

The Synergy Program: Reframing Critical Reading and Writing for At-Risk Students

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ABSTRACT: In this description of a learning community for “at-risk” and basic writing students at the University of Wyoming, I outline the reasons our students resist academic writing prior to their entry into college—reasons largely unrelated to typical perceptions of at-risk students as “lazy” or intellectually less capable. For students who come from family or community cultures that are far removed from academic discourses and hierarchies, accepting a new form of writing—and therefore thinking—is akin to widening a rift between them and their home cultures. Because of this tension, faculty in the Synergy Program approach basic writing not as a deficiency in writing structure or mechanics, but as a deeply held attitude of uninvestment in the writing process. In an attempt to help students overcome this attitude of uninvestment, particularly toward writing projects involving research and clear thesis structures, Synergy faculty in the Composition and Critical Thinking courses collaborated in melding two courses that give students room to develop not only writing, but also reading and critical thinking literacies in a context that does not presuppose their investment in the process. The Synergy Program includes three courses in the fall and one course in the spring. In addition, students attend a one-day, six-hour summer orientation during which they gain an in-depth introduction to the program and form initial connections with faculty and peers. This article presents a learning community model for encouraging academic literacies that foregrounds students’ anxieties about acculturation into academic modes of thinking and inspires ownership of course projects through ethnographic research and a capstone web portfolio.

KEYWORDS: at-risk students, learning communities, student ethnographies, critical reading, web portfolios

It’s probably not an over-generalization to assert that at the secondary and college level, high-stakes writing assignments (and most low-stakes writing assignments) are modeled after a scholarly or professional research process. The details of professional research grow more varied as one advances to the upper levels of specific disciplines, but a common process infuses them all: posing questions, conducting research (primary and/or secondary), drawing conclusions, and finally submitting those conclusions to an

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The Synergy Program

editor or professional audience in thesis-based prose with discipline-proper format and documentation style. The aim for scholars, of course, is to publish and, with any luck, create a small shift in the thinking of the field. Those in professional or technical fields are expected to deliver concise findings in the proper technical format.

Teachers, as former students (usually of the diligent variety) and current scholars, internalize this process so thoroughly that we often lose sight of the degree to which this standard permeates expectations for student writing from very early grades. Even in elementary school, students are asked to write paragraphs using a style that is influenced by a thesis-research structure, from topic sentence to supporting evidence—a fairly rigid mold that differs from what most students have learned about conversational discourses that circle and wind and often leave off with a messy or subtle conclusion.

In this article, I will discuss a learning community for “at-risk” students at the University of Wyoming that attempts to engage basic writing students in the thesis-research process. The Synergy Program includes three courses in the fall and one course in the spring. In addition, students attend a one-day, six-hour summer orientation during which they gain an in-depth introduction to the program and form initial connections with faculty and peers.

I will begin by giving the background of the Synergy Program and discussing several reasons that our students have resisted academic writing prior to their entry into college. Then I will describe two linked courses that highlight the connection between thinking, reading, and writing, and an approach to research that acknowledges the tensions that these students feel toward academic discourse. I will describe how the Synergy learning community has worked toward meeting several goals, which include:

- Respecting students’ backgrounds and personal cultures, and showing this respect by making students co-investigators into issues of identity formation and how acculturation into academic modes of thought (that is, the thesis-research process) can alter identity in potentially threatening ways.
- Showing connections between learning in various contexts, by helping students negotiate the balance between thinking, reading, and writing.
- Teaching critical reading strategies and using compelling texts that foreground students’ own writing projects.
- Encouraging students to take ownership of the thesis-research process through an ethnography research project and final web portfolio.

Background of the Learning Community

The Synergy Learning Community was initiated as a pilot program at the University of Wyoming (UW) in fall 2001 with the goal of offering conditionally admitted students a focused, integrated, and successful first-semester experience. Students labeled “conditional” because of low high school GPAs or ACT scores join the program voluntarily—some, admittedly, because of parental pressure. The students who enroll in Synergy each fall earn an average score of 16 on the English portion of the ACT, significantly lower than the average score of 19 earned by the comparison group of conditionally admitted students who did not participate in Synergy. Prior to the Synergy Program, UW’s English Department offered a remedial composition course recommended for students identified as basic writers based on in-class diagnostic essays. In 2001 Synergy “replaced” these courses and took on the role of addressing the needs of basic writers. Approximately 75 to 85 percent of Synergy students enter the program with characteristics that would have placed them in the remedial course, and for this reason, faculty recognized early that critical reading and writing needed to be central components of the program.

Instructors volunteer to teach in the Synergy Program, and Synergy’s class sizes are smaller than regular courses—18 students maximum as compared with 23 for regular classes. The Program strives to create an academic learning community through several important structural features. According to definitions provided by the Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, Synergy fits the description of a cluster model learning community, in which two or more classes are linked thematically or by content. In a cluster learning community, students attend classes together, and faculty plan the program collaboratively. The Washington Center defines learning communities broadly as “classes that are linked or clustered during an academic term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, and enroll a common cohort of students. A variety of approaches are used to build these learning communities, with all intended to restructure the students’ time, credit, and learning experiences to build community among students, between students and their teachers, and among faculty members and disciplines” (*Learning Communities*).

For one week each summer, new and veteran Synergy instructors meet to plan the courses and develop a sense of friendship and shared goals. Since the program’s inception in 2001, Synergy faculty consistently report many of the benefits of working in a learning community, which were documented

by a national study of learning communities conducted by Lenning and Ebbers in 1999: “diminished isolation, a shared purpose and cooperation among faculty colleagues, increased curricular integration, a fresh approach to one’s discipline, and increased satisfaction with their students’ learning” (iv). The learning community benefits described by students in end-of-semester questionnaires also correlate with published results of learning communities at other institutions, namely increased engagement in courses and improved self-confidence fostered by a strong peer group and social community (Mlynarczyk and Babbitt; Johnson, Johnson, and Smith).

The learning community model is particularly effective for a program serving academically at-risk students. Bruch et. al. argue that “learning communities can provide historically marginalized students with a sense of belonging and space such that they can be truly engaged and active contributors in the learning community” (18). Because Synergy students tend to experience higher levels of frustration with critical reading and academic writing, the learning community courses employ connected approaches to projects to engage students’ interest on multiple levels. Connections within the learning community often involve common readings and themes as well as assignments that begin in one course and continue in more depth in another.

In foregrounding Synergy students’ habits of resistance toward academic writing, it’s important to note that the Synergy program attracts a disproportionate number of males and minorities. In fall 2004, for example, 72.7 percent of Synergy students were male and 31.8 percent were minorities—a significant ratio in light of the fact that minorities comprise only 8 percent of the general student population at UW. According to university statistics, males, minorities, and students admitted with conditions are at a higher risk for dropping out or failing than the overall population of students. As Elbow points out in his article “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard,” “highly resistant students fight and sabotage the teacher, they sometimes walk out, and the only thing they give is the finger. Boys and men seem to fall more often into this relation to teacher authority than women do” (20). Synergy instructors have noticed this type of rebellious behavior among male students in the learning community to a greater degree than in their non-Synergy courses.

Minorities in Synergy, especially Native American students, struggle with a sense of disenfranchisement from their home communities as they enter a setting where the dominant race is white, and the dominant cultures unfamiliar. As Gray-Rosendale, Bird, and Bullock point out in “Rethinking

the Basic Writing Frontier: Native American Students' Challenge to Our Histories":

At times Native American students are those for whom leaving the tribe to gain a college education can feel like a tremendous betrayal of one's culture and may be talked about as such by other members of one's clan. . . . [I]n their cases, is the journey from "margin" to the "center" such a valuable journey after all? (79)

Just as significant as the demographic data defining Synergy students' identities are the perceptions of conditionally admitted students held by faculty, administrators, and the students themselves. Based on patterns of poor academic performance and apparent lack of motivation, familiar constructions of underprepared students as cognitively or culturally deficient and unsuited for college are sometimes adopted by even the most liberal minded colleagues at UW. Many academics, with some support from conservative social science research, assume that students' low scores on college aptitude tests (in this case the ACT) reflect low IQs and low levels of general intelligence needed for successful college work. And although Synergy students represent a typical cross-section of social classes at UW, we've heard several comments by sympathetic colleagues that reveal perceptions of Synergy students as coming from predominantly lower socioeconomic classes. Considering that UW is located in the poorest county in the state with a 21 percent poverty rate (and that 87 percent of on-site students come from Wyoming towns), this misrepresentation of Synergy students contributes to some negative institutional bias as administrators attempt to protect students from representations of Wyoming residents as "low class."

Students' Resistance to Academic Writing

While it is difficult to make generalizations about Synergy students who come from a wide range of backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultures, faculty have discovered during the program's first four years that Synergy students feel a higher than average degree of marginalization from academic settings. For years, many of our students have been considered "class clowns," rebels, bad students, poor writers, and bad influences on other students. In fact, during interviews that faculty conducted in fall 2003, the most common reasons students cited for their conditional status was a lack of motivation toward academic work and a learned process of "getting by"

The Synergy Program

in high school with little work, intermittent study habits, and poor attendance. When asked in an early self-assessment to simply reflect on their high school experiences, students' responses overwhelmingly represent dueling perceptions that success in school is a matter of luck, and failure a matter of uncontrollable uninvestment. The following quotations represent attitudes characteristic of many Synergy students:

When I think of high school I think of the word "slacker." I was a very well trained slacker. . . . [E]very day I would wake up at 9:35 a.m. and go straight to second hour I often would sleep in through second hour as well because the teacher could hardly care less. . . . I guess I did all the work I was assigned which got me through it so easily. . . . I think I may have finished that class with a A- or B+ but I didn't even have to try at all it just came easy to me. Some kids would try as hard as they could but they ended up getting low C's, I guess I'm just lucky. [Hispanic male]

In high school I was constantly skipping classes and procrastinating which hurt my GPA and attendance. I only had one friend who graduated with me but unable to achieve the same goals of entering college. [Native American female]

When I look back on my high school career there are a lot of memories that come flooding back. Ironically almost none of these memories have anything to do with education. . . . The last day of school my senior year was one of the days that really messes with me. No more high school, no more teachers, no more stupid rules to follow. . . . [A]s always it's just a matter of getting past the frustration and doing what you have too to be a success in life. [white male]

Of the twenty-seven students in two Synergy courses who completed the self-assessment, none of them expressed respect or enjoyment of their secondary schooling or revealed an academic experience that struck them as worthwhile. And, each fall, we encounter a few students who do not overcome their deeply ingrained negativity and passivity toward academic learning. As Shor writes in *Empowering Education*:

Habits of resistance are learned early and well by many students in traditional schools. Unfortunately, these habits are carried into

democratic and critical classrooms. Having internalized resistance to authority in schooling, students take their sabotaging skills wherever they go. Because of this, empowering educators face traditional student resistance as well as resistance coming from the invitation to empowerment itself. (139)

Many of our students enter the Synergy program with great suspicion of teachers who give students even partial control over grades or ask them to find personal connections with writing assignments, having been duped in the past into believing these practices really “mattered” to their final grade or led to believe that these approaches are correlated with “easy” classes that offer few meaningful challenges.

On the other hand, when presented with too many rigid rules and guidelines for writing assignments and class participation (or when presented with material that they find irrelevant to their own identities), Synergy students detach, falling back on familiar and rebellious high school roles. In this sense, faculty face a tricky balance with our approaches to course policies and writing assignments, attempting to present students with firm expectations while inviting their participation in evaluating their own work and shaping course policies, themes, and assignments. This is a balance we continue to try to master, year after year.

It is my strong belief that Synergy students’ disengagement from (and sometimes strong dislike for) thesis-research writing is not based on simple laziness or lack of ability. Rather, students’ self-assessments in 2003 and 2004 reveal repeated testimony that many students’ negative attitudes are founded on anger, a long-standing rebellion against instructional techniques that students felt trampled their “right” to express their often marginalized opinions—in whatever form they chose. Resistant students discover early that the ways they express themselves at home or with peers are considered unacceptable in academia, and rather than adapting to the new standard, they begin to take pride in overtly shaking up the polite and teacher-pleasing classroom deportment of their peers. Needless to say, their writing—if they actually do it—is equally rebellious against “the rules.” These feelings of anger might be manifested in conscious and outright protests against writing assignments, or they might simmer for long periods of time underneath a frustrated but teacher-pleasing facade and show up in the students’ indecipherable writing style. This kind of anger transcends issues of social class or home culture.

Students’ fear of investing themselves in academic writing has seldom been articulated in interviews and self-assessments, but can be seen

primarily in the high rate of disengagement and dropout among Native American students in our program (and at the university as a whole). For students who come from family or community cultures that are far removed from academic discourses and hierarchies, accepting a new form of thinking is akin to widening a rift between them and their home cultures. These students don't necessarily feel unable to learn the new discourse, but they keenly and quickly see how it clashes with the discourse of their deepest identities. On some level, these students understand that learning the new discourse—academic writing, for example—changes the way they think and therefore *who they are* in a fundamental way. These fears raise enormous tensions in students toward adopting new modes of thinking and expressing themselves in writing, and in turn, they disengage or continue to write in the style of their familiar identities.

Min-Zhan Lu addresses this resistance in her article “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing” when she explains that “learning a new discourse has an effect on the re-forming of individual consciousness” (95). Lu describes how basic writing instructors of the past have either persuaded students that the new discourse will not alter their home identities (an approach discussed by Mina Shaughnessy), or they have attempted to convince students that the “anxiety” or “psychic strain” of learning a new discourse will “disappear once the students get comfortably settled in the new community” (Bruffee; Farrell 8). Instead, Lu asserts that “it’s important to let students know the anxiety of acculturation may continue. In fact, teachers [must be] interested in actively honoring the students’ decisions and needs to ‘live with the tension of bi-culturism.’” She continues, “The best way to help students cope with the ‘pain,’ ‘strain,’ ‘guilt,’ ‘fear,’ or ‘confusions’ resulting from this type of conflict is not to find ways of ‘releasing’ the students from these experiences or to avoid situations which might activate them” (95). Rather, Lu argues, a contextual approach would be more effective, since it could help students deal self-consciously with the threat of betrayal, especially if they fear and want to resist it.

Engaging Students Through Course Connections

The heart of Synergy’s approach to writing lies in the connections between the program’s two linked writing- and research-based courses, College Composition and Rhetoric and Critical Thinking in Intellectual Communities. Each of these courses is required by the university, though non-Synergy students generally take an “Intellectual Communities” (I-course) associated with their chosen major (I-courses replaced the previous

“University Studies” course that many perceived as intellectually weak and unproductive). I-courses have the charge of focusing on critical thinking and career exploration in each discipline. The Synergy Intellectual Communities course, which we designated a “Critical Thinking and Reading” course, is unique both in its connection to the Composition course and its mission to help students negotiate issues of identity and success that underlie many students’ past struggles with academic writing. Synergy dispels much of the stigma attached to basic or remedial writing courses by approaching basic writing not as a deficiency in writing structure or mechanics, but as a deeply held attitude of uninvestment in the writing process.

In an attempt to help students overcome this attitude of uninvestment—particularly toward writing projects involving research and clear thesis structures—Synergy faculty in the Composition and Critical Thinking course collaborated in melding two courses that give students room to develop not only writing, but also reading and critical thinking literacies in a context that does not presuppose their investment in the process. One project in particular is central to this goal. Both the Composition and Critical Thinking courses share a semester-long ethnographic research project, an endeavor that students find interesting and relevant, and a process that affords faculty crucial opportunities for “folding in” more traditional reading and writing assignments. The ethnography research project culminates in students designing a web portfolio to house their process, findings, and personal reflections.

Ballenger points out some of the primary reasons students find ethnography so compelling: it involves inquiry into people and particularly groups, it requires concerted attention to social context, and its questions are answered by spending significant time *in situ*, or in the places where the community are doing what they usually do. The ethnography, in short, leads students to “own” this project in ways they have never owned thesis-research writing assignments before, and its ultimate genre—the web portfolio—reaches an immediate and personally relevant audience.

When asked in fall 2004 to reflect in writing about research projects completed in junior high and high school, Synergy students overwhelmingly revealed negative perceptions of the writing component of the research projects. Some students enjoyed the learning that accompanied research and a few enjoyed choosing topics, but invariably they expressed strong ambivalence or dislike for putting their findings into writing. One student wrote, “We had to choose an issue like abortion or logging and research it then write an argument for or against and present it in several different

The Synergy Program

ways—a formal presentation and a poem or something. . . . I hated them. Learning about different things was alright but putting them into a paper really was crappy.” For many of our students the valuable part of the research process was their interest in the topic; writing meant undergoing the drudgery of satisfying what they knew to be the teacher’s main interest—the thesis-focused product. In addition, because students were relying almost entirely on research conducted by others in formulating their arguments, they found the reading accompanying research projects to be extremely difficult to engage with.

In the Synergy Program, as a lead-up to the ethnography, the Critical Thinking course begins the semester with five weeks of reading assignments connected to identity formation, issues of acculturation, and community study. Students take reflective notes on each assigned text in a format of their choosing. In the Composition course, students begin the semester by contacting and initiating a relationship with their chosen community and beginning to pose research questions. They use this connection with their community (in addition to the readings in the Critical Thinking course) as a starting place for initial writing assignments. In the second half of the semester, the ethnography work transfers to the Critical Thinking course, where students continue working on primary research and begin designing the web portfolio. Students spend the last six weeks of the Composition course conducting secondary research on an issue relevant to their chosen community and composing a classical argument essay. The links between the courses are summarized very briefly in the following chart; assignments marked with an asterisk are taken from the *Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing* (Ramage, Bean, and Johnson):

Synergy Program: Connections between Composition and Critical Thinking Course	
College Composition <i>1st half of the semester, approximately</i>	Critical Thinking <i>1st half of the semester, approximately</i>
Choose and contact a community for ethnography: conduct one interview with a member of the community and one observation of the community. Discuss interview techniques employed by authors of <i>Our America</i> .	Discuss issues of identity, acculturation, conceptions of success through <i>Our America</i> and personal reflections.
Posing a Question Essay* (focusing on a community students have belonged to or currently belong to).	Short readings and note-taking; exploring the meaning of critical thought and active reading.
Editorial Essay (developing Posing a Question essay into an article).	Begin web work (learning to negotiate FrontPage software).
Essay reacting to <i>Our America</i> and planning reflectively for the Ethnography Project.	
<i>2nd half of the semester, approximately</i>	<i>2nd half of the semester, approximately</i>
Discuss rhetorical appeals, write Rhetorical Analysis (Summary Strong Response)* of group book.	Group book project: choose a book to read in groups and prepare group panel presentation.
Conduct secondary research for Classical Argument essay.	Refine research questions for ethnography; develop consent forms.
Write Classical Argument essay* concerning problematic issue faced by ethnography community.	Conduct further observations and interviews; take photos.
Culminating Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop components of ethnography and final Web Portfolio. • Oral Presentation of Web Portfolio. 	

As this table reveals, many of the essay assignments included in Synergy's Composition course are not uncommon to first-year composition courses at universities nationwide, including the posing a question, rhetorical analysis or summary strong response, and classical argument essays. Synergy's approach stands apart from more traditional first-year writing courses because of the learning community's emphasis (largely through connections to the Critical Thinking course) on active reading, issues of acculturation into academic thinking and writing, and student-centered research in the ethnography project. In the following sections, I will explain these fundamental areas in detail and discuss how they have helped our students to feel more invested in reading, research, and academic writing.

Engaging Students in Reading

The first text students read for both Composition and Critical Thinking courses is *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago* (Jones and Newman), a book that provides a starting point for investing students in the writing process by helping students explore issues of acculturation. While students read several books over the course of the semester, I will focus my discussion on *Our America* because it represents a concerted connection between reading and writing that all texts in the learning community employ. *Our America* is essentially a transcription of a series of interviews conducted by two eleven-year-old black boys, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman, who live in or near the Ida B. Wells project in South Chicago. When approached by journalist David Isay concerning the alleged murder of a five-year-old boy in the project by two older children, LeAlan and Lloyd agree to conduct an "inside" investigation into the murder by interviewing various people in the project and reflecting on their own experiences growing up in an atmosphere that they repeatedly compare to a war zone.

Several features set this book apart from much of the academic reading students have done and make it a crucial starting point for both courses. First, the book achieves an interesting hybrid status by representing both written and spoken discourse. Because every chapter in the book (aside from Isay's preface) originated as a taped interview or recorded monologue by one of the boys, the language is conversational, circular, at times raw and at times childish, but unmistakably "oral language." The boys use the dialect of their South Chicago community and include a glossary of terms at the back of the book.

Asking students to read a book that is, in one sense, more speech than it is “prose” highlights a crucial connection between thinking, speaking, and writing that exemplifies the connections between the two courses. Synergy students tend to be very adept “talkers,” and because of the roles many have experienced as “outsiders” or “skeptics” in secondary school, they often possess some critical thinking skills that even the brightest students in our regular classes have yet to develop. Synergy students readily accept and understand a connection between thinking and speaking. However, because they have never really been offered a chance to talk their way through a writing assignment, and because they have been told countless times that it’s incorrect to “write the way you talk,” the path from thinking to speaking to writing seems to have a “dead end” at the writing leg of the journey. In an article titled “Assessing Talking and Writing: Linguistic Competence for Students at Risk,” Montgomery writes:

Traditionally, educators assumed that the development of oral language preceded other forms of literacy, especially formal writing. Recent research, however, has suggested that all literacy forms—reading writing, speaking, listening, and thinking—emerge concurrently, serving to reinforce each other throughout school years. When all of the forms are recognized and supported, growth in one form, such as student writing, facilitates progress in another, namely, oral language. The process moves in both directions. . . . [S]tudents at risk for developing literacy can benefit greatly from a talking/writing instructional program. (243)

Our aim in beginning both courses with *Our America* is to model for students that their own familiar modes of thinking and speaking can create compelling written arguments—can become a powerful form of discourse, even in an academic course. Recognizing and respecting this possibility is the first step in gaining students’ investment in learning other forms of discourse—namely, the thesis-research writing process.

In the Critical Thinking course, nearly all of the readings deal with issues of marginalization, identity formation, and community study and reflection. Students take notes on each reading by highlighting the main points and their own reactions in whatever form they are most comfortable with—visual tables or drawings, standard outlining, annotating the reading, or recording thoughts on tape.

In 2001 and 2002, faculty struggled to convince students to express their own thoughts and reactions to the ideas presented, to go beyond simply representing the main points of the reading. Students seemed reluctant to take a stand or express an opinion about the reading in their writing (though this problem was not present in class discussion), and they doggedly adhered to standard outlines or bullet-lists of the main points. In an attempt to help students see the difference between critical reflection and summary, faculty shared examples of more reflective notes written by a few students, modeled the process, and asked students to practice annotating the reading according to their personal reactions in small groups—to no avail. In our end-of-semester interviews in 2002, many students shared with us that this kind of written reaction to reading was not encouraged in high school, where instructors penalized reading responses that deviated from a rigid book-report model.

In 2003, faculty attempted to integrate the hybrid text/speech dynamic of *Our America* into students' reading responses by asking them to engage in an online threaded discussion of the reading with their peers. In our first attempt, we asked students to write about what surprised them most in *Our America*. When we read these discussion threads later, we were delighted at how thoughtful students were in discussing the book when engaged in an electronic discussion with classmates. These electronic discussions represented more careful and more organized thinking—and students achieved some of the elements of critical thought, which they had been unable to practice in their weekly note taking. The online discussions give students a chance to write without worrying about the mechanics of their language, but rather to simply experience how writing helps to shape and define their thinking—in dialogue with their peers. Quiet students participated enthusiastically, and all of the “voices” were read with equal attention, creating an environment in which students cared about their writing and their audience's reaction. Following are a few “threads” from the discussion:

I actually thought it was amazing how every one was so willing to talk to LeAlan and Loyd. I guess that I have this stereotype about the projects that most of the people are hateful and wouldn't want to talk to any one knocking on their door, or some one just walking up to them in the street. I guess that this book cleared up that misconception about these people. Now I know that these people want to talk and be heard.

April Heaney

My response to our america was nothing but anger. Anger in the fact that our so called presidents running for office are spending what, two hundred million dollars on thier campaign to get alected for prez, when we have these problems..... just wait till i write my essay on this subject [for College Composition].

Unlike traditional note taking, the threaded discussion bridges the gap between thinking, speaking, and writing in a familiar and discussion-based context. We continued the threaded discussion as a way to encourage this type of reflective dialogue for the remainder of the semester.

Allowing students to read texts that foreground the voices of marginalized individuals and to explore complex issues of acculturation in the reading and their own responses aided several students in recognizing the basis of their own skepticism toward academic work. For example, one student recently chose to write about how his own affiliation with a gang made it difficult for him to engage in school because he saw plainly how the school system viewed gang members as “kids in the quest to commit violence,” when in reality “they work everyday of their life staying alive and providing for their [gang] family.” He writes, “Many join because the gang may provide love, brotherhood, and compassion that the kid is missing at home from his own family. . . . Gangs often recruit youths who have low self-esteem or are picked on [by] others at school. . . . The schools need to reach out to the person. They need to stop stereotyping them.”

For this student, the stereotyping may have been only part of his resistance to school: he points out again and again in the response how the gang family is built around absolute loyalty to the gang’s way of life (and, more importantly, the gang’s definition of “success” in life). Acculturation into an academic, upwardly mobile “mindset” could certainly challenge that affiliation. It’s difficult to pin down the role these initial reflective note-taking assignments play in increasing student motivation, but this student showed a marked effort at mid-semester to invest himself in both the Critical Thinking and Composition courses—more than he had in the early weeks of the semester. He scheduled conferences with instructors and began to work on making up assignments he had missed. Understanding that there is no recipe for “solving” each student’s struggles with academic discourse and issues of acculturation, we took this as a positive sign that this student had begun to feel some investment in learning—he understood that these courses were making a sincere effort to explore complex issues *with* him and weren’t offering pat answers or ultimatums.

The Synergy Program

In keeping with our goal of connecting speech with prose and opening up discussion about tensions between home communities and college, students next watch a taped C-Span interview that took place in 1997, when LeAlan Jones was eighteen years old and a first-year college student. After listening to LeAlan's attempts to explain how he balances his identity between the norms of the housing project in which he grew up and the university—for him, two communities that require entirely different forms of discourse, dress, and even ways of thinking—students discuss this issue in class and as a threaded discussion. Do they see evidence of tension in LeAlan's responses? Do they think it is possible to maintain a healthy balance between disparate communities and keep strong ties to both? What is LeAlan risking in speaking out to inner city youth about his own transformation? In a threaded discussion, one student wrote:

I think that he glossed over the deeper issues. Even though he discussed some heavy issues, it seemed like there were definitely some underlying problems that did not get addressed. He may have sugar coated it so that it would be easier to swallow for people who had no experience with drugs and violence like LeAlan and Lloyd had.

Another student responded:

I agree that he glossed over the deeper issues. . . . I was most interested about the insecurities Lealan and Loyd felt about their future. They had a lot of curiosity about what other members of their community thought about their future. Considering a lot of members of their community have turned out with such troublesome lives, it seems like it would be a concerning issue.

In class discussion, we talked more about these “deeper issues,” speculating about how LeAlan's friends and family in the projects might respond to his education, and how the interview seemed to bring out mixed emotions in LeAlan: pride in his background, determination to “make something” of himself while remaining loyal to his family and community, pain for the suffering he had witnessed, and a dueling mixture of anger and respect for the “political machine” that had ignored his community for so long. Those Synergy students who identified most with LeAlan's struggle to integrate the norms and values of disparate communities predominantly came from home cultures that either did not value higher education, or valued its rewards but

did not put these values into practice by encouraging or modeling good learning habits. In an interview conducted in 2004, one white male student from a rural town in Wyoming described the challenges he faced in balancing his goals at the university with his family's attitude toward education:

My mom was 15 when she had her first kid. She dropped out and got married to my dad. He graduated high school but didn't go any farther with it. One works at Ace Hardware and the other works at the Dollar Store. There's no income in that. The main thing—I don't want to financially struggle. After looking at everything, like my brothers, I don't want to be like that. Most of my brothers are pretty mad because they didn't think I would make it [to college]. They are like he'll drop out and be like the rest of us. He'll be around here and we'll have fun. I always make everything fun. Since I am not there they always call and ask what I am doing or if I will be home this week. I say weekend—I have class. When I go home, they want me to stay an extra day to go hunting or something. I tell them I can't because I have class.

As this student exemplifies, the individuals who found connections with LeAlan's story were not only minority students or students from urban areas; many white students from rural communities also found much to relate to in *Our America*.

Culminating Projects: Ethnography Project and Web Portfolio

To put *Our America* in another light: students begin the class by delving into a book that describes, in essence, a research project. The two eleven-year-old authors are far from academics, yet they are posing questions about their community, interviewing people both inside and outside their home culture, struggling with the answers, and investing themselves in a research process that is highly meaningful to them. They have created an informal ethnography of a violent community in South Chicago, using their own voices and their own questions. In this sense, LeAlan and Lloyd help introduce Synergy students to the most compelling benefits of ethnographic research: the researcher becomes the expert in the areas that interest him or her most. The research process involves much more than reading articles and books and writing on note cards—it involves *speaking, listening, thinking, watching, and growing*. The researcher investigates secondary sources from

a place of true ownership of the core project and conclusions. Finally, as Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater point out, ethnographic study involves focusing on and developing abilities that come naturally to most of us:

Ethnographic fieldwork offers us formal techniques for recording and documenting what we already do quite well informally: observe carefully, listen closely, and speculate about others' talk and behavior. But, as anthropologists have long known, learning to do fieldwork has an added value: one begins to see oneself and one's own cultural attitudes more clearly—since any study of an other is also a study of the self. (3)

Our America models a form of personal ethnography in which the researcher uses his or her own voice in creating “thick description” (Geertz) of a community that typifies ethnographic research. While we give students important guidelines for their projects, we also encourage them to find a style and tone that works best for their study and persona. To learn more about the ethnography process, students listen to the experiences and advice of volunteer guest speakers from Anthropology and International Studies; they read a detailed description of ethnographic research and writing process excerpted from *The Curious Writer* (Ballenger); and they analyze several print and web ethnographies, including “Ethnography of a Junior High” by Janet Davis (book chapter), “An Urban Ethnography of Latino Street Gangs” by Francine Hallcom (website), and “An Ethnography of a Neighborhood Café: Informality, Table Arrangements and Background Noise” by Laurier, Whyte, and Buckner (website).

During the first half of the semester, students choose a community, complete an initial observation and interview, and write two short essays in College Composition in which they reflect on their past experiences with community involvement and strategize for the ethnography study. Students occasionally choose to work in pairs or small groups because of a common community interest or reluctance to meet strangers alone, but all students develop individual research questions, turn in individual assignments, and compose their own web portfolio. Instructors loan out tape recorders to students (each class has approximately three tape recorders for student use), and students use their own cameras for taking photos of the community. Because Laramie is a relatively small town comprised of a six mile by four mile rectangle and a centrally located university, students do not typically have problems with transportation to community sites.

In the Critical Thinking course, students turn in detailed notes on their observations and interviews and refine the four initial questions that guide them in studying the community in more depth. Again in the Critical Thinking course, drawing on course readings, we generate areas for critical observation of a community, which might include gender roles, appearance, comfort level with revealing details about personal history, body language, topics of conversation, and different dynamics between members of the community. Students spend the latter half of the semester creating consent forms, conducting more observations, interviewing key informants and relevant “outsiders,” taking photos, narrowing and revising research questions, and formulating conclusions.

Following a set of guidelines, students use FrontPage software to create a personal web portfolio that highlights their chosen community and all of the various research elements they have put into the ethnography. They create a homepage, links to interviews and observations, links to photos, and a link to the central piece—a comprehensive discussion of their process, questions, and conclusions (see Appendix for the complete assignments). Although the ethnography project is the weightiest assignment in the Critical Thinking course, comprising one-third of the students' final grade, students earn credit throughout the semester for turning in reading notes, engaging in a mid-semester group book presentation, submitting interview and observation field notes, completing preparatory writings for the final ethnography, and submitting drafts of the final ethnography. Students must receive credit for at least half of the preliminary assignments in order to pass the course, even if they complete the ethnography web portfolio.

Students have great flexibility in designing their web portfolios, and each one becomes a reflection of the individual student as well as the community studied. On their homepage, students include a link to a personal reflection that responds to the prompt:

Introduce yourself. Tell us where you're from and some details about the places and people that mattered most to you growing up (maybe your hometown, high school, church, work, sports, friends, family). Tell us a little about the path you took getting to the University of Wyoming—the challenges and encouragements you experienced. Finally, think about the relationship between your own background and the community you studied. What did this ethnography help you learn about yourself?

The Synergy Program

On the last day of class, students present their web portfolios in an atmosphere of excitement and pride—typical feelings for “presentation day” in many courses, but a new experience for many of our students. In 2004, a few students who had missed weeks of classes and failed to complete many other assignments during the course of the semester showed up on the last day to present their web portfolios (and the portfolios were quite good, for the most part, though some students unfortunately still did not earn enough points to pass the course).

Students traditionally labeled “at risk” or “basic writers” for an array of complex reasons often need a context for thesis-research projects that they find meaningful to their own identities—and a product that puts the scholarly paper, long despised by these students, on the back burner. Because the more traditional writing assignments in the Composition course are closely tied to the ethnography study, these writings take on more meaning and motivational value for most students. The web portfolio, the culminating result of much of their previous work, reaches a much broader and closer audience, including friends and family, and it remains “alive” on the web long after the courses end. In experiencing a sense of ownership of this ethnographic study, and in caring (perhaps for the first time) about how diverse audiences will react to their portrayal of a specific community online, students gain a glimpse into the academic mindset that has previously been a mystery to them—the expectation that learning to research and present conclusions for an outside audience is a valuable discourse and worth practicing.

Our hope is that students will take this experience with them into future classes, and attempt to find ways to take ownership of their other coursework in similar ways. Although Synergy courses only extend through spring semester of the first year, the majority of students maintain contact with their Synergy instructors—often through their senior year. In addition, many enroll in non-Synergy courses taught by Synergy faculty. Perhaps the most powerful ongoing connection to the learning community occurs through students’ peer groups. Synergy students continue to have close friendships and study groups with their Synergy peers for many years. In follow-up phone interviews with Synergy students from 2002 and 2003, all reported having maintained close ties with one or more peers from the learning community.

In the following paragraphs, I will describe one ethnography project that highlights one of the greatest benefits of the ethnography assignment: its tendency to help students recognize the dueling personas they may be struggling to reconcile in their approach to academic success (and academic

writing). In this example, the struggle occurs between the student's loyalty to a culture she sees as rebellious and un-academic and her desire to gain a college education.

Maria is a Hispanic student whose immigrant grandparents had only a third-grade education and whose mother worked her way from the beet fields of Nebraska to an administrative position at the university. After spending much of the semester expressing her anger at social injustices committed against Hispanics, and against downtrodden people in general, Maria chose to study theater majors for her ethnography. In her editorial essay for Composition, Maria begins:

You would think that slavery ended after the Civil War was fought many years ago. In all honesty slavery still exists in the United States today. Shocked? I would hope not, I would hope that the citizens of the U.S. would know about the treatment of many Mexican immigrants in the fields of California.

Later in the essay, Maria describes an interview she conducted with a family member:

Elias Cardona experienced this unfairness while living in the state of Nebraska. I asked him how it felt, he said "It was a struggle everyday. Seeing signs like No Mexicans or Dogs Allowed, it's hard and it made you angry, but you had to keep trying no matter what. . . . [T]here is racism and inequality in the world still, and all you can do is just keep fighting and believe you can make a difference."

In an interview we conducted with Maria near the end of the semester, she revealed that she feels less hopeful about the ability of marginalized people to find justice in America: "There are just some people out there that just can't make it and I don't want to think negative like that. When you actually think about it—it's something that made me angry in class—somebody said these people can pull themselves up and become anything they want just like we can. I was like, no they can't. If they make it they end up getting beat down."

In the interview, Maria also expressed some competing feelings about her schooling:

In school, I was always the one who was different to everyone else. I was the loud one and would crack up at everything and would

mess around with the teachers. I think I still feel like a little of an outcast. . . . [I]t's like we are in college and we have this money we are giving to the college trying to make something of ourselves so what we are doing is sitting in class listening to some guy when we could be out helping people. It seems that life and government has put a screen over our face about what's really going on and what we can do with ourselves. They put the only way to make money is to go to school. The only way you mean something to society is if you go to school. There are some problems out there that need to be fixed and a lot of us can do it but we are too busy going to school. I don't like thinking like this—let's move on. I think I am one of those people who want to be remembered for something. . . [B]ut you see people's mistakes and you don't want to make them and that motivates you to do better. I see [my sisters] having a hard time right now. They both have kids and are married. They both got involved in really bad things that screwed up their lives. It's definitely motivation to go to school to see how that came out.

In choosing theater majors for her ethnography, Maria found a community that echoed some of her own feelings—identifying themselves largely as outcasts, working through their art to portray social issues, and gaining a college education as a means to develop personal talents rather than to increase their standard of living. In her ethnography, Maria writes:

This community was truly original because they are taught to question society, and to talk about what people usually do not want to discuss (ex. Sex, drugs, war). Drama students believe that the play writes the truth and shows many things that people need to see and learn about. I found this surprising of the theater community because in a way drama students are leaders, martyrs, and revolutionists in today's society. I am sure that many outsiders of this community would not be aware of the message that theater students are always trying to send into the world in the form of simple school plays.

This community helped Maria identify with college in a way that validated her own misgivings about selling out to “the system,” and while it likely did not alleviate all of her conflicted feelings about being in college, it expanded her conception of what academic work can achieve for social good.

Synergy's Effects on Student Writing and Retention

In evaluating the progress of student writing in Synergy, we control for instructor bias by participating in the English Department's grading jury, a system by which students' major writing portfolios are holistically evaluated by the students' instructor and one or two other composition teachers who are not part of Synergy. In 2001, Synergy's first year and before the program initiated meaningful connections between the Composition and Critical Thinking courses, Synergy students' final grades in the Composition course were significantly lower than those of students in regular Composition courses. In 2003, after the initiation of the connected reading, writing, and web portfolio assignments, Synergy students' final Composition grades showed significant improvement (see Table 1 for comparative data).

Table 1: Grades in Composition Courses for Synergy and Regular Students

	A	B	C	D	F
Synergy, 2001	0%	39%	15%	38%	8%
Regular Composition, 2001	25%	47%	23%	3%	2%
Synergy, 2003	28%	48%	24%	0	0

These improvements have held steady every year since 2003, and the fall 2004 midterm portfolio grades showed similarly encouraging results: A: 9 percent; B: 24 percent; C: 67 percent; with no Ds or Fs. It's important to note that midterm grades for students in all Composition courses, both Synergy and non-Synergy, are lower than students' final grades, in part because the midterm portfolio is due five weeks after the semester begins.

In 2003, Synergy students also showed significant improvements in retention over the comparison group of conditionally admitted students who did not participate in Synergy. The retention rate from fall to spring semester was 87 percent for Synergy students as compared with 81 percent for the conditionally admitted students who chose not to participate in Synergy. Among the comparison group, 63 percent were on academic probation at the end of fall semester, while only 27 percent of Synergy students were on academic probation. In addition, the average GPA for Synergy students was 2.39 as compared with an average GPA of 1.77 for the comparison group. These statistics become even more impressive when considering that at the

beginning of both years, Synergy students' high school GPAs were lower than those of the comparison group, and Synergy English ACT scores were markedly lower. These retention data support Synergy faculty's belief that the problems our students face with writing go much deeper than structural or sentence-level issues. We believe that addressing students' anxieties about learning academic writing and achieving academic success (ideas that are often linked in students' underlying perceptions of academia) can increase student motivation and success in far-reaching and significant ways.

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APPENDIX

Prompts for Ethnography Study and Web Portfolio

ETHNOGRAPHY STUDY & WEB PORTFOLIO

We've spent the first half of the semester starting to think about community study and contacting and observing various groups; we've read several short articles looking at identity formation (gender, multiple intelligences, and definitions of success) and longer texts looking at how people become part of a community and how that community shapes who we are (geeks, college sorority and drinking groups, poverty-stricken communities). Now, we'll begin concerted work on finishing at least 3 observations and 3 interviews with key informants and working on drafting your actual written ethnography. Finally, you will create a web portfolio to house your ethnography, your personal reflections on the project, and links to the raw data and observation notes you've compiled over the course of the semester.

What is an ethnography?

An ethnography is a method of studying and learning about a person or group of people. Usually, ethnography involves the study of a small group of subjects in their own environment. Rather than looking at a small set of variables and a large number of subjects ("the big picture"), the ethnographer attempts to get a detailed understanding of the circumstances of the few subjects being studied. Ethnographic accounts, then, are both descriptive and interpretive; descriptive because detail is so crucial, and interpretive, because the ethnographer must determine the significance of what she observes without gathering broad, statistical information. Clifford Geertz is famous for coining the term "thick description" in discussing the methodology of the ethnographer. Try to figure out what a group of people know and how they are using that knowledge to organize their behavior. Instead of "What do I see these people doing?" ask, "What do these people see themselves doing?"

Remaining Deadlines for the Project
(You can turn any of these elements in early if you'd like.)

Complete three field observations of your community and take notes.

- **Observation 1:** already due—if you haven't turned in these notes, do it asap!
- **Observation 2:** field notes due November 1
- **Observation 3:** field notes due November 15

Complete three to four interviews with key informants and outsiders to the community.

- **Interview 1:** due November 1 (this deadline has been pushed back 1 week)
- **Interview 2:** notes due November 8
- **Interview 3:** notes due November 22

*Note: One of these interviews should come from an outsider to the community. Feel free to conduct more than 3 total interviews if possible.

Conduct secondary research on the community and issues that influence the community.

- **Coe library presentation** of research resources: November 1
- **Secondary research summary:** due November 8

Draft your ethnography essay.

- **Ethnography preparation essay:** due November 22

Develop the web portfolio.

- **Draft of web portfolio due:** December 6 for in-class workshop
- **Final draft due:** at our final presentation