Discourse and Identity among ESL Learners: A Case Study of a Community College ESL Classroom

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While research in L2 language and literacy in academic contexts has shed light on learning language per se (e.g., students’ development of syntactic complexity), classroom situations, in which ESL students engage in English and make it meaningful to them, have received far less attention. With a sociocultural perspective, this qualitative case study examined the discursive practices of a face-to-face community college ESL classroom and of its online discussion forums. We found that the discourse in the face-to-face classroom tended to prioritize shaping students’ academic knowledge and identity, pushing aside knowledge and identities that were peer- or life-world based. In contrast, the online forums afforded discourses through which students displayed peer-based, life-world, and academic knowledge and identities, while negotiating responses to academic assignments. The study suggests that classroom-based online forums can provide a space for the legitimate display of students’ nonacademic discourses in the service of academic work.

We guess there would be little debate among educators that a key goal in the schooling process is to help students to thrive academically as they grow into the life around them (to take a phrase from Vygotsky [1978]), and, as individuals with their own sets of experiences, to find in their classes supportive places to do so. Debate occurs when we ask what students need to learn, and how they need to be learning, in order to achieve these goals. The debate isn’t new, and it drives such language and literacy concerns as what counts as “academic” as students develop as language users in school—what topics are worth discussing for students and what ways of discussing are worth spending time on (Sperling & DiPardo, 2008). While such debate may sometimes seem a relative luxury for students already conversant with the social and academic practices of the society in which they live and learn, it is hardly so for second-language (L2) students who are new to the society in which they are expected to grow and succeed. While research in L2 language and literacy learning in academic contexts has shed light on any number of phenomena related to language per se, from the development of syntactic complexity to the use of varied discourse structures (e.g., Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002), the range of classroom situations in which ESL students new to the United States engage in English and make it meaningful to them has received far less attention (Duff, 2010).
The research on which we report reflects these issues as it addresses such new students. It considers community college students who come from outside the United States, developing English as their L2 in the United States as they engage in the academic practices promoted by their instructor and as they and the instructor instantiate these practices in two contexts: the classroom, meeting face to face, and the extension of the classroom, interacting online.

It is the online component that we are especially interested in, largely because online activities have been increasingly important elements in L2 learning (see, e.g., Duff, 2010; Hampel & Lamy, 2007), and because we feel that the existing research has only gone so far in uncovering what ESL students are able to discuss and how they are able to communicate when they interact online as part of regular course work.

**Online Communication and ESL**

The diverse forms of online communication—email correspondence, threaded discussion forums, online chatting, and social networking, for instance—have, for some time, reinforced the teaching and learning of second and foreign languages (Abraham & Williams, 2009; Fotos & Browne, 2004; Kern & Warschauer, 2000). Nevertheless, the relationship between contextual features of teaching and learning—such as the existing culture of the institution, the particular ecology of the classroom, classrooms’ traditional penchant for certain academic topics and discourse, or students’ varied social and academic identities in relation to these—and the affordances of students’ online communication is only recently becoming a topic for research (Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2004).

Informed by the sociocultural tradition in language and learning research (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998), in the last decades, a number of L2 researchers have begun to explore students’ online language activities by attending to the interaction between learners and their sociocultural contexts (see Sfard, 1998, and Zuengler & Miller, 2006). In much of this work, learning is seen “as a process of becoming a member of a certain community” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6; see Duff, 2010, on L2 “language socialization”), including gaining “the ability to communicate in the language of this community and act according to its norms” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). Further, rather than conforming to predefined, routinized norms, L2 students are seen to participate in “negotiated literacy” (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 61), actively making meaning of their learning and negotiating their group membership based on the affordances and constraints of the contexts in which they find themselves, including cultural norms, social expectations, and institutional ideologies, as well as students’ goals, personal histories, and multiple identities.

Not surprisingly, research on L2 learning online has begun to investigate how specific sociocultural contexts of learning shape or are shaped by learners’ online activities (e.g., Chen, 2006; Shin, 2006; Thatcher, 2005; Thorne, 2003; Ware, 2004, 2005). Many such L2 studies have also raised issues regarding participants’ online identity, with increasing numbers of publications based on the assumption of an interrelationship between identity and L2 online communication. For example,
foregrounding the role of identity, L2 research has begun to explore the opportunities afforded in online communication for L2 learners to discursively construct identities and negotiate memberships in the various communities in which they participate (e.g., Black, 2009; Bloch, 2007; Chen, 2013; Klimanova, 2013; Lam, 2000, 2004; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011; Sun & Chang, 2012), with attention paid as well to communities other than school. Focusing on Facebook, for example, Chen (2013) explored the ways in which two international graduate students constructed identities through their discursive practices on this social networking medium. Enticingly, research looking into informal online contexts such as Facebook, online fan clubs, and the like—ones that are used voluntarily and that sit outside the context of school (e.g., Black, 2009; Bloch, 2007; Klimanova, 2013; Lam, 2000, 2004)—suggests that informal online communication may afford L2 learners opportunities to navigate across language varieties, invoke and display multiple identities, assert agency, and highlight their cultural values. However, whether such opportunities are afforded by formal, classroom-bound online communication is still not well understood.

In the present case study, we examine that question. We explore how six ESL students in a community college made use of a formal online component of their ESL classroom and discuss the ways they discursively displayed their identities, not only as students in an institution and classroom that placed a premium on academics, but also as peers and as members of social groups outside the academy. In doing so, we watch them negotiating the dominant values of the institution in which their class was situated, all in the service of participating in classroom activities. Taking a “participationist” rather than an “acquisitionist” approach to learning (for example, as Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, and Sfard, 1998, have described), we ask, what were these L2 students doing, socially and culturally, online as opposed to in class—that is, who were these students in these two instructional contexts?

**Theoretical Framework**

Sociocultural premises ground this study. The notion that we act on and are acted upon by the contexts that we inhabit suggests, as Bakhtin (1981) eloquently discussed, that our thoughts and language are “infused with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents” (p. 276), reflecting the multiple forces with which we live and by which we are shaped. We take this premise to the question posed above: Who were these students in these instructional contexts? The question is about shaping, and it is about identity. And while identity is seen to be “related to different demographic categories such as age, gender, nationality, and race” (Block, 2007, p. 866), these categories have come to be seen also as fluid and fragmentary, so identity is at once much more than these categories yet often captured by them as well.

We find Gee’s work (1996, 2001, 2002) relevant to expand this notion of identity. Aligning with the sociocultural tradition, Gee (2001) suggests that we all construct what he calls “identity kits” (p. 526), reflecting varied Discourses (the capital D is his), the combinations of “saying-being-doing-and-valuing” that
frame our actions and language use so as to enact and display a self that others will recognize. This recognition is based on an interpretive system (Gee, 2000–2001, p. 107), which is to say, institutional norms, taken-for-granted cultural beliefs, common-sense social behaviors, and the like. Further, identity kits or Discourses that are promoted in social institutions and that lead to social goods can be seen as “dominant Discourses” (1996, p. 132), the Discourses that ESL students, in part, are expected to acquire in their new cultural settings.

From this perspective, people do not simply learn English or English reading and writing in general. Rather, they learn a specific social language (in the Bakhtinian sense of language related to particular social strata—professional groups, age groups, and so on) to accomplish certain social purposes. Furthermore, people do not use one unitary social language, but mix various ones to participate in varied social interactions. Mixing different social languages makes our multiple identities visible.

For this study, then, we regard the identity of ESL students as multiple, contextually situated, and constructed in the process of recognizing and being recognized within particular Discourses or identity kits afforded by the contexts in which they learn and communicate. Drawing on this theoretical perspective, and as indicated earlier, this study asks about what these ESL students were doing, socially and culturally, online and in class. Who were they in these contexts and what were the contexts that they invoked in order to be who they were? To explore these questions, more particular questions helped with analyzing the data: (a) What was the dominant Discourse into which the institution and the instructor attempted to socialize the students? (b) How did the students discursively enact their identities in class and online, and to what extent were such enactments afforded by these different learning contexts? (c) How were the students’ and teacher’s communicative practices related to the dominant Discourse of the institution?

Methodology
A qualitative case study methodology was adopted for this research because it allowed for situating students’ local actions and interactions within the wider (social, cultural, historical) context where they took place (see Erickson, 1986; Merriam, 1998). The setting was a community college in Southern California and one ESL class in that college that integrated online discussion forums into the formal curriculum, along with face-to-face class sessions. Six focal students were selected among the class participants. The focus on a small number of students in a case-study classroom allowed for close analysis, foregrounding the phenomenon of social interaction among these participants and their peers and positioning the cultural-institutional context as the background.

Overview of the Case-Study Classroom
The site of the study was a credit-bearing ESL class at Rose Hill Community College (RHCC; all names are pseudonyms) in Southern California. Like most of the public community colleges in California, RHCC has an open-door policy, admit-
ting students with a high school diploma or equivalent. The case-study class was taught by Ms. Jones, who was white, in her forties, and from California. Ms. Jones had taught English as a foreign language overseas for three years. She enjoyed her EFL teaching experience so much that, upon returning to the United States, she pursued a master’s degree in teaching English as a second language. At the time of the study, she had been a full-time ESL instructor at RHCC for 13 years. Although she didn’t claim to be tech-savvy or a computer geek, she was interested in integrating technology into her ESL teaching. She had been using an online forum in her ESL class for five years. Her own participation in the online forum was limited to posting a prompt for each forum and providing paper-based evaluation and grades focusing on the depth of content as well as the accuracy and complexity of syntactical structures that students employed in their writing.

Fifteen students were enrolled in the class. Most of them were recent immigrants who had been in the United States for less than five years, and many hadn’t had prior US schooling experience. Because the college’s location is close to a large Chinese ethnic community, Asian students, predominantly from China, comprised most of the class, with two Hispanic students making up the rest.

A typical class consisted of several mini-lessons on English reading and writing. At times, Ms. Jones intermixed these mini-lessons with vocabulary or essay quizzes or with students’ oral reports on projects that they conducted outside the classroom. At times, students were asked to write essays in class on topics from their course readings. In addition to the face-to-face classroom meetings, which took place for two hours each, five times a week, over a 16-week academic term, Ms. Jones initiated five threads of electronic discussion forums at two- to three-week intervals. The students were to interact in these asynchronously. All students were required to write a paragraph 15 to 20 sentences long to respond to Ms. Jones’s posted prompt, including the grammatical structures that she had recently taught in class. The students had a week to reply to Ms. Jones’s prompt and were required to read and reply to at least one peer’s message with comments.

Participants
Participants included the six focal students, Ms. Jones, and the coordinator of the ESL program at the college. The focal students (see Table 1) were selected to reflect the classroom population and provide contrasting characteristics in terms of gender, ethnic background, and academic ability. Since community colleges are known to matriculate students with diverse educational goals (e.g., academic transfer, vocational orientation, self-growth) and immigration status (e.g., permanent residents, recent immigrants, international students), students reflecting these differences were selected as much as possible. This group of students, although not able to fully represent the range of students in the classroom, made up a fair microcosm of the class.

Data Collection
Data were collected across one (spring) semester and included institutional and instructional documents, semistructured interviews with the participants, field
notes and audio recordings of all face-to-face classroom meetings, and observation notes and electronic records of the online forums. Class meetings and interviews were transcribed. Each focal student was interviewed two to three times for 50 minutes each. The interviews revolved around how these students perceived their ESL learning experiences online and in face-to-face classroom instruction, as well as the students’ life experiences or resources outside college that they felt shaped their life at the college. In the interviews, the students were also shown segments of their text productions in the online forums and were prompted to recall and provide rationale for these texts. This stimulated recall technique (DiPardo, 1994) allowed the interviewees to interpret their social interactions online and served as a means to triangulate researchers’ interpretations of the students’ online textual productions during data analysis.

Three formal interviews were also conducted with the course instructor. These focused on understanding her teaching experience, teaching philosophy, and instructional goals. In addition, one formal interview was conducted with the coordinator of the ESL program to gain a general understanding of the official curricular structure of the ESL program and ESL students’ educational pathways in the college. These data helped to situate the case-study classroom within a broader institutional context and to reveal the instructor’s and institution’s aims for the students.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis relied on “frame resolution” (Agar, 1996, p. 35) to develop analytical categories and identify themes for the purpose of mapping out the saying-being-doing-and-valuing highlighted in the college and classroom, as well as the

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<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Educational Goals</th>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>College transfer/vocational certificate</td>
<td>Recent immigrant</td>
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*aAll names are pseudonyms.*

*bAs determined by preliminary classroom observations, along with teacher assessment.*
students’ reactions to these. For example, informed by previous studies on ESL students’ identity formation, we initially categorized data into institutional values, instructional goals, and students’ practices outside school. Under the category of institutional values, subcategories, such as college mission, faculty/students’ perception of the college, and curriculum goals, were developed. During the process of studying these subcoded data, academic transfer eventually emerged as a theme across these subcategories. In this way, the dominant Discourse underwritten by the institution and the academic identity that the college invited the students to take on began to become apparent. In a similar way, students’ practices outside school was divided into subcategories, and themes such as cultural expectations and social affiliations became apparent as shaping the students’ responses to the dominant Discourse of the institution. These themes guided us in the way we ultimately portrayed the students’ interactions.

Spoken and written text analysis (Johnstone, 2002), which conceptualizes language as a tool that human beings use to accomplish social tasks (e.g., making certain things significant, enacting certain identities, signaling communicative context), provided another lens for looking closely at what was said in the face-to-face classroom and online to reveal the kinds of saying-being-doing-and-valuing that the students spontaneously took on or were invited to take on. Also, with our research questions implicitly reflecting the students’ participation in a particular academic culture, we explored students’ classroom and online interactions to identify how and whether they were “academic”—that is, how and whether they conformed to the ways of using language privileged in the academy (see Duff, 2010). In students’ online texts in particular, we focused on written and oral language features (Chafe, 1982) to show how they used different language variations to accomplish different social tasks and to enact different identities in the online forums.

Repeated study of classroom observations and students’ online texts allowed us to develop a general sense of the interactional dynamics in both settings and to identify what was typical and what was not in these settings. Reviewing these data extensively permitted us to choose a representative subset across time and settings for detailed analysis. This process led us to identification of participants’ various discourses and identities. We settled on three key categories for these: academic, peer, and life-world. Our findings, presented below, come from and represent the analyzed data subset.

Findings

**Dominant Discourse and Identity Socialization in Context**

Although American public community colleges are designed to serve a number of student needs by performing various curricular functions, including academic transfer, vocational training, continuing education, and community services (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Woodlief, Thomas, & Orozco, 2003), facilitating academic transfer appeared to be the most valued curricular function promoted at RHCC. Data from the California Postsecondary Education Commission indicates that in the 2007–2008 academic year, among the 109 California public community col-
leges, RHCC was among the top five in transferring students to California’s public four-year universities. Transfer-related information was highly accessible to the students, and transfer-related activities had a high profile on campus. For example, the college’s official website brought a link to the Transfer Center to the immediate attention of visitors. In the weekly campus newsletter’s list of future events, four out of the 10 events scheduled in one week in March during data collection were transfer-related. This was typical for this newsletter. The ESL coordinator took pride in RHCC’s reputation as one of the top community colleges to transfer students to four-year universities, commenting on the overall curriculum goals of the ESL program as “preparing students for freshman English and for other college classes, and for transfer. A lot of what we do is geared toward the universities.”

In conversation with the dominant Discourse of the college, Ms. Jones attempted to help her students acquire a specific type of academic writing consisting of a fixed set of stylistic and syntactic structures—in particular, a written format of topic sentences, supporting details, and concluding sentences, as well as formal as opposed to colloquial vocabulary. When asked about the curriculum goal of her ESL class, Ms. Jones said,

This is an academic writing course. English 1A is academic writing, so [the students’] transition from level two to level three is kind of the transition from just writing to a more academic writing, although in each case, they are developing a topic sentence with supporting points, so we are following academic formats from the beginning.

This academic orientation was evident in the face-to-face classroom.

**The Face-to-Face Classroom**

Students’ contributions to the academic topics at hand were usually received positively in the face-to-face classroom. Ms. Jones elaborated on them as she encouraged students to support their ideas and to use academic language. We can see this happening in the following excerpt, which illustrates the typical IRF (initiation-response-feedback) pattern through which Ms. Jones controlled and contributed to the discussion while acknowledging each student’s contribution, in this case based on a course reading, as fitting in:

**Ms. Jones:** What can you infer about the relationship about people to nature?

[She calls on a student.] **Sarah.**

**Sarah:** Um. They accept things that happen.

**Ms. Jones:** They accept things that happen instead of trying to fight them, OK? Good.

This IRF interaction allowed Ms. Jones to repeat Sarah’s contribution in a tone of voice that confirmed what Sarah said while providing additional elaboration (“instead of trying to fight them”), giving Sarah and the class a sense that this kind of elaboration was what was wanted, that maybe Sarah herself would have so elaborated if she had thought to (“OK? Good.”).
This implicit message was typical in such interactions, as when, after watching a video clip on an ecovillage, Ms. Jones invited the class to identify the reasons why people would like to move to an ecovillage based on what the video clip said. When Mathew volunteered that one reason is that people there can get to know each other, Ms. Jones then elaborated:

**Ms. Jones:** OK, so to get to know the neighbors, right?
**Students:** Mm, hmm.

**Ms. Jones:** So, it was important for that lady, she said at least she knows the people who live down her street and in this case she got to know them more.

Again, Ms. Jones, in effect, put words into the students’ mouths as if the words were almost already there.

Even when the students were not able to correctly respond to Ms. Jones’ questions on the first try, they were given more opportunity to develop their ideas toward her academic goals. For example, she invited the students to articulate their understanding of a video clip that the textbook had recommended they watch:

**Ms. Jones:** What’s another reason? Sarah, what was a reason?
**Sarah:** Uh, preserving the land and having house.

**Ms. Jones:** Um. No, that’s not a reason that they gave. That’s true, that happens, but that’s not one of the reasons that one of those people gave.

**Sarah:** Uhm. They can share things like—lawn mowers.

**Ms. Jones:** OK, they can conserve and share. Conserve resources and share, like the lawn mowers.

Although Sarah failed on her first try to answer the question correctly, Ms. Jones seemed to want to help her save face (“That’s true, that happens, but that’s not one of the reasons that one of those people gave”), and when she allowed Sarah a second chance to answer, she elaborated on Sarah’s contribution—much as she had done in the previous example—and added academic-like language (“conserve resources”). Ms. Jones gave serious attention to these academic exercises of finding evidence in the text (a film, in this case), helping her students to participate by promoting the accuracy and fullness of their observations, and pulling them into an academic world where language features such as relatively formal word choice, like “conserve,” and abstraction, like “resources,” are desirable. In fact, in this 45-minute lesson, the class was engaged in this kind of interactional dynamic for 27 minutes, with the rest of the class time allocated to small-group discussion (7 minutes) and video watching (10 minutes).

Sometimes it was students who asked questions, and, when the topic was academic, the pattern was much the same as seen above. During a mini-lesson on how to convert direct speech into indirect speech, Charlene raised her hand and asked about one of the examples that Ms. Jones had written on the board:
CHARLENE: When do we need to add *that*?

**Ms. Jones:** Uh, *that* is optional in a noun clause. OK, so that’s a good point. Sometimes I have it and sometimes I don’t. Um, she’s talking about optional. So, if it helps you to remember you’re singling a noun clause. [Ms. Jones explains the grammatical usages of noun clauses and then refers back to the examples on the board.] So, here, it’s acting as the object, right? “He said,” what did he say, “he would.” Now, you can use the word *that* to indicate the beginning of the clause. So, “He said *that* he would come.” And here you could say, “He said all tickets had to be bought in advance.” It’s optional. OK? But that’s a good thing to point out, thank you.

Here, Charlene raised a question that was relevant to the academic topic being discussed, and her contribution was corroborated by Ms. Jones. Ms. Jones not only complimented Charlene’s idea and thanked her for it, but also turned Charlene’s question into a contribution that deepened the class’s understanding of the topic of indirect quotes by directing the whole class to Charlene’s question and clarifying it for them (e.g., “Um, she’s talking about optional”). The face-to-face classroom allowed the student to spontaneously ask a question and allowed the instructor to provide an immediate response that addressed the speaker while quickly shifting to address the whole class too, all supporting the academic topic.

In contrast, when the students strayed from the academic topic being discussed, for example, attempting to fold knowledge from their own life-worlds into the discussion, their voices tended to be pushed aside, if not bluntly rejected. For example, in an assigned task that required the students to report their findings from interviewing people from countries other than their own country of origin, Tina, a Chinese student, reported on what she learned from her Korean interviewee. Other students chimed in, moving the conversation in a different direction:

**Tina:** About the Father’s Day and Mother’s Day, which is coming, right? Koreans have the same day, they call it the Parents’ Day, on May 8th, on the same day. And also they have the Teacher’s Day, which is after the Parents’ Day, on May 15th. I don’t know if American has the Teacher’s Day.

**Students:** No, no, not in America. Only in China. [Students snicker and speak simultaneously.]

**Vincent:** In China, we have a Lady holiday.

**Ms. Jones:** Lady holiday?

**Students:** Yes, yes, Lady holiday. Oh, yes. We celebrate for women. [Many students speak at the same time.]

**Ms. Jones:** OK, Lady’s Day.

**Vincent:** We also have a Children’s Day.

**Tina:** Yes, Children’s Day. We have an international Children’s Day. We celebrate for children.

**Ms. Jones:** Children’s Day? No, we don’t have a Children’s Day.
VINCENT: But I think it’s the most common holiday, I mean the Children’s Day. [Students laugh and speak simultaneously.]

MS. JONES: Hey, hey, hey, let’s get back to Tina.

While the students simultaneously snickered at the fact that Americans, unlike the Chinese, do not celebrate Teacher’s Day, Vincent stepped in and, it appears proudly, told Ms. Jones about holidays in China. Vincent’s use of “we,” evoking his ethnic cultural membership, was spontaneously echoed by his Chinese peers and reinforced by their laughing and all speaking at once. These interactions conveyed the implicit message that they were, as a group, honoring their Chinese practices and their Chinese identity. Their responses, however, were cut short when Ms. Jones redirected the class back to the academic topic with the repeated and interrupting “Hey, hey, hey.”

Steering students away from their life experiences could happen more dramatically than in the conversation above. In one classroom conversation, for example, Ms. Jones attempted to explain a text on cultural diversity by juxtaposing the practice of American rodeo with the practice of Mexican horse tripping. Doing so, she raised an ethical concern, not about rodeo, a practice that arguably raises any number of ethical concerns, but about horse tripping:

MS. JONES: So, when you have cultural diversity, some of it is easy to understand and accept, but some of it is, like, I don’t understand that, I can’t understand that. So I can’t understand why it’s fun to hurt an animal, and maybe have to kill the animal, or like the bullfighting, I don’t understand that.

RODRIGUEZ [STUDENT]: The power of the men with the animal. That’s the whole big picture.

MS. JONES: [Overlapping Rodriguez’ turn] I don’t get it. So it’s hard for me to understand that. Because in my cultural upbringing, because my personal idea and also my cultural idea of animals and how animals are treated going against another culture and how animals are treated.

As Ms. Jones devalued horse tripping, Rodriguez, a Hispanic student representing himself as an insider to Hispanic culture, defended the Mexican cultural practice and, implicitly, his heritage and cultural identity. His intention, however, was silenced by Ms. Jones’s overlapping talk (“I don’t get it”). Notably, none of the other students said anything. As in a traditional classroom, the teacher’s voice took over here, along with her own cultural values.

As illustrated in these examples, Ms. Jones tended to prioritize academic topics, and academic ways of discussing them, and the IRF structure allowed her to support students in developing these. Yet, the same structure could shut off opportunities for the students to extensively or even meaningfully interweave their life-world knowledge and identities into the discussion and make them count. The situation was different in the online forums.
Online Interaction
As literature on educational uses of technology in the classroom has suggested (e.g., Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Dwyer, 1997; Warschauer, 1999), the existing cultures of classroom and institution shape how technology is used. Ms. Jones’s intended use of online forums echoed the dominant academic Discourse valued at RHCC. When asked about the aims of the online forums, she stressed the academically oriented goal:

[The forum] gives them an opportunity to practice their academic writing. It gives an opportunity for students to practice writing at home. Also this gives them opportunity to post their ideas and respond to their classmates. This gives them an audience to their writing. Whereas they are only writing in class on paper and give it to the teacher, the teacher is the only audience, this way they are writing to the classmates.

Furthermore, commenting on her selection of forum topics, she said, “Well, they are predominantly connected to the [course] readings. So when I have the [topic of] earthquake, all of the topics are linked somehow or something that’s in the book. . . . So I want things to be connected thematically and not just random.” When asked about how she graded these forum entries, she replied that she was more lenient in grading these than students’ other work because, in her words, “I want the Web board to be somewhat encouraging.”

In the face-to-face classroom, when instructing the class to take part in the first online forum, Ms. Jones referred to this forum as an “assignment,” “an academic practice,” and “not a chat room.” In addition, she encouraged the students to write in the online forums using the academic language promoted in the classroom, such as writing “a little paragraph with a topic sentence and support,” and to avoid informalities such as contractions or casual chat-room language. Students were also instructed to write “a thoughtful response” that commented on their peers’ content as well as language structures (such as “Do you have a topic sentence?” or “Are you supporting with specific examples?”) and not to use colloquial language such as “Wow! Kevin, sounds great!” or “Yeah! Cool!” Ms. Jones regarded the online forum as a venue to shape students as academics by writing in the language valued at the college and in her classroom.

Although the contexts of the institution and classroom had the potential to shape what and how they wrote online, the students did not sit back to be so singularly shaped. In the online forums, they negotiated what it meant to be students, peers, and social beings with their own life-world backgrounds. As illustrated in the next section, the students integrated the values and practices that they participated in as part of other discourses from outside the college and the classroom while also appropriating the academic identity that the school and the instructor invited them to take on. These discussions were not cut off by Ms. Jones or redirected because she wasn’t part of them. In fact, as we will see, she could actually implicitly invite them.
Identity Negotiation in the Online Forums

The focal students drew on a mixture of social languages to enact their varied identities in the online forums. To align with the dominant Discourse and display a sense of academese, they employed formal language that contained prototypically written features (Chafe, 1982). However, despite the instructor’s emphasis on shaping an academic discourse online, the students rewrote such expectations by also stressing involvement and shared experiences with their peers. As they did this, their language was marked by the kinds of oral conversational features (Chafe, 1982) that reflected their out-of-school selves. The students also referred to their experiences and the knowledge they gained from their life-world identities to address the academic topics assigned by the instructor.

In effect, for all of the focal students, the online forums reflected a conglomeration of identities. Table 2 gives a glimpse of this mix.

The first column in Table 2, “Academic Discourse,” shows the students’ formal language, which fit the academic discourse promoted by Ms. Jones. As in Sarah’s enactment of academic identity below, the focal students’ academic discourse in the online forums was marked by the use of such written academic language features as abstract sentence subjects (e.g., “Environmental conditions are very important to human beings”), nominalizations (e.g., “There are more and more environment problems cause by the development of technology”), participles used nominatively (e.g., “Advertising athletes had been a popular method”), attributive adjectives (e.g., “he was able to achieve greater popularity than his overwhelming rivals”), conjoined phrases (e.g., “Seabiscuit’s popularity grew up because of his incredible speed and his owner’s opportune marketing”), sequences of prepositional and prepositional-like phrases (e.g., “Environmental conditions are very important to human beings in order for us to live healthy and happily”), pre-posed subordinate clauses (e.g., “Even though he did not look like a high-class horse, he was able to achieve greater popularity than his overwhelming rivals”), and relative clauses (e.g., “What concerns me the most is the climate change, which [we] know as global warming and greenhouse effect”).

In contrast, reflecting their peer identity, the students drew on a broad spectrum of oral language features, in effect attempting to involve their peers in their lives and creating a shared social world. The second column, showing peer discourse, illustrates this informality and intimacy in the students’ use of second-person direct address (e.g., “Hi everyone, I am Charlene”), and oral language features such as first-person references (e.g., “I never thought about that I will be a teacher, I am still a student”), monitoring of information flow (e.g., “I hope you find my writing interesting and informative”), exhortations (e.g., “Be a teacher!”), showing mental processes (e.g., “I would like to share my exciting experience with all of you”), and colloquial expressions (e.g., “My favorite sport is soccer, and I’d like to play with you guys”). In addition, emoticons (e.g., 🙂), commonly seen in teenagers’ chat-room language, penetrated the students’ texts in the online forums.

In addition to reflecting both their academic and peer identities, the students also drew from experiences and knowledge that they gained outside the classroom.
### Table 2. Sample Discourse from Focal Students’ Initial Written Texts Online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Academic Discourse</th>
<th>Peer Discourse</th>
<th>Life-World Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Charlene</strong></td>
<td>Environmental conditions are very important to human beings in order for us to live healthy and happily; therefore, people are very concerned about environmental issues. (Assignment 5)</td>
<td>Hi everyone, I am Charlene. I would like to share my exciting experience with all of you. (Assignment 1)</td>
<td>Many women like shopping and buying new clothes... What I intend to do is to apply recycle goods as part of my life... For example, cutting out pieces of fabric from my old clothes and making a quilt blanket. (Assignment 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sheena</strong></td>
<td>There are more and more environment problems cause by the developing of technology. What concerns me the most is the climate change, which know as global warming and greenhouse effect. (Assignment 5)</td>
<td>I can study in the public library or at school. I can also go to the beach or hiking in the mountain. (Assignment 5)</td>
<td>I am from Taiwan and I speak Chinese. I like to read novels and watch Japanese cartoon in my free time. (Assignment 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virginia</strong></td>
<td>Seabiscuit was a very famous racehorse during the years of the Great Depression. Even though he did not look like a high-class horse, he was able to achieve greater popularity than his overwhelming rivals. Seabiscuit's popularity grew up because of his incredible speed and his owner's opportune marketing. (Assignment 4)</td>
<td>Hello everybody, this is Virginia. I hope you find my writing interesting and informative. 😁 (Assignment 2)</td>
<td>Sometimes, I have so much homework to do that I do not know where to start. I feel overwhelmed and I cannot concentrate in any subject. When this happens to me, I find it very helpful to make some time to walk my dog. (Assignment 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vincent</strong></td>
<td>Advertising athletes had been a popular method both today and during Seabiscuit's time. Depending on how athletes are advertised, it could be good or bad. (Assignment 4)</td>
<td>Be a teacher! I never thought about that I will be a teacher, I am still a student. I feel so funny when I received this order. How can I teach kids drawing? (Assignment 1)</td>
<td>I am a designer so I use a lot of paper. I use recycled paper for my sketches and drafts, and I only use good paper for my final projects. (Assignment 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Matthew</strong></td>
<td>Today, people are in a new civilization because there are numerous of high-tech industry factories were built. As a result, gaining in factories and population need more water for every single city. What worries me most is the shortage of waters in the city... To sum it up, these are my three ways to save water which are recycling daily life’s water, checking out the faucet, and ways to wash dishes. (Assignment 5)</td>
<td>Hi, this is Mathew. I come from Qingdao, China. My favorite sport is soccer, and I’d like to play with you guys... Here, I have a question for you: Have you ever thought about the result of playing with fire when you were a child? (Assignment 1)</td>
<td>I am a Christian, so I always pray whenever I felt something which seemed to be stressful. No matter your religion is built on mentally or physically, praying is the best way to reduce the stress for Christian. (Assignment 3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All names are pseudonyms.*
to address the academic topics assigned by the instructor. Their written texts often reflected their non-school-based identities from home or community-based organizations. As listed in Table 2 under the last column, “Life-World Discourse,” Charlene, an Asian woman, referred to the Asian female practice of “making a quilt blanket from old clothes” to talk about recycling as a way to conserve resources. Her reference to this experience received a response from another female student who appreciated it and shared a similar interest. Mathew, who devoted much of his after-school life to church activities, drew from his religious practice (e.g., “I am a Christian, so I always pray,” “praying is the best way to reduce the stress for Christian”), making this life-world identity visible to the class. Thus, in the online forums, students blended, without apparent internal constraints, multiple identities and discourses into the official online text.

A further example of this point is Ms. Jones’s request, in the third online forum, for the students first to refer to their textbooks and then to write a paragraph to explain what they do when they are in stressful situations: “How do you handle your stress? Write a paragraph with 15–18 sentences that answers the question above. Be sure to include two sentences that have adverb clauses or phrases. Reply to one classmate with a thoughtful comment.” Notice Ms. Jones’s implicit invitation to students to draw freely on and express their life-world identities. However, the students’ writing was also explicitly expected to be framed within an academic discourse, as their attention was directed to the textbook and to certain grammatical structures (adverb clauses or phrases) that they saw commonly used in academic writing. The following response was produced by Sarah:

As the improvement of people’s standard of life, people have lots of entertainments to relax themselves, but stress still can’t be avoided. For me, as a student, I have stress from study. When I was in high school, I was really stressful, because I had to prepare for the college entrance exam. I had never had so much stress before. I thought I couldn’t continue to study if I didn’t find a way to relieve stress. Fortunately, my teacher told me that I could write journals if I was upset. I wrote journals everyday and I found I felt much better. I looked journals as my “closest friend” and wrote whatever I wanted. Writing journals is a good way for me to relieve my stress and listening to the music is another good way for me to relax myself. Some people use drinking to relax themselves in order to keep away from their annoyances. As for me, I use music to help me keep away from the upset things. I like to listen to music and lie on the bed, then I turn the volume up so that I can’t hear any other voice except the music. This atmosphere makes me feel comfortable and helps me to get into the world of music. The light music is a good one for me because I can relax my mind totally and sometimes I will fall asleep when I listen to the music. After I get up, I will eat food that I like. The reason why I eat food is that when I am eating, I feel very happy and content. The stress can be gained as we getting older, so I should find some better ways to relieve my stress. Handling stress is important but not difficult if you can find the way to relieve yourself.

In this text, Sarah simultaneously adopted three different “voices” and, as such, three different identities. For one, she enacted an academic voice to meet Ms.
Jones’s expectation of good students. This voice was marked by a third-person sentence subject, suggesting a kind of universal knowledge (e.g., “people have lots of entertainments to relax themselves”), and such written language features as sequences of prepositional phrases (e.g., “the improvement of people’s standard of life”), participles in the subject position (e.g., “Handling stress is important”), and complement clauses (e.g., “some people use drinking to relax themselves in order to keep away from their annoyances”). She also included the adverbial phrases and clauses required by the prompt (e.g., “As the improvement of people’s standard of life”; “When I was in high school”). Using these linguistic devices, she was able to produce the voice frequently seen in academic genres. We also note the topic sentence that Ms. Jones wanted and the academic-like wrapping up of her text in the form of a life lesson.

Yet the instructor had explicitly asked the students to draw on personal experience, experience from what we are calling students’ life-worlds. It is not surprising, then, that Sarah did not fully conform to the academic discourse that Ms. Jones expected. She also drew on oral language features. In addition to the implicitly called-for first-person reference (“When I was in high school, I was really stressful, because I had to prepare for the college entrance exam”), she used emphatic particles (“I had never had so much stress before”), and her writing was somewhat colloquial (“really stressful”). Sarah conveyed a sense of involvement with her readers, not academic detachment, as she forged a personal self. Also, by referring to her prior educational experience in China (e.g., “When I was in high school”) and to youth culture (e.g., “I like to listen to music and lie on the bed, then I turn the volume up so that I can’t hear any other voice except the music”), she made her identity as a Chinese immigrant teenager visible to her classmates.

Sarah’s enactment of her life-world identity as a Chinese teenager was recognized and affirmed by her peer, Rachel, in her response to Sarah’s written text. Rachel wrote not about how Sarah’s text was written but about their shared life experiences:

Hi, Sarah. I’m Rachel. We had same experience about the college entrance exam, and I think that is the big stress for a lot of students in China. I remember the teacher said this is your only chance to get into a good college and it is the only way you can better your future. We all knew that meaning, it seemed a last warning before you took the exam. Through these online exchanges, Sarah and Rachel displayed themselves not only as Chinese immigrant teenagers, but also as fellow insiders to Chinese culture (“I think that is the big stress for a lot of students in China. . . . We all knew that meaning”). Rachel’s introduction (“Hi, Sarah. I’m Rachel”) also reflected a personal connection. The online forums, then, were a social venue where the students had a relatively unconstrained opportunity to reveal their life-worlds to their classmates and to be affirmed in them, as well as to build up nonacademic relationships with one another.

When recalling her experience of writing in the online forums, like most of the focal students, Sarah revealed a concern about grammatical accuracy and
syntactic complexity as she described her writing process in these forums: “I start with free writing . . . and then I revise it. I check the grammar, make sure no errors and combine simple sentences. I check, especially the topic sentence. I make sure I include the topic sentence.” But she also revealed her comfort in interacting with those peers who shared her interests and cultural background: “Like we have the same topic, like similarities, and then I can talk about it more, I can reply more. If he or she said something I’m not familiar with, I will not reply.” Sarah praised the online forums for giving her an opportunity to connect her life-world to that of her peers.

Speaking of how she felt when peers commented on her online texts in the forums, Sarah said,

I think if someone read my writing, I will be happy if someone read my assignment, and then give me a reply. Because when someone replied to my essay, that means they read it seriously. So I feel happy and confident. And I have more motivation to write because I know someone is reading my work and someone is interested in my work.

Addressing the same issue, Vincent commented,

When my classmates gave me comments, I felt happy about it. I felt excited. I mean it’s nice to have comments. Then you know people like your work. In some ways, it even motivates you to write.

From what we observed and what these students said, we suggest that the online space for these students to display and affirm their multiple identities, using the appropriate discourses, likely had a positive effect on the students’ L2 experience.

**Discussion and Implications**

This study addresses the interaction of dominant, academic identity socialization in classrooms and students’ identity performance in institutionally developed online spaces, specifically with regard to transnational students in a community college setting. The topic, setting, and particular group of students merit much more attention than L2 research has thus far given them.

In studying these with the aim of better understanding the affordances of online as opposed to classroom interaction for these students, we note that, as in many classrooms, discussion in Ms. Jones’s classroom, even though informal and friendly, was highly structured via IRF. This structure allowed Ms. Jones to keep students to academic topics, expand their academic language, and guide them to follow the academic practice of finding textual evidence for claims. It also allowed her to shift her attention quickly and seamlessly from individual students to the whole class and back again. Notably, it also allowed students to speak individually and en masse, not incidentally as en masse talk can convey its own message, for example of concordance and echo. But as it fostered the academic, the classroom discourse also eclipsed different sorts of commentary, different ways of expressing and knowing.
The online forums, in contrast, had certain affordances that the students took up, allowing them to expand beyond what they experienced in the classroom. In an institutional and instructional context that highlighted academic achievement and academic Discourse, the students used a mixture of social languages or discourses online to enact multiple identities when they interacted. They were not told to do so; in fact, they were told not to.

The online forums shaped a way into academic discussion not possible in the IRF structured classroom setting. Online, students reinforced friendship and affinity with peers to address the academic topics assigned by the instructor. And while it was indeed the case that, as Ms. Jones indicated in an interview, the online forum gave students a chance to address an audience other than the teacher, and to do so at home rather than in a classroom setting, “audience” and “setting” were seen in this study to entail their own purposes, their own tone and tenor, their own layered social underpinnings and ways of knowing, and thus their own language. We suggest that Ms. Jones’s more lenient grading, meant to encourage students to write and respond in these forums, also, implicitly, fit into this equation.

As literature in L2 identity socialization shows, although social institutions such as schools have the power to transmit and cultivate certain sociocultural values and identities through linguistic practices, L2 students do not always comply with such institutional goals (Golden, 2001; He, 2004; Vann, Richardson, & Escudero, 2006; Willett, 1995). In face-to-face classroom interaction, they may comply with as well as resist the identities that the institution attempts to socialize them into. This study extends this notion to consider the online forum as a natural venue for L2 students to do both—to comply and to resist in the service of academic, life-world, and student peer understanding.

Although previous studies have demonstrated that informal, voluntary online communication provides L2 learners with a discursive space to display their multiple identities, we believe that this study enlightens our understanding even more in showing that school-based online discussion forums appear to provide what Canagarajah (2004) called a “safe house,” “a space where students [can] adopt more hybrid identities deriving from the heterogeneous discourses they [are] competent in” (p. 123). Investigating the relationship between classroom identities and L2 learning, Canagarajah (2004) lamented that these safe houses are usually hidden as underlife in institutional contexts, such as asides between students, passing of notes, peer activities, and marginalia in textbooks. This case study has revealed other possibilities, embedded in classroom work itself, for students to legitimately display some spectrum of who they are while negotiating responses to academic assignments. For the focal students in this study, the experience of interacting in class-sanctioned online forums not only drove them to write (sometimes a great deal), but also afforded them opportunities to use varied discourses to accomplish multiple social functions. The study invites L2 practitioners to try out online as well as face-to-face communication in ways that give students more control over their discourse, and to engage them in dialogues that invite a range of ways of speaking and writing without sacrificing academic goals.
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Douglas Brian Fisher, extraordinary teacher, literacy leader, researcher, and writer, is the recipient of the Conference on English Leadership’s Exemplary Leader Award for 2014. Dr. Fisher has maintained an active teaching career at San Diego State University while also working intensively with schools and districts across the United States and internationally. He has served as dean of faculty affairs for the past seven years for the Health Sciences High and Middle College, a public charter school focused on college and career pathways in health care.

Dr. Fisher has presented at NCTE, IRA, and ASCD, and for myriad other professional groups. He has written or co-written dozens of professional books and texts as well as many dozens of articles and chapters. Two recent publications include Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading and the series Common Core ELA in a PLC at Work.

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