

Exploring Racial And Academic Identity Through a Literate Practice: Strategies of South  
African High School Students

Sara Mouhktar

Advisor: Linda Flower

Carnegie Mellon University, Honors Thesis

Spring 2013

### **Acknowledgements**

I would've never had a chance to spend two months in Cape Town, South Africa without the Jennings Family Brave Companion Scholarship. I truly, infinitely thank CMU Trustee Larry Jennings and his family for funding my time abroad – it was an amazing, wonderful, memorable, educational trip. Furthermore, this project would not have been possible without the mentorship, patience and encouragement of Linda Flower – thank you for your help and inspiration every step of the way.

This project explores the racial and academic identities of South African high school students: how they plan, construct, and write a response to a prompt regarding racial definitions. This inquiry investigates the students' socio-cultural environment (at school and at home), their writing processes (how they plan and write a response paper) and what factors of self-identity, social environment, racial history, and planning processes led the students to speak about, and write, what they did.

We see that there are many social, cultural and academic factors that influence the writing decisions a student makes. The fact that English is the students' second language, the instructor's assumptions and perceptions of how to orchestrate Collaborative Planning sessions, and the students' meta-knowledge, all impact this literate practice. On a cultural note, we see that students' identities are deeply rooted in South Africa's Apartheid period. We also observe that discussing, reflecting, and writing about one's own identity leads to new paths of self-understanding; it also paints a clearer picture of the steps a student makes in articulating him or herself.

This paper, then, investigates: the historical, cultural, and academic context in which the students participate in a specific literate practice; the students' planning, discussion, and written responses to a given prompt; and how their writing strategies impacted the decisions they made - as writers, students, and black South Africans. I will also investigate whether what the students said and planned to do mapped on to their final written work - and if it didn't, what kind of knowledge representation could have accounted for it. Finally, I reflect on my own experience and perspective on culture and race in South Africa.

### **Apartheid in South Africa**

Apartheid laws in South Africa were enacted in 1948, in order to make white domination permanent (Chokshi et al.). This "domination" began in the seventeenth century, as European settlers started to colonize there. Apartheid essentially institutionalized racial separation and oppression, allowing upper-level jobs to be "white-only," making marriage between whites and non-whites illegal, and pushing blacks into townships (Chokshi et al.). There were (and still are) only three classifications of race: Black, Coloured, or White.

During Apartheid, there were severe penalties – life imprisonment, torture – for any protest against the enacted laws. Black Africans were pushed into terrible living environments; they were not given equal opportunities (Chokshi et al.). For black Africans, this was a period of turmoil, severe violence, and prejudice. Hundreds were jailed – even for peaceful protests – and hundreds more were tortured, just for the color of their skin (Chokshi et al.). It wasn't until the '90's that South Africa's younger politicians began to embrace more progressive ideas, officially permitting the existence of Black political parties, and doing away with racial restrictions. In 1994, the first democratic election was held, leading to Nelson Mandela's victory as president of South Africa (Russell, xi). Although Mandela's election was a tangible step towards diminishing Apartheid ideas in South Africa, hostility did not just disappear. Injustice and indignation are still felt throughout the country. Alec Russell, in *After Mandela*, writes about the widespread inequality that still remains in South Africa, despite Mandela's and the African National Congress's "victory" over Apartheid in 1994. It is clear that racial tensions did not just disappear because Apartheid was outlawed.

## **LEAP**

LEAP 1 Science and Maths Secondary School is a small institution located in the Pinelands – right on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa. It serves Black Africans from underprivileged backgrounds. This particular branch was the first LEAP created; there are currently six around the country, each serving students from a particular township ("LEAP Science and Maths Schools"). LEAP 1 busses students from the township Langa every morning at 8:15, and takes them back at 5:15PM.

A township, in South Africa, refers to extremely underdeveloped urban areas – a wound still left from the Apartheid era, where black Africans were forced to live in cramped, small shacks. Most of the students still live in those impoverished areas today.

## **L.O. and LEAP's Community**

The culture and community at LEAP is important when considering the construction of the students' social and academic identities, and how they subsequently respond to the prompt given about racial definitions. The students' environment leads to an active construction of how they view, and act upon ideas. This ultimately affects how students speak, write, and think about

themselves. LEAP's Life Orientation class and weekly meetings are important factors that impact the community of the high school (i.e., how much students feel they are able to share, argue, and speak about).

"Life Orientation" (L.O.) is a mandatory class that each student takes every year at LEAP. The L.O. instructor "actively engages with students to develop self awareness and confidence" ("LEAP Science and Maths Schools"). During L.O., everyone sits in a circle, and class begins with a guided meditation. After that, the floor is open; any student can bring up any issue they feel should be discussed. Every person is challenged to form and articulate his or her beliefs and opinions. Sometimes, one student may have a problem with another, and, because L.O. strongly encourages coming to terms with conflict, students confront one another about personal, academic or social issues.

This class was made primarily as a way for the students (almost all of whom come from troubled backgrounds) to cope, and to leave optimistic, assertive, and articulate. This community gives students a space to further develop, and own, their words and opinions. It becomes a place that helps shape one's sense of self, and, additionally, becomes "a site for personal and public inquiry and ... a site for rhetorical theory building as well" (Flower, *Community Literacy* 19).

Moreover, every Wednesday, the whole school meets in the canteen for a community talk. As a somewhat larger form of L.O., it begins with the students singing a Xhosa song. Again, students have one main topic to discuss, and everyone is encouraged to speak their opinions. This strengthens the notion of LEAP as a community where ideas about politics, race and ethnicity are constructed *by* the students themselves; there are always opportunities for students to speak about their opinions, and construct and articulate reasons for believing what they do. Their own self-concept, then, is actively self-constructed. This school is unique in a sense that it actively encourages students to figure out who they are on their own. It is important to consider L.O. classes, and the overall community of LEAP, when exploring the students' responses to the prompt given in this study.

## **Method**

Because of the recency of Apartheid and the diversity of the country, racial definitions in South Africa carry such heavy, unique significance. Moreover, the students' writing processes

(how they plan, write, and actively construct meaning) is valuable to explore, since they are just entering secondary school. In this project, I explored how Black Xhosa teenagers understood race, their identity, and the social and political setting of South Africa today. Because I explored this topic through the students' literate practices, this study also investigates the writing strategies of ninth graders at LEAP. This study traces their planning sessions, their written work, and different factors that affected both processes (like meta-knowledge or active meaning construction). I also discuss their overall responses and reflections about racial definitions in South Africa today.

Ten students, all female, were asked to write a paper about their experiences of racial definitions. They participated in collaborative planning (CP) sessions prior to writing, where they talked about what they were planning to do for their response paper. CP sessions were a way to scaffold the students' ideas regarding how to write a response, as well as to reveal the steps they took in constructing a written paper. The prompt was:

As you know, I come from the United States, where racial differences have a long history, and are an ongoing source of difficulty for everyone. But I also know that our ideas of race and ethnic identity change depending on where you live and what your history is. So I would like to help you with your writing and at the same time ask you to help me understand how race works in South Africa. I am asking you to do this by writing a brief paper in which you describe your **experiences of racial definitions in South Africa** to someone like me who isn't from there. How do you name yourself? What does it mean to be \_\_\_\_?

During the CP sessions, the instructor asked questions that would help them think more deeply about what and how to write a response. CP sessions help writers further understand what to do (not just what to 'say'), by framing topic information in terms of purpose, key point, argument, and text conventions (Flower, "Part I" 104). These questions cued more thought towards the audience, the main message, and rhetorical moves that could be used in their papers.

For the ten participants, there were three CP sessions in total. The first one was just the instructor (SM) and the first participant (P1). The next two were group CP sessions, where one session was P2 – P5 (four students and the instructor), and the other was P6 – P10 (five students

and the instructor). During group CP sessions, the students often talked to each other (as well as the instructor) about the topic and how to plan the paper. After the collaborative planning sessions, students were free to write on their own. I, the instructor, collected their papers the next day, and they participated in a retrospective interview, where I asked about how their writing went, what challenges they faced, and why they made the decisions they did. The collaborative planning transcripts, written papers, and retrospective interviews were analyzed.

### **Collaborative Planning Sessions**

Collaborative planning sessions served as both a method of this study, as well as a scaffold for the students (to help them plan their papers). Tape-recording the students' group CP sessions has helped us gain insight into how students talk, and think, about this topic. CP planning "is a problem-solving strategy that helps restructure ... while drawing out the writer's best work" (Flower, *Community Literacy* 55).

Here, I transcribed and traced the topics that we talked about during the CP sessions. I characterized the issues discussed as "topic info" (which is just general background information about the prompt – e.g., Apartheid and the history of South Africa), "rhetorical planning," (using background information and their own self-understanding to consider the overall purpose of the paper), and "structure/layout" (how/in what order the students decide to present their ideas in their written work). I traced the "moves" (e.g., changing from topic info to rhetorical planning) made in the CP sessions, and compared it to their written work.

#### *1. Purpose and Topic Information*

During CP sessions, we first read the prompt out loud and went over what was being asked. For all three CP sessions, then, the first subject discussed was the purpose/goal of the paper. For example:

SM: So, I'll read it out loud. [*reads prompt: 'As you know ...'*]. Okay, first we're gonna talk about what the paper is asking you. So what do you think the paper is asking you to do?

P6: I think the paper is asking me to describe myself and what do I call myself

and why do I call myself that name. Because here in South Africa we have different kinds of race.

P7: And that you want us to help you – about the race – about how race works here in South Africa and that you are going to help us to write.

SM: So what are you going to write about? How are you gonna start your paper?

P8: I think I'm gonna start telling you what is happening here in South Africa; like in race, how you describe yourself. And then, 'how do you name yourself,' then we're gonna start to answer this question.

So, the first topic in the CP sessions is the general problem/purpose of the paper. Figuring out what the prompt is asking of the writer is an important first step, because it lays out a mutual understanding (with all the CP partners involved in planning the paper) of what is expected and asked. The students' understanding of the prompt impacts the next moves they make and what they subsequently talk about during CP sessions (which impacts how they write a response). Generally, reading and discussing the prompt led to further discussion of the students' own topic knowledge. They started talking about topic information – their background, South Africa's history, or their personal experiences regarding race:

P2: I would write that blacks were separated from whites, they didn't live in the same places and they were taken to the townships where it was believed it suited them. Townships are small places - they have high population density. [Blacks] were taken there, and when they go to towns they have their own [separate] toilets, and when they ride the bus they have their own busses – for blacks only. And their places are dirty, but the white people's things, they were clean.

P3: Also if they would go to town for shopping, they had to carry their ID – 'dumb pass.' So if you go to a white toilet, where white people pee, you would be arrested because you're not supposed to go to their toilet. You have your own toilet where you go.

P4: Also, it was not only us that were not free. Also, white people were not free because they weren't allowed to interact with us. If a white person is seen talking to a black person, or doing whatever, having a relationship with that black person,



that white person would be in trouble. And also if you are black and you break the rules or the laws, you will not only be arrested but you will be tortured to death. And be hanged.

P3: But black South Africans, they didn't like the way they were treated, and started demonstrating, like some were arrested for 27 years like Nelson Mandela, just because of fighting for what he believed in, like equality. And so he went to jail for 27 years.

The history of South Africa – Apartheid, Nelson Mandela, etc - was at the forefront of the students' general understanding of racial definition. After discussing what the paper was asking, students generally spoke about the history of their country – because race is still a salient feature of South Africa's history. It is clear that the country's recent history affected how Xhosa students view racial definitions.

It seems that the discussion of background knowledge took the students away from an explicit labeling of their own, individual racial identity. They all began to talk about Apartheid in general, and blacks being oppressed, in general. Looking back on it, I realize during CP sessions, I interpreted this general discussion of South Africa's history differently than the students did. I thought that even though they were talking about discrimination in a broader sense, they were going to explicitly label their sense of self in terms of their history in their written responses. I thought that was just understood, and, consequently, didn't think to ask more explicit questions like “how did Apartheid impact your understanding of yourself and your race?”

## *2. Audience Awareness*

In the written prompt, I asked the students specifically to imagine an audience as “someone like me who isn't from there.” The CP sessions demonstrate that thinking of the audience plays an important role in how the students choose to present their topic information, and what they subsequently chose to write. For example:

P1: Um, I think first of all there are few people that don't know the history of South Africa.

SM: That's true. Wait, let's pretend – pretend that you're gonna write to someone from the U.S. that has no idea about South Africa. That thinks everything is like America ... cause you know, America ... so just assume that your audience is like, someone who doesn't know about South Africa and doesn't understand –

P1: Doesn't know anything?

SM: Yeah, I mean, a lot of people think that everybody identifies themselves the same. Like, 'over there, in America, I identify myself as black, so in South Africa, I should be black too. ' You know what I mean? But it's not like that.

P1: Ohh! And also I hear that some of the people overseas think in South Africa, it's a place of animals.

The first line of the transcript above shows that the student (P1) had one idea of the audience (“few people don't know the history of South Africa”). This implies that P1 didn't think about explaining South Africa's history in her paper. After SM helps P1 understand the audience as someone who doesn't know the history well, P1 is able to step outside of her own shoes, and into the perspective a reader (who is, hypothetically, ignorant of her country's history). This understanding, evident in the last line of the transcript above (“some people overseas think...”) is evident in P1's (and the other participants') paper; they all wrote about South Africa with an assumption that the readers didn't know much about its history.

This move is important, because it influences how the student writes – i.e., if she thinks all readers know everything about South Africa, the background information in her paper (where she shares the topic information about race) would be more brief than if she considers an audience that isn't as informed about the racial history of her country. This more elaborate explanation, to an imagined audience from the U.S., may also lead to a deeper exploration of her identity/self-concept, because she is challenged to consider how her narrative fits in a larger, international scope. For instance:

SM: mhm. So how would, um, the audience – like if someone's from America, and has no idea about the history of South Africa, or how race works. A lot of people in America think that the way that our racial definitions are, are like that

for everybody. Every country is like that. But it's not true, right? Race in America is very different than race here. So how would you write – how would you put that in a paper if you were gonna write about it?

P2: I would write that blacks were separated from whites, they didn't live in the same places and they were taken to the townships where it was believed it suited them. Townships are small places - they have high population density. [Blacks] were taken there, and when they go to towns they have their own [separate] toilets, and when they ride the bus they have their own busses – for blacks only. And their places are dirty, but the white people's things, they were clean.

Imagining an audience who isn't from South Africa also gives the student a sense of authority. David Bartholomae, in "Inventing the University," asserts that "writers who can accommodate their motives to their readers' expectations are writers who can both imagine and write from a position of privilege" (515). The prompt given in this study challenges these students to explain to an outsider, someone who isn't in their circle – which should, inherently, give them a sense of authority. This makes the students more comfortable with talking about their knowledge and situation (since they feel that they know more than me, the instructor), and could also cue a more thorough and clear explanation of their country's history (since I am not from their country).

Although the students are not used to, or completely comfortable with, the academic discourse yet (they are just beginning secondary school, and English is their second language), an important part of writing is realizing that they, just as writers, have power and authority. *They* decide what they believe, what to write about, and how to present their ideas. One of the main goals of L.O. classes at LEAP is to strengthen these students' sense of inner power - to give them a sense of authority in their every day life. This way of thinking can also translate into a way of writing.

Beyond thinking of the audience as American or South African, the *specific role* of the reader also impacts how the student writes (me, as an instructor, versus me, as a curious American), and affects the overall purpose of the paper. Moreover, LEAP's academic setting impacts how students go about thinking of an audience: they are becoming trained to speak more openly about any issue that bothers them – whether it's political, cultural, or racial (mostly

because of L.O. classes). Maybe the implications of this open community can be found in the bluntness and openness of how the students speak about their living conditions, and their experienced discrimination.

This also brings up an interesting question: when we write in the academic world, who are our audiences? How does it affect our purpose? It could depend greatly on the prompt given, and the main goal or message we are trying to convey. In this case, perceiving the audience as someone non-South African gives the students more authority, and thus leads to a more expansive paper than if the readers knew about South Africa. This also implies, however, that the students embed their self-identities so much in the history of South Africa (so if an audience knew about the history, there may not be much to say about themselves).

### *3. Audience + Topic Info: An Important Move*

When the students begin to consider audience *and* topic information, they end up planning their papers to a new depth; that is, they start coming to terms with a better-defined goal. Towards the end of one CP session (with P6 to P10), for example, students used their original understanding of purpose, topic information, and audience, to construct a more articulated purpose:

SM: Okay. So what is the main message that you want to, like, convey in writing the paper? What are you trying to say? What would you want to say about racial –

P9: I think they're trying to say that discrimination didn't end here in South Africa. There are people who like to discriminate each other and there are people who like to end this racism but they cannot do that without the help of others.

Compared to how the students thought of the purpose/goal in the beginning of the CP session (e.g., “how I define myself”), after discussing and thinking about the topic information and the audience, they found themselves using their narratives (of history and their own experiences) to talk about discrimination in a deeper sense: they began to think of what ‘discrimination not ending’ in South Africa means, to them, and to their audience.

This move seems to be evident in a few students during the CP sessions, when topic information and audience awareness are well-understood and the purpose has time to be further

explored. This uncovers an important idea of CP sessions: it shouldn't be one issue after another discussed as separate entities (topic information, for example, separate from audience awareness). The key to gaining successful insight is *incorporating* the discussion of one issue to the others discussed – for instance, the question should be “how can I incorporate my understanding of my audience into how I present my ideas regarding race in South Africa?”

#### 4. Paper Structure

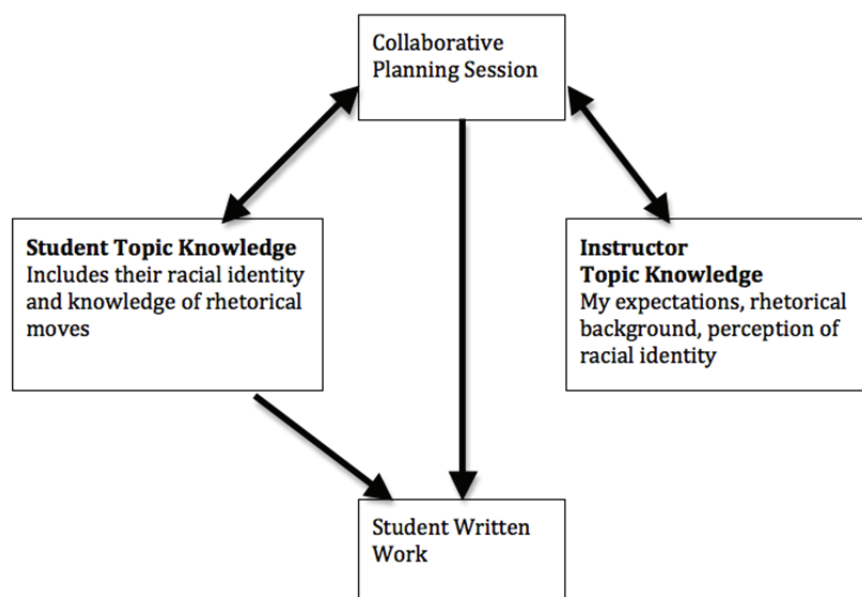
David Olson, in “Writing and the Mind,” asserts that writing adds a new type of structure to our thinking, by making us think about the composition and organization of language (108). In this study, one of the final topics discussed during CP sessions was the rhetorical structure/layout of the paper. After discussing the ideas surrounding the prompt, I asked how the students were planning to lay out their ideas in an essay:

P1: Hm, first of all I'm going to do an introduction, [where I'll say] what I'm going to talk about. And then in the body I'm going to talk about the main event that happened in South Africa, and also the results of that. And the effects – and why did it happen. And then on the last page I'm going to summarize all that and also – and put on my own views about what happened in South Africa and how I feel about it.

One resounding theme in the structure the papers was an intro-body-conclusion layout; as ninth graders, this structure was being taught in their English classes as an introduction to academic writing. If we see writing as a means of organizing one's own thoughts, this layout is important to acknowledge. As Olson's point supports, this intro-body-conclusion layout seems to be an important framework in organizing the thoughts discussed in during CP sessions (Intro: topic info, body: own experiences, conclusions: who they are). “Writing provides the concepts and categories for thinking about the structure of spoken language,” Olson writes, “not the other way around” (110). It could be, then, that writing and thinking about topic information and their own experiences leads the students to form a more articulate, thought-out response to who they are as a Black African.

### Collaborative Planning Sessions: A Brief Summary

We see from CP sessions how impactful the instructor's role, topic information, and expectations are when students plan to write. These CP sessions were meant to narrow the gap between the instructor's expectations and the student's paper construction. I learned, throughout the sessions, how distinct my perspective, topic knowledge and writing expectations were from the students'. At times, the instructor's (my) perspective and topic information may have led me to perceive and interpret what the students discussed differently from what the students themselves remembered. When they spoke about Apartheid, for example, I just thought that they understood and would write about the connection between Apartheid and their own identity; I didn't explicitly label everything they said as something they can use to make a clear, point-driven paper.



As shown in the diagram above, student and instructor topic knowledge both impact the CP discussions. In this case, my knowledge of how written papers should be structured cued me to ask more questions regarding rhetorical purpose (i.e., connecting their sense of identity with topic information), while the students' topic knowledge of how to write cued them to answer only with topic information regarding their experiences with race. What the students took away

from the CP sessions, then, coupled with their topic knowledge, is what impacted the writing decisions they made.

An important factor of this issue is meta-awareness – that is, being aware of their own literate decisions, and the conscious incorporation of the discussion from their CP session. James Gee, in “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics,” writes about the importance of meta-knowledge in being “literate” in a discourse. He asserts that meta-awareness of language, words, and attitudes impacts our writing decisions (532). One has to be cognitively aware of the different facets of language to properly enter a discourse, Gee writes (533). In this case, the students have to be aware of the different aspects that were discussed in Collaborative Planning sessions, and consciously use those topics to decide on what and how to write.

The students were making rhetorical moves during the CP sessions, but were not necessarily aware of their own thinking as ‘rhetorical,’ – so, some things, which were clear during the CP sessions, didn’t completely transfer onto their written work. This supports the importance of meta-discourse; that is, being aware of important parts of the discussion that can be used in a written discourse. This conclusion, based on my observations, strengthens the idea of the significance and value of meta-knowledge in paper construction, as well as the importance of the instructor being explicit by labeling the students’ thought process. By looking into the CP sessions, we gain insight into some of the students’ logic, which may not have been clear if we just look at their written work.

### **Written Responses**

When students wrote their responses on their own, we are able to see how they, individually, handled the prompt and what they took away from CP sessions. While reading their responses, I realized how my expectations and perceptions impacted what I saw. In this section, I will first discuss how the students responded, and then how my expectations first affected how I read and interpreted their written work.

The students’ written responses consisted of two main topics: background information (the history of South Africa, Apartheid, Nelson Mandela), and self-identification (based on background information, their understanding of ‘Black,’ and their personal experiences of

discrimination). Many students described what it means to be Black in terms of South Africa's history. For example:

*Background info:*

"In 1948 Apartheid law was introduced and Black people including white were not allowed to interact with each other. Things turned worse when Andreo Hendrik was the leader and introduced Group Areas Act in 1950.

*Self-identification:*

I was not born at that time but I can see the results of Apartheid now that is over. I am living in a place that is not appropriate for humans to live in, in a place for animals and that place is called a 'Township.' ... I am ... a proud young Black fellow. We are all equal despite the colour of the skin. My aim is to first free the minds because we as Blacks we are still mentally dominated because of our history." –P3

P3's response demonstrates her ability to explain how she defines herself in terms of South Africa's history (an important move discussed in the Collaborative Planning sessions). I am struck by P3's bluntness of her living condition – "a place for animals" – and attribute her openness to L.O. classes and LEAP's encouraging environment.

Some students did not explicitly bring themselves into the picture, and just talked about racism against Blacks in South Africa in a more general sense:

"To be black means to be discriminated against by white people. When you are a black person you have to be strong and brave because in your life time you will have to fight. During apartheid which started in 1948 black people were treated like dogs. We fought and fought for our freedom until we were heard and we got our freedom in 1994. Although the constitution says we are all equal I feel like that is not true because black people and white people are not equal. A white person has more privileges than a black person... all I can say is racism in South Africa is a huge issue." – P5



In the excerpt above, P5 is able to intertwine different issues regarding race (history, claims based on experience), to illustrate that discrimination is still present in South Africa. There is no personal account, however, of her perspective as a young Black woman, and how she defines herself. I believe that because the students' identities are embedded so much in the broader issues (of history, Apartheid, racism), for many of them, that is how they define themselves. This is also evident in P4's paper:

“In these days racism still affects us ‘Blacks.’

We are being judged, according to the colour of our skin, treated different in terms of jobs, living.” –P4

Generally, the papers discussed racism, Apartheid, and unfair opportunities – that is what being black means to these students. Although some papers didn't explicitly make a claim about personal self-identity, there was always an implication that they see themselves as oppressed.

Many students ended on a positive note, however – that being discriminated against made them strong. So, being Black means going through racism and unfair treatment, but it also means being strong enough to fight through it. For instance:

“South Africa is a diversified country and it is a rainbow nation. Here in South Africa we have man different kinds of cultures and different races. I name myself as a black South African because I belong in that race as it described in S.A. IT means to be a black to me I have to be strong and do what I believe in. Actually I want to prove the people who treated black people like dirt that it is not OK because they had to fight for the country they belong to.” - P7

While some students were not explicitly clear with answering “how they define themselves,” every paper painted a vivid picture of discrimination – either things they experienced, or know the previous generation went through. While, at first glance, some papers didn't seem goal-driven (because there was nothing about “I am \_\_\_\_\_, and this means \_\_\_\_\_”) – they were all driven by the same purpose: to explain to you, the reader, the terrible things blacks have experienced, and how they have coped, are still coping, and will be stronger. This

point, I believe, illustrates rhetorical thinking – but it took me, the instructor, more than one reading of the written papers to understand what the students were trying to convey.

Carl Berieter and Marlene Scardamalia have introduced two models of writing strategies: knowledge telling and knowledge transforming. Knowledge telling considers writing as an intuitive task, where we use “already existing cognitive structures” (5). This is evident in the students’ intro-body-conclusion layout, and in their discussion of the general history of South Africa. Knowledge transforming, another model Berieter and Scardamalia discuss, involves thoughts “coming to existence through the composing process itself” (10) and using discourse schemas to translate problems in a rhetorical space. At first glance, the papers of these South African students seem to fit into the knowledge-telling model. This is evident in their use of background information to construct and claim their sense of racial identity. The students used an already existing cognitive model (intro-body-conclusion) to present the idea of racism through South Africa’s history.

If we integrate what we’ve seen during the CP sessions, however, I argue that there is also some (less clear) evidence of knowledge-transforming, which we wouldn’t see if we just look at their written work alone. During CP sessions, students were able to move through topic information, audience awareness, and rhetorical structure to delve deeper into the overall purpose of the paper (to talk about their sense of self through Apartheid, history, and discrimination), which showed up in their written work – albeit less explicitly. Just seeing the topic information presented in their written work makes it seem like they were just knowledge-telling, but from the various moves they made during CP sessions, we know that there is much more going on underneath that. We know that they have begun to think in terms of a new discourse schema (that is, talking to someone who isn’t from South Africa), to embed their self-identity through their country’s history. So while the students never began their papers by saying “I am \_\_,” and mostly wrote about topic information, they are relying on the reader to understand that *that* is how they identify themselves.

### *My Expectations and Understandings of Written Work*

An interesting factor, when analyzing the students’ written responses, is my (the instructor’s) expectations and understanding of their work. As an English student in academia, I perceived the CP sessions differently, and was expecting their written responses to include an

explicit labeling of who they are, not just a knowledge-telling response about Apartheid and racism. It wasn't until I reread the transcripts and written responses that I realized that these students actually did what I asked them to do: they wrote about how they defined themselves. A knowledge-telling response was appropriate, because it used a model they were comfortable with, and conveyed their self-identity *through* the use of their topic knowledge. These students define themselves by their history, and because I don't characterize my racial definition so much in terms of my country's history, I was not expecting or understanding of their responses and immediately thought they were missing something. In this case, it was the instructor's personal experience, expectations, and understanding of race that painted her interpretation of the written responses.

The fact that English isn't students' first language – that they are generally more comfortable with Xhosa – also impacted my perception of their written work. These students are still building an English vocabulary, and are just starting to learn how to fit this new language into an academic structure. There were numerous spelling and grammar mistakes, and that colored my first impression of their papers. I had to remember that even though they were fluent speaking English, they are still working on mastering how to write it – so, writing about topic information and background knowledge (which is more basic, and uses already existing cognitive models) seems appropriate. It could be that when language is a barrier, or when we can't find the write words or phrases, students fall back on knowledge telling. This doesn't mean that they didn't think about it more thoroughly – it could just mean that they hadn't found the right words.

In the academic world, each instructor has different expectations and understandings of their students' work. Many times, all the teacher gets is the final draft of a paper – and that is all they have to judge from. I was only able to see the students' work as knowledge-transforming because I talked and planned with them, and analyzed how they thought about and structured their papers. The bigger issue here is how to get the students' final written papers to be congruent with their planned intentions.

I believe the instructor's explicit labeling of the students' moves during their planning sessions is an important factor in determining what gets to their written work. I think the way I orchestrated CP sessions was with an assumption that these ninth graders were on the same page I was on (which is ridiculous, considering I'm from a completely different country, with a

completely different academic background). Making clearer, knowledge-transforming papers could also be something that is still developing in the students. They just entered secondary school, and are still learning the discourse (both of English in general and English in academia).

Just as the students need to have meta-awareness of their planning, I've learned that the instructors need to be aware of the different perceptions, interpretations and planning behind a students' written work. There are numerous factors that impact what a student decides to write, and all of those aspects can be hard to see when given just one final paper.

### **Retrospective Interviews & Social Practice**

I conducted retrospective interviews when the students handed in their paper. I asked students about their experience writing the paper on their own – if they faced any challenges, why they chose to write what they did. Most of the retrospective interviews were short; the students didn't have much to say about the process of actually writing. This goes back to the point that there was a lack of an explicit meta-awareness while writing. As the instructor, during the CP sessions, I didn't label the moves they made out loud while they were speaking; I am seeing, now, that may have been necessary for them to gain a better awareness of the moves made in their papers.

One student, however, mentioned one important aspect of writing and literacy: social action.

P6: ... I wrote about the discrimination between white people and black. I did not write about cultures. I said that here in South Africa, discrimination didn't end. And so that we as people who do not want to allow that [discrimination] to happen and just continue, we must act against it.

P6, as well as P8, wrote about subsequent action against discrimination. (In P8's paper, she writes: "I think we as people who don't follow this discrimination thing must act against it.") Literacy, it has been argued, is a social practice; one that often leads to action. Students wrote and discussed South Africa's history, topic information, discrimination, and what race means to them – which finally led them to conclude that something must be done. In addition to being able to say 'I define myself as black,' after writing the prompt, some talked about what should happen

now – what it means to them. Paulo Freire wrote about the active role of a student in problem-posing, and taking consequent action – literacy, he attests, is a continuous process of action, reflection, problem-posing, and then more action and reflection (72). He asserts that we all have an active role in the construction of our knowledge. Literacy, then, inherently leads to action (because it involves naming a problem or issue or idea, and taking into account its causes, implications, and contradictions). This whole process of acting, reflecting, and continually constructing knowledge, can be seen in the students’ continuous exploration of how they define themselves, and what that means to them. Many participants, after talking about discrimination, said that Blacks “must act against it.” Would they have been able to talk about this issue – an action, based on reflection – if they hadn’t gone through this literate practice and were being cued to give a written response?

The significance of this kind of literate practice could involve posing a social or cultural problem, reflecting and further understanding it, and then taking some sort of action. Or it could just lead to a better, deeper understanding of the problem, and further substantiate the author’s stance on the problem. Because the issue was race, the students very fluidly saw the problem and articulated a stance against racism. I don’t think these students explicitly realized this move that they were making (translating writing into social action) – but it is a significant discovery from the retrospective interviews. To me, it means that some of the participants weren’t just thinking about a situation they are stuck in – they were also thinking that they could do something about it.

But what if the issue or paper topic wasn’t race? How can we challenge students to always invest themselves in their papers – in problem posing, generating a purpose, and furthering their understanding of the problem? I believe that giving students a sense of authority, and reminding them of what’s at stake (which, in this case, was generally their well-being), are strong factors in helping students see writing as important and influential.

### **Cultural Reflections**

During my first day in South Africa, I attended an orientation through my study abroad program. I learned that there are three classifications of race there: White, Coloured, and Black. I learned that “coloured” referred to those whose ancestors were a mix of the white European settlers and Black Africans – giving them not completely dark, but colored, skin.

When I went to LEAP and began to talk to students, one of the first questions I was asked by a ninth grader was, “Are you coloured, miss?” I was a bit confused by the question, but realized pretty quickly that I do have the same complexion as a South African “coloured.” Many people mistook me for a coloured during my two months in South Africa (I’m Egyptian, so I have pretty tan “coloured” skin).

When they learned I was American, however, the students at LEAP had a lot of questions about pop culture, music and media in the U.S. I believe that their perception of me as an American of color impacted their understanding of race in other countries (and, subsequently, their responses to me about their own race). In addition to their writing strategies, this prompt has shed some light on how these students think about their race, and themselves.

I believe that in some cases, it challenged them to generate new understandings of their racial identity. Many students have never been in a position where they had to explain their race to a curious American before, and maybe have never had to articulate their circumstances and experiences, which has always been present and understood. This may have led to an introspective construction of self-understanding. For example, during a CP session, one student said: “I think black people, the way we treat ourselves nowadays, we don’t want to come out of [our] shell because we know – since we know our history, how it was like. So we don’t want to put a strain on ourselves.” I believe statements like those illustrate an expansive understanding of one’s own race; about why some blacks in South Africa act the way they do.

Generally, I’ve learned the upsetting truth that racial definitions are still rooted in Apartheid. I’ve learned that many of these students are still experiencing racism and discrimination, and those who haven’t been victim to hateful crimes still live in a direct result of it: townships. It seems appropriate for their self-understanding to be rooted in Apartheid because it was so recent, and they are still seeing the effects of it today. It was tough to read some of the students’ responses – I was taken aback by how aware and blunt they are about their living conditions; about the racism and hate that they still see everyday. LEAP’s community and L.O. seem so much more important after hearing these students’ stories; they are carrying so much weight and suffering.

When I first looked over the students’ written papers, I thought that they had it all wrong. I saw no rhetorical “moves” – just background information about Apartheid. I was expecting them to talk more explicitly about themselves. It wasn’t until I was back in Pittsburgh, and re-

reading their papers, when I realized that Apartheid *is* how these students define themselves. Their self-understanding is embedded in the “background information” of the history of South Africa, so maybe they didn’t think they needed to make it more explicitly clear.

### **What I’ve Learned: Summary and Conclusions**

This inquiry has taught me so much – about culture and history of South Africa, the students at LEAP, their writing strategies, and what impacts our own self-concepts. It inspired me to reflect on what I would answer the question of racial definition – and if this answer would change if I were in a different country, on a different continent. I’ve learned how being “black” in the U.S. means something completely different in South Africa; how “colored” is defined there (versus how it used to be defined in the U.S.). I’ve learned that we each have certain ideas we cling to when we think of race, and that ultimately determines our attitudes towards it.

I’ve learned how important secondary school is for shaping one’s self-identity, and how valuable Life Orientation classes are in confronting negative issues. I’ve seen that Mandela’s regime didn’t just wash away all the effects of Apartheid. I’ve begun wondering if students in the U.S. define their race in terms of history, too.

I’ve learned so much about literate practices in secondary school education – how Collaborative Planning sessions uncover the thought processes behind a student’s written work; how meta-knowledge, audience awareness and topic information all contribute to the rhetorical moves a student makes. I’ve seen how important the instructor’s perceptions and expectations are when judging written work.

I’ve discovered that there are many social, cultural and academic factors that impact the writing decisions a student makes. We’ve seen how student and instructor topic knowledge both impact CP discussions, that students have to be aware the topics discussed in Collaborative Planning sessions and meta-cognitively use those topics to decide on what and how to write. We’ve also observed the significance and value of meta-knowledge in paper construction, as well as the importance of the instructor’s explicit labeling of the students’ thought processes during CP sessions. An important part in gaining successful insight during CP Sessions, we’ve observed, is *incorporating* the discussion of one issue (e.g., topic info) to the others discussed (e.g., audience).

While some students were not explicitly clear with answering “how they define themselves,” every paper painted a vivid picture of discrimination – either things they experienced, or know the previous generation went through. Even though at first glance, some papers didn’t seem goal-driven (because there was nothing about “I am \_\_\_\_\_, and this means \_\_\_\_\_”) – they were all driven by the same purpose: to explain to you, the reader, the terrible things blacks have experienced, so that the reader can understand how they define themselves.

This brings up several questions for educators today: are instructors aware of this gap between student topic knowledge and perceptions, and instructor topic knowledge and expectations? What factors discussed in this study – using audience awareness, for example, or rhetorical structure, or meta-knowledge - can be used to scaffold students into writing in ways that are more congruent with their planning?

It has been argued that our sense of self is dynamic and always changing (e.g., Eakin). It could be that the very act of writing about oneself through a certain lens impacts one’s self-understanding. Giving the students this prompt gave them a sense of authority, and an opportunity to reflect on how they would define their race and their identity – this reflection, I believe, is an important part of every person’s awareness of who they are – racially, culturally, and academically.

Discussing, planning, and writing about one’s own self-understanding reveals the impact literate practices have on discovery, reflection, and action. Just one prompt – one question – uncovered so much about writing strategies and the cultural identities of these ten South African high school students.



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