MAIS Portfolio

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MAIS Portfolio – Fall 2026

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MAIS Experience Narrative and Reflection

As I reflect on my experience in the Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (MAIS) program at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, I recognize how much this academic journey has influenced the way I think about teaching, research, and my own development as a scholar. When I began this journey, I wanted to continue my education, strengthen my knowledge of literature and writing, and become a more effective instructor. But I also wanted to explore areas topics that were of an interest to me, like the Special Topics classes offered in MASC. However, throughout the program, I have come to realize that graduate education is not simply about acquiring more knowledge. It is also about questioning what we think we know, challenging our assumptions, and learning to approach familiar ideas from different perspectives. In many ways, this experience has encouraged me to reconsider not only how I teach but also how I learn.

One of the most meaningful aspects of my graduate experience has been the opportunity to connect what I am learning academically with what I encounter in my own classroom. As a Rhetoric and Composition instructor teaching both traditional college and dual enrollment students, I am constantly reminded that students enter the classroom with different experiences, expectations, and relationships with reading and writing. I have often questioned why some students seem genuinely interested in a particular reading while others approach the same assignment as something they simply need to complete. My graduate coursework has encouraged me to look beyond students' immediate responses

and consider the larger cultural, linguistic, and educational experiences that influence how they engage with academic texts.

Throughout my studies, I have become particularly interested in literacy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the relationship between reading and lived experience. Engaging with scholars such as Paulo Freire, Louise Rosenblatt, James Paul Gee, and Maryanne Wolf has challenged me to reconsider what it means to read critically and how instructors can create opportunities for deeper engagement. These perspectives have helped me recognize that reading is not simply about understanding the information presented on a page. It involves making connections, asking questions, interpreting language, and sometimes reconsidering what we initially believed. This understanding has become increasingly important to my teaching philosophy because I want my students to recognize that their experiences and knowledge have a place in academic conversations. They have a voice in my class, and their perspectives and experiences can help them develop their skills as writers, readers, and researchers.

Looking back at the three artifacts I selected for this portfolio, I can see how each course contributed to my development as an instructor and scholar in different ways. In ENGL 6320, my project *Making English Fun Again* reminded me how important student choice, purpose, and audience are when it comes to making writing meaningful. Seeing my own students become more interested in writing when they had the freedom to explore topics that mattered to them was especially rewarding. My coursework in U.S. Southwest Borderlands challenged me to think more critically about the educational inequalities

Indigenous communities face, particularly how language, cultural identity, and economic circumstances can influence educational opportunities. In my Chicana/o Studies course, analyzing Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* encouraged me to consider how literature and film can help us examine issues such as immigration, labor exploitation, technology, and cultural identity. Although these projects approached different subjects, each one reminded me that learning does not happen separately from the experiences and circumstances people bring with them.

My portfolio project, A Walk in Their Shoes? – Using a Biographical Lens to Promote Deep Reading, Cultural Connection, and Engagement in First-Year Writing, represents an important part of my academic development. Through my examination of David Bowles's The Smoking Mirror, I explored how learning about an author's cultural background and lived experiences might encourage students to develop more thoughtful interpretations of literature. What began as an interest in making reading more engaging eventually developed into a larger investigation of how cultural recognition, contextual research, and close reading can work together. Developing this project also challenged me to move beyond discussing educational theories and consider how I might translate those ideas into meaningful classroom activities.

Another important part of this experience has been developing greater confidence in my ability to participate in academic conversations. Graduate-level research and writing have challenged me to read unfamiliar scholarship, evaluate different perspectives, and develop arguments supported by evidence. I have learned that being a scholar does not necessarily

mean having all the answers and that is ok (which I often share with my students). Sometimes, it means being willing to ask questions, acknowledge what we do not understand, and remain open to changing our interpretations. This is something I hope to continue practicing in my own academic work and modeling for my students.

As I prepare to complete my MAIS degree, I am also looking forward to expanding my teaching experiences. In Spring 2027, I will be teaching a bilingual English/Spanish Rhetoric and Composition II course, an opportunity that connects closely with my growing interest in culturally and linguistically responsive instruction. I see this as another opportunity to consider how students' language practices and cultural knowledge can contribute to their development as readers, writers, and critical thinkers. While I recognize that I still have much to learn, I am excited about the possibilities of incorporating what I have explored throughout my graduate studies into my future teaching.

One of my biggest takeaways from these courses is the importance of being more intentional about the choices I make as an educator. Whether I am developing a writing assignment, selecting a reading, or encouraging students to consider perspectives different from their own, I want to create opportunities for them to recognize how their experiences connect to what they are learning. These courses have also reminded me that I need to continue questioning my own assumptions and remain open to approaches that may better serve my students. As I move forward in my teaching and academic work, I hope to continue bringing together what I have learned about literacy, culture, and the importance of understanding the experiences of others.

Looking ahead, I hope to pursue a Ph.D. in English and continue exploring questions related to literacy, composition, and student engagement. Although my research interests are still developing, this program has helped me identify the kinds of questions I find meaningful and the academic conversations I want to continue contributing to. It has also reminded me that my development as an instructor and scholar is an ongoing process.

Ultimately, my MAIS experience has been about more than completing a graduate degree. It has provided me with opportunities to reflect on my teaching practices, challenge my assumptions, and recognize the connections between research and the classroom. I began this journey wanting to become a better educator, and while I believe I have grown in that direction, I also recognize that becoming an effective instructor requires continued learning, reflection, and a willingness to make changes. If there is one thing I will carry forward from this experience, it is the understanding that meaningful learning does not end when we complete an assignment, a course, or even a degree. Instead, it continues through the questions we ask, the experiences we encounter, and our willingness to keep learning. Never stop learning.

Artifact 1

ENGL 6320 - Rhetoric, Comp, Literacy

Making English Fun Again



Down but Not Out

Educators have such a responsibility to their students, their place of employment, and themselves, so much so that it can weigh heavily on their minds and hearts in the pedagogy and strategies that apply to any given class. Upon the start of teaching English 1301 to college students, I was deeply saddened by the lack of interest many of them had in reading and writing. The students' strong aversion towards English and all its components, left me astounded. Admittedly, it was a bit discouraging to connect with students who were not enthusiastic about these essential skills, especially considering that reading and writing are integral parts of their college curriculum. Reading through the students' pre-course reflections, which is aimed to allow them to reflect on past experiences in reading and writing, it became clear to me that their previous educational experiences had stripped away the joy of reading and writing. Based on their reflections,

students had grown to view English class as a collection of tasks to be completed, “most students need to write paragraphs, compositions, argumentative essays and reports for coursework and for exams.” (Dragomir, 2020). Students have learned to write to the test, so to speak, rather than viewing writing as learning opportunities in a rhetorical sense with skills that solidify a foundation for their further college writing endeavors. Feeling a bit defeated, I turned to Kelly Gallagher’s Teaching Adolescent Writers for guidance and inspiration and the answer to my questions, how could I assist students in gaining interest in reading and writing after the interest had left? As well as what approaches could I incorporate to achieve the goal of changing the mindsets of students to make English fun again?

Golden Assistance from A Distinguished Educator/Author

Kelly Gallagher is a well-known author in the literacy education world. He is not only an author of books but also a teacher, coach, and public speaker - he is recognized as one of the most prominent figures within his area of expertise. His background in teaching gives him firsthand knowledge of the experiences he writes about with students.

In *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, Kelly Gallagher (2006) explains how to teach writing to middle and high school students effectively. The book focuses on strategies to help young writers develop their skills, confidence, and voice. Gallagher stresses the importance of teaching writing as a process involving prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The book entails seven chapters in which he thoroughly addresses a variety of

everyday struggles that many students and educators share, as well as strategies to assist in overcoming those struggles. Below is the breakdown of the chapter titles and themes:

Chapter 1: *Running with the Literacy Stampede* -

Addressing writer's struggles and challenges are identified as well as methods to overcome them, such as writer's block, lack of engagement, and fear of failure.

Chapter 2: *Overcoming "The Neglected 'R': Establishing a Time and a Place to Write* -

The emphasis is given to creating a classroom environment where students feel safe expressing their ideas, sharing their work, and providing constructive feedback to peers.

Chapter 3: *Beyond the Grecian Urn: The Teacher as a Writing Model* -

Integrating well-written examples from professional writers, such as teachers and mentors, to demonstrate effective writing techniques.

Chapter 4: *Elevating Student Writing: Using Real-World Models*

Advocating for assignments that are meaningful and relevant to students' lives, encouraging authentic writing tasks like letters, blogs, and editorials.

Chapter 5: *Beyond Fake Writing: The Power of Choice*

Exploration of choice in writing with options, helps students feel more connected to their work. Discussion on specific ways to successfully incorporate choice in writing assignments.

Chapter 6: *The Importance of Purpose and Audience*

Discussion of the concept that students become better writers when they know why they are writing and when they are writing for real people. Techniques are shared to help students understand why they are writing and how to inspire them by creating writing tasks where they write for people other than just their teacher.

Chapter 7: *Using Assessment to Drive Better Student Writing*

Advice on how to give constructive feedback and evaluate student writing in a way that encourages improvement in writing, instead of just giving grades.

To suggest that *Teaching Adolescent Writers* is a most useful resource for educators is an understatement. Kelly Gallagher seeks to inspire and empower educators with the knowledge to build up young writers while improving their literacy skills.

All the Way Up

One of the things I focused on was in Chapter 5, "Beyond Fake Writing: The Power of Choice." Gallagher emphasizes how giving students the freedom to choose their own writing topics is essential. “If we are to be successful in getting our students to turn the corner as writers, we must put them in a position to see that writing is much more than a school-oriented hoop to jump through to reach graduation. For literate adults, writing is one of life’s staples.” (Gallagher, 2006), but this is no easy task. Most students are accustomed to being given a topic with said criteria, and they produce the writing

assignment. However, giving the students a choice in writing topics was daunting because they were forced to think carefully and critically about the topic and their rhetorical choices. Applying this strategy of choice was fun but challenging because most students did not know where to start - - they had never been given the freedom to write about something that interested them. The project was for students to think of a community group/business that they would like to make aware to the public. They would have to write an article highlighting the group or establishment and must pertain information that could not be found on Google or Yelp, for example, a backstory of the community group/business and/or how they contribute to the community. They would also have to create a rhetorically sound flyer. Pictured below is an example of work that demonstrates the work students can create when given the freedom to choice. This student chose to highlight the public library's Teen Program, where she directed her rhetorical choices to her peers as her audience.

Harlingen Public Library

Teen Program



Maggie Caballero

11.26.24

English 1301

T.A.G

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Let's Take A Look

Whether you have visited the Harlingen Public Library to check out a good book or catch up on schoolwork, you may have seen the Teen Room in the back of the library, While the Teen Room can get lost behind the many rows of shelves lining the library floors, it is nothing to miss out on. As the home to the Teen Program, the Teen Room is filled with interesting books with genres suitable for all teens, computers to relax and browse the web, or catch up on homework, and most importantly T.A.G or the Teen Advisory Program. This program is designed to give teens much-needed opportunities and skills that can leave a lasting impression and be beneficial throughout their lives. As teens navigate the world before them, the foundation they create for themselves in their youth will play a crucial role in their development as adults.

Straight To The Point

So you may be wondering, "What's in it for me?" For a busy teen, another obligation outside of school can seem like an added hassle but the Teen Program is meant to aid students and be readily available to teens throughout the community. Ultimately, the Teen Program seeks to broaden the range of skills and experiences of teens while allowing them to give back and connect with fellow teens in their community. When you join the Teen Program you are not only furthering your academics but building new relationships with others your age and being an active part of your community.

All The Facets

So what does the Teen Program community look like? As stated in the Teen Programs name, you will be surrounked by teens from all walks of life. This program is designed with teen socialization at the forefront and provides many opportunities for teens to become acquainted with new people. One of the amazing individuals you will see visiting the Teen Room often is Eva Belicke, the Teen Program advisor. Mrs. Belicke takes on the role of managing all activities, meetings, and events that take place in the program as well as signing off on teen volunteer hours. Not only are teens needed to allow the program as run smoothly, but also incredible people such as Mrs. Belicke, who make the program flourish. One major element included within the program is the Teen Room where most if not all the monthly activities are held for teens (Fig. 1). Some activities include Teen Video Game Day, where teens can enjoy snacks while playing on the Nintendo Switch against their friends or they can get creative and pick up new hobbies such as crocheting. When activities aren't being held or if you would rather use your time to relax, the Teen Room becomes a space that you can simply use to study on the computers or pick up a good book (Fig. 2).

(Assignment: Community Group Profile & Flyer – Harlingen Public Library, Teen Program)

Interestingly, not one single student had the same topic. Gallagher points out that not only does “choice foster a feeling of ownership in the writer”, but also “choice drives better revision”, students no longer dread revision or feedback, but they want to improve their masterpieces. (Gallagher, 2006)

All submissions were different and creative in their own way. The feedback I received from the students on the assignment was that this was one of the most enjoyable ways of incorporating writing and an interest they wanted to write about and share with their peers, the public, and me.

This leads me to my other focus, Chapter 6, The Importance of Purpose and Audience; through this chapter, Gallagher highlights the strategies students can use in their writing to display their abilities that reach an audience beyond their teacher, which they do not typically think of. Again, much like coming up with their own idea for their topic of writing, wrapping their minds around the idea that their peers could potentially be their audience or their parents was a new concept to them. In the project, shown above (Community Group Profile & Flyer), students were asked to make rhetorical choices in their articles and flyers, keeping their audience in mind. Word choices, font styles, colors, images were all aspects that were considered and identified as effectively considering their audience in every decision. As suggested by Sa’adah, “The writing skill is not automatically mastered by English learners, since it needs a long process and a really hard work to have this skill.”, which students would agree with.

Learning Never Stops and Writing CAN be Fun

After integrating a couple of Gallagher's approaches to lessons in my class, the shift in morale was mutually felt. Students were much more vocal and seemed happier, which was important to me. Creating a comfortable space where students have the creative freedom of writing "expressing their ideals, thoughts, and fears regarding their academic and personal lives was essential for the mental health of students", according to Zell et al. (2021). Being an educator is not always easy, "… a composition instructor plans, monitors, evaluates, and reevaluates their teaching practices and figures out the strengths and weaknesses of his or her teaching." (Ahmadi, 2024) Acknowledging and adapting is key to teaching, which I quickly learned.

By engaging in a text that was not necessarily aimed at teaching first-year college writers, but rather adolescent writers, as educators, it serves as a reminder that sometimes getting back to the basics is what is most needed. Incorporating fun activities that allow students the space to think critically, make rhetorical decisions, and fully grasp the idea of the writing process is what my first-year college writers needed. Adapting to Gallagher's approach and strategies benefited my students tremendously.

Kelly Gallagher is not just an author, but a true teacher with a wealth of knowledge embedded into every single page of his book, and the proof is in the strategies suggested. Without a doubt, this will continue to be a staple in my lessons because it is our responsibility as educators to step in and act when students might be a bit out of touch;

“new knowledge is integrated with prior knowledge” (Meyers et al., 2024). When students enjoy what they are writing about, they no longer see the assignment as just a means to get a good grade, but rather they are enjoying the process of learning, exploring, researching, and guess what, writing too!

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Artifact 2

MASC 6390 – Special Topic: U.S.-Southwest Borderlands

An Analytical Perspective on Indigenous Education and Border Dynamics

Introduction

Indigenous education in the US-Mexico borderland faces a unique balance between obstacles and opportunities influenced by a myriad of variables. The material obstacles imposed by the borderline itself constitutes obstacles. Hardships that restrict access to services and educational opportunities are the cause of economic disparity, traditional differences, as well as continuing historical inequalities, which further complicate the educational situation of Indigenous populations as this analytical perspective aims to explore.

Multinational agility is an important aspect of life for Indigenous peoples in borderland districts, as they are guided by a variety of public standards, languages, and education systems. The current changeless movement in the midst of traditions requires flexibility and resilience, as the Indigenous student must adapt to the usual ways of life with the expectations of traditional teaching. The financial disparity within the boundaries of the boundary lines has exacerbated the gap between studies on Indigenous societies, continuing poverty, and marginalization. Insufficient infrastructure, restricted materials, and unequal investment only exacerbate the educational inequalities experienced by these communities. The traditional variation has different layers of complexity, as autonomous students are trying to preserve their heritage while trying to achieve educational success.

Despite the numerous roadblocks, Indigenous communities in borderland areas show extraordinary resilience and resolve in their efforts to study. Casteneda-Perez highlights one of

their needs as “pursuing a life-long project to attain upward social mobility by getting access to better economic or educational opportunities in the U.S” (p. 2). Scholars such as Sergio Chavez and Oscar Martinez provide invaluable insights into the lives of people who overcome these obstacles. Through their narrative, we gain a better understanding of the systemic challenges affecting autonomous studies in borderland and the robustness of their efforts to overcome obstacles. We gain a profound understanding of the complexities encountered by the Indigenous people by exploring the intricate intersection between guidance and boundary activities. The hardships and victories experienced by this group of people in borderland areas reveal the wide social concerns affecting their opportunities. We can contribute to the approval and development of every person living in a borderless area by recognizing this world and being active in a more diverse and impartial education system.

Structural Barriers in Indigenous Education

One of the significant obstacles faced by Indigenous students in border communities is the systemic inequality deeply rooted in educational institutions. The challenges that immigrant students experienced upon their initial migration to borderlands continue to persist today. Chavez (2016) examines the economic instability and transnational lifestyle of border commuters, emphasizing how frequent border crossings disrupt the educational consistency of Indigenous students. In *Border Lives: Fronterizos, Transnational Migrants, and Commuters in Tijuana*, Chavez recounts an interview he conducted with Fidel Ramos, “By the time Fidel was thirteen years old, he had already migrated twice with friends and considered himself a seasoned migrant (p. 66)”.

Furthermore, Martinez (1994) classifies individuals in border regions into various groups, highlighting how Indigenous migrants often fall into the economically disadvantaged category, further restricting their access to quality education. In *Border People, Part II: Border Types*, Martinez employs distinctions to distinguish the various groups, "Among the variables that determine whether borderlanders are national or transnational and where they fit within each of those broad categories, are ties with interior areas, occupation, sources of income, level of education, family networks, and social relationships (p. 60)."

As the descendants of Indigenous communities seek out improved economic opportunities, often resulting in a stagnation of intellectual growth and a lack of support leading to lower rates of student retention and graduation, many multinational life studies highlight the tendency of Indigenous children to transfer between educational institutions in pursuit of better financial prospects. This phenomenon is compounded by language barriers, with challenges arising from the need to navigate both Spanish and native languages, further complicating the educational journey for indigenous students. The absence of bilingual resources in many academic settings exacerbates these difficulties, exacerbating the linguistic and social challenges faced by these students. Regrettably, these hurdles persist within our institution, underscoring the ongoing challenges that Indigenous students encounter in accessing a high-quality education that meets their needs and supports their academic success.

Cultural Identity and Educational Outcomes

The issue of continuing Indigenous societal distinctiveness within the limits of the residual training system is of paramount importance. Chavez's personal investigation revealed the social assimilation coerced experienced by many border communities, which resulted in the

decline of Indigenous languages and traditions. This cultural corrosion is particularly harmful to Indigenous students who attend borderland schools since they often fight alongside a course of study that disregards their common heritage. Therefore, those students frequently experience detachment and low intellectual performance. Not to mention the lack of acknowledgment of language barriers by educators and those facilitating their education.

Furthermore, Martinez stresses the psychological and social obstacles faced by Indigenous students in borderland districts. His analysis classifies borderlanders and stresses that Indigenous students are often relegated to marginalized collectives, subjected to intolerance and communal rejection within the educational environment. The above components contribute to the continuation of educational disparity and hinder prospects of upward mobility for Indigenous youth. To guarantee the academic success and social stability of the autonomous student in the educational system, it is clear that overcoming these obstacles is of vital importance.

Economic Constraints and Educational Access

Financial volatility is significantly affecting the educational journey of the Indigenous student, as highlighted by Chavez (2016), who lightens the way that economic stresses drive several people populating beside the borderline toward participation in multinational commutation to protected job opportunities. This monetary uncertainty directly impedes the access of juveniles to education, as several autochthonous households rely on infant labor as a means of increasing their household income. Moreover, the enormous costs associated with education, including education costs and transportation costs, add to the obstacles faced by autochthonous clans, making traditional education a less viable option for many.

Martinez (1994) furthermore supports this statement by demonstrating how economic adversity forces many borderland inhabitants to be after employment in informal labor markets centers, which regularly fail to provide crucial financial stability to support further education. The Indigenous student, in particular, is confronted with the intertwined difficulties of economic marginalization and traditional withdrawal, which hinders their ability to achieve scholarly success.

Policy Implications and Potential Solutions

To overcome the obstacles faced by autochthonous students who reside in borderland towns, the introduction of policy intervention intended to achieve educational equity plays a key role. A bilingual and socially diverse curriculum, including autochthonous narratives and languages, is important to enable students to critically interact with their learning adventures. Scholars like Chavez (2016) and Martinez (1994) have pointed out the need for a policy response that takes into account the unique socioeconomic and social context of people living in borderlands. By recognizing and matching these explicit destinations, educational efforts may better serve the needs of autonomous students, eventually promoting an overly comprehensive and impartial learning environment. The obstacles to intellectual victory can be properly balanced, owing to improved information results and better prospects for Indigenous citizens in borderland areas through targeted interventions.

Moreover, aid for economic recovery schemes, such as scholarships and subsidized housing, may help alleviate the financial distress suffered by Indigenous households. By increasing cross-border education programs that allow Indigenous students to access materials simultaneously on both sides of Mexico-U.S. Towards the borderlands, we can support some of

the movement and uncertainty challenges that are common obstacles to their scientific development.

In fact, recommendations for the introduction of a variety of study paths and increased monetary aid would show a commitment to dealing with the educational inequalities experienced by Indigenous students in borderland areas. Recognition of the importance of traditional sensitivity and financial support can be used to create increasingly accessible and nurturing training conditions that will enable Indigenous youths to flourish.

Conclusion

Indigenous learning in borderlands is shaped by a delicate interplay between money, society, and civic elements. As Perez, Chavez, and Martinez illustrate, the multiethnic world of borderlife poses significant obstacles to information access and success for Indigenous students. A multilateral approach including policy changes, society interaction, and traditional flexible teaching frameworks is needed to deal with these challenges. Acknowledging and addressing these organizational inequalities is a prerequisite for the establishment of an educational environment that empowers Indigenous students and preserves their ethnic heritage while providing them with purposeful opportunities for socioeconomic development.

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Artifact 3

MASC 6390 – 90L Special Topics in Chicana/o Studies

Reimagining Alex Rivera's "Sleep Dealer" – Conference Paper

Since the 1600's, immigrant workers have played an essential role in shaping the fabric of society, with their contributions spanning various industries such as agriculture, construction, and hospitality. These immigrant workers often leave their home countries in search for better opportunities, fueling economic growth and cultural diversity in their adopted nations. Despite facing challenges such as language barriers and discrimination, they continue to make invaluable contributions to the workforce, enriching the social tapestry of the communities they reside in.

"Historically, most Mexicans have been economic immigrants seeking to improve their lives. In moments of civil strife, such as the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) and the Cristero Revolt (1926–1929), many fled to the United States to escape religious and political persecution" (Gutierrez, 2019). It has been no secret that cheap labor was and has been the drive behind the motivation to exploit other human beings for the wealthy's personal gain (Collin, 1996).

Despite the prevailing beliefs among many, it is important to note that the passage of time into the future will not change certain underlying realities. Specifically, the demand for inexpensive labor will persist even as technology advances. This means that immigrants, who are often vulnerable to exploitation and outsourcing, will unfortunately continue to face these challenges.

Alex Rivera, a talented filmmaker known for seamlessly weaving together Latinxfuturism elements through cultural lens his film incorporates realism, science-fiction, horror, and fantasy. His works explore the complex and timely issue of cheap labor outsourcing to immigrants through his thought-provoking filmography. By creatively blending these genres, Alex Rivera sheds light on the dark underbelly of society and explores how these societal issues persist across time and space, even in futuristic settings.

Through his provocative and captivating narratives, Rivera challenges viewers to consider the lasting impact of historical injustices on the present and future, reminding us that the past will always exert a powerful influence on the trajectory of humanity, even in the face of rapid technological advancement. By analyzing this film through the lens of Latinxfuturism, we gain valuable insights into how Rivera uses speculative fiction as a tool for examining the intricacies of Latinx identity in an ever-evolving global landscape (Taylor, 263).

My argument in this presentation will assert that no matter how advanced technology becomes, the underlying societal structures and historical foundations will always play a crucial role in shaping our future trajectory, our past is very much present in the future.

The dystopian future portrayed in Alex Rivera's "Sleep Dealer" unfolds in a small border village, Santa Ana del Rio, located near the region of Oaxaca, Mexico. It is a dry dessert with no running water, with makeshift homes. The people of this town are hardworking, simple people with the ideals of maintaining their cultural ways despite the evolving world around them.

Thus they not only battle with the changes in the times, but also battle with the harsh reality of water scarcity, an extreme situation that has been heightened by the damming of their once-lifegiving river. As a result, the people are now forced to undertake treacherous journeys to purchase water, a precious resource now strictly controlled by an oppressive government, that is ready to use all force necessary to protect the water at all costs.

Alex Rivera, carefully portrays a surreal world where age-old traditions clash with modern tyranny, his characters though set in the future setting seem to still connect and explore the horror behind the present-day social issues. Though presently the government does not hold control over the ability to obtain water through various sources, as occupants of a home, establishment, and/or business there is a fee that must be paid to get the water source connected and received on a monthly basis.

“Along with concern about protecting individual rights to a clean safe water supply, there is concern about the ability of national water resources to meet all our community’s needs, without unacceptable environmental damage” (Middleton, 1997). The setting serves as a powerful platform for the film's societal commentary, prompting viewers to reflect and feel the delicate balance between survival and autonomy in a society where the basic necessities of life are ruthlessly regulated.

Though taking place in the future, our present, which is their past, is very much part of the future. Notably, in "Sleep Dealer," the elements of realism with sci-fi, horror, and fantasy are intricately detailed in the film's setting.

Locals of the land are exploited as cheap labor in the construction of a massive virtual reality network. With the intention of making things right after tragedy strikes home, Rivera's main character ventures out his comfort zone near the border to face the realities of the futuristic world that he had longed to explore.

Rivera seamlessly weaves fantastical elements throughout the storyline, challenging the conventional boundaries of realism. In his relentless pursuit of discovery and innovation, Rivera's character embarks on a journey of exploration that eventually leads him to uncover a groundbreaking technology that had already begun the exploitation of labor workers.

This newfound technological advancement holds the potential to not only revolutionize industries but also serve as an impulse for realizing the American Dream, a concept rooted in the belief that anyone can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination, which is often seen as a beacon of hope for many individuals especially those wanting to cross the border into the United States in search of a better life.

In search of the connection to entertaining the technology that has overtaken those around him, he sets out to find a way to integrate himself into the technology. The core basis of the movie surrounds the intriguing concept of "sleep dealers," individuals who intricately link their nervous systems to a worldwide network.

He himself enters a factory of some sorts, beginning his part of being one with the machinery as many around him already connected. Here, surrounded by the constant hum of technology, he connects his body to the Internet through a series of intricate wires and

sensors, a process that allows him to send his labor far away, all the way to a robot in America.

Despite being physically present in Mexico, his actions and efforts are now being carried out in a different country, a surreal disconnection between his body and his work. In this peculiar arrangement, he becomes embroiled in a new kind of privatization, one where his own physical self is commodified and controlled by the digital realm, blurring the boundaries between man and machine.

There is a common form of exploitation that takes place within the framework of our current economic system. Specifically, within the labor dynamics of capitalism, and more prominently within the experiences of undocumented individuals working within this system, there exists a parallel process of exploitation that centers around the control and manipulation of their labor and physical well-being. And this is not a new concept, historically this has been happening for ages.

Additionally, Alex Rivera enhances the sci-fi and fantasy elements in his work by illustrating a futuristic society where individuals participate in the lucrative trade of selling their memories and life experiences to interested buyers. This concept of commercializing personal memories adds depth to the exploration of themes related to identity, privacy, and the impact of technology on human relationships.

Often depicted in horror narratives, the loss of identity emphasizes the characters' powerlessness and vulnerability as they are confronted with the sinister consequences of advanced technology.

Continuing his thought-provoking storytelling and creative world-building, Rivera presents a vivid and engaging depiction of a world where memories have become a commodity. This innovative concept blurs the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary, as characters gain the ability to immerse themselves in the recollections of others as if they were their own.

Through this revolutionary technology, Rivera explores profound themes of self-identity, the power of memory, and the profound repercussions of existing in a society where every facet of our existence is interconnected within a sprawling digital realm.

However, the threat behind advanced technology is grim and is very much present in the movie as the dangers of being connected are brought forth in getting lost in the connective space where the transfer of energy is given but also in means of the possibility of other dangers within the internet.

“Awareness, cultural shifts, technological advancements, inter-continental collaboration, and a steadfast commitment to ethical considerations are the pillars upon which a more secure future rest. This comprehensive exploration serves as a compass, guiding everyone through the complex maze of cybersecurity in a world where yesterday’s solutions may not suffice for tomorrow’s threats” (Bhortake).

Though taking place in the future, our present, which is their past, is very much part of the future, as the events and decisions made in our current time will have a significant impact. They set the stage for the opportunities and challenges that will inevitably arise along the way.

In addition to blending genres and realism, Alex Rivera also intertwines the human element throughout the entirety of the movie. The film resonates with various audiences on an emotional level due to its portrayal of a heartfelt story that addresses genuine societal issues.

These themes are exemplified by the main character's father reflecting on past struggles while also shedding light on present challenges and those that may arise in the future that ends up unfolding as the story progresses.

Dealing with the emotional weight of grief, fear, and loneliness, Alex Rivera's main character learns valuable lessons about the importance of family, forgiveness, and the healing power of reconciliation.

As the plot unfolds, the audience is completely captivated by the unexpected romantic developments between the main characters. With each scene, they become further invested in the budding relationship and contemplate the potential future of this newfound love interest.

The subtle gestures and meaningful conversations between the characters draw the audience in, leaving them eagerly anticipating what lies ahead for this blossoming romance. It is through these elements that Alex Rivera does not shy from the norms of society but embraces the here and now while exploring the future.

Through this approach, Rivera creates a complex narrative that makes the audience connect with the characters deeper and more profound level. With pressing concerns of

the present day and potentially grim realities for the future - adding depth and complexity to the narrative truly allows the audience to view how the past can reflect the future.

In "Sleep Dealer," Alex Rivera skillfully navigates through various genres and styles, effectively blending elements of realism, sci-fi horror, and fantasy to craft a richly layered and thought-provoking narrative.

By examining themes of globalization, technology, and human experiences, Rivera forces viewers to confront the implications of our growing interconnectedness in a globalized world. With meticulous attention to detail and a keen eye for storytelling, Rivera creates a cinematic experience that not only entertains but also challenges the audience to reflect on the impact of technology on society and the nature of human connection.

Through his masterful direction and innovative storytelling techniques, Rivera establishes himself as a visionary filmmaker pushing the boundaries of traditional cinema.

The decisions made by past generations, whether in politics, economics, or culture, continue to exert influence on the path we are on today and will affect the choices we make in the years to come. Understanding these structures and foundations is key to navigating the complexities of our present and charting the course for a more equitable and sustainable future.

This depiction of a world plagued by environmental degradation and economic inequality is a stark reflection of our own society's struggles with these issues. By grounding the film in a familiar reality, Rivera is able to draw viewers in and make them confront uncomfortable truths about the world we live in.

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Revised Research Paper

ENGL 6357 – Young Adult Literature

Reflection

As I reflect on this project, I realize that what initially began as a concern about students' engagement with reading has developed into a much larger conversation about how I approach literacy instruction in my own classroom. As a first-year, full-time writing instructor, I often find myself questioning whether students are genuinely engaging with the readings I assign or simply completing them because they are required. I have noticed that students seem to perk up and tune in when they recognize something familiar in a reading. This project allowed me to explore why those connections matter and, more importantly, how I might use them to encourage students to read more deeply.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this project was revisiting the scholarship of Freire, Gee, Rosenblatt, and Wolf. Their perspectives challenged me to think about reading as more than comprehension or the ability to identify information within a text. I was particularly drawn to Rosenblatt's distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading because it made me reconsider my own reading experience with David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror*. Although I appreciated the novel's cultural significance, I sometimes found myself overwhelmed by the unfamiliar Mesoamerican mythology and focused more on understanding what was happening than enjoying the story. Interestingly, this experience made me think about my students and the challenges they encounter when reading unfamiliar texts. It also reminded me that struggling with a reading does not necessarily

mean a reader is disengaged. Sometimes, that struggle can become an opportunity for questioning, researching, and developing a deeper understanding.

What I found especially valuable was exploring how a biographical lens might help bridge the relationship between the reader, the author, and the text. Learning about Bowles's background and cultural influences encouraged me to reconsider certain passages and recognize details I might otherwise have overlooked. However, I also came to understand the importance of not allowing an author's biography to determine the meaning of a literary work. This distinction is something I would want my students to recognize as they develop their own interpretations. Research should help them ask better questions and examine evidence rather than simply search for what they believe is the correct answer.

Developing the classroom assignment was another important part of this process because it challenged me to move beyond theory and consider how these ideas might actually work in my ENGL 1301 classroom. I wanted to create an activity that builds on practices students are already familiar with, including annotation, research, discussion, and reflection, while encouraging them to revisit their initial interpretations. I also recognize that cultural familiarity alone will not guarantee engagement, and I cannot assume that all students will connect with the same aspects of a text. What matters is creating opportunities for students to bring their own knowledge into the conversation while remaining open to unfamiliar perspectives.

Ultimately, this project has encouraged me to become more intentional about how I teach reading. I do not want students to view reading as something they complete before

beginning the real work of writing. Instead, I want them to recognize reading as an ongoing process of questioning, interpreting, researching, and reconsidering ideas. While I have yet to implement this particular approach, I am interested in seeing whether it encourages students to become more invested in their reading and more confident in developing their own interpretations. Perhaps my biggest takeaway is that meaningful reading does not always begin with understanding everything in a text. Sometimes, it begins with recognizing what we do not understand and being willing to investigate further.

Revised Research Paper

A Walk in Their Shoes? - Using a Biographical Lens to Promote Deep Reading, Cultural Connection, and Engagement in First-Year Writing

I. Introduction: When Students Can See Themselves in What They Read

As a first-year writing instructor, one of the challenges I continue to encounter is getting students to engage meaningfully with assigned readings. Many students enter the classroom already expecting academic reading to be difficult, uninteresting, or simply another assignment they need to complete. I have noticed that students sometimes approach reading with the goal of finishing rather than understanding, questioning, or connecting with what they have read. However, I do not necessarily see this as an indication that students lack the ability to read critically. Instead, I have begun to question how we, as instructors, can create opportunities for students to become more invested in the texts we ask them to read.

Through my experiences teaching first-year writing, I have noticed that students tend to become more interested in assigned readings when they recognize something familiar within the text. Sometimes, that connection comes from the lifestyle or experiences being described, the language or slang an author uses, or even the mention of a particular location students recognize. These moments may seem small, but I have observed how they can change the way students respond to a reading. Students appear more intrigued and willing to engage with the content when they can relate it to something they already know or have experienced. This has led me to think more critically about the role personal and cultural connections play in reading engagement. Rather than viewing students lived experiences as separate from academic reading, I believe these connections can serve as starting points for deeper interpretation, discussion, and inquiry.

This concern is particularly relevant in first-year writing courses, where must learn to analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, recognize rhetorical choices, and develop their own interpreta.0tions. Reading becomes an essential part of learning how to write academically. Yet, if students view reading as disconnected from their lives, they may struggle to recognize its purpose beyond completing an assignment. This raises an important pedagogical question: How can instructors help students understand that their own cultural, linguistic, and lived experiences are valuable resources for engaging with academic and literary texts?

One possible approach is to introduce students to the experiences of the writers whose works they encounter. A biographical approach encourages readers to consider how an

author's cultural background, language, community, and lived experiences may have influenced the creation of a text. Rather than examining a literary work in isolation, students investigate the relationship between the author and the world in which the work was produced. This approach does not suggest that an author's biography determines the meaning of a text. Instead, biographical research can provide additional context that allows readers to develop questions, challenge assumptions, and support interpretations through evidence.

David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror* offers a productive opportunity to explore this approach. Drawing on Mesoamerican and Indigenous mythology, Mexican American cultural experiences, and questions of identity and belonging, the novel presents a narrative that can encourage readers to consider relationships among language, culture, heritage, and storytelling. Bowles's connections to South Texas and his work as a writer, educator, translator, and folklorist provide opportunities for students to investigate how an author's cultural and linguistic experiences may inform literary choices. For students familiar with South Texas or Mexican American cultural traditions, aspects of the novel may feel recognizable. For other students, the text may provide an opportunity to encounter experiences and perspectives different from their own. In either case, these connections can become starting points for deeper reading and inquiry.

This project draws on several theoretical perspectives to examine the relationship between reading, experience, and meaning making. Paulo Freire's understanding of reading the word and the world provides a foundation for considering how lived experiences influence

literacy. James Paul Gee's work on situated language emphasizes the social and cultural contexts through which readers construct meaning, while Louise Rosenblatt's reader-response theory highlights the active role readers play in interpreting texts. Maryanne Wolf's discussion on deep reading adds another dimension to the relationship between reading and lived experience. Rudine Sims Bishop's discussion of literature as mirrors and windows, along with Luz Yadira Herrera and Carla España's work on translanguaging pedagogy, further supports the importance of recognizing students' cultural and linguistic knowledge as resources for learning. Together, these perspectives offer a framework for considering how biographical research might encourage more meaningful engagement with reading.

Ultimately, I argue that students may become more invested in assigned reading when they recognize meaningful relationships among a text, an author's lived experiences, and their own cultural, linguistic, and personal knowledge. Using David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror* as a model, this project proposes that a biographical lens can function as a culturally responsive literacy practice in the first-year writing classroom. By connecting students' existing knowledge with biographical inquiry, textual analysis, and research, this approach seeks to move students beyond simply completing a reading assignment toward questioning, interpreting, and creating knowledge through reading and writing.

II. Review of Literature: What Does It Mean to Read Deeply?

Reading is an essential component of the first-year writing classroom, yet encouraging students to move beyond simply completing assigned readings remains a challenge. As instructors, we often ask students to read critically, analyze arguments, identify rhetorical

choices, and engage with unfamiliar perspectives. However, these expectations raise an important question: What does it actually mean for students to read deeply, and how can instructors help them develop that kind of engagement?

Literacy as Reading the Word and the World: Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire's "The Importance of the Act of Reading" provides an important foundation for understanding literacy as something that extends beyond the ability to decode written language. Freire argues that reading is closely connected to how individuals understand and interpret the world around them. He explains that "reading the world precedes reading the word" (5), suggesting that literacy begins with the experiences and knowledge individuals develop long before encountering written texts. Through their interactions with family, community, language, culture, and everyday life, individuals begin developing ways of interpreting meaning that later influence how they approach reading.

What I find particularly meaningful about Freire's perspective is his recognition that students do not arrive in educational spaces without knowledge. They already possess experiences that shape how they understand new information. In a first-year writing classroom, students bring different cultural backgrounds, linguistic practices, educational experiences, and assumptions that influence how they approach assigned readings. These experiences should not be viewed as obstacles to academic literacy but as resources that can contribute to the reading process.

I have observed this relationship between lived experience and reading in my own classroom. When students encounter a familiar expression, recognize a location mentioned in a reading, or relate to the lifestyle being described, they often seem more

interested in the text. Something that initially appeared unfamiliar or disconnected from their lives becomes more meaningful because they can connect it to knowledge they already possess. These moments have encouraged me to think about how reading instruction might begin with what students recognize and then guide them toward examining what they do not yet understand.

Freire also challenges the assumption that assigning more reading necessarily leads to greater understanding. Reflecting on educational practices that prioritize completing large amounts of reading, he describes situations in which texts were treated as material "to be devoured than truly read or studied" (9). His criticism resonates with my experiences teaching first-year writing, where students sometimes approach assigned readings as tasks they must finish rather than opportunities to investigate ideas. Although completing an assignment is important, finishing a reading does not necessarily mean that students have engaged with it critically or developed a meaningful understanding of its content.

Freire's discussion encourages me to reconsider what I want students to accomplish when I assign a reading. Rather than focusing primarily on whether students have completed the text, I want them to recognize how reading can help them question their assumptions, connect ideas, and develop new understandings. This distinction is especially important because recognizing a personal connection is not necessarily the same as engaging critically with a text. A student who recognizes a cultural tradition in a literary work might initially respond by sharing a similar experience from their own life. While that connection is valuable, deeper reading requires the student to investigate how the tradition functions

within the text, why the author may have included it, and what larger cultural or historical questions it raises.

This distinction is particularly relevant to my proposed biographical approach to David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror*. Freire's understanding of literacy suggests that both readers and writers encounter language through their experiences of the world. If students bring their own knowledge and experiences to a text, it is also worth considering the cultural, linguistic, and social contexts in which an author creates that text. Learning about Bowles's experiences as a South Texas writer can provide students with another perspective through which to investigate the novel.

Freire's work supports an approach that moves between the reader's world, the author's world, and the text itself. The goal is not simply for students to identify what feels familiar but to use those connections as opportunities to ask questions, develop interpretations, and engage more critically with what they read.

Reading as Situated Language: James Paul Gee

While Freire emphasizes the relationship between literacy and lived experience, James Paul Gee's "Reading as Situated Language: A Sociocognitive Perspective" provides a more detailed explanation of how language and meaning operate within social and cultural contexts. Gee challenges approaches to reading that focus primarily on individual cognitive skills without adequately considering the social environments in which language is learned and used. He argues that "reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening, and interacting" (714). This perspective emphasizes that reading is not an

isolated academic skill but part of a larger process through which individuals use language to participate in and make sense of the world.

An important aspect of Gee's argument is that language does not carry meaning independently of the situations in which it is used. He explains that "meaning in language is tied to people's experiences" (715). Readers draw on experiences, social knowledge, identities, and cultural expectations to interpret language. The same words or expressions may communicate different meanings depending on the context and the knowledge a reader brings to them. Gee's discussion of social languages and discourses is especially relevant because it demonstrates how language is connected to particular identities, activities, and ways of participating in the world.

This perspective helps explain something I have noticed in my own teaching. Students sometimes become more engaged with a reading when an author uses familiar language or slang. A particular expression may immediately capture their attention because they recognize how it is used within their own communities. However, another student reading the same passage may not recognize the expression or may interpret it differently. These differences are not necessarily evidence that one student is a stronger reader than another. Instead, they demonstrate how readers approach texts with different forms of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

In the first-year writing classroom, these differences can create opportunities for discussion and inquiry. Students can consider why certain language choices feel familiar to some readers but unfamiliar to others. They can also examine how language

communicates identity, establishes relationships, and reflects particular social or cultural contexts. This kind of analysis moves students beyond simply defining unfamiliar words and encourages them to investigate the rhetorical significance of language.

Gee's work is particularly useful when considering a text such as *The Smoking Mirror*. Bowles's incorporation of Mexican American cultural experiences and Mesoamerican mythology provides opportunities for students to investigate how cultural knowledge influences interpretation. Students familiar with traditions, expressions, or cultural references may recognize meanings that other readers initially overlook. At the same time, students who are unfamiliar with these references can develop their understanding through contextual research and discussion.

This does not mean that students who share aspects of an author's cultural background will automatically understand the text more accurately. Cultural experiences are not uniform, and readers within the same community may interpret a literary work differently. Instead, Gee's perspective encourages instructors to recognize the different resources students bring to reading while also helping them develop the knowledge necessary to interpret unfamiliar contexts.

For my proposed classroom approach, Gee's work strengthens the argument that understanding a text requires attention to the social and cultural worlds in which language operates. Biographical research can help students investigate some of those contexts by examining an author's linguistic practices, cultural experiences, and relationship to the

communities represented in a literary work. Students can then use this contextual knowledge alongside textual evidence to develop more informed interpretations.

Reader-Response Theory: Louise Rosenblatt

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading provides another important perspective for understanding the relationship between readers and texts. In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, Rosenblatt challenges the assumption that meaning exists entirely within a written text and is simply transferred to the reader. Instead, she emphasizes that meaning emerges through an active relationship between the reader and the text. As Rosenblatt explains, "The finding of meanings involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it" (14). This perspective recognizes that readers do not approach texts without prior knowledge or experiences. Rather, their memories, cultural backgrounds, emotions, and personal perspectives influence how they understand and interpret what they read.

Rosenblatt further explains that "The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality" (12). This statement is especially relevant to my experiences teaching first-year writing. I have noticed that students often become more interested in assigned readings when they encounter something familiar, whether it is a particular expression, a reference to a location they recognize, or a lifestyle similar to their own. These moments suggest that students are drawing on their existing knowledge and experiences to make sense of the text. Rosenblatt's theory helps me understand that these connections are not simply personal reactions separate from academic reading. Instead, they are part of the process through which readers begin constructing meaning.

What I find particularly valuable about Rosenblatt's work is that it encourages me to reconsider the role of students' initial responses during reading. In academic settings, students are frequently asked to identify main ideas, summarize arguments, locate evidence, or answer comprehension questions. While these activities are important, they can sometimes encourage students to approach reading primarily as a task of extracting information. Students may become focused on finding the correct answer or completing the assignment rather than considering their own responses to the text. Rosenblatt's theory suggests that those responses deserve attention because they reveal how students are engaging with the language and ideas presented.

Her distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading further develops this understanding. Efferent reading emphasizes what readers take away from a text, such as information, conclusions, or ideas they can use afterward. Aesthetic reading, in contrast, emphasizes the experience of reading itself, including the feelings, associations, and reflections that emerge during the encounter with the text. These two approaches are not necessarily competing activities. Instead, they represent different ways readers direct their attention. In first-year writing, students need opportunities to develop both, particularly when reading literary works that invite personal responses while also requiring careful analysis.

For example, a student reading David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror* might recognize a cultural reference or connect with a character's questions about identity and belonging. That initial recognition may encourage the student to become more interested in the

narrative. However, the instructional opportunity lies in helping the student move beyond recognizing something familiar and begin investigating its significance. Why did the author include this particular cultural reference? How does it contribute to the character's identity or the larger narrative? How might another reader interpret the same passage differently? These questions encourage students to revisit the text, examine specific details, and develop interpretations supported by evidence.

Rosenblatt's description of the literary work as something that comes into being through the interaction between reader and text reinforces this point. She writes that "'The poem' comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and 'the text'" (14). This understanding is important because it recognizes that reading is not a passive activity. Students actively participate in interpreting what they encounter, and their responses may develop or change as they acquire new information. In my proposed biographical approach, learning about Bowles's cultural and linguistic experiences would provide students with additional context that could influence how they understand the novel. However, this contextual knowledge would not establish one correct interpretation. Instead, it would encourage students to reconsider their initial responses and examine how their understanding changes through research.

When considered alongside Freire and Gee, Rosenblatt's theory provides a stronger explanation of why students' experiences matter during reading. Freire emphasizes the relationship between literacy and lived experience, while Gee explains how language and meaning are situated within social and cultural contexts. Rosenblatt extends these

perspectives by emphasizing the reader's active participation in constructing meaning. Together, their work suggests that reading involves an ongoing relationship among the reader's experiences, the language of the text, and the social and cultural contexts surrounding both.

For my project, Rosenblatt's transactional theory helps establish why a biographical lens may be valuable in the first-year writing classroom. By encouraging students to investigate the author's experiences while reflecting on their own responses, the approach creates opportunities for students to move between personal connection, contextual research, and textual interpretation. Ultimately, the goal is not simply for students to recognize themselves in what they read, but to use that recognition as a starting point for questioning, analyzing, and developing a deeper understanding of the text.

Deep Reading in a Digital Environment: Maryanne Wolf

While Freire, Gee, and Rosenblatt help explain how readers construct meaning through their experiences and interactions with texts, Maryanne Wolf's *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* raises an equally important question: Are readers developing the attention and patience necessary to engage deeply with what they read? Wolf examines how reading habits are influenced by digital environments, particularly when readers become accustomed to quickly moving between information, skimming content, and responding to constant distractions. Early in her book, Wolf argues that what individuals read, how they read, and why they read influence the ways they think (2). Rather than approaching her work as evidence of a general literacy crisis, I find it more useful to

consider what her research reveals about the cognitive processes involved in deep reading and how instructors might encourage students to develop these practices.

One of the concepts I find particularly relevant is what Wolf describes as "cognitive patience," or the willingness to devote sustained time and attention to reading. Wolf expresses concern that habits developed through frequent digital reading can influence how individuals approach longer and more demanding texts. She discusses the effects of digital distractions, including the tendency for readers to move quickly from one stimulus to another (70). When readers become accustomed to quickly locating information and responding to new information, they may find it increasingly difficult to slow down, reflect, and engage with complex ideas. This distinction is important because reading efficiently is not necessarily the same as reading deeply. Although skimming can be useful when searching for specific information, it does not always provide the attention needed to interpret an author's argument, examine unfamiliar perspectives, or consider the larger significance of a text.

Wolf's discussion of skimming is especially relevant to the first-year writing classroom, where students are often expected to engage with academic articles, research studies, and literary works that require sustained attention. Wolf examines patterns of digital reading, including the tendency for readers to follow an "F" or zigzag pattern when navigating information on screens (77). She further raises concerns about how habitual skimming may reduce the time readers devote to the slower processes involved in deep reading (83–84). These observations encourage me to think about the difference between students

completing an assigned reading and students taking the time to question, analyze, and reconsider what the text communicates. Students may successfully identify main ideas or locate information without necessarily developing a deeper understanding of what they have read.

What makes Wolf's argument especially meaningful to me is her emphasis on the cognitive processes that deep reading makes possible. These include inference, critical analysis, reflection, empathy, and the ability to consider perspectives beyond one's immediate experiences. Wolf's discussion suggests that deep reading provides opportunities for readers to develop insights and consider ideas that may not emerge through a more superficial encounter with a text. From this perspective, deep reading involves more than comprehension alone. It requires readers to make connections, examine assumptions, and remain open to interpretations that may challenge their existing knowledge.

In my own teaching, I have noticed that students sometimes approach assigned readings with the intention of completing the task rather than exploring the ideas presented. However, students who recognize particular cultural references may initially become interested because of their personal connections, while students unfamiliar with those references may become curious about their meanings. This observation has led me to consider whether personal and cultural connections might provide an opportunity to encourage the kind of sustained engagement Wolf associates with deep reading. The instructional opportunity lies in what happens after that initial recognition. Rather than allowing the connection to remain a brief moment of interest, instructors can encourage

students to slow down, return to the passage, and investigate why the detail matters. This might involve examining the author's language choices, researching the cultural or historical context, or considering how the reference contributes to the larger meaning of the text. This possibility is central to my proposed biographical approach to David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror*. The novel's incorporation of Mesoamerican mythology, cultural traditions, and questions of identity and belonging creates opportunities for students to encounter both familiar and unfamiliar experiences.

And although Wolf raises concerns about the influence of digital environments on reading habits, I do not believe her work requires instructors to reject digital reading or technology. Digital resources can also provide opportunities for students to investigate unfamiliar cultural references, access information about authors, and encounter different perspectives. The more important instructional question is how students use these resources and whether they are encouraged to move beyond quickly collecting information toward examining and interpreting what they discover.

Ultimately, Wolf's work helps clarify an important distinction within my approach. My goal is not simply to make assigned readings more interesting or relatable. Instead, I want to explore how meaningful personal and cultural connections might encourage students to invest the attention and intellectual effort necessary for deeper reading. When considered alongside Freire, Gee, and Rosenblatt, Wolf's discussion adds another dimension to the relationship between reading and lived experience. While the other scholars help explain how students construct meaning through their experiences, Wolf emphasizes the attention

and reflection necessary to develop that meaning more fully. Together, their perspectives support an instructional approach that begins with personal recognition but moves toward critical inquiry, research, and deeper interpretation.

Bringing the Theoretical Perspectives Together

Although Freire, Gee, Rosenblatt, and Wolf approach literacy from different perspectives, their work collectively challenges the idea that reading is simply the process of extracting information from written language. Freire emphasizes the relationship between literacy and lived experience. Gee demonstrates how language and meaning are shaped by social and cultural contexts. Rosenblatt explains the active role readers play in constructing meaning, while Wolf highlights the cognitive and reflective processes involved in deep reading.

Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for understanding why students' personal, cultural, and linguistic experiences deserve a place in the first-year writing classroom. Students do not approach assigned readings as individuals without prior knowledge. They bring experiences that influence what they notice, what they question, and how they interpret unfamiliar ideas. Recognizing these experiences does not mean that every interpretation is equally supported or that personal responses should replace academic analysis. Instead, it creates opportunities for students to examine their assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and develop interpretations grounded in evidence.

This theoretical framework also helps explain why I am interested in incorporating a biographical lens into reading instruction. If reading involves relationships among

language, experience, and context, then investigating an author's cultural and lived experiences may provide students with another way to engage critically with a text. The author's biography becomes an additional source of contextual evidence rather than a definitive explanation of literary meaning.

Using David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror*, I propose an instructional approach that begins with students' initial responses and encourages them to move toward deeper investigation. Students can identify what feels familiar or unfamiliar, examine how their experiences influence those responses, research the author's cultural and linguistic background, and return to the text with new questions. Through this process, reading becomes connected to the broader practices of inquiry, analysis, and research that are central to first-year writing.

Ultimately, the scholarship suggests that meaningful reading involves more than comprehension alone. It requires readers to connect existing knowledge with new ideas, remain attentive to language and context, and reconsider their interpretations through reflection and evidence. For my approach, these ideas establish the foundation for examining how culturally relevant literacy practices and biographical inquiry might help students move from personal recognition toward deeper reading and academic engagement.

III: Culturally Relevant Literacy - Mirrors, Windows, Language, and Identity

Literature as Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors: Rudine Sims Bishop

Rudine Sims Bishop's "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" provides an important framework for understanding the relationship between cultural representation and reading. Bishop explains that literature can function as a mirror, allowing readers to recognize

aspects of their own experiences and identities, or as a window, offering opportunities to encounter experiences different from their own. She also introduces the idea of sliding glass doors, through which readers can imaginatively enter the worlds represented in literature. As Bishop explains, "Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange" (ix). Her metaphor emphasizes that reading can provide opportunities for both recognition and discovery, allowing individuals to encounter experiences that reflect their lives while also introducing them to unfamiliar perspectives.

What I find particularly meaningful about Bishop's work is her recognition that literature can affirm readers' experiences and identities. Bishop describes reading as "a means of self-affirmation" (ix), suggesting that encountering aspects of one's own life in literature can help readers recognize their experiences as meaningful and worthy of representation. This idea connects closely to what I have observed in my first-year writing classroom. When students encounter familiar language, cultural references, or locations in assigned readings, they often appear more interested in the text. A particular expression or reference may encourage them to participate in discussion or share an experience that helps them connect with the reading. Although these moments may seem small, they have led me to consider how recognition can become a starting point for more meaningful engagement.

Bishop also emphasizes that the absence of representation can communicate powerful messages about whose experiences are valued. She explains that when children cannot find themselves reflected in literature, or when the representations they encounter are

distorted or negative, they may develop an understanding that their identities and experiences are not valued within society (x). Although Bishop's discussion focuses on children's literature, I believe her argument raises important questions for first-year writing instruction as well. Students entering college bring different cultural, linguistic, and educational experiences, yet academic reading can sometimes feel disconnected from the communities and identities that have shaped them. This does not mean that every assigned text must reflect students' personal experiences, but it does suggest that instructors should consider whose perspectives are represented and how those choices may influence students' opportunities to connect with what they read.

At the same time, Bishop reminds us that literature should not function only as a mirror. Windows are equally important because they provide opportunities for readers to encounter experiences and perspectives beyond their own. She warns that readers who encounter only reflections of themselves may develop an exaggerated sense of their own importance and a limited understanding of the larger world (x). This idea is especially relevant to first-year writing, where students are expected to question assumptions, consider different perspectives, and engage critically with unfamiliar ideas. Reading should not simply reinforce what students already know; it should also encourage them to expand their understanding.

For this reason, I do not want my proposed approach to suggest that students can only engage meaningfully with literature that reflects their own cultural backgrounds. Instead, I am interested in how both familiarity and unfamiliarity can become productive starting

points for reading. A student who recognizes a cultural reference might begin by explaining its significance based on personal experience, while another student encountering the same reference for the first time might begin by asking what it means, as mentioned previously. Both responses can contribute to a deeper understanding of the text when students are encouraged to investigate their interpretations and support them with evidence.

Another important aspect of Bishop's article is her attention to the relationship between language and cultural representation. She discusses how literature can reflect different varieties of spoken English and the ways language communicates the experiences of particular communities. Through examples of culturally specific storytelling, Bishop demonstrates how characters' voices contribute to their authenticity and identities. She observes that changing these voices to Standard English would diminish part of what makes the characters distinctive (xi). This point is particularly relevant to my experiences teaching in South Texas, where students may encounter and use different varieties of English, Spanish, and regional expressions in their everyday lives. When literature reflects these language practices, students may recognize forms of communication that are meaningful within their own communities.

Bishop's discussion of language also creates an opportunity to consider how students interpret unfamiliar expressions. Rather than treating language differences simply as vocabulary that must be translated or corrected, students can investigate how particular

expressions communicate cultural knowledge, establish relationships, and contribute to an author's representation of identity.

For some students familiar with South Texas or particular Mexican American cultural traditions, aspects of the novel may function as mirrors, reflecting experiences or knowledge they recognize. For students unfamiliar with those traditions, the same passages may function as windows into different cultural and historical perspectives. Importantly, a text may function as both a mirror and a window for the same reader, depending on the experiences and ideas being explored.

Bishop's framework also provides a useful connection to the biographical approach I am proposing. If literature can function as a mirror or window, then learning about the author offers another opportunity to investigate how those representations were created. Rather than simply asking students whether they recognize themselves in a text, I want them to consider who created the narrative, what cultural or linguistic experiences may have influenced it, and how those experiences contribute to the literary work. In this way, biographical research can help students move beyond recognition toward critical inquiry.

Ultimately, Bishop's work helps me recognize that culturally relevant literacy instruction involves more than selecting texts students may find relatable. It also involves creating opportunities for students to encounter different perspectives, question assumptions, and examine the relationship between literature and lived experience. Her framework supports my larger argument that personal recognition can serve as an entry point into reading, but

deeper engagement requires students to move beyond familiarity toward interpretation, reflection, and inquiry.

Centering Language, Identity, and Student Experiences: Carla España and Luz Yadira Herrera

Carla España and Luz Yadira Herrera extend this conversation by examining how educators can create learning environments that affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities. In *En Comunidad: Lessons for Centering the Voices and Experiences of Bilingual Latinx Students*, España and Herrera (2020) argue for instructional practices that recognize bilingual Latinx students' languages, experiences, and communities as valuable resources for learning. Their work challenges educational approaches that treat students' home languages and cultural knowledge as separate from academic literacy. Instead, they encourage educators to center these experiences when selecting texts, designing instruction, and creating opportunities for students to engage with reading and writing.

One of the strongest connections between España and Herrera's work and Bishop's framework is their shared emphasis on the importance of representation. Building on Bishop's metaphor of literature as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, España and Herrera emphasize that students should have opportunities to recognize their own experiences in the stories they encounter while also learning about the lives and perspectives of others. They advocate for texts that affirm students' identities and create opportunities for understanding across cultural and linguistic differences. This perspective reinforces Bishop's argument that literature can provide both recognition and discovery, while also emphasizing the role educators play in making these opportunities available.

This connection is particularly meaningful to my experiences teaching first-year writing in South Texas. Students enter my classroom with different linguistic backgrounds, cultural experiences, and relationships to the communities in which they live. Some students may regularly use English and Spanish in their everyday interactions, while others may be more familiar with one language or particular regional expressions. These differences influence how students recognize and interpret language in assigned readings. I have noticed that when a text includes familiar expressions, cultural practices, or references to locations students recognize, they often appear to connect and it visible by them nodding their heads or smiling in agreement with the text. España and Herrera's work encourages me to consider these moments not simply as examples of student interest, but as opportunities to recognize the linguistic and cultural knowledge students already possess.

A central aspect of España and Herrera's approach is translanguaging pedagogy, which recognizes that bilingual students draw on their full linguistic repertoires when communicating, learning, and constructing meaning. Rather than viewing languages as completely separate systems that must remain isolated from one another, translanguaging acknowledges how students use their linguistic resources together to interpret ideas and participate in learning. In the first-year writing classroom, this perspective raises important questions about how students' existing language practices are recognized and valued. Although students are expected to develop academic reading and writing skills, these expectations do not have to require them to disregard the languages and cultural knowledge they bring from their communities.

I find this particularly relevant when considering how students respond to language in literary texts. A student who recognizes a Spanish expression or a regional phrase may understand its cultural significance in ways that are not immediately apparent to another reader. This knowledge can become a valuable starting point for discussion and analysis. Rather than treating the expression simply as vocabulary that needs to be translated, students can investigate why the author chose that language, what it communicates about identity or community, and how its meaning might change depending on the audience. In this way, students' linguistic experiences become resources for critical reading rather than something separate from academic work, which they can impart with their peers and me.

España and Herrera also offer a practical framework for planning culturally and linguistically responsive instruction through what they call the 3Ts: Topics, Texts, and Translanguaging (19). This framework encourages educators to consider the subjects students are invited to explore, the texts used to support that exploration, and the linguistic resources students can draw upon throughout the learning process. I find this framework especially useful because it moves beyond simply acknowledging the importance of cultural representation and provides a way to think about how these principles might shape classroom activities.

The first component, *Topics*, encourages educators to consider subjects that connect with students' lives, interests, and communities. In my proposed approach, students would explore questions related to identity, cultural heritage, language, mythology, and belonging through David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror*. These topics provide opportunities for

students to consider how their own experiences may connect with or differ from those represented in the novel.

The second component, *Texts*, emphasizes the importance of selecting readings that affirm students' identities while also introducing them to different perspectives. Bowles's novel provides an opportunity to examine Mexican American cultural experiences and Mesoamerican mythology through a literary narrative. However, the value of the text does not depend on every student sharing the author's cultural background. Instead, the novel can create opportunities for both recognition and discovery, reflecting Bishop's understanding of literature as mirrors and windows.

The third component, *Translanguaging*, encourages educators to recognize and support the linguistic resources students bring to learning. In a classroom application of my proposed approach, students could be invited to discuss unfamiliar expressions, examine the cultural meanings of particular words, or draw on their knowledge of English and Spanish while researching references in the novel. Students might also compare how language functions in different contexts and consider how Bowles's linguistic choices contribute to characterization, identity, and meaning. These activities would allow students to use their existing knowledge while developing more detailed interpretations through textual evidence and research.

Importantly, I would not want these activities to place students in the position of representing an entire culture or explaining particular traditions simply because they share aspects of the author's background. Students' linguistic and cultural experiences are not

uniform, and participation should not depend on students disclosing personal information. Instead, the goal is to create opportunities for students to draw on their knowledge when they choose while also providing the resources necessary for everyone to investigate unfamiliar references.

España and Herrera's emphasis on advocacy also encourages me to consider the instructor's responsibility in creating an inclusive reading environment. Their work calls on educators to advocate with and for bilingual students, their languages, and their lives. This perspective suggests that culturally and linguistically responsive instruction involves more than choosing representative literature. It also requires instructors to consider how classroom expectations, discussions, and assignments communicate whose knowledge is valued.

For my project, this means approaching students' linguistic and cultural experiences as legitimate starting points for academic inquiry while continuing to support their development as critical readers and writers. Students should be able to recognize that the language practices they encounter outside the classroom can contribute to their understanding of literary texts. At the same time, they should be encouraged to investigate unfamiliar perspectives, evaluate evidence, and communicate their interpretations to different audiences.

Ultimately, España and Herrera's work strengthens the culturally relevant foundation of my proposed biographical approach. Bishop helps explain why representation matters, while España and Herrera demonstrate how educators can intentionally center students' cultural

and linguistic resources through their instructional choices. By bringing these perspectives together, I propose using biographical inquiry to help students examine the relationships among their own experiences, Bowles's cultural and linguistic background, and the literary choices represented in *The Smoking Mirror*. The goal is not simply to make reading more relatable, but to create opportunities for students to move from recognition and curiosity toward deeper interpretation, critical inquiry, and meaningful engagement with literature.

IV. The Biographical Lens as a Pedagogical Approach

A biographical approach to literary criticism examines how an author's life, historical circumstances, cultural background, and experiences may inform a literary work. This approach encourages readers to investigate the relationship between the person who creates a text and the ideas, characters, settings, and language represented within it. Rather than approaching literature as something created independently of the world, biographical inquiry invites readers to consider the experiences and influences that may have contributed to its development.

For my proposed approach, I am particularly interested in using biography as a tool for inquiry rather than simply providing students with background information before they begin reading. Learning that David Bowles is a South Texas writer who incorporates Mesoamerican mythology and Mexican American cultural experiences into his work may help students recognize possible connections between his background and the narrative of *The Smoking Mirror*. However, knowing these details does not automatically produce a deeper understanding of the novel. Students must still investigate how those influences appear in the text and what they contribute to its meaning.

This distinction is important because biographical criticism can become limiting when readers assume that every element of a literary work directly reflects the author's personal experiences or intentions. An author's background may provide valuable context, but it does not determine a single correct interpretation. Literary texts are shaped by imagination, genre conventions, research, artistic decisions, and cultural influences that extend beyond an individual's biography. For this reason, I would want students to treat biographical information as evidence that can inform their questions, not as proof of what a particular passage must mean.

The relationship between biography and close reading is central to my proposal. Students might begin by researching Bowles's experiences as a writer, educator, and scholar of folklore. They could then examine passages from *The Smoking Mirror* that incorporate cultural references, language choices, or questions of identity. Rather than simply identifying similarities between Bowles's background and the novel, students would be encouraged to explain how specific literary choices contribute to characterization, conflict, and theme.

For example, students might investigate Bowles's interest in Mesoamerican mythology before examining how the concept of the *nagual* functions in the twins' understanding of their family history. They might also consider how the novel's use of Spanish, Nahuatl, and culturally specific expressions contributes to its fictional world. These investigations would require students to move between contextual research and textual analysis, testing their

interpretations against evidence rather than relying exclusively on personal recognition or assumptions about the author.

I also see this approach as a way to connect students' experiences to academic reading without suggesting that all students share the same cultural background. In my first-year writing classes, I have observed that familiar expressions, locations, and cultural references can sometimes encourage students to participate more actively in discussions. A biographical approach could build on that initial curiosity by asking students to investigate the author's experiences alongside their own interpretations. Students unfamiliar with particular references would also have opportunities to develop questions, conduct research, and contribute alternative perspectives.

Essentially, students would not be expected to disclose personal experiences or speak on behalf of a particular cultural group. Their participation would be grounded in their choices as readers and researchers. Some might identify meaningful connections to their own lives, while others might focus on unfamiliar ideas that challenge their assumptions. Both responses could support the larger goal of developing thoughtful, evidence-based interpretations.

The approach also requires recognizing the limitations of biographical research itself. Interviews, author websites, and published profiles present selected accounts of a writer's life and work. These sources may help readers understand an author's stated interests, but they should also be evaluated for purpose, audience, and reliability. A published interview,

for example, may explain how Bowles describes his intentions, but students should still examine whether and how those intentions are developed within the novel.

Ultimately, I propose using the biographical lens as a bridge between students' initial responses to literature and the deeper reading practices expected in college. By moving between the author's background, the literary text, and their own developing interpretations, students can practice asking questions, evaluating sources, analyzing language, and reconsidering their assumptions. The goal is not to reduce literature to an author's life story, but to use contextual research to support a more sustained and critical engagement with the text.

V. David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror*: Cultural Identity, Mythology, and Belonging

David Bowles and the Cultural Context of the Novel

David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror* (2015) follows twelve-year-old twins Carolina (Carol) and Juan Ángel (Johnny) Garza, who discover that their family's history is connected to supernatural abilities and a mythological world they previously understood primarily through stories. The twins' suspicions about their mother's, Veronica Quintero de Garza, absence is evident, "Yet the problem wasn't the loss itself. What was tearing her family apart was not knowing what had happened." (3). Carol has her own thoughts, "She isn't dead. She didn't run off. Someone took her. I don't know how I know it, but I do. Someone took her and they're hurting her and there's nothing I can do to stop it. (3) These thoughts eventually lead Carol and Juan toward Mictlán, the underworld associated with Aztec mythology.

Although *The Smoking Mirror* contains many familiar elements of fantasy literature, including magical transformations, supernatural creatures, and dangerous encounters, what makes the novel particularly interesting to me is the way Bowles incorporates cultural knowledge into the characters' everyday experiences. Rather than presenting Mesoamerican mythology as distant or unfamiliar history, he makes it part of the twins' family background and developing identities. This relationship between contemporary life and inherited traditions creates opportunities to examine how cultural experiences influence the stories authors choose to tell.

Bowles's own comments about the novel offer useful context for this interpretation. In a 2015 interview with *AL DÍA*, he identifies family, culture, and understanding as important elements of the twins' journey. His discussion suggests that the novel's emotional relationships are as significant as its supernatural adventures. However, while Bowles's background and stated intentions provide valuable context, they should not be treated as the only explanation for the novel's meaning. A biographical reading approach is most useful when information about the author helps generate questions that readers can investigate through the literary text.

Cultural Inheritance and the Discovery of Identity

One of the most significant themes in *The Smoking Mirror* is the relationship between identity and cultural inheritance. This becomes particularly evident in Chapter Four, when Bowles introduces the revelation through the mother's recollection Johnny listens as Carol reads their mother's diary, "Today Mom told me the craziest thing: I'm like her, a shapeshifter. A nagual. I didn't want to believe her, but then she shifted into a jaguar right in

from me!...". (27) The account reveals that this ability has been passed down through generations of the family. What initially appears to be an extraordinary supernatural discovery becomes a way of exploring the family's history and the knowledge inherited by its younger members.

The informal language is significant because it places a supernatural discovery within the familiar experience of a conversation between a mother and daughter. The expression "the craziest thing" also captures the character's disbelief, making her reaction recognizable even when the circumstances are extraordinary. In this moment, Bowles combines the conventions of fantasy with an ordinary family relationship, allowing cultural inheritance to emerge through personal storytelling rather than through a detached explanation of mythology.

The connection between identity and inherited knowledge becomes more complex when the mother explains that transformation involves a person's *tonal*, or "beast-soul" (28). She describes transformation as a gradual process that requires an individual to develop awareness and control over an aspect of the self that was previously unknown. This explanation suggests that discovering one's identity does not necessarily mean immediately understanding it. Instead, the process involves learning about inherited abilities, recognizing their significance, and determining how to live with that knowledge.

I find this particularly meaningful because the twins' discovery can be interpreted as more than a fantasy convention. Their experiences raise questions about how individuals come to understand the histories, traditions, and cultural knowledge that shape their identities.

Bowles does not suggest that identity is simply inherited and fully understood from the beginning. Rather, the characters must actively investigate their family history and reconsider what they believed they knew about themselves.

Mesoamerican Mythology, Language, and Cultural Knowledge

Another important feature of *The Smoking Mirror* is Bowles's incorporation of Mesoamerican mythology into the novel's setting, characters, and conflicts. His use of mythological references does more than establish an imaginative world. It also introduces questions about cultural knowledge, historical memory, and the relationship between language and identity.

On page 45, the twins encounter Pingo, a member of the *tzapame*, who explains aspects of his people's history and language. Pingo describes a community whose members have different relationships to English, Spanish, and Nahuatl. Some have adapted to newer languages, while others continue to understand the world through older linguistic traditions. Through this exchange, Bowles presents language as something shaped by history, community, and experience.

This detail is especially relevant to my interest in culturally responsive literacy instruction. The presence of multiple languages in the novel is not merely decorative. Instead, language helps establish the histories and perspectives of the characters and communities within the fictional world. Readers must recognize that unfamiliar words and expressions may carry cultural meanings that are not immediately apparent through translation alone.

The same passage introduces Mictlán as the place where the twins' mother has been taken. Carol recognizes Mictlán from her knowledge of Aztec religion, but she struggles to accept that the mythological place could exist in the world she now inhabits. Her disbelief is captured in the question, "Wait. It's real? There's an actual Aztec Land of the Dead?" (45). Although brief, this moment represents a significant shift in the character's understanding. What Carol previously understood as mythology becomes part of her immediate reality.

Bowles's decision to position Carol between familiarity and disbelief is particularly interesting. She possesses some knowledge of Mictlán, but that knowledge is incomplete. Her experience requires her to reconsider what she knows and develop a more complicated understanding of the stories she has encountered. In this way, the novel presents cultural knowledge as something that can be questioned, expanded, and reinterpreted.

This aspect of the novel connects to Rudine Sims Bishop's discussion of literature as mirrors and windows. Readers who recognize particular cultural or mythological references may experience moments of familiarity, while readers encountering those references for the first time may be introduced to different traditions. However, recognition alone does not establish a complete understanding of the text. Bowles's incorporation of mythology invites further investigation into how these references contribute to characterization, conflict, and the larger themes of identity and belonging. I have grown to appreciate students' ability to navigate unfamiliar cultural and mythological references, recognizing

how these challenges can foster deeper reading through questioning, interpretation, and critical engagement with the text.

Family, Belonging, and the Meaning of Transformation

Although the novel is filled with supernatural challenges, the relationship between Carol and Johnny provides much of its emotional significance. Their journey requires them to confront unfamiliar dangers, but it also forces them to recognize their dependence on one another. The twins' relationship develops through moments of disagreement, vulnerability, and mutual support, suggesting that family connections are central to their understanding of themselves.

This becomes especially clear on page 198, when Johnny acknowledges Carol's role in helping him regain control during a dangerous encounter. He explains that her presence helped him focus on their mother and prevented him from losing control of his abilities. His acknowledgment culminates in the simple statement, "You saved me" (198).

What makes this moment meaningful is the contrast between the supernatural circumstances and the ordinary emotional experience of one sibling recognizing the importance of another. Johnny's abilities may give him extraordinary strength, but they do not make him independent of the people he loves. Instead, the scene suggests that emotional connection and trust are necessary parts of his development.

The passage also complicates the meaning of transformation within the novel. Physical transformation represents the twins' inherited supernatural abilities, but their emotional development involves learning to trust, support, and understand one another. In this sense,

transformation operates on more than one level. It is both a supernatural experience and a process through which the characters develop a stronger understanding of family and belonging.

Bowles's emphasis on family is also reflected in his comments about the novel. In his interview with *AL DÍA*, he identifies family, culture, and understanding as important to the twins' ability to overcome the challenges they encounter. This connection between the author's stated intentions and the characters' experiences offers an example of how biographical information can contribute to literary interpretation. At the same time, the scene on page 198 provides textual evidence that allows readers to examine how those ideas are developed through characterization and dialogue.

Critical Perspectives and the Novel's Significance

Published responses to *The Smoking Mirror* provide another perspective on the novel's treatment of mythology, family, and cultural representation. A 2016 review published by *Rich in Color* highlights the novel's distinct sibling perspectives, descriptions of Mictlán, and incorporation of Spanish. These observations support an interpretation of the novel as a work that combines fantasy storytelling with culturally specific language and traditions.

The review also raises questions about the novel's pacing and suggests that the emotional consequences of the family's experiences could have been explored more fully. I find this criticism useful because it encourages a more balanced interpretation of the text. While Bowles creates opportunities to explore cultural identity and belonging, readers can still question whether particular narrative choices allow those themes to develop as fully as

they might. This would make a for an excellent opportunity for a rhetorical choices plática with students.

This distinction is important to my proposed approach. Selecting a culturally relevant text should not mean that students are expected to accept every aspect of it without question. Instead, students should have opportunities to evaluate the author's choices, consider alternative interpretations, and develop their own responses using textual evidence. The cultural significance of a literary work does not place it beyond critical examination.

Connecting the Novel to a Biographical Reading Approach

Taken together, these elements make *The Smoking Mirror* a promising text for exploring how a biographical approach might support deeper reading in first-year writing. Bowles's use of Mesoamerican mythology, culturally specific language, and family relationships creates opportunities to examine how an author's cultural interests and experiences may influence literary choices. The novel also provides moments in which readers may recognize familiar language, relationships, or cultural references while encountering ideas that challenge or expand their existing knowledge.

What interests me most is the possibility of using these moments of recognition and curiosity as starting points for more sustained inquiry. A student might initially recognize a Spanish expression, a reference to mythology, or a familiar family dynamic. However, the goal would be to move beyond that initial connection by asking how the reference functions within the novel, what it contributes to the characters' experiences, and how additional research about Bowles and the cultural traditions he incorporates might deepen or complicate the interpretation.

Ultimately, *The Smoking Mirror* illustrates the possibilities of bringing cultural context, literary analysis, and biographical inquiry together. Rather than approaching the novel solely as a story about supernatural adventures, readers can examine how Bowles uses fantasy to explore cultural inheritance, identity, and belonging. These qualities make the novel a useful foundation for the classroom approach I propose in the following section, where students would investigate the relationships among the author's experiences, the literary text, and their own developing interpretations.

VI. Classroom Application: Bringing the Biographical Lens into First-Year Writing

As I consider how to apply this approach in my first-year writing classroom, I want to create a reading experience that encourages students to move beyond completing an assigned text simply because it is required. One challenge I have observed in teaching Rhetoric and Composition I is that students do not always see how academic reading connects to their lives or interests. However, when a reading includes language, places, or experiences they recognize, students sometimes become more willing to participate and share their own interpretations. These observations have encouraged me to consider how I might use those initial connections more intentionally to support deeper reading.

For this proposed classroom application, I would use David Bowles's *The Smoking Mirror* as the central literary text in a sequence of reading, research, discussion, and writing activities. The activities would be designed to help students investigate the relationship between Bowles's cultural and linguistic background and the choices he makes as a writer. Rather than beginning with a detailed lecture about the author's life, I would first invite

students to respond to the text itself. This would allow their initial questions and observations to guide subsequent research.

Beginning with Students' Responses

The first stage would involve students reading selected chapters of *The Smoking Mirror* and recording their initial responses in a reading journal. I would ask them to identify passages they find familiar, unfamiliar, confusing, or particularly interesting. Students might notice Spanish expressions, references to Mesoamerican mythology, family relationships, or the characters' reactions to discovering their inherited abilities.

At this stage, I would emphasize that students do not need to understand every reference immediately. Instead, their questions would become part of the reading process. For example, a student unfamiliar with the term *nagual* might ask about its cultural significance, while another student who has encountered the term before might consider how Bowles's representation compares with what they already know. Both students would be encouraged to return to the passage and investigate how the concept functions within the story.

This activity connects to Rosenblatt's understanding of reading as an interaction between the reader and the text. Students bring different experiences and knowledge to their interpretations, but those interpretations can develop as they encounter new information. My goal would be to help students recognize that their initial responses are valuable starting points, not necessarily their final conclusions.

Investigating the Author

After students have developed their initial responses, I would introduce a guided biographical research activity focused on David Bowles. Students would examine credible sources such as author interviews, published profiles, and discussions of his writing. They would investigate his connection to South Texas, his work with folklore and mythology, and his interests in representing Mexican American experiences through literature.

Students would be asked to distinguish between information that is documented about Bowles and interpretations they develop about the novel. For instance, learning that Bowles has an interest in Mesoamerican mythology may help explain why those traditions appear in his fiction, but students would still need to examine how he adapts particular references to serve the narrative.

This stage would also provide an opportunity to practice research skills that are central to first-year composition. Students would evaluate sources for credibility, identify relevant information, summarize findings, and document their research using MLA citations. By connecting these skills to questions that emerge from their reading, I hope to make research feel less like a separate assignment and more like a way of developing understanding.

Returning to the Text Through Close Reading

The third stage would ask students to return to selected passages after completing their biographical research. This is where I believe the most important opportunity for deeper reading would occur. Students would compare their initial interpretations with what they

have learned and consider whether the additional context changes, supports, or complicates their understanding.

For example, students could examine the account of the family's *nagual* inheritance on pages 27–28. They might consider how Bowles presents supernatural transformation through ordinary family conversation and how the passage connects identity to generational knowledge. Students could also analyze page 45, where language and mythology intersect through the introduction of the *tzapame* and Mictlán. A third passage, on page 198, would allow students to consider how the twins' relationship contributes to the novel's treatment of family and belonging.

Rather than asking students only to identify the themes in these passages, I would encourage them to analyze specific choices in dialogue, characterization, narrative perspective, and language. Students would need to explain how the evidence supports their interpretations and how their research informs their reading without replacing their own analysis.

Collaborative Discussion and Interpretation

Because students often develop their ideas through conversation, I would also incorporate small-group discussions. Each group could examine one passage and develop an interpretation supported by both textual evidence and relevant contextual research. Students would then share their findings with the class, allowing different interpretations to emerge.

I would encourage students to consider where their interpretations agree or differ and what evidence supports each perspective. A student who recognizes a cultural reference might contribute one understanding, while another student might identify a literary detail that complicates that interpretation. The purpose would not be to establish which student possesses the most cultural knowledge, but to demonstrate how readers can learn from one another while remaining accountable to the text.

This approach would also connect to the collaborative and critical thinking objectives of first-year writing. Students would practice explaining their ideas, listening to alternative interpretations, and reconsidering their conclusions when presented with new evidence.

Moving from Discussion to Analytical Writing

The final instructional stage would involve an analytical writing assignment in which students develop an argument about how Bowles uses a particular literary element to explore identity, cultural heritage, language, or belonging. Their writing would incorporate evidence from *The Smoking Mirror* and at least one credible source about Bowles or the cultural context of the novel.

I would encourage students to develop an interpretation rather than simply summarize the author's biography or the plot. A successful paper would explain how specific details in the novel contribute to a larger idea, how contextual research helps illuminate those details, and what limitations or questions remain.

Throughout this sequence, I would use reading journals, annotations, discussions, and draft reflections to monitor students' developing interpretations. These activities would

provide opportunities for feedback before students complete their final analytical writing assignment.

My intention is to design a reading experience in which students' initial curiosity becomes the foundation for sustained inquiry. The progression from personal response to biographical research, close reading, discussion, and analytical writing would allow students to practice the habits of deeper reading while recognizing that meaning develops through active engagement with both the text and its context.

VII. Proposed Assignment and Reflection

To bring the biographical approach into a structured classroom activity, I propose an assignment titled **A Walk in Their Shoes: Reading *The Smoking Mirror* Through a Biographical Lens**. The assignment would ask students to investigate how David Bowles's background and cultural interests may inform particular elements of the novel while developing their own evidence-based interpretations.

The assignment would build on reading and research practices already emphasized in my first-year writing courses, including annotation, source evaluation, rhetorical analysis, MLA documentation, and reflection. Rather than introducing biography as an isolated research topic, the activity would ask students to use their research to revisit and reconsider a literary passage.

Proposed Assignment: A Walk in Their Shoes

Purpose

The purpose of this assignment is to explore how researching an author's background can contribute to a deeper understanding of a literary text. Students will examine the

relationship between David Bowles's experiences, cultural interests, and literary choices in *The Smoking Mirror* while developing their skills in close reading, research, and analytical writing.

Part 1: Reading and Initial Reflection (Appendix A)
Students will select a meaningful passage from *The Smoking Mirror* and complete a short reading journal. Their journal will include a brief summary, annotations of important language or literary details, and an explanation of what they initially find interesting, familiar, unfamiliar, or confusing.

Students will also develop two or three questions they would like to investigate further. These questions may concern cultural references, mythology, characterization, language, or the author's possible influences.

Part 2: Biographical Research (Appendix B)
Students will locate at least two credible sources about David Bowles or the cultural and historical contexts relevant to their selected passage. They will record MLA citations, summarize the information they find, and explain how each source might help them investigate their questions.

Students will also evaluate the limitations of their sources. For example, an interview may provide information about Bowles's intentions, but it does not necessarily establish the meaning of every detail in the novel.

Part 3: Returning to the Passage (Appendix C)
After completing their research, students will reread their selected passage and identify at least two details they can now interpret more fully. They will compare their initial

observations with their developing understanding and consider whether their research supports, complicates, or changes their interpretation.

Students will be encouraged to examine the author's language, characterization, narrative choices, and use of cultural references rather than relying exclusively on biographical information.

Part 4: Analytical Response (Appendix D)
Students will write an approximately 750–1,000-word analytical response addressing the following question:

How does learning about David Bowles's background or cultural influences help you develop a deeper interpretation of a particular passage or theme in The Smoking Mirror?

Their response should present a clear interpretation, incorporate textual evidence, engage with relevant research, and explain the relationship between the author's context and the literary work. Students should also acknowledge that biographical information may inform an interpretation without determining its only possible meaning.

Part 5: Reading Reflection (Appendix D)
Students will conclude with a brief reflection on their reading process. They will explain how their understanding developed from the initial reading to the final analysis, identify a question that remains unresolved, and consider whether researching the author helped them notice details they might otherwise have overlooked.

Assessing Student Learning
To evaluate this assignment, I would focus on the quality of students' reading and interpretive processes rather than the number of personal connections they identify. The

central criteria would include the specificity of their textual analysis, their use and evaluation of credible research, the clarity of their interpretations, and their ability to explain how their understanding changed or became more complicated.

I would also examine the relationship between students' initial reading journals and their final analytical responses. For example, an initial journal might identify *nagual* as an unfamiliar term, while the final response might explain how the concept contributes to the novel's representation of inherited identity. This development would provide evidence that the student moved beyond identifying an unfamiliar reference toward interpreting its literary significance.

However, I recognize that completing these activities would not, by itself, demonstrate that students had become deeper readers. A student might produce a more detailed interpretation because of instructor guidance, collaborative discussion, additional reading time, or other aspects of the assignment. For that reason, I would avoid attributing any observed improvement solely to the biographical approach.

I would also consider gathering students' perspectives through a brief anonymous reflection or questionnaire. Questions might ask which activities helped them understand the novel, whether researching Bowles influenced their interpretation, and what challenges they experienced while connecting contextual research to close reading. These responses could help me identify which aspects of the assignment students found useful and which might need revision.

Anticipated Opportunities and Challenges

One potential benefit of this approach is that it may help students see academic research as a meaningful extension of reading. Rather than locating sources simply to satisfy an assignment requirement, students would investigate questions that emerge from their encounters with the novel. I hope this would encourage them to view reading as an active process of questioning, investigating, and interpreting.

At the same time, I anticipate several challenges. Some students may struggle to distinguish between an author's biography and the fictional experiences of the characters. Others may focus so heavily on researching cultural references that they neglect the language and structure of the literary text. These possibilities reinforce the need for explicit instruction, guided questions, and opportunities to practice integrating research with textual analysis.

Another consideration involves the diversity of students' cultural and linguistic experiences. Although *The Smoking Mirror* incorporates traditions that may be familiar to some students in South Texas, I cannot assume that all students will recognize those references or identify with the characters. The assignment must therefore provide multiple ways to engage with the novel and avoid treating any student as a representative of a particular community.

Ultimately, I view this proposed assignment as an opportunity to investigate whether biographical inquiry can help students develop more sustained and thoughtful relationships with assigned readings. Its value would not depend on students agreeing with my interpretation of the novel or finding every aspect of it personally relatable. Instead, I

would look for evidence that they are asking more specific questions, reconsidering initial assumptions, using research responsibly, and supporting their interpretations with close attention to the text.

The assignment also reflects my developing understanding of my role as a writing instructor. I want students to recognize that reading is not simply a task completed before writing begins. Reading involves choices, questions, experiences, and interpretations that continue to develop as students encounter new evidence. By making that process more visible, I hope to help students understand how the reading practices developed in first-year writing can support learning beyond my classroom.

VIII. Conclusion: Reading Beyond Recognition

This project began with a question that has continued to shape my thinking as a first-year writing instructor: How can I encourage students to engage more deeply with assigned readings when they do not always see those readings as meaningful or connected to their experiences?

The purpose of this approach is not to suggest that cultural familiarity automatically produces deeper reading or that an author's biography provides a complete explanation of a text. Recognition may encourage curiosity, but meaningful interpretation requires readers to investigate their questions, evaluate evidence, consider different perspectives, and remain open to revising their understanding. Similarly, biographical research should expand the possibilities for interpretation rather than limit students to what they believe the author intended.

Because this project presents a proposed instructional approach, I cannot yet determine whether it would improve students' reading engagement or analytical abilities. Its effectiveness would need to be examined through classroom implementation, students' written work, reflections, and feedback. Nevertheless, developing this proposal has helped me think more carefully about how I might connect the academic expectations of first-year writing with the experiences and knowledge students bring to the classroom.

I also recognize that this approach has implications beyond a single novel or assignment. Students encounter texts in many academic disciplines that may initially feel unfamiliar, difficult, or disconnected from their lives. Learning to ask questions about a text's context, investigate the experiences and perspectives that inform it, and reconsider initial interpretations may help students approach those readings with greater curiosity and confidence. These are habits I hope they can continue developing throughout their college education.

Ultimately, I want students to understand that reading deeply does not require them to leave their experiences behind. Their knowledge, questions, and perspectives can become valuable starting points for interpretation, provided they remain willing to examine evidence and encounter ideas beyond what they already know. Through this proposed biographical approach, I hope to create opportunities for students to see reading not simply as an academic requirement, but as an active process of making connections, challenging assumptions, and developing a more thoughtful understanding of texts and the worlds from which they emerge.

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Appendix A.

Part 1: Reading and Initial Reflection

Name: _____

In this activity you will read your assigned passage in *The Smoking Mirror* and write summary. annotations of important language or literary details, and an explanation of what you initially find interesting, familiar, unfamiliar, or confusing. Then create a couple of questions you would like to further investigate.

1. Summary of passage/pages assigned:

_____

_____

_____

2. Identify a meaningful word, image, or piece of dialogue from the text. Explain why it stands out to you and how it contributes to your understanding of the story.

_____

3. What does that detail suggest about identity, language, family, or belonging?

_____

_____

4. What is familiar, unfamiliar, or surprising? You may respond without sharing personal information.

---

5. What do you find confusing in the passage that you might want clarity on?

_____

_____

6. What are 2-3 question that could be investigated through credible contextual research:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Appendix B.

Part 2: Biographical Research and Source-Evaluation

Name _____

Locate at least **two credible sources** that help you learn more about David Bowles or the cultural and historical background connected to your selected passage.

Research question 1:_____

Source 1: Author, title, publication, date, URL or database, and MLA citation:

_____

_____

What does the source document? Quote or paraphrase accurately:

_____

_____

Who produced it, for what audience, and why is it credible for this question?

_____

_____

What does it NOT prove about the novel or the author's intentions?

_____

_____

Source 2: Author, title, publication, date, URL or database, and MLA citation:

_____

_____

What does the source document? Quote or paraphrase accurately:

_____

_____

Who produced it, for what audience, and why is it credible for this question?

_____

_____

What does it NOT prove about the novel or the author's intentions?

_____

_____

Research question 2: _____

Source 1: Author, title, publication, date, URL or database, and MLA citation:

_____

_____

What does the source document? Quote or paraphrase accurately:

_____

_____

Who produced it, for what audience, and why is it credible for this question?

_____

_____

What does it NOT prove about the novel or the author's intentions?

_____

_____

Source 2: Author, title, publication, date, URL or database, and MLA citation:

_____

_____

What does the source document? Quote or paraphrase accurately:

_____

_____

Who produced it, for what audience, and why is it credible for this question?

_____

_____

What does it NOT prove about the novel or the author's intentions?

_____

_____

Appendix C.

Part 3: Returning to the Passage: Rereading, Claim, and Reflection

Name _____

In this assignment you will reread your selected passage and identify at least two details you now understand more deeply based on your research. Explain how your research supports, challenges, or changes your original interpretation, paying attention to the author's language, characterization, narrative choices, and cultural references.

Initial interpretation: _____

New context learned from a source: _____

_____

Textual detail and page number: _____

Alternative interpretation or remaining uncertainty: _____

_____

Write a paragraph that moves from claim → quoted textual evidence → close analysis → contextual source → qualification.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Exit reflection: What changed between your first and second readings? What specific evidence caused the change?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D. Student-Facing Assignment and Assessment Guide

A Walk in Their Shoes: Reading *The Smoking Mirror* Through a Biographical Lens

Part 4: Analytical Response (750–1,000 words)

Write an analytical response addressing the question:

How does learning about David Bowles's background or cultural influences help you develop a deeper understanding of a passage or theme in The Smoking Mirror?

Develop a clear interpretation supported by evidence from the novel and your research. Explain how the author's background connects to your interpretation, recognizing that a text can have multiple meanings.

Part 5: Reading Reflection

Conclude with a brief reflection explaining how your understanding of the passage developed throughout this activity. Discuss what your research helped you notice and identify at least one question you still have about the text.

Submission Requirements:

(1) Completed Part 1: Reading and Initial Reflection

(2) Completed Part 2: Biographical Research and Source-Evaluation

(3) Completed Part 3: Returning to the Passage: Rereading, Claim, and Reflection

(4) Analytical Response: 750 -1,000-word analytical response,

(5) Reading Reflection:150–200-word reflection,

(6) MLA Works Cited page

Please Note: Do not substitute plot summary or author biography for analysis.

Grading Rubric: Close Reading, Research, and Reflection - Your work will be evaluated using the following 3–2–1–0 scale, focusing on how effectively you analyze your selected passage, incorporate research, develop an interpretation, and reflect on your reading process.

Criteria	3 – Meets/Exceeds	2 – Approaches	1 – Does Not Meet	0 – Missing
Close Reading	Carefully analyzes specific words, images, dialogue, or literary choices and explains how they contribute to a deeper understanding of the passage.	Identifies relevant details but provides limited analysis or explanation.	Mostly summarizes the passage with little attention to specific textual details.	No close reading provided.
Research Quality & Citation	Uses at least two credible sources, connects research meaningfully to the passage, and includes appropriate MLA citations.	Uses research but connections to the passage are underdeveloped or citations contain errors.	Uses limited or questionable research with little connection to the passage; citations are largely incomplete.	No research or citations provided.
Interpretive Claim & Qualification	Presents a clear, thoughtful interpretation supported by textual evidence and research while recognizing that other interpretations are possible.	Presents an interpretation but needs stronger evidence, explanation, or acknowledgment of alternative meanings.	Interpretation is unclear, unsupported, or relies primarily on assumptions about the author.	No interpretation provided.
Reflection & Revision	Thoughtfully explains how the initial interpretation developed or changed through rereading and research, including new insights and remaining questions.	Describes some changes in understanding but offers limited reflection on the reading process.	Provides minimal reflection with little explanation of how understanding developed.	No reflection provided.

Reminder: The goal of this assignment is not simply to summarize *The Smoking Mirror* or research David Bowles's life. Instead, you should demonstrate how **close reading, research, and reflection work together to help you develop a deeper and more thoughtful interpretation of a literary text.**

Bio

Naomi Vela is a Rhetoric and Composition instructor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), where she teaches first-year writing courses to both traditional college and dual enrollment students. She is also preparing to teach a bilingual (English/Spanish) Rhetoric and Composition II course in Spring 2027, reflecting her commitment to creating inclusive learning environments that recognize students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

As she works toward completing her Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in English, her academic interests focus on culturally responsive teaching practices, literacy development, and the relationship between students lived experiences and academic engagement. Her current graduate research explores how incorporating a biographical approach to literature can encourage deeper reading and meaningful connections in the first-year writing classroom.

Through her teaching and research, Naomi hopes to create learning experiences that encourage students to recognize their own knowledge and experiences as valuable resources for academic growth. Looking ahead, she plans to pursue a Ph.D. in English and continue exploring ways to strengthen literacy instruction and student engagement in higher education.

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