

# When Bootstraps Break: Re-examining Assumptions about the Symbolic Capital of Immigrant Students' Personal Persistence Narratives

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*ABSTRACT: In the hopes of deepening Basic Writing instructors' critical awareness of their authority in assigning meaning to student experience, we present a case study of two adult-arrival immigrant students. We explore the ways that writing instructors and tutors encourage students' personal narratives of persistence—rather than actual persistence habits—and shape their academic and person identities, at times in ways beyond students' choosing. We call into question the relevance and utility of applying the popular theoretical framework of symbolic capital (Bourdieu) to Basic Writing and college literacy pedagogy. Instead, we call for Basic Writing instructors to respond to students' personal narratives as a form of participation within a specific academic discourse community. This work requires refocusing the learning environment as a community of practice to center student agency alongside educators' and students' participation goals, while providing students with an explicit introduction to participation expectations so that they can make informed decisions about how and when they choose to share personal stories.*

*KEYWORDS: agency; Generation 1 learners; immigrant college students; personal narrative; symbolic capital; cultural capital*

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*For her Integrated Reading and Writing class book report presentation, the student projected an image of the title page and the photograph of a family circa World War II. The student did not address the presentation guidelines of introducing and summarizing the book and instead discussed her own experiences as a young girl during the 1970s Afghanistan War: "It [the book] is exactly the same. . . even you lose your friend, your family, your everything. The pain was exactly the same." For 30 minutes, the student shared personal stories about fleeing from the Taliban, escaping from her deceased husband's controlling family, and being a refugee. During the question-and-answer period, no one asked about the book or her personal connections to the text. Instead, classmates praised her bravery and perseverance. (Observation Notes)*

Following Anne Ruggles Gere, we define the personal narrative as "prose that gives significant attention to the writer's experiences and feelings" (204). The genre legitimizes developing writers' experiences and feelings and is most effective in college writing contexts when learners' disclosure of personal experiences aligns with course learning objectives to support students' progression toward academic or research writing (Bartholomae and Petrosky; Borshuk). Paul Eakin notes that personal narratives allow for identity expression, creating space for marginalized students to develop their sense of belonging and make meaning of their lived experiences. Furthermore, the trauma narrative, a subgenre of the personal narrative, is purported to offer multiple benefits for introducing academic writing (i.e., Borrowman; Brown; Dutro; MacCurdy). Trauma narratives feature an "infliction on the psyche" and demand a response from the reader (Spear 61), and teaching with narrative through a trauma-informed pedagogy can honor the experiences of survivors as they reclaim their voice to determine the meaning of their experience (Harrison et al.).

However, focusing on personal experiences, especially those involving immigrant students' experiences of trauma, can also shift attention away from academic skills development (Almon; Anderson et al.; Bajwa et al.; Carello and Butler; Suh, "Off"; Westfield). Although assignment prompts regarding personal narratives of overcoming can introduce students to the power of these narratives—particularly ones of perseverance—in Basic Writing and English Composition classrooms (Swartzlander et al.), Linda Harklau critiques adult ESL curricula that frequently draws upon personal experiences and survival tropes. Harklau argues in particular against what she describes as the overuse of personal persistence narratives focused on "coming to America," a prompt that assumes that learners of immigrant

backgrounds are newly arrived in the country through a journey that they are willing to share, while constrained to reduce this journey to assignment parameters. Further, scholars have not yet explored *how* educators may take up such writing as representative of students' ability to develop academically, or what kind of pedagogical training and skills may best advance writing toward such goals (Carello and Butler), leaving open questions around students' telling of such stories as part of academic development, including the empathy and advocacy for professional counseling and other supports that may be needed.

Overall students can face multiple challenges in developing their academic persona through the celebration of a "survivor" identity. In *Bootstraps from an American Academic of Color*, Victor Villanueva rejects the exhortation for students of immigrant backgrounds to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," noting how this adage places full responsibility for success—or failure—on students while ignoring the role of faculty and staff in disseminating these stories beyond the page and into other (physical and metaphorical) spaces. Like Villanueva and others, we question the degree to which the valorization of grit can support learners of all language backgrounds in the English classroom. Educational scholars have offered related critiques (Mills; Morton and Paul; Nathan; Ris). In particular, literacy educator Alfred Tatum criticizes instructional overemphasis on soft knowledge as "a conceptually thin approach to overall socioemotional and cognitive development" (45). Instead, Tatum advocates for literacy instruction focused on the development of skills for academic literacy practices.

Trauma-informed pedagogy similarly calls for a recognition of learning as the primary goal of exploring trauma in educational spaces. Janice Carello and Lisa Butler describe trauma-informed practices as (1) understanding how violence, victimization, or other traumatic experiences have impacted the lives of those involved and (2) providing services and designing systems to meet the needs of trauma survivors. They note that "A central tenet of this view is that individual safety must be ensured through efforts to minimize the possibilities for inadvertent retraumatization, secondary traumatization, or wholly new traumatizations in the delivery of services" (156). The authors present examples of uninformed inclusion of trauma in college writing classes that they dub "risky" (159) and "potentially perilous pedagogies" (153). Further, scholarship on trauma-informed practices include cautions against non-clinical perspectives that associate painful personal sharing with growth or require the re-elaboration of students' trauma (Carello and Butler; Davidson; Downey). Outside of trauma-informed pedagogy, Melanie

Booth as well as Brandi Frisby and Robert Sidelinger, who study the impacts of student disclosure, have identified several potential negative consequences of sharing—or oversharing—in the classroom, highlighting similar risks.

This piece emerged from our work as director and instructors in an integrated reading and writing course discussing our concerns over students' oversharing. We took on a two-year long course redesign to transition from stand-alone reading courses to corequisite, integrated reading and writing shortly after the first author became the director of our developmental literacy program. As we discussed the merits of various genres and assignment types in our lesson planning and the role of various literacy assignments in facilitating first-year student success, we reflected upon our observations of personal narratives in some cases taking on a life beyond the written genre to become talking points or presumed evidence of student persistence in campus conversations (Suh, "Off"). As developmental literacy practitioners, we noticed the challenges that arose from the interplay between students' personal narrative sharing and instructor/tutor responses when we assigned personal narrative writing. Our interest led us to re-examine the ways in which personal narratives can be taken up by college instructors and tutors, particularly when students come from diverse backgrounds.

In the present study, we explore the experiences of two Generation 1 learners, adult-arrival immigrant students, as they share their personal stories of trauma in the Basic Writing classroom, the writing center, and other study spaces. We seek to inform Basic Writing instructors on ways to support students' narrative sharing to both foster their academic development while offering empathy and advocating for professional counseling and support when necessary. Following the previously established nomenclature in the literature, we identify Generation 1 learners as "immigrants who (1) arrived in the U.S. at the age of 22 or older (Rumbaut) and are therefore ineligible for U.S. high school, (2) are adult learners (Knowles, *Modern Practice*) who first experience U.S. education in adult ESL (i.e., outside of U.S. K-12), and (3) transition to college with the plan to earn a degree" (Suh, "Counting Backwards" 3-4). While we acknowledge the dangers associated with labeling students and how such practices can reduce students' complex backgrounds (see Anderson; Orapeza et al.), we echo Suh's argument for increased collaboration between the fields of applied linguistics and Basic Writing in order to increase awareness of Generation 1 learners as individuals possessing unique life circumstances and experiences within the larger, more visible population of students who are learning English as an additional language. In particular, we hold with Suh that "Generation 1 learners are adult learners

who are influenced by their multiple social roles (Knowles, *Modern Practice*) and educational experiences outside of the U.S. K-12 system” (“Counting Backwards” 3-4). These multiple roles include that of family caregiver, employee, and community elder, among others that are not commonly held by Generation 1.5 students or other traditionally aged learners (Suh, “Counting Backwards”). Suh further notes how “Scholars’ failure to establish a unified term for adult immigrant students is indicative of the students’ marginalization within fields of educational scholarship and learning institutions” (“Counting Backwards” 1) and calls for scholarly recognition of this group of students in order to emphasize their uniqueness and strengths as adult-arrival immigrants who are learning English as an additional language.

Rather than examining the construction of the narratives themselves or the ways in which narratives are taught in Basic Writing (Borrowman; Dutro; MacCurdy; Spear), our present examination focuses on the sharing and circularity of the narratives told by two such Generation 1 learners within Basic Writing contexts around their college community. Our exploration was also influenced by our reflections on the first author’s role as both a researcher and writing instructor/tutor at the focal students’ college during a previous (2017) study of Generation 1 learners transitioning into community college (Suh, “Off”). The second and third author share this reciprocal relationship of their scholarship and instruction as they, like the first author during the data collection, seek to improve their teaching through relevant and personal research. In our conversations about the ways in which the learners’ narratives were taken up by institutional actors and how they came to possess varying levels of symbolic capital within the college, we were guided by the following questions:

- What personal narratives do Generation 1 learners share in their first term in college?
- And, how and by whom are Generation 1 learners’ personal narratives received by others in the college?

We begin by summarizing the current literature on students who have recently immigrated and then highlight the shortcomings of over-applying theories of symbolic capital (Bourdieu; Oughton) for guiding Basic Writing instructors and tutors who label learners’ personal experiences as valuable, or what scholars term *symbolic power* (Bourdieu). In particular, we examine Bonny Norton’s theory of investment, which is highly influential in the fields of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching English to Speakers of Other

Languages. Investment theory emphasizes learners' choices towards identity formations within new or targeted community membership; however, our exploration uncovers the powerful influence of *other* community members in accepting or rejecting learners' identity enactment. From this examination, we conclude that Basic Writing instructors and tutors must acknowledge our roles in creating and circulating students' personal narratives. Instead we encourage our readers to re-conceptualize students' personal narrative sharing as a form of participation in the community—rather than capital to be deployed. Finally, we illustrate how a focus on personal experience through the personal narrative assignment can inadvertently shift attention away from developing academic skills, particularly for Generation 1 learners with rich personal and academic experiences. By contrast, refocusing popular second language acquisition and Basic Writing theories may help to amplify students' ability to assign their own meaning to the narratives they share while disconnecting stories of personal persistence from expectations of academic persistence.

### **GENERATION 1 LEARNERS' PERSISTENCE NARRATIVES: THEORIZING PARTICIPATION AND SYMBOLIC CAPITAL**

In differentiating the different types of students learning English as an additional language in college, Robert Terenishi and colleagues document the rise of immigrant-background students' entrance into higher education, noting that many of these learners begin their college careers in Basic Writing and other developmental education contexts. This literature focuses on Generation 1.5 students, who are foreign-born but U.S.-raised and educated (i.e., Doolan; Haras et al.; Kanno and Harklau; Roberge et al.; Rumbaut and Ima). In his exploration of the overlap between conceptualizations of ESL writers and basic writers, Paul Kei Matsuda describes Generation 1.5 students as “active learners of the English language who have received at least several years of U.S. high school education” (68), while Generation 1 learners are adult-arrival immigrants whose age prevents their participation in the U.S. K-12 system. Although they come with a range of previous formal education experiences, Generation 1 learners typically first enter U.S. education through adult ESL programs. Basic writing scholars who explore the intersections of BW and speakers of additional languages populations focus on Native English Speakers, Generation 1.5 students, English Language Learners or L2 writers, and advocate for translanguaging approaches to working with these students (Comeau-Kirschner and Shahar; Maloy; MacDonald

and DeGenaro). These approaches emphasize linguistic difference yet fail to take account of the important differences that exist between Generation 1 students and Generation 1.5. students in terms of their academic preparation, socialization, and life and cultural experiences.

One popular theorization of both Generation 1 learners and Generation 1.5 students' entry into the U.S. educational system and their language and cultural learning draws from Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's communities of practice model (Becker; Gil; Mecom). According to Lave and Wenger, newcomers are apprenticed into community participation through mentorship by, and interactions with, other more experienced community members. Despite unequal levels of participation between community members, Lave and Wenger maintain that newcomers' limited engagement within the community is a form of "legitimate peripheral participation" (98), which invokes "relationships between newcomers and old timers. . . and activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice" (29). As participants gain increasing insight into the community and mastery of community participation rituals, they take on more central participation roles.

Lave and Wenger's communities of practice model has also been taken up in Basic Writing and postsecondary English language instruction contexts where students are introduced to academic writing conventions and participation expectations (Osman et al.; Razak and Saeed). Shannon Carter, for example, explains how Basic Writing classrooms can facilitate legitimate peripheral participation. Carter's description of the "groups of individuals who sanction and endorse particular ways of doing things and particular results" (102) illustrates the authority of community "old timers" (Lave and Wenger 29), such as instructors and tutors who may label certain activities or behaviors as "innovative and valuable [while] condemning others as ineffective, inappropriate, or even unacceptable" (Carter 102). Carter further documents how students come to understand the importance of the "rules" of writing and their instructors' authority in determining those rules. As one of Carter's students explained, "[W]hat I write really depends on my teacher and my surrounding" (109). This contextual awareness is essential to students' academic success: "If we are in school, this community of practice, then we have to follow the[ir] rules, because that's how this community works. People who can't follow the rules will be left out of the community, no matter how intelligent they are" (Carter 119). Understand-

ing the rules of what and how to share of personal experience may be even more challenging for recent-arrival adult immigrants.

Bonny Norton similarly explores how Generation 1 learners engage in the target language as a form of investment in various language-using communities. According to Norton, learners' participation in the language-using community is a process of acquiring and applying "a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase their value in the social world" (166). In other words, Generation 1 learners seek to leverage their education, relationships, and other resources for recognition of their community membership while simultaneously gaining a stronger sense of identity and additional capital through their participation. Norton draws from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *symbolic capital*, or the "fundamental powers" of economic, social, cultural, and linguistic capital that are recognized by others as legitimate. Legitimated symbolic capital offers the individual possessing it a level of control over the valuation of others' identity as members of the community of practice. Scholars such as Steven Alvarez have argued that instructors ought to include a personal statement assignment in their course to highlight the ways students' cultural capital transform in a system to what is considered academic merit. While Alvarez advocates for a return of authority back to learners as an essential component of learning, the explicit processes by which symbolic capital, such as personal experience, become legitimated—and that individuals have the power to legitimate that capital—remain underexplored.

Several scholars apply the lens of capital to research on emergent multilingual or immigrant-background communities' and individuals' educational experiences (e.g., Bunar and Ambrose; Igarashi and Saito; Shin). Drawing from Marx, the adult education scholar Helen Oughton argues that capital has high or low exchange-value (i.e., assumed level of prestige or transferability of capital to another context), as well as high or low use-value (i.e., the level to which capital is assumed to be practical but not necessarily valued in other contexts). Oughton warns of the dangers of overapplying educational theories of symbolic capital that perpetuate "the danger of the instructor or researcher imposing their own cultural arbitrariness in deciding what 'counts' as funds of knowledge," or how to value students' personal experiences (70). Critical perspectives on the utility and symbolic value of personal experience, and how these experiences come to be recognized as relevant to students' academic development, therefore, remain especially necessary as educators continue to view personal experience through a

lens of symbolic capital and to assign symbolic value to learners' personal experiences.

As we describe above, personal narratives have the potential to afford students substantial amounts of symbolic capital. Because represented struggles are often already legitimized in the academic and public sphere, personal narratives of overcoming may provide an immediate "in" for students who experience "othering" due to cultural, educational, or linguistic differences. Personal narratives of persistence can also facilitate students' enactment of their desired identities by presenting the persona they wish to become (Brown; Dutro). However, scholars increasingly critique the use of narrated celebrations of grit as a pedagogical practice for supporting culturally or linguistically minoritized students. Their concern stems from a focus on personal vulnerability that does not finally empower students to action (Pollard). Merridy Wilson-Strydom argues against using notions of individualized responsibility to teach persistence since such frameworks fail to acknowledge the role of social context and the limits institutions can impose on individuals. Within the context of English as a Second Language education, Harklau critiques the over-reliance upon "coming to America" narrative assignments that similarly reduce students' immigration experiences to stories of individual effort while failing to acknowledge the nuances of individual students' immigration experiences. Such assignments frequently result in an overly simplistic storyline.

Additionally, we acknowledge quantitative explorations of the potential harms of personal sharing outside of assignments or the English classroom (Frisby and Sidelinger; Sidelinger et al.). Sidelinger and colleagues, for example, found a negative correlation between frequent personal disclosures by the instructor and reports of affective learning in public-speaking courses. In a study of student perceptions about the appropriateness of personal disclosures, Frisby and Sidelinger found students negatively responded to personal sharing they perceived as being too frequent, negative, or irrelevant to the class and course concepts. In her discussion of unintended consequences in assigning personal narratives, Booth notes the difficulty of authentically assessing such learning and addressing the unequal power relations which grant instructors significant control over responses to self-disclosure. Booth, who supports student self-disclosure, cautions, "We may find that students reveal personal information that raises questions about our boundaries, our roles, and our ethical responsibilities" (6). This literature indicates that violations in topic or amount of personal sharing negatively impact learning; however, additional research is needed to qualitatively un-

derstand how oversharing impacts students (particularly those from diverse cultural, linguistic, and age groups) and the impact of such sharing beyond the written page and into other campus spaces, as learners navigate their entrance into the academic community of practice.

Because such a community is not limited to the physical boundaries of the Basic Writing classroom, we were particularly interested in how, where, and by whom these narratives are taken up in the college. Given the diversity within the human experience upon which such sharing is based and the uniqueness of individual learners, we also sought to understand nuances in faculty and staff responses to personal sharing and how such responses can vary by context. In transition to our methods, we restate the questions that guided our research: What personal narratives do Generation 1 learners share in their first term in college? And, how and by whom are Generation 1 learners' personal narratives received by others in the college?

## **OUR STUDY: METHODS**

This IRB-approved study draws from a larger multiple case study examining the experiences of six Generation 1 learners who were all adult-arrival immigrants in their first term of transition from adult ESL into mainstream college classes (Suh, "Off"). Since the original study's completion, the first author has further developed or re-analyzed the data to explore several aspects of Generation 1 learners' transition to college, including learner resistance as engagement and identity enactment (Suh, "Engagement"; Suh and Shapiro), learners' literacy strategy use (Suh, "Strategy"), and learner and faculty expectations for being a college student ("Expectations"). In the initial study, six learners were chosen as a convenience sample based upon their transition into developmental literacy classes. All six learners were observed sharing personal stories through writing assignments, conversations with college personnel, and/or in class discussions/presentations. To address the guiding questions of the present study, however, the two cases with the greatest variation of outcome, Labiba and Olan (names are pseudonyms), were reanalyzed to examine the learners' use of, and instructor/tutor response to verbal personal narrative sharing in or emanating from the Basic Writing classroom, the writing center, and advising lab. Labiba and Olan were in their first term of college during the data collection. Although the first author was a faculty member at the community college, she was not their instructor during the study.

## **Learner Profiles and College Context**

In her late 50s during data collection, *Labiba* was only seven years old when she fled her home country of Afghanistan after Mujahideen soldiers destroyed her village and murdered her cousin. She had lived the majority of her life as a refugee in Pakistan, Iraq, and Iran, marrying and raising her children abroad before immigrating to the United States where she completed several ESL courses as her children finished high school. Although Labiba had spent several years at the college completing ESL classes, she felt most connected to the Bridging Lab, an on-campus study space where advisors tutored students preparing to take the college's placement exam. Labiba had been a student in the lab before the study began, and she remained close to the lab advisors who had assisted her with each part of the application and registration processes. Lab advisors encouraged Labiba to view her personal overcoming as evidence of her ability to persist in college. Even after she began college classes, Labiba continued informal visits to the lab to visit with the advisors or study at a computer desk.

*Olan* entered the United States through a special immigrant visa program for military interpreters due to his support for U.S. troops in Iraq. As a Yazidi, Olan spoke his home language of Kurdish and had learned to read and write in Arabic and English. Olan was one of many Yazidi interpreters who had been settled by the federal government in the same town. As a result, Olan drew from his relationships within this tight-knit community in order to make informed decisions about college. Olan was open about his military service and the hardships he had faced in Iraq; however, unlike Labiba, his stories about his past were less central to his interactions with others about college—and in his view, less consequential to his academic progress. These two learners were chosen for the study because of their divergent ways of personal sharing and for how college faculty and staff perceived this sharing to be relevant to the learners' academic success.

Data were collected at a mid-sized community college in a midwestern capital city. Observations were conducted in the learners' classrooms, the writing center, and the learners' preferred study space. The learners were taught by the same instructor during different terms. Because both classes were small (fewer than ten students enrolled in each section), the instructor established an informal environment by emphasizing class discussion and peer work, including reading and responding to classmates' assignments. Students were thus familiar with each other and their writing. In interviews, the instructor described prioritizing relationship building, the results of

which were noted in observations of students' attentive listening to each other's personal sharing and the instructor's reference to learners' lives outside of the classroom.

The writing center similarly offered an environment for developing personal relationships with students. Writing sessions took place in a cozy, secluded space at the back of the library. The seating arrangements allowed both tutor and learner to simultaneously view and write on a shared document at small round tables slightly larger than those found in cafes. The center was staffed by professional (rather than peer) tutors who worked multiple shifts per week in schedules posted on a center bulletin board. As a result, students could work repeatedly with the same tutor, establishing relationships and developing storylines and academic skills over multiple sessions. Both interviewed tutors described how they came to know details about students' lives, which they encouraged students to share in their writing. Despite the welcoming environment tutors attempted to create, in interviews they lamented their limited opportunities for professional development to support multilingual, multicultural students and the complete absence of support from the college for working with survivors of trauma.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The present study involved a reanalysis of data examining learners' experiences transitioning to college. For that data collection, the first author followed an open-ended interview protocol described in Suh ("Off"). Interviews occurred after observations in order to solicit clarification of observation tasks or the interview participants' perceptions of the observation. The first author asked learners to describe in their own words their study routine as observed and to identify additional ways they studied. Follow-up questions emerged in response to learners' statements about their studying routine and choices. For example, in response to Olan's description of studying in Iraq, the first author asked him to compare reading unknown English words in class and his work as an Army interpreter. Olan's resulting explanation of the irrelevance of his military service compared to his high school experiences provided a rich data source examined in our findings.

Similarly, the first author's interview protocol for instructors, tutors, and advisors elicited their observations and impressions about the learners' preparation for college. The first author asked participating faculty to describe in their own words moments they identified as important in the observed instructional period and to identify the learner's level of prepa-

ration for college success based upon their demonstrated academic and English language skills. However, in discussing observations, these college personnel frequently offered commentary about the connections they deemed between learners' past experiences and their present academic efforts. In their interviews, for example, the instructor and several tutors and advisors independently commented upon the negative effect that trauma had on Labiba's engagement, based upon their knowledge of Labiba's past and their impressions of her participation in class and at the writing center; these college personnel had decided that Labiba's struggles in college could be partially the result of PTSD. The present study included data from three interviews with each learner (199 minutes), two instructor interviews (52 minutes) one interview each with two writing tutors (68 minutes), and one interview with a Bridging Lab advisor who worked with Labiba while she studied (10 minutes).

Observation sites were likewise tailored to explore personal sharing's circularity and impact across the college and learning experience. The first author completed two observations in each learners' English classroom, an observation of each learner in the writing center, and an observation of each engaged in their studying routine (totaling 330 minutes). Data from the writing center were included to explore how content from a personal narrative assignment, for example describing how the writer overcame a struggle, could become a resource for student motivation as well as content for future writing assignments. The first author also observed the learners in their preferred study space. Inclusion of observations from these spaces allowed the research team to examine how learners' stories were taken up by other college agents when learners studied on campus. While Olan chose to study at home, Labiba studied in the campus' Bridging Lab located in the library. The advisors' desk was adjacent to the row of student computer desks, allowing advisors and student to converse with ease while student studied. Although Labiba was no longer a current lab student at the time of data collection, she often chose the computers and companionship of the lab over the relative silence of the rest of the library. Because Labiba chose to study in the lab during her observation, lab advisors were interviewed.

Through analysis of the thick, rich observational data (Geertz) and interview transcripts, and using the multiple case-study as model (Merriam), the research team captured the nuanced ways in which learners' personal narratives of persistence were revisited in conversations by the learners or instructors and tutors to influence their positioning within the college and their perceptions of their acceptance in the college community. Research

offered a rich portrayal of how learners' written narratives of personal persistence became part of larger discourses in class and around campus—in contexts beyond instruction about or the drafting of assigned narrative writing. As a result, the ways that faculty and staff took up and emphasized the learners' personal persistence narrative essays in subsequent conversations and class discussions, referencing learners' writing rather than the written products themselves, became the focus of our analysis.

Before discussing the themes that emerged in the context of our learners' portraits, we first acknowledge the study's limitations. This study focuses on the sharing of narratives, or the stories that people tell, about their persistence and others' responses to those narratives. Persistence is a popular topic of educational studies, and a subsequent analysis of the data would yield germane insights into learners' persistence behaviors; however, as we have already noted, this study focuses on how the retelling of personal narratives of persistence can move beyond the essay and narratives of persistence into perception, to profoundly influence student experience. Additionally, our analysis examines the experiences of only two Generation 1 learners and the college personnel with whom they interacted. Further data collection, such as interviews with classmates or other college personnel might have illuminated how others less familiar with the learners perceived the appropriateness of their personal narratives. Future research could also examine Generation 1 learners' personal sharing in other college classes to ascertain whether their experiences bear out research on native students in these contexts (e.g., Booth).

## **FINDINGS: THE POWER OF PERSISTENCE NARRATIVES REVEALED**

In this study, we explored how Generation 1 learners' personal narratives were received in Basic Writing contexts and the extent to which their narratives influenced the learners' entry into the academic community. We present student and instructor or tutor interactions in each academic context, interweaving observation and interview data in order to analyze the stories learners shared and the ways others responded to those stories.

### **Labiba: When Personal Narratives Become Too Powerful**

*Labiba in Class:* Our opening description of Labiba's book report presentation illustrated how Labiba's sharing became powerful beyond the scope of her written work. During that presentation, Labiba's classmates

and instructor listened attentively as Labiba described her cousin's murder at the hands of the Mujahideen, her harrowing escape from the Taliban, and her experiences as a homeless single mother camping outside the U.S. embassy. Indeed, the instructor and several classmates were already familiar with these events after having read about them in previous essays. Despite the repetition and the disconnect between her oral presentation and the required topics to be included in the presentation, Labiba's classmates and instructor affirmed her persistence. Like Labiba, they did not address the book or Labiba's developing academic reading skills as required in the assignment guidelines. For instance, Labiba's use of the expert reading strategy of making comparisons between herself and the text (Horning) directly aligned with a course student learning outcome but was ignored in the ensuing celebration of Labiba's grit.

As the term progressed, Labiba's instructor and classmates became increasingly frustrated by her storytelling, which they perceived as interruptions. In a later observation, the first author noted classmates' eyerolls and refusal to respond to Labiba's frequent requests for clarification. Later in an interview, Labiba's instructor reported to the first author that Labiba could sense others' growing hostility. By the end of the term, the instructor noted that Labiba had increasingly withdrawn from class discussions although she continued sharing about her personal hardships. The instructor explained her choice not to directly address Labiba's participation with her, noting, "I know she's got the trauma."

*Labiba in the Writing Center.* Over the course of her daily visits to the writing center, Labiba openly shared about her life as a college student and her experiences as a refugee abroad. In interviews, tutors reflected upon the times that Labiba's personal and academic persistence would surface in conversations about school. One writing tutor described how "All of the kinds of tribulations that she had experienced usually fed nicely into what she was being asked to do [for class]. . . with its focus on narrative work." He recalled, "I spent a lot of time kind of validating her experience and that she was brave to be writing these things, that it was good, and therapeutic for her, and I don't know if that was really true, but it—there was a lot of encouragement, a lot of praise." Tutors actively encouraged Labiba to view her stories of past overcoming as relevant to her college experience, assuming that the stories themselves, and the persistence they described, were both content for writing assignments and motivation for college success. As a result, Labiba readily and uniformly shared these personal stories with her tutors, suggesting her internalization of the stories' power but not her

“rhetorical dexterity” for negotiating the changing literacy contexts of different writing assignments and academic genres (Carter 101).

The tutors noted Labiba’s mounting struggles to negotiate the college’s multiple literacy spaces. Although they encouraged Labiba to move beyond narrative support for her assignments, such as by engaging with assigned texts or conducting independent research, they described her growing agitation in response to their recommendations. One tutor shared with the first author how tutors collectively decided that “she [Labiba] has PTSD basically and that when she is stressed, she can’t learn, and she is stressed all of the time.” As a result of this informal, non-clinical diagnosis, these college personnel appeared to avoid offering directive feedback for fear of retraumatizing Labiba.

*Labiba in Her Own Words.* During the first author’s observation in the lab, the advisor had warmly greeted Labiba and described her as the “hardest worker,” recounting stories for the first author of Labiba’s academic efforts and her work ethic as a single mother. Later that visit, the advisor described how Labiba was “here every day at the computer doing the work, yet despite everything that she’s been through, she is such a happy person wanting to learn.” Labiba in turn referred to the lab advisors as personal friends and continued to visit the lab daily to chat with tutors and study at the computers, despite the fact that she was no longer a student of the lab (which prepared students to take the college placement exam). As the term progressed, Labiba seemed to become increasingly distrustful of the lab and others who sought her out, including the first author (E). The following exchange occurred during their last scheduled interview, which took place in the student center at Labiba’s request.

L: Why did you ask to talk to me?

E: Remember that we scheduled this time for your interview?

L: Everyone is always wanting to interview me. [Tearfully] They [a Bridging Lab tutor] called me too. [College] is full of bad men. Everyone is harassing me. Why can’t they just leave me alone?

E: Did something happen?

L: My friend... they [other students] won’t sit next to her because of

hijab [unintelligible speech as Labiba ate her sandwich and spoke in a distressed tone under her breath]. Why can't they just leave us alone?

E: Do you want me to leave you alone?

[Labiba agreed.]

The first author stopped the recording, but Labiba continued to speak, referencing on-campus hostility she felt and claimed to experience because of “bad men,” a label she applied to college employees whom she saw as persecuting her. Labiba cried softly as she ate her sandwich and told the first author she was going to drop out of college because of these “bad men” and racist students. Ironically, the lab staff trying to reach Labiba did so out of concern for her mental health; however, because the college lacked in-house counseling, the advisors felt they had few resources to offer Labiba.

The exchange between Labiba and the first author illustrated the degree to which Labiba felt threatened by college personnel and other college students as she experienced the college's transition from a historically White, monolingual student body to one which was increasingly more racially and linguistically diverse. The campus's shifting demographics reflected similar changes and challenges in the surrounding community as it took in immigrants through a national refugee resettlement program. Labiba's perception of her treatment at the college echoed some of the negative experiences she had faced in the community as well; she felt fully the systemic nature of the racism within her college and community. Instead of the strength she had previously drawn from retelling stories of her persistence as an immigrant and her plans of graduating college, Labiba was now focused on the hardships she faced at the college because of her race and, as a result, she planned to leave school. Just as her instructor, tutors, and advisors linked Labiba's academic success to her personal persistence, Labiba now connected her past experiences to her struggles and her personal narrative to ongoing traumas too difficult to speak or write from.

### **Theorizing the Importance of Labiba's Narratives**

Theories of adult language learners' investment of their symbolic capital (Bourdieu; Norton) or as members of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger) can offer important insight into Labiba's personal sharing.

According to Lave and Wenger, “participants [within the community of practice] share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and communities” (98). Within the college as a community of practice, the instructor and tutors were “old timers” (Lave and Wenger) who mentored Labiba into the community and whose invitations or encouragement to retell her personal experiences signaled her expected participation role. In particular, Labiba’s personal sharing fed into the “bootstraps” narrative of immigrant success through hard work and determination (Villanueva). Through the tutors’ and the instructor’s encouragement of Labiba’s sharing, her stories became a form of symbolic capital, or a good upon which Labiba could draw in order to gain recognition within the community. Despite overlap between Labiba’s experiences and this celebrated trope, Labiba’s retelling of her personal stories demonstrated that she did not understand the rules for engaging in this form of legitimate peripheral participation within the college. Rather than empowering Labiba, the tutors’ recommendations to include personal narrative elements in her writing instead evidenced tutors’ *symbolic authority*, or power, to name and identify certain forms of capital as valuable (Bourdieu).

Labiba’s narratives lacked what Oughton refers to as use-value: the stories alone were not actually demonstrative of academic persistence. Labiba’s stories overshadowed other aspects of her identity and, in their focus on Labiba’s personal stories, faculty and staff did not acknowledge Labiba’s academic strengths in other areas. Rather than positioning her as a capable student, Labiba’s personal narratives in some cases became others’ justification to refer to Labiba not as a survivor but instead as a victimized refugee. The writing tutors and college lab advisors grew increasingly concerned about Labiba’s mental health as the term progressed. Witnessing her growing distress, one advisor sought Labiba out on campus and called to check in. Unaware of the advisor’s intent, Labiba perceived the call as further evidence that everyone was trying to harass her. Labiba was threatened by these gestures and, during her last interview, explained how she now felt unsafe on campus because of the now unwanted attention she received from advisors and tutors—the “bad men.” Her use of the phrase was telling as she had previously used the label for Mujahideen soldiers from her past. Her reaction suggested that Labiba’s narratives held so much power that they led to her silence and facilitated her contemplation of victimized identity as she attributed others’ responses to her status as a foreigner and refugee.

In applying a lens of symbolic capital within the community of practice, scholars can describe the power of Labiba’s stories and the actors who

responded to them. However, such a reading fails to offer an appropriate pedagogical response. In particular, this framing does not sufficiently account for a fuller understanding of the role of the instructors and tutors. These individuals encouraged Labiba to draw upon her personal experiences as capital, but they did not explain how she could transform that capital so that it would be relevant to her college goals including actual, transferable academic persistence. Without that explicit instruction, Labiba's instructor and tutors became the shadowy figures Carter's students assume are responsible for creating "the rules of writing" (110), and who ultimately de-authorize the learner as a writing-speaking subject. The instructors and tutors were disconnected from their expectations about when and how to place personal stories in an academic context; neither they nor Labiba appeared to have the power to unpack those expectations.

In order to value Labiba's experiences and guide her in the application of that capital, college faculty and staff must enact a pedagogical stance that both makes visible the implicit rules of sharing personal experiences and honors learners' agency in determining how their stories are taken up in college.

### **Olan: When Others Command Learners' Narratives**

*Olan in Class.* Olan's instructor encouraged students' personal sharing in class as inspiration for academic persistence and as narrative material for essays. When Olan shared that he had served as an interpreter for the U.S. Army in Iraq, his instructor emphasized the relevance of his service to his academics. For the instructor, the experience of translating from Kurdish or Arabic to English was highly relevant to Olan's coursework. In a private conversation, his instructor discussed with the first author how she felt these interpreting experiences contributed to Olan's developing inference skills and cultural context knowledge for assigned readings. However, Olan dismissed such a comparison, instead pointing to his previous academic achievements as evidence of his linguistic aptitude. He elaborated to the first author, "I studied British language in school. . . . I read and work and just practice." Ironically, Olan's rationalization that his persistence in his studies and on the job made the work unchallenging supported his instructor's comparison of the skills involved in interpreting work and writing for college. Yet Olan and his instructors drew upon different stories and interpretations of Olan's past. Despite his lack of conviction about the relevance of his interpreting experiences, Olan worked hard to incorporate narrative

elements into his assignments. In fact, by the end of the term, his instructor noted Olan's "difficulty transitioning to the more academic writing because he was still kind of wanting to tell a story."

*Olan in the Writing Center.* When he visited the writing center for assistance in removing first-person language from his problem-solution essay, Olan did not intend for his essay, "Immigrants Living in America," to focus on his own experiences. However, the tutor encouraged him several times to draw from his own life and "write a personal statement." After Olan completed a read-through of his essay for organization, he voiced his lingering concern: "The most, that was confusing to me" about adding in his personal experiences without using first-person language because, "She [the instructor] said like. . . can't use 'I.'" Such a shift would have required moderate revisions to the manuscript. In response, the tutor noted that "It doesn't say anything about not using [first-person]," and she recommended that Olan could return for additional assistance. Olan concluded, "So if I write about my experience, then it will be fine?" The question indicated his acceptance of the tutor's advice and expectation to incorporate a personal narrative into his problem-solution essay.

*Olan in His Own Words.* Readers might question whether Olan demurred from writing about his previous experiences because of the trauma those memories invoked. However, Olan openly and regularly shared about his past. For example, while Olan composed a draft of his essay on how to improve working conditions, he recounted for the first author his despair and helplessness as he worked a fast-food job while his family fled the ISIS attack on Mosul. Olan recounted this experience as he sat in his living room, composing an essay about the workplace. That same visit, Olan engaged in the following exchange with the first author (E), which further illustrated his dismissal of the connection between his previous work and his academic future.

E: You continued to practice speaking English the whole time you worked [as a translator], all those six years. Did you do any other practice?

O: No, you know the practice was not really, you know, they always—the security situation was very, very dangerous, even sometimes we cannot go from our rooms to speak to the soldiers more practice. . . . Not really much practice. You know for six years, if I always do like the practice talking, will be more even.... I [could] go

right away to the Compass [placement] test, and then pass all the levels for English.

This study session offered an important glimpse into Olan's life and the experiences and relationships he most valued. Olan belonged to a tight-knit group of Yazidi interpreters and families, some of whom had immigrated several years before him and were now graduating from college. While Olan studied, his wife baked bread to share with these friends, and Olan told several anecdotes about benefiting from their advice regarding placement testing, advising, and tutoring. He also told stories about being a gifted student and language learner in Iraq: "Whenever teacher explain to me, sometime I do homework but not really a lot, not really well. When they teach me, when explain, I know everything." Although Olan's existing linguistic strengths and his relationships with other interpreters were much more valuable than his experiences interpreting, the first author found no evidence that other college personnel acknowledged or drew from narratives of Olan's mastery of Arabic as a second language to inspire his efforts to learn English.

### **Theorizing the Importance of Olan's Narratives**

As we noted in the case of Labiba's experiences, investment theory offers several notable points regarding Olan's personal sharing and college personnel's responses, yet ultimately falls short of guiding our teaching of Basic Writing. Olan's ability to integrate personal narrative elements into his writing represented his peripheral participation at the college and suggested that he possessed a greater level of rhetorical dexterity (Carter) than Labiba did. Despite his deeper knowledge of the "rules" for participating, tensions emerged within Olan's interactions with the instructor and tutor related to their conflicting assessment of the value of Olan's experiences: While they wanted to celebrate his previous personal persistence, Olan instead wanted to capitalize on his relationships and linguistic strengths—both of which went unnoticed by the faculty. Conversely, faculty and tutors privileged narratives about Olan's Army service as it implied his mastery of English and therefore suggested his legitimate participation within the college's community of practice. While Olan dismissed these narratives, he lacked the symbolic power to control the value of experiences and relationships he deemed most relevant to his college success.

Whereas Labiba initially accepted college personnel's celebration of her personal sharing, Olan rejected their efforts to repurpose his narratives around his ability to "pull himself up by his bootstraps," as such an

understanding left no space to recognize Olan's social connections or his self-described natural language abilities. As a result, Olan and his instructor and tutor could not reconcile their contrasting understandings of how Olan should share his stories—or which stories to share. Ultimately, Olan's stories of his experiences as a language interpreter were symbolic capital with high-exchange and high-use value (Oughton); but in related cases, when instructors and tutors identify students' experiences as such, this labeling can fall short of transforming our teaching practice. Instead, we must make explicit the expectations for sharing personal narratives and the rules determining how narratives are valued so that Olan and others can “effectively read, understand, manipulate, and negotiate the cultural and linguistic codes of a new community of practice (the academy)” (Carter 99).

## CONCLUSIONS

Our findings lead us to question both uncritical applications of investment theory for making sense of Generation 1 learners' experiences in Basic Writing and the ways that learners' stories of personal persistence come to be seen by others within the college as relevant to the learners' academic success. In this section, we begin with theoretical implications for this work. We then discuss practical implications for engaging with students' personal sharing in Basic Writing.

Bonny Norton's investment theory and other theorizations of symbolic capital and participation in the community of practice have profoundly influenced teaching Generation 1 learners and other students enrolled in Basic Writing and beyond. While Norton's theory of investment focuses on learners' desired membership and participation choices, this study illustrates the powerful influence of *other* community members in accepting or rejecting learners' moves. Helen Oughton similarly critiques theories of symbolic capital that perpetuate instructor-imposed cultural arbitraries, or students' loss of control over the symbolic capital of their personal stories. In particular, we illustrate the problematic ways that college faculty and staff can come to value *stories of persistence*—rather than *actual persistence*—and how an overemphasis on this symbolic capital can misdirect our pedagogical response to these stories.

The study complicates our understanding of both symbolic capital and learners' ability to deploy it as a resource in the community of practice. In both cases, the college personnel erroneously assumed that personal narratives about persistence were directly translatable to the learners' persistence

within the academic community. Yet, we were ill-prepared to assist learners' application of the persistence featured in those narratives to their academic goals or their identification of other narratives with greater relevance to their college success. In both cases, the learners lacked control over the symbolic power associated with their narratives and became locked into a resulting "bootstraps" and "grit" trope not of their choosing. Our findings also complicate Lave and Wenger's assumption that even newcomers with peripheral participation are always received as legitimate members of the community. At times, the ways college personnel and students made meaning from both Labiba and Olan's personal narratives prevented the learners from engaging in more central participation despite their desire to participate and to make meaning of stories they viewed as relevant to their academic success.

### **Recommendations: Refocusing Personal Narrative Writing within the Learning Environment**

We recognize that college faculty and staff's focus on Labiba and Olan's personal experiences indicated their genuine investment in these learners. In order to foster perseverance within Generation 1 learners—and all students—through narrative sharing, writing faculty must make explicit the connections between learners' personal sharing as a means of participation and the learners' academic goals. In particular, writing instructors must teach students to be aware of the way literacy is used, or what Carter refers to as "the 'rules' one should know and apply before she will be considered 'literate' by other literate members [of the community]" (106). While all students benefit from this meta-awareness, such knowledge is essential for Generation 1 learners who are more likely to experience academic, social, and cultural marginalization than their U.S. born and educated peers.

- **First, faculty should forefront student agency, or their ability to assign meaning to their own experiences.** Shapiro and colleagues' teaching for agency framework includes (1) acknowledging students as agents with control over their own acts and academic development, (2) teaching students to notice when action needs to be taken and to evaluate possible actions in light of contextual factors, and (3) creating optimal learning conditions for students to develop awareness and exercise their agency. Given instructors' inherent symbolic power in the writing classroom (Booth), adopting an agency-enhancing pedagogy supports students' meta-awareness and ability to assign meaning to

their personal narratives and academic development. For example, faculty could have encouraged Labiba and Olan's meta-awareness through a comparison of their personal and academic persistence and exploration of specific habits, behaviors, or relationships the learners identified as relevant to their academic success.

- **Second, the academic community must respect the participation goals of all community members, not just the writer.** In contexts, such as Basic Writing classes, where the primary goal is academic skills development, assignments should reflect and scaffold to that goal. This is not to say that personal narratives have no place in Basic Writing but rather that instructors who choose to assign them or privilege these stories when they emerge must also be prepared to assist the class in connecting the content of such narratives to learners' participation in the academic community. Brown further acknowledges the difficulty of ensuring that one student's personal narrative does not drown out other voices or foreclose academic discourse. This point is particularly salient given the students' frustrated responses to Labiba's frequent interruptions that were not immediately relevant to the current class topic. Instructors must take the lead to ensure that all learners are heard in the classroom community.
- **Third, Basic Writing instructors can educate themselves about trauma-informed pedagogy.** Carello and Butler encourage faculty to center learning as their primary goal and to remember that emotional safety is a precondition for learning. Instructors must be prepared to provide referrals to counseling or emergency services, acknowledge how trauma can impact learning even when it is not an explicit aspect of the curriculum, reject the romanticization of trauma, and understand the dangers of generalizing clinical research to nonclinical learning contexts. Carello and Butler conclude, "Teaching about trauma is essential to comprehending and confronting the human experience, but to honor the humanity and dignity of both trauma's victims and those who are learning about them, education must proceed with compassion and responsibility toward both" (164). Others similarly emphasize the academic goals of nonclinical spaces and encourage educators to both maintain high academic expecta-

tions for all students while also empowering students to protect themselves by offering choices about disclosure and participation (Davidson; Downey; Wolpow et al.).

Finally, participation in the academic community must be supported by explicit instruction and opportunities to engage in informed sharing of personal narratives. In assigning personal narratives, faculty can support learners' academic identity by maintaining the personal narrative's academic purpose. As Olan's instructor noted, even a skilled student can experience "difficulty transitioning to the more academic writing" if they have been trained "to tell a story." Learners need opportunities to transition into assignments requiring more than personal experience or opinion for support. Faculty must help students understand that sharing personal stories is but one of many possible forms of academic participation—and that personal sharing may not facilitate students' desired participation role within the community. Instructors must clarify the expectations for sharing personal narratives, the ways that those narratives come to be valued, and strategies for students to exercise their agency in determining when, how, and to what effect they will share their personal stories as a form of participating within the college's community of practice. It is only when learners are thusly empowered that they are truly free to engage in the academic community.

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