester, PHCC is offering 58 sections of English Composition I across its four campuses in Pasco and Hernando counties. Of these 58 sections, only five are on-line courses. There are 26 sections of English Composition II scheduled, of which only five are on-line. These numbers may be inadequate to accommodate the needs of the Hispanic student population in areas served by PHCC. However, PHCC is already striving to make itself more accessible by adding additional campuses. The Spring Hill Campus opened in 2010 and plans are underway for the Porter Campus, located in Wesley Chapel, scheduled to open in 2013-14. Still, more on-line course offerings would help to alleviate the problems associated with access.

Obviously, students must have access to a computer and to the Internet in order to take advantage of on-line courses. According to the PEW Hispanic
Research Center, 54% of foreign-born Hispanics have a home Internet connection, and 69% of Hispanics have a home broadband connection (Livingston, 2011). Among Hispanics, higher levels of educational attainment and household income are linked to higher rates of Internet use, home internet access, and having a home broadband connection (Livingston, 2011). While these numbers are lower than those of whites, the share of Latinos ages 18 to 29 who were online jumped from 75% to 85% from 2009 to 2010 (Livingston, 2011).

The type of medium used to present the on-line course must also be considered. The on-line courses currently offered at PHCC are asynchronous, a medium that the majority of researchers agree is at least as effective as traditional ways of teaching (Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenburg, 2000, cited in Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p. 105). In general, students taking on-line asynchronous courses “had more time to think about their responses and that the increased thinking time improved the depth and quality of responses” (Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenburg, 2000, cited in Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p. 96). This extra “thinking time” could prove to be useful for ESL students who may need additional time to formulate their responses. These benefits could be increased by having non-native speakers as teachers for some of the on-line classes.

The Need for Special ESL Curricula

Curricula should be designed to be “culturally responsive” and to build an “intimate connection between knowledge considered basic to any school
curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experiences of these students as individuals" (Paulo, 1998, cited in Stroter, 2008, p. 2). There are community colleges in the state of Florida in areas that have large Hispanic populations, and these schools may serve as models for the development of Hispanic ESL curricula. For example, Miami-Dade College, whose main campus is located in Miami, Florida, has an ESL Resource Department that offers courses designed especially for Hispanic ESL learners. In 2003, the college was granted the right to award baccalaureate degrees in education to meet future academic needs. This change has resulted in creating more opportunities for Hispanic students in the area to have access to four-year degrees. As of 2010, 65% of the population in Miami was Hispanic (State & County QuickFacts, 2010).

Programs similar to those at Miami-Dade College could serve as a model for other institutions to utilize in developing their own ESL programs. While courses of this type are not currently offered at PHCC, some of the participants in this study expressed their interest in taking such a course if it were made available. Ramira stated that she believed her “struggles would be lesser” if she had the opportunity to be in a writing class that was designed especially to meet the needs of students like herself; as she put it, she does not “learn the same way as [a] native speaker would.” Abella said that she felt she was not getting the individual attention she needed as an ESL learner; Suelo wished that instructors would “take one hour of the class and dedicate it to pronunciation.” Creating writing courses designed with the needs of ESL students in mind could
provide these students with the opportunity to learn to read and write English more efficiently and effectively.

The need for Hispanic-centered academic programs in the Miami area is clear, but this need is just as strong for areas that do not contain Hispanic populations of this size. In New Port Richey, Florida, where the main campus of Pasco-Hernando Community College is located, the Hispanic population is 11.2% (State & County QuickFacts, 2010). The needs of all students must be paramount in our higher education system, and Hispanic ESL learners should not miss out on any opportunities simply because they live in a part of the state with smaller Hispanic populations and fewer ESL programs.

Another way to encourage and support ESL students might be through the use of “English conversation corners,” informal meeting place where learners of English meet and practice their English. These meetings can be face-to-face, or conducted via electronic media. A search of the Internet produced several of these on-line forums, for Hispanic, Asian, and other ethnicities. These might serve as models for creating similar organizations at PHCC. Every year, PHCC celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month (running from September through October). This event could provide instructors with the opportunity to discuss the creation of a conversation corner for our ESL learners.

In an English writing course, the choice of textbooks should take into account the ethnic diversity that is evident in our college classrooms. While there has been some progress made in making the reading selections more diversity-sensitive, there remains room for improvement. AT PHCC, The Norton Field
Guide to Writing (with Readings and Handbook) (Bullock, Goggin, & Weinberg, 2010) is used for English Composition I. For English Composition II, the college uses LIT (Kirszner & Mandell, 2011), a text that was adopted by the college last year. A quick review of the biographies of the contributing authors in these textbooks revealed several Hispanic authors. While this is a step in the right direction, the proportion of Hispanic authors (and of women and minority authors) seems insufficient. A quick search of the Internet for Latino authors found several scholarly anthologies of Hispanic texts; among them is The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature (Stavans, Acosta-Belén, Augenbraum, Herrera-Sobek, Hinojosa, & Fermat (2010). A collection of this nature might be offered as an alternative or complementary textbook.

There is one cautionary note that should be mentioned. Instructors must be aware of the dangers inherent in assuming what the particular learning needs of a specific population might be. The data collected in this study may point to commonalities among the concerns of the participants, but this does not mean that there is a set formula that outlines these needs and dictates a single solution. Instructors must keep in mind the diversity that is present in all students, even in students who fit into the very broad category of “Hispanic.”

The Need to Build Academic Self-Confidence

The participants in this study described their desire to succeed and their dependence on their families, friends, and instructors to help them accomplish this. However, when all of these resources failed to fill their needs, the
participants were left with only one option: self-reliance. They described having to develop an inner strength to help them move forward when no one else was willing or available to help them. Leticia, for example, said that her parents’ English skills were very limited. Even though they wanted Leticia to succeed, they were unable to help her in any concrete ways. She learned, therefore, to cultivate her self-confidence and overcome her feelings of low self-esteem. She accomplished this by developing a strong work ethic and devoting a great deal of time to her studies. She would spend hours working on a writing assignment until she was satisfied that it was worth turning in. For Sarita, it was important that she could choose her essay topics and “be herself.” This improved her self-esteem, she said, and encouraged her to write more, and write better: “I’m good at what I’m doing because I can do whatever I want.” The trust that results from this sort of student-instructor relationship is key in promoting self-esteem among ESL students.

Implications for Future Research

Historically, there has been a lack of research into community college ESL programs that has continued into this millennium (Ignash, 1995). The need for a thorough examination into this population’s unique set of experiences is clear. I offer here some suggestions for future studies of the type described in this dissertation.
Instructional Media

Included in the implications for teaching practice described above was the idea of incorporating more on-line courses into the college’s curricula. In my study, I used the medium of the writing course as a criterion (traditional classroom settings), but I did include one additional participant (Doncia) who took her writing course on-line. While I did not investigate any specific differences in her responses as compared to those of the other participants, there are existing studies that have examined the differences between on-line learning and learning in a traditional, face-to-face classroom setting (Altmyer & Sheng-Ping, 2010; Bernard et al., 2004; Shana, 2009; Schoenfeld-Tacher, McConnell, & Graham, 2001; Wang & Yang, 2012). In addition to examining issues related to the question of convenience over quality of instruction, future studies could limit the research to Hispanic ESL learners and compare on-line and face-to-face college composition instruction and their effects on learning experiences.

Gender and Age of Participants

Because gender was excluded as a factor in my study, future studies might incorporate a comparison of the phenomenological influences discussed in this study through the lens of gender differences. Existing studies have explored gender as a factor in learning experiences at the high school and college level that included students in writing courses (Hamilton, 2007; Honigsfeld & Dunn, 2003; McCune, 2004; Perin, Keselman, & Monopoli, 2003; Risman, 2004). However, a study that explicitly examines the differences between Hispanic male
and female students in college writing courses could shed light on a different aspect of the experiences described in this study. Similarly, the age of the participants is another potential factor that could become the focus of future research. While some existing studies have looked at age as a variable (Calagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009), future studies might examine specific age groups (such as teenagers and young adults, or students who have been out of school for a number of years) among the population that was the subject of my study.

Career Objectives

Because community colleges offer a variety of degree programs and certificates, the diversity ESL students bring to higher education is reflected in their academic objectives (Blumenthal, 2002; Cohen, 2008; Ignash, 1995). My study did not make a distinction among the various career goals and educational objectives of the women who participated. However, there was a significant discrepancy among this group of eight participants. For example, Ramira expressed the desire to become a cardiologist, while Leticia plans on becoming a mechanical engineer. Suelo said she will be content if she can earn an associate’s degree and continue to work in a nursing home. Future studies could use the participants’ objectives as an investigative criterion and assess how their culture influences their career goals.
Prior Experiences of Participants

This study focused on the experiences of the participants while they were attending Pasco-Hernando Community College but did not consider any prior experiences the participants may have had at other colleges. Future studies might include previous experiences among female Hispanic students as a factor in their learning experiences. It is also interesting to speculate about a future study that would include the same eight women describing their experiences in other disciplines, such as science or math courses. How do they perceive their culture and its role in learning in other courses and what would a study of this type reveal? I have also wondered how my participants would respond to a different researcher; would they be more forthcoming, or less so? I can envision a study conducted by two, or even more, researchers, working as a team to gather and analyze data.

Placement in First-Year College Writing Courses

According to the on-line catalog for the college being examined, the admissions process requires a prospective student to submit his or her high school transcript indicating that a high school diploma (or GED equivalent) was awarded to the applicant. In addition, an applicant must provide standardized test scores (such as ACT, SAT, or CPT) that are no more than two years old. This information is used to place the applicant in math and English courses at the appropriate level. If such scores are not available or are too old, the applicant must take the college’s placement test, the verbal portion of which involves
reading and sentence-building skills. In the case of applicants who attended high
school or took standardized tests in a different country, the admissions director of
the college makes a determination of the appropriate placement on a case-by-
case basis. Although placement in English courses at the college in question can
be problematic for ESL students, my study did not examine the testing process
itself but focused on the results of that process as they pertain to ESL students
and writing courses.

Unfortunately, it has been my experience that some ESL students are
incorrectly placed in first-year writing courses. The result is that these students
often struggle along for a few weeks and then drop the course or continue
attending the class and receive a poor final grade; both outcomes are
unsatisfactory.

Conclusion

There is a critical need to understand the specific challenges students like
the ones described in this study are facing. These students must also have the
opportunity to describe these challenges, as they perceive them, in their own
words. Only then can we begin to take action to address their needs.

While it is my hope that this dissertation will have an impact on the way
educators teach ESL students in college writing courses (especially female
Hispanic students), I believe that the last several years I have spent thinking,
researching, analyzing, and writing about the subject of this dissertation have
changed the way I will teach English Composition in future classes.
For example, based on the comments of my participants described in Chapter Four, I will try to create assignments that provide students who need extra help with grammar and mechanics the practice they need. Offering additional help as optional assignments would allow any student who needs more in-depth instruction the chance to get the help he or she may need. Since grammar instruction is not currently a component of the composition course at PHCC, perhaps this is an issue I can raise at department meetings – that we should incorporate at least some grammar instruction into our writing courses. I will also try to initiate dialogues among my colleagues to discuss these issues and see what we can do as a team to improve the earning experiences of these students. Ideally, such meetings would include the students themselves; I saw firsthand with this study how important it is to hear them describe their concerns.

Interestingly, many of the strategies I am considering to help ESL students in my classes would be helpful for all my students, and not just the non-native speakers. The concept of universal design – “an approach to the design of all products and environments to be as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability, or situation” (Universal Design Education, n. d.) is especially applicable when one is interacting with a variety of learning needs, including those of non-native speakers of English. While universal design theory was not developed solely for use in instructional settings, its premises may be appropriate when educators are endeavouring to make changes to curricula that will be beneficial to individual needs, and to the class as a whole.
The seven principles of Universal Design as developed by the NCSU Center for Universal Design are based “on a broad spectrum of human abilities, including vision, hearing, speech, body function, mobility, and cognition” (Scott, Shaw, & McGuire, 2001). The researchers formulated nine principles for incorporating universal design into college instruction:

- Principle 1: Equitable use
- Principle 2: Flexibility in use
- Principle 3: Simple and intuitive
- Principle 4: Perceptible information
- Principle 5: Tolerance for error
- Principle 6: Low physical effort
- Principle 7: Size and space for approach and use
- Principle 8: A community of learners

Several of the words used in stating these principles --- “equitable use,” “flexibility,” tolerance for error,” and “community of learners” – are appropriate for all students, yet they must be recognized as especially important for any student who falls outside of the norm (e. g., the students who were the focus of this study). Flexibility is critical to the success of students who have responsibilities to earn a living, care for a child, or find transportation to and from school. Perceptible information means that the course material must be presented in a way that all students can comprehend and allow for error. A community of learners is the ideal setting for students who may feel as if they do not belong to the mainstream population and who want very much to be accepted into the
dominant culture. Thus, while I am contemplating changes to my instructional methods for future composition classes, I will keep in mind the needs of all of my students, and not just a select few. However, I must say that there students (ESL learners in an English composition class are a strong example) where these principles are especially important.

Perhaps the most important change I have undergone as the researcher in this study is the effect it has had on my attitude towards my students. I like to think of myself as a dedicated, open-minded instructor, one who truly cares for the individuals she has the privilege of teaching; yet as I got to know my participants, I realized how easily I slipped into stereotyping them. And I do not refer only to the ESL students in my classes, Hispanic or otherwise. I became more aware of the fact that each individual has a story to tell, a story as unique and special as the person himself or herself. Whatever changes or adjustments I make to my pedagogy in the future, I will surely have that consideration foremost in my mind. Yet I must admit that the women who took part in this study will always hold a special place in my heart. Their needs are at the core of this study, and I do not want to forget all the things they said to me, candidly and honestly, with the utmost faith and trust in me. As Hispanic women, they have done their culture proud.

Still, the facts are troublesome. Over the last 40 years, Hispanics have been much less likely to finish college than their white peers. According to the PEW Research Institute, only 12.5% of the current U. S. population who self-identified as Hispanic has a college degree, as compared to 30.9% of the non-
Hispanic population. The disparity is even greater when comparing foreign-born Hispanics and native-born Hispanics. Hispanic immigrants are more likely to drop out of high school and never enter college in the first place (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004).

Nevertheless, college entry has significantly expanded among Hispanics. This growth may be in response to the disappearance of manufacturing jobs due to outsourcing, or to an increase in the number of Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. In 1970, only 25% of young Hispanic high school completers were enrolled in college at the time of interview. By 2007, almost 40% of Hispanic high school completers were pursuing college (Fry, 2009). Of these, some 46% were attending a community college (Fry, 2011).

A college degree will become more necessary than ever in our changing job market. While a four-year degree may not always be required (or obtainable), the opportunity to earn an associate’s degree should be made possible for everyone who desires one, regardless of gender or ethnicity. America’s community colleges are poised to be the embodiment of this opportunity and must recognize the needs of all students, especially those students who have been traditionally underrepresented. This goal cannot be realized without educating and graduating more non-native, first-generation, and minority students (McGlynn, 2011).

The women who took part in my study contributed significantly to the understanding of the lived experiences of female Hispanic ESL students in college writing courses. As with any exploration of a complex idea, each point
that was clarified opened the door to new questions and new possible explorations, some of which are outlined above. From the journal responses and the interviews, I have built a description of the various perceptions these students provided. They all perceive academic success to be dependent upon emotional support, motivation, and cultural assimilation; English language acquisition underscores these concerns.

Participants in this study expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to talk about their experiences and their culture, and regretted not having more opportunities to do so. Several of them expressed their excitement to be a part of this study, and they told me they were surprised that anyone would be interested in their opinions. After conducting the analysis of the data compiled through the journal responses and the individual interviews, I was impressed with the candor and willingness of the participants to share their learning experiences.

Female Hispanics must be encouraged to take advantage of every opportunity available to them to become successful members of American society. Using the descriptions provided here, I hope a greater understanding of the issues facing these students will be achieved. I hope this study also helps college writing instructors think about what these students need in order to be academically successful, and to teach with these needs in mind.

As a concluding note, I might add that it is interesting to consider that the suggestions I have described here are not intended solely for those of us who teach English. I am sure my colleagues who teach math, history, biology, and all the other subjects that are part of our college’s programs of study also
experience many of the same concerns that I have experienced for our ESL learners. Likewise, I am sure that the students themselves are facing challenges with these subjects as well. Challenges relating to their skill level with English could have a powerful influence on their coursework outside of English class. I can imagine a non-native speaker who struggles with English vocabulary trying to figure out a word problem in algebra, or a social studies student who is unfamiliar with the way the U. S. government works trying to write a paper about our presidential election. This leads me to believe even more strongly that change must be universal and all-inclusive. I can only take small steps at PHCC to practice what I have been suggesting here, but small steps can be the start of great journeys. I am motivated by all I learned during the course of this study, and I hope I can spread that enthusiasm to others. I want all of our students to succeed, no matter where they were born.

We must not think in terms of merely adapting higher education; rather, we must think about expanding what has already been proven to work. We need to continue to have conversations about the concerns of non-native speakers of English in our college classrooms, especially in English composition courses. We need to establish a dialogue in which every voice is heard, particularly those of a population that has been under-represented in the past: “One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding” (Freire, 1970). I
hope that this study can contribute to initiating that dialogue and help educators
realize the potential among all our students that is waiting to be recognized.
References


doi:10.3102/0002831210368989


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Appendix A

Request for Participants

Hello,

I am a faculty member here at PHCC. I am also a doctoral candidate at The University of South Florida. As part of my required course work for my dissertation, I am conducting a study and I would like your help. The goal of my study is to obtain a better understanding of female Hispanic students at PHCC who have taken English Composition I within the last two semesters. I am asking you to complete this brief questionnaire to see if you might be eligible to be a participant in my study. If you are eligible, and you agree to participate, you will receive a $50.00 VISA gift card at the conclusion of the study.

If you do decide to participate, we will discuss a time and a location to meet to conduct a one-on-one interview. This interview will consist of some questions about your experiences in your English course at PHCC, and will take about one hour. The interview questions are intended to make you feel comfortable speaking about yourself, your cultural background, and your school experiences. However, there may be questions that tend to be personal or that touch on experiences that you have not talked about to many people. You will have the option of not answering any question(s) that you do not want to. I will also ask you to respond to three writing prompts via email. Your privacy with respect to the information you disclose during participation in this study will be protected within the limits of the law. I will assign you a pseudonym so your identity will be protected. I appreciate your cooperation. Thank you.
Sincerely,

Barbara B. Booker  
bookerusf@hotmail.com

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<th>Where were you born?</th>
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<th>Are you at least 18 years of age?</th>
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<th>NO</th>
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<th>Are you a first generation college student?</th>
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<th>Have you completed English Composition I at PHCC?</th>
<th>YES</th>
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If YES, was it in a regular classroom setting, or was it an on-line course?

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<th>REGULAR CLASSROOM</th>
<th>ON-LINE COURSE</th>
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If YES, when did you take the course (semester/year)?

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<th>Is English your first language?</th>
<th>YES</th>
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Please give me your contact information:

Email:

Phone:
Appendix B

Email to Colleagues

Dear PHCC Colleagues,

I am a full-time faculty member in the English Department at the West Campus. I am also a doctoral candidate at The University of South Florida, and I want to begin collecting data for my study. I will be examining the influence of culture on the learning experiences of Hispanic ESL females who are at students at PHCC. To identify potential participants for my study, I would like your permission to visit your classroom at the start of the Fall 2011 semester to distribute a brief questionnaire to your students. This will take only a few minutes; I have included here a copy of the questionnaire and the Informed Consent form so that you may see the types of information I will be requesting. I will answer any questions that you or your students may have, including clarification of the conditions, obligations, and benefits of participation. I have filed the appropriate permission forms with PHCC, and with USF. I hope to hear from you shortly, and I thank you in advance for your time and consideration. I have provided my contact my information here. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Barbara B. Booker
Office: 727- 816-3332
bookerusf@hotmail.com
Appendix C

Informed Consent

Adult Education, Community College Teaching, Curriculum and Instruction
University of South Florida

Information Consent for People Who Take Part in Research Studies

The following information is being presented to help you decide whether or not you want to take part in a minimal risk research study. Please read this carefully. If you do not understand anything, ask me for an explanation.

Title of Study: Perceptions of Female Hispanic ESL Students Toward First-Year College Writing Courses: A Phenomenological Examination.

Principal Investigator: Barbara B. Booker

Study Location: Pasco-Hernando Community College

1. This study involves interviewing PHCC students regarding their experiences in English Composition courses at this college, and is therefore research.
2. The purpose of the study is to describe and explain selected students’ perceptions of their experiences in their college writing courses.
3. I expect the study to last from August 2011 through November 2011.
4. The approximate number of students to be interviewed ranges from five to six interviewees.
5. The procedure of the research involves asking students who consent to participate to be interviewed by the researcher.

6. The interviews will take place on the West Campus of PHCC, in my office in the G Building (G235). The interviews will last approximately one hour.

7. Participants will also be asked to respond in writing (via email) to some journal prompts I will provide.

8. There are no foreseeable risks to eligible students who choose to participate.

9. Possible benefits: participants will receive a $50.00 VISA gift card after satisfactorily completing the study. They will also receive copies of the interview transcripts. Significant new findings which relate to the concerns of Hispanic female ESL students will be provided.

10. The confidentiality of the participants will be completely maintained throughout the study; only I will know their identities, which will remain anonymous in the study.

11. For questions about the research and the participants’ rights and any other issues arising from the research, please contact me, Barbara B. Booker, at: bookerusf@hotmail.com

12. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits. Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

13. There is no cost to you for participation in this research study.

14. The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) may be contacted at: 12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd, MDC035, Tampa, Florida, 33612;
telephone: 813-974-5638. The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board / Department of Health & Human Service may request to see my research records of this study.

Print your name here:

___________________________________________________

I agree to participate in this study with Barbara B. Booker. I realize that this information will be used for educational purposes. I understand I may withdraw from the study at any time. I understand the intent of the study.

And sign your name here:

___________________________________________________

Date: ____________________________
Participant Journal Entry Prompts

- Journal entry 1: reflect on your experiences in acquiring English writing skills, particularly the role that others (such as family, friends, or other members of your culture) play in this process. Do you think these others support your efforts to acquire college-level writing skills? If so, how?

- Journal entry 2: think about your own English learning activities after class, and your purposes for these activities. Are you involved in any clubs or organizations that are designed for Hispanic non-native speakers who are trying to improve their English speaking and writing skills? If so, how do these organizations help you with your learning? If you are not involved in any of these types of organizations, can you explain why? How do you feel about organizations of this type?

- Journal entry 3: what advice do you believe would help other Hispanic females who are trying to acquire college-level English writing skills? What do you see as the greatest obstacle facing students like yourself? Is there anything else you’d like to add?
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

1. Can you describe any influence that your Hispanic culture had on you as a student in a college writing course?

2. Think about the writing assignments you had in your college writing course. Did any of these assignments cause you to question the way you normally act?

3. Why do you think some Hispanic women students are more successful in their college writing courses than other Hispanic women students?

4. As a student in a college writing course, how important was it to you to get emotional support from others? Are these “others” family members? Friends? Teachers? Please describe.

5. Did you have enough time from your other responsibilities, such as work and family, to devote to your assignments in your college writing courses? Did others help you with your other responsibilities when you had assignments to work on for these courses?

6. Would you please describe for me how you typically prepared for your college writing course at PHCC?

7. Can you describe your impressions about learning from your college writing instructor over the early weeks of the semester? That is, what do you think of the way the instructor presented the course material? How
was it explained? Did the instructor make you feel confident about your ability to learn, or nervous, or something else?

8. Now that you have completed a college writing course, what stood out the most for you as far as your learning experience?

9. What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your thinking skills?

10. What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your research skills?

11. What activities or assignments do you feel helped you develop your grammatical, formatting, and citation skills?

12. Did you have an experience in your writing course at PHCC that had a significant impact on your attitudes and perceptions toward your culture? If so, please describe.

13. Was there a time in your college writing courses when you realized that your values, beliefs, opinions, or expectations had changed? If so, please describe what happened.
PHCC English Composition I Syllabus

Pasco-Hernando Community College
English Composition I
Spring 2011 Term II January 10 – May 2

Monday – Wednesday
ENC1101 3025 08:00A - 09:15 0007
ENC1101 3022 09:30A - 10:45 0012
ENC1101 3016 11:00A - 12:15 0018
ENC1101 3013 12:30P - 01:45 0019

Tuesday – Thursday
ENC1101 3008 08:00A - 09:15 0014
ENC1101 3064 11:00A - 12:15 0022
ENC1101 3158 12:30P - 01:45 0009

Room: G112
Instructor: Barbara B. Booker, Assistant Professor
Phone: (727) 816-3332
Office: G 235
Email: bookerb@phcc.edu *be sure to use this email address ONLY

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
Prerequisite: Appropriate placement test score or ENC 0010 (completed with a grade of “C” or higher) and REA 0002. This course is designed to develop effective written communication skills for academic and professional use. It includes practice in the selection, restriction, organization, and development of topics and reinforces the student’s facility with sentence structure, diction, and mechanics. Selected writing samples are examined as models of form and as sources of ideas for the student’s own writing. Students will be required to use a computer to compose essays in this class. In accordance with the Gordon Rule, this course requires a research paper; an oral presentation; and review/discussion of written responses to critical questions based on the readings. If used to meet the requirements of the AA Degree or the AS Degree, a grade of “C” or higher must be attained. This is a three credit hour course.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:
The goal of this course is that students will acquire pre-writing and writing skills as they write critically about literary works. In the research component of the course, students will learn to integrate the work of others with their own writing, using the proper scholarly methods for research and documentation. It is
a further goal of Composition I that students will discover and enjoy in the
literature they read those elements which make the best of it universal and
timeless.

REQUIRED TEXT:
*Please bring this book to every class.

OPTIONAL TEXT (strongly recommended):
*Be sure you have the seventh edition; the MLA has made changes that are
included only in this latest edition.

I suggest that you bring a dictionary to class; a small, "pocket-size" one will do.

OTHER REQUIRED MATERIALS:
1. One thin, two-pocket folder in which to submit your Research Paper.
2. A blue scantron (sold in the PHCC bookstore) for the MLA quiz.
3. Paper on which to take notes.
4. A stapler (I really dislike receiving loose sheets of paper, or papers
held together with paper clips).

PLAGIARISM:
Plagiarism, or using the work of another person and passing it off as one's
own, is prohibited by PHCC. Plagiarism is the failure to give proper credit to
one’s source of information in the form of a citation, and it also includes allowing
someone else to compose or rewrite an assignment for a student. Plagiarism that
is the result of incorrect citation may be unintentional on the part of the student;
nevertheless it is still plagiarism and will be treated as such. Plagiarism may
result in a failing grade for the paper in question, a failing grade for the semester,
or both, at the discretion of the instructor. Corrected versions of plagiarized
papers will not be accepted. If the student has any questions about citation, it is
his or her responsibility to obtain answers to these questions in order that citation
is used correctly. Students may refer to the MLA section in the textbook, or ask
the instructor for assistance. We will review MLA citation this semester; students
who have questions about citation are expected to express their concerns/ask
questions during these lessons.
CELL PHONES:
Please turn off your cell phone prior to class.

SMOKING:
Smoking is permitted in designated areas only.

FOOD/DRINKS:
PHCC policy prohibits eating and drinking in the classroom. If you need to excuse yourself during class time, please do so as unobtrusively as possible.

EQUAL ACCESS/EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMITMENT:
The college is committed to providing equality in educational and employment access and opportunity without regard to race, color, gender, age, religion, marital status, disability, or national origin. Harassment in any form will not be condoned or tolerated by the college, whether directed toward the employers, employees, or students.

SPECIAL NEEDS:
Persons who require any special services should contact the Assistant Dean of Student Services.

ATTENDANCE POLICY:
Since each lecture builds upon the previous material covered, students cannot afford to miss classes and are expected to be present for all class meetings. Attendance records will be kept and excessive absences (three or more for the twice a week classes, two or more for the once a week classes) will lower the student’s final grade. Every effort should be made to arrive on time for class. Students arriving more than five minutes late will be marked absent 1/2 attendance for that day (two of these late arrivals will therefore amount to one absence). Any student who sleeps during class time will be counted absent for the entire class.

If you are absent, please do not ask me what you missed. It is your responsibility to find out what went on in class; ask a classmate to share his or her notes with you.

One more time: attendance counts as part of your final grade.

WARNING -- KNOW THE FACTS ABOUT TITLE IV FEDERAL REPAYMENT:
You MUST ATTEND class through 60% of the term. FAILURE to do so may require you to repay all or a portion of your Title IV Financial Aid (Pell, SEOG, and Stafford Loans) to the Federal Government and/or to PHCC. If you have any questions, contact the Financial Aid Office on your campus.

CANCELATION OF CLASSES:
In the event that I must cancel a class, the college will notify students by phone. If I am late for class, wait 15 minutes after the start of the class; if I am still not there, circulate a sign-up sheet with the date and our course name/section number. After all students have signed their names on this sheet, please have someone hold onto the sheet until our next class meeting. I will collect it then and record attendance. See comments under “Make-up Assignments” for information regarding hurricane-related cancelations.

RIGHT TO CHANGE:

The instructor reserves the right to alter course assignments, requirements, or any other information as necessary during the term. Any changes will be provided to students in advance.

MAKE-UP ASSIGNMENTS:

For the most part, work that is missed through absence cannot be made up. All assignments are due on the dates listed in the Daily Schedule, and it is the student’s responsibility to be sure all work is turned in on time. If class is canceled due to a hurricane or a similar occurrence, any papers or assignments due that day will be due next class. If compelling circumstances warrant a make-up assignment, the student must present documentation concerning these circumstances and make arrangements with the instructor to make up the missed assignment. Even if a make-up assignment is accepted, all work not turned in on the date it is due will be marked down one letter grade for each class meeting it is late. All make-up work must be completed within two class periods of the original date.

GRADING:

Grades are based on a point system. Please be aware that final grades may be lowered due to poor attendance, lack of participation, etc., at the discretion of the instructor, regardless of the number of points earned.

A total of 1,000 points is available.
A = 900-1000 (90%)
B = 800-899  (80%)
C = 700-799   (70%)
D = 600-699   (60%)
F = below 600 points

POINT BREAKDOWN:
1. Final Draft of Research Paper 300 points
2. Polished Draft of Research Paper 100 points
3. Outline of Research Paper 50 points
4. Oral Presentation 100 points
5. Portfolio Entries (6 @50 points each) 300 points
6. Portfolio Entry of Student’s Choice for Grading 75 points
7. MLA Quiz 25 points
8. Peer Responses (2 @25 pts. each) 50 points

TOTAL 1000 points

Please see the Daily Schedule for all due dates

DESCRIPTION OF COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:

1. Final Draft of Research Paper
   You will write a minimum of FIVE, FULL pages. It would be a good idea to go onto SIX pages to be sure you have five full pages. The Works Cited page does not count as one of these five pages. The paper will be typed and double-spaced using size 12 font, with 1" margins all around. We will follow the MLA formatting guidelines, See pages 428 through 476 in Norton for MLA information. Also, there is a sample of a paper cited using MLA documentation beginning on page 468. Your research paper will be formatted exactly the same way as this sample paper.

   Research is required with proper MLA documentation. You must use at least THREE scholarly sources (not something you find through a Google search). Encyclopedic sources, such as Wikipedia, do not count as scholarly sources; dictionaries are not scholarly sources, either. You must use the PHCC academic databases for at least ONE of your sources. You must also give your paper a title.

   *See the “Doing Research” section on pages 375-383, and the “Sources” section on pages 384 - 424 in Norton for more information. Also, see pages 83-110 in Norton for arguing a position.

   Be sure to approach the topic as controversial. In other words, “Child abuse” is an idea for a topic, but cannot be used as the basis for an argument (you cannot say you are against child abuse; what sane person is for it?). Instead, you would need to argue something like, “The incidence of child abuse is increasing because of the lack of effective prosecution” – you would then argue that the laws relating to child abuse are ineffective, explaining why you feel this way and supporting your opinion with research. Your goal is to persuade the reader to agree with your position. External sources (research) should be used to help bolster your argument.

   I will provide a list of potential ideas for topics. I will allow only two people to do a single topic. Your choice of topic may be given to me at any time, but no later than Week 4. Be aware that the longer you wait, the narrower your choice becomes. (TYPE your choice of topic on a full sheet of paper with your name and date and turn it in to me).

NOTE: the following topics may not be used for the Research Paper:
Be aware that a research paper is not simply a collection of facts on a particular topic. It is a chance for you to develop and display your reasoning ability. This paper represents our final exam and is worth almost half the final grade; it serves as a representation of everything we cover during the semester. Be sure that you analyze, compare, evaluate, and argue. It is important that you understand exactly what these terms mean in relation to your paper. Don’t let your paper be a “data dump”!

IMPORTANT: It is imperative that you understand the nature of this assignment (it is an argument, not a description, a causal analysis, a definition, or a comparison/contrast, although the argument may contain elements of those rhetorical patterns). It is also essential that you understand how to use MLA documentation correctly. In this research paper assignment, you will learn how to

- Include an interesting introduction which provides a hook, defines unknown terms and gives necessary background or contextual information
- Provide a clearly stated claim (narrow, debatable, realistic)
- Give thoughtful and relevant reasons to support your overall claim
- Use sufficient evidence (at least four outside sources) to support your argument
- Organize your claims, reasons and evidence so that the paper is unified and focused. Use clear transitions to guide readers between your ideas
- Analyze your target audience (their beliefs, values, background, assumptions) and write according to their needs and interests
- Address your readers' opposing views wherever necessary (the refutation)
- Use appeals effectively and avoid fallacies of argumentation
- Include a Works Cited page and use proper MLA documentation for citations
- Avoid distracting spelling and grammar errors to improve credibility

FORMAT FOR THE RESEARCH PAPER (final draft and polished draft)

★ points will be deducted for any paper that does not follow these guidelines.
- 12 point font, black ink
- No bold, italics, or other fancy fonts. Use Times New Roman or Arial
- 1” side margins, 1” top/bottom margins
- Paragraphs indented 5 spaces
- Double-spaced (with no additional spaces between paragraphs)
- Don’t use a cover page
- On the first page, put your name, course name, instructor’s name, and the date on the top left-hand side
- Center the title of your paper, using no bold, underlining, italics, or quotation marks
- Put your last name and the page number on the top right-hand side of every page
- Put your GRADED polished draft, final draft, and copies of your sources in a THIN two-pocket folder

See the sample paper beginning on page 468 in the Norton book.

Once again: you will turn in your final draft in a THIN two-pocket folder (no three-ring binders will be accepted) along with copies of your sources (copies of the printouts from electronic sources, and copies of book/journal covers and the pages you referenced), and your GRADED polished draft. Points will be deducted if these directions are not followed exactly. Your paper will be graded on:
- Focus (establishing and maintaining your key point)
- Having a clearly stated position on a topic that has two sides (thesis statement)
- Development (using appropriate and sufficient details to support the focus)
- Organization (following a logical order to present your ideas
- MLA documentation and the required number and types of sources
- Grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation
- Format

Points are awarded according to the rubric that follows.

Rubric for the Research Paper Final Draft

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Thesis is clearly stated as an argument; main points are adequately developed and supported</th>
<th>100 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Introduction, body, refutation, and conclusion are presented in logical order</td>
<td>50 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>Correct use of MLA citation; parentheticals and the Works Cited page follow proper MLA format; three scholarly sources are used, including one from the PHCC databases</td>
<td>75 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copies of sources</td>
<td>Printouts of the sources used in the paper are included in the folder; the GRADED polished draft is included</td>
<td>25 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar, punctuation, spelling, and format</td>
<td>Paper has been carefully and closely edited for grammatical and mechanical errors, and for correct format (NO COVER PAGES, e.g.).</td>
<td>50 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During Weeks 11 - 13, our class will not meet. Instead, I will schedule each of you for an individual conference with me (to be held in our classroom during regular class time) to discuss any issues or questions you may have concerning the final draft of the research paper. You need only come to class if you are scheduled to meet with me that day. This means you will have three of the four days off, so I expect you to be working very hard on your final drafts on those days. Please bring a copy of your paper to facilitate this discussion. This meeting is mandatory. Missing this conference will have a negative impact on your final grade.

2. Polished Draft of the Research Paper
You will bring your draft to class on the due date listed in the Daily Schedule. If you do not have your draft with you on the due date, you forfeit those points. I will not accept emailed or dropped-off drafts. In class, I will answer specific questions and concerns about the drafts. I expect to see a Works Cited page and proper parenthetical documentation in the draft. Remember, this is a POLISHED draft, not a rough one. 100 points.

3. Outline of the Research Paper
We will follow the guidelines for organizing a persuasive paper as described in Norton, beginning on page 105. In addition, here is a link to help you: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/544/02/ 50 points.

4. Oral Presentation
You will present your research paper orally to the class. The choice is up to you. You must “talk” your paper – I will not allow anyone to read his or her paper aloud. Instead, the presentation should be a discussion of the topic. You may use notes to help you remember important points.

Presentations must last a MINIMUM of 10 minutes and be no longer than 15 minutes (I will stop you at 15 minutes). Points will be deducted for presentations that are shorter than ten minutes in length. A sign-up sheet will be circulated for Oral Presentation dates. At that time, you must tell me which paper you have chosen to present. You should use visual aids (Power Point, posters, handouts, BRIEF film clips no more than two minutes maximum). Be aware that if you use an electronic visual aid (Power Point, the Internet, e.g.), you are responsible for setting it up. A word of advice: have a back-up plan. That is, if the computer in this room refuses to cooperate, or you cannot open your link, or
anything of that nature, you must still do your presentation, or lose all of the points. 100 points.

NOTE: you MUST attend class on ALL of the presentation dates, even if you are not presenting that day. Your role is to function as an audience member for the presenter. Your participation in the discussion is part of your participation grade for the semester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric for Oral Presentation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparedness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimum Time Met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **Portfolio Project**
Your portfolio will contain the following SIX entries:

- A literacy narrative (pp. 21-36). You will write the narrative of your personal experiences as a reader (perhaps describing how and when you learned to read).
- An analysis of a text (pp. 38-58). You will choose an advertisement from a magazine, newspaper, journal, or website and analyze it according to our class discussion. Include a COPY of the advertisement.
- An annotated bibliography (pp. 116-123). Based on the topic of your choice for the Research paper (the controversial issue), locate THREE sources of information on that topic and create an evaluative annotated bibliography of those sources.
- A literary analysis (pp. 143-152). Choose a text that is NOT found in Norton (may be a poem, a short story, or an article from a journal or magazine) and write an analysis based on our classroom discussion. Include a COPY of the text.
- A memoir (pp. 153-160). Write about a memorable experience in your life that has special SIGNIFICANCE to you, being sure to explain why and how it is significant.
- A résumé and job letter (pp. 188-200). We will discuss formats for these genres.

Each entry has a due date listed in the Daily Schedule. I will collect the entries on those dates, check them for completion, award you 50 points for satisfactorily completing the assignment, and then return the drafts to you the next class. You will then work in small groups to read and discuss each other’s drafts. If you are not prepared, you lose out on the point values assigned to each assignment (50), and your lack of participation in class will be detrimental to your
final grade for the semester. WITHOUT EXCEPTION, NO LATE SUBMISSIONS ACCEPTED. Six entries at 50 points each (300 total points).

On the date the portfolio selection is due, you will select ONE of your portfolio entries for me to grade. You will attach the entry of your choice to a clean sheet of paper labeled (TYPED) “My Choice for Grading.” This entry will be worth 75 points.

See the Daily Schedule for due dates.

6. MLA Quiz
You will need a blue scantron (sold in the PHCC bookstore) for this multiple choice quiz. The quiz will test your knowledge of correct MLA documentation and will be based on our discussions of MLA in class (I strongly suggest you take notes during these discussions). 25 points.

7. Peer Responses to Classmates’ Research Papers
On the due date for these papers, you will each read and respond to two of your classmates’ Research Papers (final drafts). We will use the questions from pages 235 - 234 in Norton. Each peer response is worth 25 points. 50 points total. There is no make-up work possible for this activity; you must be present in class, with your paper, to participate.

Note: This semester, you will be asked to complete an online evaluation in which you assess the course and the instructor. It is very important that you do this, as it is your opportunity to give the college your opinion about your experiences in this course. The information is strictly anonymous, and is used to help improve the curriculum and how it is taught. Please make a note to complete the evaluation when the time comes. I will make an announcement to remind everyone about it. Thank you.
Appendix G

Researcher Reflective Journal

Wednesday, March 16, 2011

My first journal entry. I am finalizing my first three chapters for my proposal defense. Right now, my biggest problem is maintaining my focus. The more I read, the more confused I seem to get. I find I cannot make the simplest statement without having to research the terms I use and rationalizing my reasons for using them. Still, I do feel as if I am making progress. I used to wonder how people ever wrote dissertations that are hundreds of pages in length; how, I asked myself, could anyone have so much to say about a single topic? What an eye-opener for me when I began doing close readings of these studies and seeing the depth of the descriptions and analyses. It’s funny, but sometimes I worry that my study will be too long. That in itself is not a problem (I saw dissertations that exceeded five hundred pages!), but I am concerned about including information that is irrelevant to my focus. When is enough, enough? I actually wrote an entire section about the teaching of college composition, and ended up deleting it because I could not relate it to my topic. I did keep the section on the background of college writing because it seemed to fit well with the whole culture-and-learning phenomenon.
Friday, March 18, 2011

I am grading the polished drafts my students turned in this week. I am at this point in the semester always a little concerned about all of my students who are not doing as well as I had hoped they would, but I find I am especially concerned about the native-Spanish speakers in the room. Of course, I think this is attributable to my study topic, and I can't help but think about other ways I might help these particular students. I have right now about six Hispanic students across my seven sections, male and female. Some of them are doing reasonable well. But some of the others seem to be struggling. In all honesty, I have to say that even some of the native speakers are struggling, too, but somehow I seem to be able to reach them better. I try very hard to give my students plenty of feedback (both written and oral). But sometimes I think I am not getting the point across clearly enough to some of the non-native speakers.

Still, since I have been working on my dissertation, I have gained some remarkable insight into the teaching of writing. I submit a draft of my paper to my major professor and eagerly await his comments. I see how it feels to be on the other side of the desk, so to speak. I listen very carefully to what Dr. Eison says; I make notes: I ask for clarification when I don’t understand; and I try my best to make use of his suggestions. I know how it feels to hope-hope-hope he will say something positive (he usually does), and to want to work even harder to meet his very high expectations. Once again, I am teacher-as-learner; I hear myself giving my students my reaction to their drafts, and I understand a bit better how they might be feeling. This in turn makes me word my comments more carefully,
and take time to make sure that my students understand what I mean. And it usually works --- except in a few cases, and unfortunately some of those cases seem to involve the challenges that non-native speakers face.

*Saturday, March 19, 2011*

I have been working hard to get the first three chapters ready for Dr. Eison to read. I want (need) to get the proposal finished and in front of my committee as soon as possible. The pressure is awful: I don't mind the writing and research part (I actually enjoy it), but the deadlines are so stressful. Still, I guess it is better to have a schedule to stick to; I can see how this dissertation project can drag on forever! I do know some people who have been ABD for years – years!—and have not written a single word of their dissertations. I do not want to be one of those people. I think it was Dr. Eison who mentioned some frightening figures about two out of three doc students never finishing (or even starting) their dissertations. So hooray for deadlines.

I have found the Proquest database to be very useful; the only drawback is that I have a terrible reading text (lots of text) on the computer screen, so I either buy the dissertation I want to read (ugh – around $45.00 a copy), or I print it out myself (cheaper, but still burns lots of ink and paper). It is necessary, however; I like to have my own copies to mark up and highlight as I wish.

*Monday, March 21, 2011*

Even when I am in the front of my classroom getting ready for the day's instruction, I always have my study at the back of my mind. I find myself looking
at the Hispanic students in my classes, and wondering about their backgrounds, their successes and failures, their needs and wants. Sometimes I wish I had expanded my study to include male students as well as female ones, but then of course, I would be introducing the whole gender thing – not exactly what I want to learn about. Not right now, at any rate – maybe one day later on. For now, it is the women who intrigue me; perhaps that is because I am a woman, and I think I can relate to their circumstances a little better. All women face challenges that are rooted in their gender, and Hispanic women (and any other ethnic or racial minority) are at the receiving end of a double whammy of sorts. This is what excites me – I want to hear from them, in their own words, their stories. I speculate what I can do to help them learn – what all educators can do to help them learn – but that is so one-sided. I am biased, and I cannot step away from my biases to get to the truth – the unvarnished truth. Sure, my study is not objective (is anything ever objective?) but I hope I can get a little closer to what these women are experiencing. I can’t wait to start the data collection part. Soon, I hope.

Tuesday, March 22, 2011

I have a student I’ll call Hector. He is a Hispanic male, about 20 years old, and a native of Colombia. He tries very hard in my class, and is doing well. He told me he is the only person in his immediate family who can speak English. His father knows very few English words, but he constantly exhorts Hector to “Finish college!” He knows how to say that in English! Hector and I have had some nice
conversations about his life – how he came here as a child, how his family has struggled to earn a living, how much hope they have pinned on Hector as the first one to go to college. I wonder if he has any sisters, and if the family wants them to attend college, too. Perhaps if I get to know Hector a bit better, I will ask him this.

Saturday, April 2, 2011

Finally, the weekend is here. I have been working steadily on my proposal. I seem to take one step forward and two steps back. The more I read, the more I realize how much is still missing. Looking at other qualitative dissertations has been really helpful, especially for the format (headings, and the like). I am enjoying keeping this journal; I did not realize how therapeutic it would be (although I am always telling my students that writing can be a release). I wish I had more time – I keep reading that qualitative research needs time, and I get that; but I wish I had the luxury of going more slowly – so many deadlines. The financial constraints are paramount, of course. Otherwise, I’d be glad to spend the next three years just reading and writing about my topic. Well, it will be over two years by the time I graduate. Two years of working on this dissertation (now that I think about it, it is really more like 2 ½ years). I remember Yenni telling me that qualitative studies take forever, and she was right. But even if I had a better grasp of statistics, I would not have wanted to do a quantitative study. Numbers just don’t tell the story, and the story is what I want. Their stories, in their words. I cannot wait to start data collection!
Wednesday, April 6, 2011

Read an interesting article by Dr. Janesick about qualitative studies. She was quoting someone named Progoff (sp?) who was her instructor years ago. Apparently, his comments about journal writing made quite an impression on her. I wanted to locate some of Progoff’s texts to see for myself what impressed Dr. J so much, so I Googled him and got some titles. I read one article by him that described the differences between plain old diary-writing and reflective journal writing. I was surprised (happily so) because Progoff claims a reflective journal is dynamic, not static like a diary. That appealed to me since I think that this is the direction my own journal is taking. Progoff says a reflective journal can help one get in touch with his own possibilities; so it is not merely a recording of What Happened Today, but an iteration of What Could Be. I think that really sums up this whole dissertation process: I am changing every day, and learning something new, every day. Amazing, really, when one thinks about it. When I finished my coursework, I was a little sad because I thought, well, no more school for me. Ever. But the happy surprise is that I am still learning. Thanks, Dr. Progoff, for pointing this out (Dr. J, too!).

Thursday, April 14, 2011

Finally finished the CITI renewal form. Thank goodness they sent an email reminder. I am wondering about the IRB process – apparently, I cannot submit the paperwork until my proposal is approved/defended. So much red tape – I
thought the master’s degree process was confusing! Oh, well – one step at a
time. If I look too far ahead, I get overwhelmed. I should practice what I preach to
my own students: don’t dwell on how far you have to go – look at how far you
have come. It’s just that for me, the end is so close – so close.

I think I am going to add to the community college section of my proposal.
I want to make clearer the connection between the demographic of the
community college and the different Hispanic cultures. I did touch on it a little
already, but I think it needs more. Been reading up on the history of the
community college, and looking at the PHCC handbook. The AACC website was
helpful, too –especially the link about diversity. I was pleased to read about the
AACC’s “challenge,” a letter sent to all community colleges concerning
completion rates. PHCC accepted this challenge, which apparently involves
tracking graduation rates. I clicked on PHCC and saw a letter from Dr. Johnson
that mentioned PHCC’s dedication to helping all students, including students who
are members of ethnic or racial minorities. That is pretty much in keeping with
what I already knew to be true, and actually was a factor in my decision about
what to examine in my study. All of my students are my priority, but I feel very
concerned about the female Hispanic students I teach.

Saturday, April 16, 2011

Had a good phone conversation with Dr. E. on Thursday. We are trying
hard to have my defense the week of May 16. Dr. E. gave me some suggestions
for revision, and I worked on them all day Thursday and again today. I’ll finish it
up tomorrow so I can email it back to him. I hope I can get my proposal to my committee this week – it is going to be tight. But I simply have to get moving – I can’t delay graduation any longer. Running out of money!

Monday, April 18, 2011

I have been reading and re-reading my first three chapters, and making corrections and additions (and sometimes, deletions). I think it is pretty good – can’t wait to hear from Dr. E. Everything I have read about qualitative research and the role of the researcher is true. I am changing! I can see how much of a problem researcher bias is – but at least I am becoming more aware of these biases (and assumptions! So many erroneous assumptions on my part!). The way to “bracket” these biases is to acknowledge them, and try to set them aside. Well, easier said than done – but I am trying. And I could argue that quantitative research is not bias-free, either. I recall Dr. Kromrey saying that if we torture the data long enough, it’ll confess to anything! So I am not too worried.

Wednesday, April 20, 2011

Big day: we are getting ready for our IRS tax audit. Not too worried; our accountant tells us that it looks like a purely random selection, and we have receipts for every deduction we claimed. We meet with the accountant tonight to get everything seta, and then the audit is next week. It’s more aggravation than anything else, but it is distracting me from my dissertation.
Thursday, April 21, 2011

I emailed Dr. Eison today and asked if we could talk on the phone. I am so eager to hear what he has to say about my proposal. Printing it out is getting to be expensive! I finally got smart and stopped printing all the appendices and references – I just print the chapters themselves. Much less ink and paper burned up. I prefer to have a paper copy to revise and edit - -I tend to miss tings when they are on the screen. I have decided that when I start chapters four and five, I will make them separate Word documents (and not a part of the first three chapters). It is too easy to miss mistakes when there is so much to scroll through.

Monday, April 25, 2011

I am still working on the Giroux part – not sure where it will fit. I have also been re-reading Creswell. Just making sure I have everything covered for the interviews. I am so excited! It will be wonderful to actually sit down with my participants and hear their stories. I hope I can choose people who will be forthcoming with their stories --- it’s all in the questions, I suppose – at least, that is what I am inferring from the literature I have read. My conversations with Marta helped me tremendously -- the subtle (and not-so-subtle) changes I made to some of the questions will be very helpful.

Tuesday, April 26, 2011

I am feeling much better. It is as if a weight has been lifted. I truly wanted to defend my proposal this May, but I can see now the benefits of having to wait
a few more weeks. What’s the difference, after all? I suppose I am too much of a control freak. I don’t like not being able to control every aspect of things. But I am making use of the little bit of extra time. Reading, reading --- the more I read, the more I find information that I think could be useful in my paper. Dr. E. did say something about keeping things concise, though. I don’t want to add anything that does not relate directly to my topic. But from some of the dissertations I have read, I see that most of them are so detailed. Every author, every idea, every concept – if I mention it, I must elaborate on it (at least a little bit). I will have to wait and see later on if I can eliminate some things.

_Thursday, April 28, 2011_

I am concentrating now on making all the changes to my draft. As soon as I make one adjustment/correction, I see others I have missed. I do know that when I start chapters four and five, I will do them as separate documents – it is difficult to keep scrolling through all the pages I have here every time I need to find something. This is one huge learning experience!

_Monday, May 16, 2011_

My draft has gone to my committee! I am so happy, and so terrified! Poor Dr. King lost her mother, and Dr. Sullins, his mother-in-law-- it is hard to keep in mind that my committee members have personal lives aside from my educational needs. But I am trying to keep their needs in mind, just as I hope that they are keeping my schedule in mind (schedule = money!). Still, it is hard to think about
bothering people about my draft when they are experiencing such awful personal troubles. And the fact that I have had to re-add Dr. Sullins to my committee --- I hate to lose Dr. Dellow, but as much as I admire his expertise, I must also admit that Dr. Sullins was a source of excellent advice for my draft. It is unfortunate that we must base our selection of committee members on availability and schedule conflicts, but that is that is the sad fact of the matter. I am grateful that my professors are so gracious, and willing to make changes as I need them to.

_Sunday, June 5, 2011_

Here it is, June 2011, and I am excited to say that I might finish my Ph. D. next May (or August). Whoo –hoo. I _have_ to finish next year -- that will be the six-year mark – I began in 2006! Right now, my proposal – the first three chapters – is in the competent hands of my committee members. I am so hopeful that they will return encouraging comments to me shortly. I really want – _NEED_ – to have my defense scheduled for the end of June/early July—I feel pretty good about what I have written so far. Of course, as I anticipate the data collection process, I am intimidated. What will be the outcome? Will I be able to obtain the information I need? Will I be able to do it in a timely manner? So scary.

It has been several weeks since I have added to this journal – of course, I really could not include any other information while I await my committee’s reaction. I have been at a standstill. Dr. Eison was kind enough to suggest that I use this downtime to review my reference pages -- I bought the most recent APA manual, and have begun checking my entries against the examples. Whoo ---so
many errors! But I think I am catching them, and making the necessary corrections. I am glad to be doing this now, rather than at the end of this process. I have heard many, many horror stories about last-minute changes and corrections. So, any corrections to format that I can make now will put me that much farther ahead. Step by step, step by step…

**Wednesday, June 29, 2011**

Well, the paperwork has been completed for my proposal defense – the big day is July 14. Whew! I am frantically revising my draft, trying so hard to eliminate anything that might create difficulties for me in the defense. Thank God my committee has been so helpful – they see things that I am embarrassed to say I missed! And it seems the more I try to fill in the blanks, the more need I see for more information! Dr. King said the other day that it is never really finished, and I can see what she means. I could revise this thing forever! But it is really taking shape, and I feel pretty good about what I have. I do believe it will be an interesting, enjoyable, and productive study – if I can just get to that point. Soon, soon.

**Tuesday, July 5, 2011**

The holiday is over, and now it’s back to work. I am very excited and nervous about next week, but I am reasonably sure that it will go well. My committee all seem to want me to succeed, so that helps a lot. The revision process is still a killer. I saw so many holes! But I have been filling in them as
best I can – the transformative learning part, with the dimensions I only stumbled by accident – quite important, and I think a good addition to the coding section. I need to look at the Atlas coding program more closely – I need a to-do list! The IRB that I started somewhere – need to locate that. I am going to the ETD bootcamp this Friday – should be good. And a proposal defense on Monday – I want to see one completed. I am not sure about the Power Point part, so I have to keep my eyes open. Dr. E. said he will look mine over prior to the defense, but he is out of town until Friday, and I have not finished it yet, anyway. Not too worried, though – it is really just an outline of the draft, and the main thing for me is to keep calm and speak slowly.

Tuesday, July 12, 2011

Dr. Bruner came through and offered to chair my proposal defense. Apparently, there are so many proposal/final defenses happening right now, and so many faculty away from campus, that there was a shortage of people to serve as chairs. Despite the best efforts of Dr. Eison, it looked like I was going to have to cancel the whole thing for the 14th. I was not happy about that since this is the third time I have tried to get this proposal defense off the ground. But thank goodness, it looks like I am all set for Thursday. Dr. E went over my Power Point with me today, and as usual, he came up with excellent tips (and a few needed changes to the proposal itself – funny how I can’t see those things by myself – need another pair of eyes – expert eyes, in this case). He suggested that I ask for participants who have completed Comp I only (not giving the option of Comp
II), as he feels it will introduce a whole ‘nother set of variables – and I agreed. Also, Dr. E thought I needed to ask where (how) the student took Comp I – I want face-to-face students, not those who took the course on-line. Makes sense – I want to know about their experiences in the classroom, with a flesh-and-blood teacher (not that the on-line folds are not flesh-and-blood!) – but I mean real, personal interaction. So many things like this keep cropping up. Well, one thing at a time. I just want to get through Thursday, and pass my first defense. What a huge step that will be! I need to get going and finish the IRB, too.

Thursday, July 14, 2011

Okay, one of the happiest days of my life: my proposal passed! What an ordeal! I was so nervous, and the committee asked me so many questions. I actually drew a blank a few times, simply because of nervousness. But after much discussion, they signed off on it. What a wonderful feeling. Now to get on with the revisions while they are still fresh in my head.

Friday, August 26, 2011

I am back. It has been an awful month (dislocated thumb, serious eye injury/infection). But I have been working on my revision. My committee was fair and very thorough in their responses, and I have much to be grateful for. I think I am in good shape now, and I submitted my IRB, so I hope that all goes though without any trouble. The new semester at PHCC has started, and I have two volunteers from my courses who will help me with the pretesting of the interview
questions. I have two sessions set for next week (30 to 60 minutes each, in my office), and I am eager to hear what these women have to say about my questions. One is from Cuba, the other from Puerto Rico.

Thursday, September 1, 2011

The pilot studies are completed, and I am really excited. The two students who agreed to help me gave me so much information – useful, insightful information – that I feel truly encouraged and confident that my study is going to produce something meaningful. The students, in some respects, responded as I expected they would. But sometimes, they gave me responses that were entirely different from what I had anticipated. Most of my questions worked well, and needed only some minor modifications. These changes revolved mostly around making the questions more relevant to writing courses. I think what thrilled me the most was their eagerness to talk about this subject. They wanted to be heard, and that is exactly why I wanted to do this study in the first place. I am very happy and motivated to get to the real interviews.

Tuesday, September 27, 2011

I received my IRB approval (Whoo-hoo), and I am ready to start data collection. It is thrilling! I have all the paperwork in order (and I double-checked with Dr. Giannet about PHCC’s authorization) and I am good to go. I sent out the first batch of emails today to my colleagues announcing my study and requesting the opportunity to visit their classrooms. I started getting responses even before I got to the end of the list, and I have a week’s worth of visits scheduled already.
**Wednesday, October 12, 2011**

I have three participants signed up after visiting several classrooms, but I think I need to expand my search as it has been very time-consuming (for minimal results). I had many responses from the PHCC student population, but relatively few students met all of the criteria. I think I am going to put up a flier, at all the PHCC campuses. This way, I can eliminate the extra step of having to go into other instructors' classrooms.

**Wednesday, October 19, 2011**

Two more students met my criteria and are signed on as participants. This makes five so far, but I would still like a few more. I got a list of Hispanic female students from PHCC Student Services. I have their email addresses, too, so I am emailing them today. Meanwhile, I am sending the participants who are signed on the first of the journal prompts. I can't wait to see their responses – they all seem so excited to be participating.

**Thursday, October 27, 2011**

I did my first interview! Verónica and I met for a little over an hour. I think I was more nervous than she was! But it was great – she was so eager to talk. Can't wait to do more interviews—I have two more scheduled for the 2nd. I am going to be sure to review my interview notes and listen to the tapes right after each interview so I can write up my initial reactions before I forget anything.
Saturday, October 29, 2011

Two more signed on! And a third whom I learned of through of my other participants. So now I have seven, but I am going to include an eighth person who responded to my flier and met all of the criteria except one: she had taken English Composition I as an on-line course, not in a traditional face-to-face classroom. She was really excited about my study, and I didn’t want to waste her enthusiasm by leaving her out. I asked Dr. E what I should do, and he said to include her as an “extra,” making sure to note the one criterion she did not meet. I reviewed Verónica’s notes and tapes --- just writing some comments on my field notes has been useful – things I am remembering that I did not make note of before.

Thursday, November 3, 2011

The first set of journal prompts have been emailed to the participants, and I have already received a few back! Very exciting. Now I can start scheduling more interviews. I am very pleased with what I have read so far in the journal responses. Very insightful. I am encouraged.

Tuesday, November 8, 2011

Two more interviews completed, and my initial reviews are finished. It’s funny, but as I ask the questions about transformative learning, and I listen to the responses, I can’t help but think about how I am transforming, too. This was
something I had not really thought about, or anticipated. But there it is. It’s like looking through a window I knew was there, but never bothered to open.

Someone (not a friend or family member, or student or participant) said to me the other day, “Why are you writing about Hispanics? They all need to go back where they came from.” I was shocked and angry. I tried to explain that, whatever your political leanings are, these are people we are talking about – and I thought, oh, how I wish you could talk to Suelo, or Graciela, or Suelo, and you could hear what they have to say – how it broke my heart sometimes to hear about their struggles – and how happy I was to share the joy of their accomplishments. If you could see that they are just ordinary women, with jobs and children and all the rest – just like everyone else. Maybe that’s the point – if we could only stop talking about “those people” and see everyone as an individual, a human being who matters. It made me very sad to hear a comment like that.

*Wednesday, November 16, 2011*

Doncia’s interview completed and reviewed. I was so impressed with her work ethic. She is so motivate to succeed, which is especially surprising in one so young. I am going to include her even though she took Comp I on-line. I will have to find out how to make it clear in the analysis (participant selection?) that she did not meet this one criterion.
Tuesday, November 22, 2011

Graciela’s interview is complete, and I just emailed her the final journal prompt. What a remarkable person she is. I cannot get over her candor – she was so willing to tell me about herself, and not hold back. I am touched by her honesty – and humbled by the faith she puts in me. I went over my notes, and I can’t wait to read her transcript.

Monday, November 28, 2011

I did Suelo’s interview tonight. Oh, my, what an experience. She was telling me about her attempt to get her CNA license, but even though she did the coursework and studied hard, she failed the test by only a few points (language difficulties). When she said this, she looked so sad and so forlorn that I almost cried. I felt so sorry for her – she’s so sweet, and she has so much going on in her life. It made me feel so helpless – like when Suelo told me how “honored” she was that someone like me would be interested in someone like her. How can I explain that our situations are merely accidents of birth, and not any indicator of ability, or intelligence, or worth? I know my study is far from perfect, but if it makes even a tiny difference in our treatment of people like Suelo, I’d be so grateful.

Saturday, December 3, 2011

I received a reply from Doncia about the interview transcript I emailed her to review. She thought it was “perfect,” except that she “laughed so hard” at how
often she said “like.” She said it was really funny to read her own words, but she needs to work on that “like” business.”

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

The last of the interview transcripts are coming in from Avalon, and I have been checking them against the tapes for accuracy. I am working hard to figure out Atlas.ti. I did the tutorials on-line, but I really did not start to grasp it until I made a “practice” document for one of my participants (Graciela) and downloaded it into the program. I had to re-read Creswell on coding to figure out where to begin, and it helped to have a real document to work with. I started going back over all the transcripts, notes, and printouts I had read before, and seeing how the handwritten notations I made could be transferred into Atlas. The hardest part, for me, was where to begin—sort of like the chicken-or-the-egg thing. But Creswell helped. He said that he usually started with a short list (he calls it “lean”) of just a few codes and then lets it grow from there. That’s what I am trying to do – it makes sense.

Saturday, December 10, 2011

The PHCC semester is over, and I have all my grades ready to be entered on Monday. This is a relief, as I can now concentrate on my data analysis. It has been difficult getting through the last of my students’ research papers, but I did it. All that is left now is graduation next Tuesday.
Wednesday, December 21, 2011

It’s almost Christmas, and I feel as if I have received a great gift. As I read the interviews and journals, I felt so grateful that all these women were so willing to open their hearts and minds to me. I was a complete stranger to them, but they entrusted me with their hopes, dreams, fears, joys, struggles, and successes. And the amazing thing is that they were grateful to me for “allowing” them to be a part of the study! I had tears in my eyes as I saw how honestly they answered my questions, how hard they tried to get their answers just right, to say what they meant to say – sometime struggling to find the right words. What an astonishing experience this has been. Merry Christmas to all the wonderful women I had the privilege to meet these past few months.

Wednesday, December 28, 2011

Took a few days off for Christmas, and now it’s back to work. I found another tutorial on-line for Atlas.ti, and it is helpful. I downloaded the first “real” document into Atlas and began the coding. So far, so good. I also read a couple of dissertations I found in Proquest to see how the data is presented. Some of them (including Nancy Mills’) use charts or tables to present the findings, and I like that. I might see if I can come up with something of the sort.

Friday, December 30, 2011

Plugging away --- I am on my third participant, getting the docs into Atlas and coding them. The number of codes is growing, just as Creswell said it
would. I need to start thinking about clustering, but it may be too early for that. We'll see.

*Tuesday, January 3, 2012*

I have been listening to the interview tapes as I read the transcripts, and along with my field notes, I think I am getting a good “picture” of each participant. It is not a linear process -- I have to keep switching back and forth among the three sources. But I am pleased with what I have so far, even though it is still very sketchy. I am writing what looks more like an outline. As soon as Dr. E takes a look at it, and tells me what he thinks, I can fill in the “blanks.”

*Thursday, January 5, 2012*

I emailed my chapter four draft to Dr. E! Very excited to hear what he has to say. Meanwhile, I am continuing to analyze the rest of the data -- I can’t let the weeks get away from me. The coding is shaping up --- I find that if I do a few participants, then upload the document into Atlas, I can manage the categories more effectively. I can see how easily the coding could get out of hand! For now, I am just creating the codes as they appear in the data, and I'll worry about grouping them -- clustering --- later. I don't want to miss any of them.

*Friday, January 13, 2012*

Finally back to my chapter four -- the new semester started at PHCC and I was swamped. It was good to take a few days away from my analysis, though -- it cleared my head. I started a document called “Chapter Five draft” because
things keep occurring to me that I must address later, and I don’t want to forget. I have also been going back to Chapter Three and correcting the methods section. The entire dissertation process seems to be a series of loops, doubling back again and again.

Monday, January 23, 2012

I should be able to talk with Dr. E this week – we keep missing each other. I have only two participants remaining to analyze! I am glad I went over my notes right after each interview --- I am reading things I jotted down for myself that I think I would have forgotten about if I had not written them down immediately afterwards. More and more codes popping up – but I see several that overlap, and can be clustered together later. Also, some will become sub-categories of existing categories. For example, I started with “struggles,” and “frustrations,” but I think the frustrations will go under the struggles headings. That sort of thing.

Wednesday, January 25, 2012

After speaking to Dr. E. yesterday, I took some time to reflect on his comments regarding my chapter four draft. I was thinking about his comments concerning richness and depth of detail, so I went back to the beginning and started to re-read (re-re-re-read) the data from each participant. His suggestions were very helpful --- I can see what he means about interpreting the data without reading anything into it that is not really there. That’s a skill I am still working on.
But at least he said the structure of my draft was on track, so I feel good about that.

I am into Doncia’s interview now, and continuing to see new codes. I switch over to Atlas once every so often and add these codes. This way, when I am finished with the data (reading and coding), I should be able to upload everything and start seeing which codes appear where. As I work on these analyses, I am becoming aware of questions I should have asked, or ways I could have probed more deeply. My status as a novice interviewer really limited me in this respect, but this is something I can mention in chapter five (implications?).

Another point Dr. E. brought up was how limited some of the responses from my participants were. I told him that this may be due to their inexperience with articulating their feelings, ideas, and opinions. Also, their limitations with English may have played a role. I think a future study that asked the same types of questions of native speakers would be useful as a basis of comparison. That’s another point for chapter five.

*Monday, January 30, 2012*

Re-reading, again and again --- it is surprising how new things occur to me as I read the data again. Taking Dr. E’s advice and looking for the deeper meaning. I must include in my analysis the fact that some of the participants are not as articulate as some of the others. I think there was a certain embarrassment rooted in their self-consciousness about their accents (often, I
think it is not nearly as noticeable as the women think it is) and by their perceived limitations in vocabulary.

Tuesday, January 31, 2012

I keep seeing areas where I could have probed so much more deeply into the responses during the interviews. I guess my deficiencies are due to my inexperience as an interviewer. It is all so obvious to me now --- and I want to holler, Why didn’t I ask her what she meant by that? Things of that sort. This will go onto chapter five, along with so many other things I wish I had done differently. Still, I am pleased with what I do have --- even with the “holes” I spot in my data, every time I read it I seem to find something I had not noticed before.

Sunday, February 26, 2012

As I analyze the data, I am trying to keep in mind Dr. E’s suggestion that I “dig deeper” into the texts to be sure I am not missing anything. This has proven to be a valuable suggestion, and I find that reading and re-reading the passages has helped me spot the more subtle sub-texts that are present. However, as I said to Dr. E, I am concerned about misinterpreting the data – reading too much into it based on my expectations and assumptions. I read Moustakas again, to see what he says about bracketing, and I was relieved to see that he pretty much states that it is almost impossible to be completely objective. In fact, he says we must acknowledge our personal biases because this is the only way we can come to terms with them. I found that to be helpful; here I am, desperately trying to disassociate myself from my own research, and failing. Knowing that I cannot
completely remove my sense of self from my interpretations comes as a relief. I am going forward with a renewed sense of confidence and not panicking every time I see myself allowing my own experiences and assumptions to come into play.

Tuesday, February 28, 2012

Still thinking about bracketing – and reading Patton about the researcher's "voice." It is strange to think about the importance (and influence) of my own voice when I am trying so hard to hear the voices of my participants. Patton talks about "authenticity" and how the researcher must understand the balance between what the data says and what the researcher perceives it to say. Heady stuff. Patton mentions reflexivity over and over, and that makes me glad that I decided to include this journal in my paper. He also said something I feel is worth quoting here: "The whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts; focus on complex interdependencies and system dynamics that cannot meaningfully be reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, cause effect relationships" (Patton, 2002, p. 41). That really spoke to me --- "discrete variables" – wow. I don't want to get too caught up in trying to quantify the unquantifiable. I actually printed this quotation out and have it on my desk so I can see it.
Monday, March 5, 2012

So many possible changes come to mind as I progress through the data. If I had to start all over again, I would use transformative learning as the theoretical framework for the study. I keep thinking about transformation learning as I read the responses, and thematically, it shows up in so many ways. The participants even seem transformed by this study; several of them mentioned their surprise at discovering that someone wants to hear their stories.

Sunday, March 18, 2012

My lack of experience with dissertation-writing has made this entire process so much harder than it has to be. If I had the opportunity to start over, I would have started reading years ago --- probably before I even entered the doc program! Of course, I had no idea what I wanted to study – well, I had some idea. I have always been concerned with the needs of my ESL students, and I had done some research into it. But it wasn’t until I was in the doc program and I had to decide on a dissertation topic that I really began to think about it. I also had no experience with conducting a study of my own. I had read many of them, of course, but I had no idea what was actually involved in the process.

Thursday, April 5, 2012

This is a process that seems to keep me doubling back on myself. As I try to identify the themes, and match the quotations to them, I find I have to change/add/delete so many things. But of course, it is all getting tighter and
tighter. Thank goodness --- I think the end is in sight. I try not to dwell too much on all the things I would do differently if I were to start over and do it all again. This has truly been a learning experience for me, and I really do believe that I have grown --- in fact, I sense a difference in myself in my classroom. My attitude towards my students (all of them, but especially the ESL ones) has actually improved (it was good to begin with!) but I have a new insight into their perceptions of their English classes. This was an unexpected benefit --- I had hoped, of course, to learn about my participants, and to use that knowledge to improve my own teaching, and perhaps the teaching of other instructors. But I don’t really think I anticipated that I would see a change in myself so quickly. An amazing occurrence.

Thursday, April 12, 2012

I went back to the beginning of this researcher journal and read some of my earlier entries. I must say, it is a very interesting record of my journey through this dissertation process! I also noticed that I did not write as frequently once I got into the data analysis. I want to try and get back into writing an entry at least once a week (more would be better) as I really do think it has helped me. I didn't see it at first --- in all honesty, I was going through the motions because I had read so much about the benefits of a reflective journal for triangulation. But I can see now that I have benefited from this, since it has served as a sort of sounding board. I am grateful that my committee recommended (strongly) back at my proposal defense that I eliminate the entries that really had nothing to do with my
research – good advice. I think I was seeing it more as a diary, and not as a place to question, to reflect, to ponder, my work. So I will try to write more often.

**Wednesday, April 18, 2012**

I have been reading about something called *contrastive rhetoric*, a theory developed by Robert Kaplan back in the 1960s. Apparently, he saw a relationship between a person’s first language and culture and its influence on second language acquisition. That sure sounded familiar. The studies he conducted laid the groundwork for what would become the basis of ESL instruction. It was a fascinating read, and I wish I had known about this earlier (much, much earlier). It would have been a useful theoretical framework. I suppose I shall mention it in chapter five, under the section with the working title “Should-a-done.” In fact, as I think about it again, I may mention it in the introduction – maybe. At any rate, it gave me something else to think about, and some potential support for the thematic analysis.

**Saturday, May 5, 2012**

I did not get back to this as quickly as I had hoped – trying hard to wrap up chapter four so I can get it to Dr. E next week. It looks like I should be able to graduate in December without any trouble. I tried for the summer graduation, but this data analysis just took too long. I had been warned – by many people who know – that qualitative research takes time --- lots and lots of time. And that has certainly proven true. But I am not sorry --- in fact, I am glad that I put so much
time into it because I think what I have is quite good. Of course, there are so many things I would have done differently, but this is, after all, a learning experience. I am a doctoral **student** --- a doc candidate, sure, but still a student in many ways. And boy, did I learn.

**Sunday, May 6, 2012**

The question of defining my terms continues to be a problem. As I was writing the thematic analysis, I found I had to define words like **theme**. There were so many different definitions of the word, and I was so confused about which one I should use. And it was so important as to which definition I chose – one source I read talked about the futility of even attempting to use a single definition of the word. It is funny to think about how important one word can be— but I am happy with the definition I decided on. I keep thinking about all the directions I could have taken – but after all, I keep remembering what Dr. King told me so many months ago – you have to stop sometime.

**Monday, May 14, 2012**

Finishing chapter five, and thinking about the limitations and implications. I started looking back at my literature review, and then looking for any new articles or studies that I should mention in chapter five. As it turns out, I did find a few, so I think I will include that under the “implications” – perhaps as evidence of change.
Monday, May 28, 2012

The summer semester at PHCC has started, and I find that my attitudes toward my ESL students have changed over the last few months. No surprise there; what does surprise me is that this change is not only directed toward Hispanic ESL students, but students of all ethnicities, as well. As I was writing the conclusion of this paper, I noted that while the individual experiences described in my study are unique to the participants I studied, the situations - - issues, challenges, both beneficial and positive experiences – are applicable to other ethnicities and races (and gender, for that matter). This is something that I mentioned in the “Implications” section, as I truly believe that what I have attempted to do here is merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Monday, June 4, 2012

The final stages of this process have proven to be, in many ways, the most challenging of all. So many things I wish I had done differently keep popping up. But I do have to remind myself that there is a reason the last step is called a defense. I truly believe that I have accomplished something here – exactly what the ramifications my study may have remains to be seen. But if nothing else happens, at least the women in my study had a chance (the first, and perhaps only, chance many of them may ever get) to be heard, to speak up. I acknowledged in the delimitations section that complete objectivity on my part is not possible, and naturally, this affected the way my participants responded. Still, I am pleased with what I learned from them, and I think I did a good job of
connecting their descriptions to the research questions. I am happy with the way my dissertation turned out, and I am looking forward to defending it to my committee.

Wednesday, June 20, 2012

After a very thorough discussion with Dr. E about my manuscript, I am feeling very encouraged. As usual, he gave me some wonderful suggestions and I have spent the day working on them. He commented about the problem of doc candidates “hitting the wall” in chapter five, and that surely does describe me. But I now have some really strong ideas of what to do next for chapter five. Chapter four, aside from some development and formatting issues, seems to be good to go. I did spend some time today going over chapter two; I added an update to the review since I wrote it last summer, and I wanted to be sure I had not missed more recent developments.

Saturday, September 15, 2012

I had written something in my acknowledgements about “the shoulders of giants,” meaning how I was able to use the knowledge and experience of my committee members and building upon it. I meant what I said when I wrote that statement (several weeks ago). But now that my pre-defense is over, and I have the committee’s comments about my manuscript in my hands, the quotation is even more appropriate. I am amazed—shocked – thrilled – that they took so much time to offer suggestions and guidance to this extent. I grade papers for a
living, and I know how hard (and tedious) that can be. But my committee slogged through a hefty document and gave me the most useful criticisms. Some of it is so obvious to me (now) that I feel like slapping myself in the head (those “I”s --- oh my). Others are not obvious at all, and I am humbled by their generosity in offering me their ideas for improvement. This makes me want to work that much harder for my own students – those first-year writers who want so badly to learn how to write a college paper. I want to do for them what my committee has done for me – provide explicit suggestions, make corrections, and offer encouragement, encouragement, encouragement. Talk about an ah-ha moment.

My committee has my most sincere gratitude, affection, and respect.

Thursday, September 20, 2012

I looked up the etymology of the word dissertation today and learned that it comes from a Latin word meaning “path.” How appropriate – this dissertation process has indeed been a strange and difficult path, but it has also been a rewarding, enlightening, and exhilarating experience for me. Thus, I come to the end of the path feeling that I have grown in so many ways. It is not a path I want to revisit; however, I will cherish the memories of the friendships I made, the people I met, and the outpouring of support that surrounded me.