

Making sense of the community college: interrogating belongingness

Naja Berg Hougaard

Department of Human Development, CUNY Graduate Center
New York City, U.S.A.

Abstract

Drawing on the transformative potential of critical-theoretical learning grounded in the CHAT framework of recognizing the bi-directional relationship between learning and development, the present paper is an investigation of how nine American community college students participating in a critical learning community (Peer Activist Learning Community) make sense of and position themselves towards the pursuit of higher education. The paper has two key findings: (1) students primarily draw on vocational discourse paired with a conceptualization of learning as rote learning (i.e. memorization and acquisition of skills) in making sense of their pursuit of higher education, and (2) students embody a transitional positioning toward the community college, which poses the ontological challenge of belonging to an academic institution while seeking to negate this belonging. The findings are framed and discussed in particular through the lens of the transformative activist stance (Stetsenko) with an emphasis on the recognition of education as the process of becoming human as well as with a focus on the transformative potential of meaningful learning experiences. I conclude by suggesting the need for transforming the aim of retention studies as well as put forward the suggestion of re-conceptualization the concept of belongingness in educational psychology in light of the CHAT framework.

“Viewed by one segment of the community as a chance to achieve the American Dream, the community college is viewed by another segment as a stigmatized, second class institution – a college of last resort.” (Dietrich, 1996, p.1)

Introduction

American community colleges are continuing to struggle with high rates of student dropouts (Seidman, 2005; 2007). The reasons for the high dropout rates seem to be a complex issue, however the vast retention literature indicates that among the reasons that students report are the lack of support by professors and administrative offices, financial strain and work (York, 1993, Seidman, 2007). Particularly low-income first generation students seem to be facing serious challenges in completing their either two or four year college degrees (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Several recent initiatives (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Osterman, 2000) focus on the notion that social integration defined as ‘sense of belonging’ is crucial in the process of increasing student retention.

Building on socio-cultural approaches to learning and identity that establish synergies between these processes (e.g., Lave, 1991, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Stetsenko, 2010, Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011), the core assumption of this study is that it is important to provide students with support and cultural tools that make learning meaningful by drawing connections between students’ evolving identities and their academic pursuits (Stetsenko, 2010). The goal is to investigate the gaps between learning and identity in minority and first generation community college students in an urban American context as one of the possible mechanism behind high dropout rates and, through a design-based action study, explore cultural mediators that help to close these gaps. The rationale is that the need of increasing retention rates in community colleges can be achieved by critically interrogating and expanding the notion of belonging based in the theory of transformative practice as the grounding for learning and development.

Drawing on the notion of learning and development as co-constitutive processes this study is based not only on the well-established recognition of the bi-directional relationship between learning and identity processes (Lave, 1991, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Nasir, 2008) as always situated and thus growing out of a social practice (Nissen, 2012), but additionally based on the notion of the transformative potential of critical-theoretical learning (Vianna, 2009; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011; Freire, 1970) as a tool that allows students to develop meaningful and activist life agendas aimed at contributing to and transforming ourselves and societal practices (Stetsenko, 2008, 2010)

In order to fully understand the challenges of the community colleges today we must investigate how the students make sense of the pursuit of education and see how this affords the students’ learner trajectories and processes of becoming, and thus successful academic pursuits (Nasir, 2009a, 2009b). In recognition of the co-constructed nature of identity (becoming a certain person) and learning processes, the present study investigates how community college students participating in weekly meetings as a part of an extra-curricular research project reflect on their learning and development in the context of a community college located in the North

East of the United States. Given the broader goal of understanding the constraints and affordances that minority and first generation college students experience in their pursuit of a community college degree, I am interested in answering the following research questions with a focus on the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, class and gender: (1) How do community college students make sense of academic learning and the pursuit of post-secondary education as they participate in an extra-curricular student guidance group? (2) How do students make sense of the community college and what role does this play for how they position themselves towards the learning in the college?

Community College Retention: interrogating Belongingness through the Transformative Activist Stance

A wealth of research has been investigating the underlying tenets of the devastatingly high dropout rates at American colleges. The results of a large, three decade survey (ACT survey, 1980, 1987, 2004, 2010) investigating the conditions for the high student dropout rates, reveals that three practices successfully address issues of retention: first year programs, academic advising and learning support (ACT survey, 2004). The 2004 ACT survey found that in spite of this knowledge, many colleges still do not have adequate systems in place to address the issue of student dropout. In addition, as indicated by the findings of the survey, it seems that colleges are more likely to explain the high dropout rates as a result of student characteristics and not institutional characteristics, and with a particular emphasis on the lack of motivation on behalf of the students (ACT survey, 2010). This approach is problematic in that it maintains an arbitrary split between the institution and the students and brings to the fore the question of how the relationship between student, the institution and motivation is defined, constituted and maintained (cf. Pintrich, 2003). Commonly motivation is defined as an individual student characteristic (as something one has or has not); however, in light of newer socio-cultural historical re-conceptualizations of the relationship between the individual and the social practice, speaking about student characteristics in an essentialized, trait-like way as the main reason for issues with college retention is rendered meaningless. Rather, 'lack of motivation' conceptualized in the materialist tradition of CHAT is considered a positioning of the student in relation to how they view the educational practice, thus not an actual lack of motivation, but rather a different kind of motivation than that which is expected of the student (Roth & Lee, 2006). The dropout rates are significantly higher amongst minority students (Seidman, 2005), and thus it appears that the colleges must account for their responsibility in contributing to 'a lack of motivation', i.e. their lack of ability to integrate minority and first generation college students in their learning practices. In a review of models of retention with a particular focus on minority students, Rodgers and Summers (2008) conclude that the traditional models explaining retention are leaving specific elements out that could be salient to explaining the particularities of the high minority student dropout rates. Like Pintrich (2003), they argue that the definition of motivation should be broadened in that it should be shifted away from being

understood merely as an intrinsic feature. In addition, they also note that several elements need to be added to Bean and Eaton's (2000) model of retention (which was a reworking of Tinto's more sociological model, 1988), in particular that of *belongingness* (2008, p.174).

A sense of belonging, defined as feelings of membership in the larger community, is an essential piece of the overall attitude that students develop about their college or university. In general, sense of belongingness or connectedness on campus has been affiliated with students' social acceptance and professors' pedagogical caring (Freeman et al. 2007) and openness to diversity (Summers et al. 2002), while sense of belongingness in classrooms has been affiliated with adaptive motivation for achievement (Freeman et al. 2007; Summers and Svinicki 2007) as well as the use of collaborative or cooperative learning (Summers et al. 2005; Summers and Svinicki 2007). (Rodgers & Summers, 2008, p. 176)

Interestingly, this emphasis on belongingness as a key concept to evaluate current educational practices (Bean and Eaton, 2001; Rodgers and Summers, 2008) aligns with how research within the cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) framework has conceptualized learning as the process of changing participation and membership (belonging) in meaningful activities through which one becomes a particular kind of person vis-à-vis participation (Lave, 1991, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1996; Nasir, 2009). While much of the retention literature merely focuses on partial components of an approach to retention (e.g., on advising or learning support as being crucial for students to finish their college degrees) which in part seems to be grounded in the compartmentalizing retention models in which factors that lead to retention are arbitrarily separated into isolated categories (e.g. Tinto, 1988; Bean & Eaton, 2001), the CHAT perspective offers an integrative theorization of how learning processes are never separate from the students' processes of becoming a contributing person with a meaningful life agenda (Stetsenko, 2008). Although the notion of belongingness as presented in the more traditional educational psychology is similarly pointing to the importance of students' membership in a given community as central to their participation in the educational practice, the theorizing of belongingness is still grounded in a Cartesian split between the student and the practice. This leads to a conceptualization of belonging as merely a positive identification with the given educational practice, and thereby becomes relegated to the individual's affective realm, brought about by e.g. professors' positive attitudes (Osterman, 2000).

Dialectically expanding on the retention framework by Rodgers and Summers (2008) that places emphasis on the notion of belonging by drawing connection to the notion of the transformative activist stance (Stetsenko, 2008), I argue that belonging should not be conceptualized as a passive, adaptive process in which students are merely expected to develop positive identifications with the practice they find themselves in. This is not to neglect the importance of students need for belonging in an educational context, however, the risk with the more traditional conceptualization of belongingness is that it fails to recognize that belongingness should not just be about affiliation (identity in a more static view) or fitting in. Stetsenko (2008) in her suggestion of the notion of the transformative activist stance argues that learning is about collaboratively contributing to practices of humanity *while simultaneously transforming them* (p.489). This new definition of learning with its emphasis on *transformation* allows us to understand the importance of belongingness in a new

light, namely as the process of actively participating in and contributing to the given practice. Transformation in this context is defined as being directed by an agenda of social justice and points towards the need for education to allow students to engage not only the contradictions in the college, but being able to place their own current struggles in the college within a larger societal context. Learning and teaching practices should be about providing students the opportunity to acquire and construct tools that will be useful for them in their life pursuits as well as that allows them to develop a critical and active stance in the transformation of society and their community practices (Stetsenko, 2008; 2010). Grounded in the notion of identity as a continuous project of becoming (Stetsenko, 2009; 2010) learning and identity in this study are therefore conceptualized, analyzed and treated as mutually constitutive as well as transformative processes. In their article on selfhood, Stetsenko & Arievitch (2004) argue that personhood is not something that comes on top of or on the side of being a human, such as a coherently developed narrative. Rather, my take on this idea is that it is the enactment and embodiment of being as a continuous process within our material forms of life to which learning contributes and is part of. This conceptualization of the relationship between learning and identity defined as an active and activist process of becoming (Nasir, 2008; Stetsenko, 2010) avoids having to locate personality or identity in any biological foundation, neither does it let it become an intangible postmodern story that merely follows the person 'on the side', but rather captures that human existence is enacted continuously as a process of connected actions and the development of personally significant deeds always situated in particular practices. Being able to socially identify with the practice is dependent on whether you see yourself as a *type of person* – a certain kind of a learner – who is a part of the institution and whether participating in the institutional practice of learning and teaching is relevant to *who you want to be and become* (Stetsenko, 2010). Namely the notion of who students want to become is central, in that it allows for a new focus in educational paradigms for understanding learning as also being directed by the stance of the student.

Negotiating action possibilities through meaning making

One cannot, of course, examine processes of learning and meaning making independently of the discursive activities where they occur (Bamberg, 2004; Daiute, 2010). In analyzing how students' make sense of their pursuit of education, learning and the institution that they find themselves in, I draw on discourse frameworks, with a primary focus on positioning as the operationalization of the process of becoming (identity). Analyzing discursive positions offers a perspective that is consistent with examining identity as a process and how people in this process are *making sense* of their everyday lives. Discourse as such is defined as particular ways of knowing, doing, being, feeling and sense making that are socially and culturally situated (Gee, 2004). Contemporary views on the role of narration and discourse as informed by earlier theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1986) suggest that meaning making indeed plays a central role in development as the process through which we develop action possibilities (Holzkamp, 1991, Roth & Lee, 2006). Drawing on the concept of action possibilities (Holzkamp, 1991) an analysis of students' meaning making moves

beyond the merely discursive realm and allows us to not only understand how students make sense of the college but also what types of actions they see themselves as being able or not able to instantiate in the college. While positioning has been used to analyze limitations in any given situation to what kinds of possible positions one might take, I am also interested in analyzing when students express that they are able to challenge certain discourses and create something new, i.e. transform a 'given' discourse (i.e. moving beyond looking only at limitations). Daiute (2006) points out how narrating (one aspect of positioning oneself as it might take place in an interview) is not only a way to show affiliation with certain values or discourses, but indeed where active negotiation of meaning takes place. As such, I am interested in seeing how students both respond to and position themselves towards certain discourses as they talk about their experiences in the college (that is, a discourse about community college students as lacking academic rigor) and how they conform to, resist, contest or transform such discourses.

Method

Recruitment and procedure

This study is part of a larger action research project carried out at Greenfield Community College (synonym) between April 2010 – July 2011 by my colleague, Dr. Eduardo Vianna and myself. The reason for choosing the action research approach is based in the widely held recognition in educational research that this method offers great potential to both investigate educational practices and their impact on students and teachers, while at the same time developing and transforming them (Somekh, 2010, Langemeyer, 2011). However, for this particular study I will only be drawing on the first round of interview data that was collected as a part of the larger study (described in the next section) and will therefore not be going into depth in explaining all the participatory action research components.

Organized around weekly meetings with a group of students, the study centers on introducing cultural tools that help students discuss, reflect on, and amend their attitudes and practices of learning in synergy with their overall goals and life pursuits. Students are invited to participate in the group, which is entitled the Peer Activist Learning Community (PALC) and it was during the weekly meetings that the abovementioned tools were introduced to students. These cultural tools are introduced through the implementation of an array of collaborative learning activities, from critical readings to essay writing and group discussions.

Data. The study was conducted over the course of two semesters with 10-15 students who met on a weekly basis for 1-2 hour long meetings reflecting with the group on their learning and how it related to their life goals, envisioned careers and values. The aim of tracking changes in students' learning and identity processes was approached more specifically through the development of a comprehensive methodological framework that included the collection of (1) student essays, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) academic performance records (such as grades, attendance, and GPA) and lastly (4) field notes written by the researchers after the weekly meetings. Students were asked upon entering the Peer Activity Learning Community (PALC) to write an

autobiographical essay about themselves. For the present study I will primarily be drawing on the semi-structured interview as well as the autobiographical essays.

Recruitment. The participants in the study were recruited through flyers handed out at the college and later through “snowballing” recruitment done by the students themselves, as well as through announcements in Dr. Vianna’s classes. This recruitment method was used since it allowed the students to participate in recruiting other students as they assessed whether another student could possibly benefit from participating in the PALC. The primary criteria for recruitment were that it was (1) a student at Greenfield Community College, (2) who would be willing to loosely commit time to showing up to the weekly meetings. Students were not used as research participants while enrolled in Dr. Vianna’s classes. The project was presented to the students as a faculty-guided student guidance group while at the same time functioning as a voluntary participatory action research project. Students were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and that they were not required to participate in the study in order to attend the group meetings.

Sample. The sample consisted of a group of students with very diverse backgrounds. The goal of the study was to engage students who were interested in participating in reflecting on their own learning and engagement in the college. Although the students had some characteristics in common, the stated motivation for participating in the weekly meetings varied from being interested in getting support for learning to being interested in building relationships with other students and faculty and possibly many other reasons as well. In addition, while the sample is quite diverse (each participant representing a unique ethnicity) it does not reflect the ethnic and racial demographics of the college. Common for almost all the students however was that they were primarily from a working class background as well as being first-generation college students, as well as many of them being second generation immigrants. These shared characteristics indeed seemed to be very meaningful in how the students experienced and positioned themselves as learners in the college.

For the present paper I am drawing on the interviews conducted with nine of the students who participated in the peer activist learning community. The interviews were conducted after the students had participated in a couple of the weekly meetings and thus the analysis will not deal with the development of the students as they participated in the weekly meetings, but rather focus on their initial positionings as they entered the project.

College context: Greenfield Community College

Greenfield Community College is located in a low-income neighborhood in a large Northeastern city. On its website the college prides itself from serving students from more than 160 countries and thus the self-presented identity of the college is that it is a diverse college that serves primarily immigrants and first-generation immigrants. The ethnic breakdown for the Fall 2011 semester (during which the first round of data was collected) was 18% Asian, 15% Black, 37% Hispanic, 10% White, 3% other ethnic origin and 17% unknown. Fifty-eight percent of the students are foreign born and thus the college primarily serves immigrants as well as second-generation immigrants. The median yearly family income in the neighborhood, in which the college is located, is \$21,000 below the national average and with the percentage of individuals living below

poverty level more than double as high as the national average the community in which the college is located is an impoverished community (2000 Census data). While my sample is not representative in statistical terms, it does represent a fairly typical 'slice' of the population in terms of diverse ethnic backgrounds, first generation college students as well as primarily working class backgrounds.

Analysis

In the following, I seek to address questions about how students position themselves towards the meaning of academic learning and the pursuit of an education as they participate in an extra-curricular student guidance group. I also seek to look at how students make sense of the community college. Throughout the entire duration of the project meetings for informal analysis of the students' participation and development in the group were conducted. However formal analysis of the data collection started in the second year of the project. The audio interviews from 9 in-depth interviews (45-65 minutes long each) were transcribed and coded using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas Ti 6.0. The process of coding took place over several rounds of coding.

Firstly, all nine interviews were coded by employing a set of theoretically informed codes related to the research questions as well as coding anything that seemed relevant to the research questions. This initial stage of the analysis included coding any segments of the interviews in which students seemed to address how they positioned themselves as learners, how they thought about the college, how they reasoned their pursuit of education and their conceptions of academic learning. This first step in the process of analysis could be termed a *top-down* or deductive approach in that it was primarily driven by the aim of investigating students' positioning of the college, their positionings towards the meaning of learning and the pursuit of education (see table 1). Secondly, upon the first round of coding, I conducted an in-depth line-by-line coding of two randomly chosen interviews as a pilot analysis for generating more codes for later application to the rest of the sample. The main codes that developed during the process of line-by-line coding were: the transitional positioning of students towards the community college, students expressing struggling with financial strain, students speaking about having been stigmatized as learners and finally students speaking about transformative teaching-learning experiences. Thirdly, following the process of the analysis and reading of the interviews with the list of generated codes I created connections between codes and developed overarching themes that encompassed the various codes in a meaningful way. An overview of the findings can be seen in table 2, in which I present the general findings with examples and definitions. These will be explained in depth in the following section.

Making sense of the pursuit of education

In regard to student's positioning to the role of academic learning and the pursuit of an education, there seemed to be at least several discourses that were common across the interviews: (1) academic learning and the pursuit of postsecondary education seen as

something that leads to getting a stable job and thus as a way to achieve financial stability: vocationalism (or *careerism*, in Katchadourian & Boli, 1985). This vocational approach towards the meaning of the pursuit of education also seemed to be linked to viewing learning as an obligation and as primarily a mechanical process of acquiring marketable skills. (2) The second discourse was characterized by viewing academic learning as something that leads to personal satisfaction or is driven by own motivation and desires (beyond vocational focus) and finally (3) the third discourse was characterized by viewing education as something that allows one to help others (make a contribution, beyond individual focus). While for most of the students the vocational approach seemed to be the dominant discourse in making sense of their college experience and their reasons for pursuing post-secondary education, they also drew on the other discourses in reflecting on the meaning of education and learning for them. In fact, it appeared that for most of the students their biggest challenge in making sense of the pursuit of a post-secondary education was how to negotiate both the strife for financial stability, desire for personal fulfillment, and their desire for a meaningful education and career and the experienced contradictions between the various discourses.

Chris (note that all students' names are fictional to uphold their anonymity), a 20-year-old male of Italian and Dominican background was a full-time student, who also worked as sales clerk in a retail store and had been contributing financially to the household since the age of 17. Immediately prior to entering the PALC, Chris had decided that he was not going to pursue art as a major, in spite of the fact that drawing was his passion, and had switched to majoring in math and science instead. During the interview Chris rationalized this choice by arguing that majoring in science and pursuing a career in the medical field would ensure job security and thus financial stability.

C: Yeah, and plus like the medical field, and being... learning science and learning about math it's just... **more safer bet for having a career** (...) being more stable, so.. (Chris, line 64)

In this excerpt Chris positioned himself as somebody who was making a good career choice by drawing on a discourse about how pursuing a major in math and science and a career in the medical field inevitably is a safe and good choice. In contrast, however, Chris also in the interview brought up how an internship at a local hospital that he was pursuing at the time of the interview, was boring him, and it made him have second thoughts about his most recent choice of majoring in math and science.

C: Uh... The hospital I guess I like.. I know.. I should say it feels like so boring there sometimes.. like everything is so plain, people are in their uniforms, doing their jobs (...) and I just wish I could like be in a place where I.. maybe I'm just putting too much into my career and that's why I'm expecting too much from it... but I just want to be a place where I could just go and [it would] be.. be my second home. (Chris, line 124)

Chris expressed concern over his desire to pursue a meaningful career and confusion over whether his new major would actually lead to that. In speaking about his experience at the hospital, Chris moved from speaking in general terms to positioning himself in 'I' terms and thus grounded his positioning in his actual experiences in the medical field. By speaking about it from this point of view, Chris moved away from the other discourse he had drawn on where pursuing a career in the medical field was solely a good and safe choice. Thus, Chris seemed to be positioning himself by drawing on

competing discourses in terms of what the meaning of pursuing majoring in math and science as well as a career in the medical field meant to him – something that both ensured job security and could be exciting, but also something that was boring and at times worried him. This tension for Chris seemed to be related to his need for pursuing a career that both was interesting to him and that would allow him to achieve financial security. In concretely talking about what constituted a good job, Chris was bringing in both the vocational discourse as well as the need for feeling fulfilled.

N: (...) what defines a good job for you?

C: Something I feel self fulfilled in... something I can... I feel empowered in, and that [I] could get **motivation from, I could be inspired every day**, (...) uh... **something that could pay well** (...) and that I can, I don't have to worry about being just a...just like I always worry about I could be okay...it's just sustainability (...) you know just like having a good job that's in demand (Chris, line 481, my emphasis)

Chris' positioning here in terms of what the meaning of the pursuit of a major in science and math as well as what a good job was for him, is particularly interesting in light of Chris' at the time disengagement from the learning at the college. Chris had during the weekly meetings voiced concern about what he identified himself as a diminishing motivation to engage in the learning in the college and in reflection contrasted it with his much greater motivation and excitement about engaging in learning when he initially entered the college. Throughout the weekly discussions as well as during the interview, Chris referred to learning as a process of 'memorization', 'organization' and developing 'good habits'.

N: .. what are [some] obstacles for you in your process of learning? Do you have any?

C: Well, sometimes, like, I guess I'm not too consistent with studying. I might have two or three good days, and (inaudible) of studying, but then maybe [I'll] just take one day off, or the next day I [don't] study as hard as I should (...) so I guess staying consistent is one of my problems I have to work with (...) uh...like with math.. like math has so many symbols and so many steps to **memorize** (...) and I guess I also have.. I think I don't look at my notebooks, I have like **organization problems**.. so I [would] like to learn how to organize my notebook better (...) so I could actually go back and look [at what I've] understand, what [I've] done in the past (...) so I guess *that*. (Chris, line 278)

Chris identified more mechanical processes as being challenges for him in his learning, and thus he primarily placed an individual responsibility on himself for not being engaged in and motivated for learning. While Chris also spoke about his desire to be "motivated" and feel "self-fulfilled" by his career, Chris' major aim of pursuing education seemed to be marked by the vocational approach, which seemed to be connected to his notion of learning as a mechanical process of 'memorizing' and 'being organized'.

Michael, a Korean-American young man also drew heavily on the vocational discourse in reflecting on his decision to pursue post-secondary education.

N: mm.. okay.. tell me a little bit about who you would like to be.. what you would like to be doing in the future

M: (sighs).. should I talk about what I used to think or [what] I think now?

N: you could talk about both

M: okay.. well.. let's see... actually I always thought that school was useless.. yeah big time.. cause I see people's just doing regular jobs and they're still getting paid, trying to make a wage.. I never understood the concept of low salary and stuff..

N: they're still getting what.. paid?

M: like just.. they're still getting paid so basically still getting money so .. just normal.. that's how I thought.. and then um.. I guess that was after 2008 when the stockmarket went down and people started losing jobs and they were going into mortgage.. so I guess even before that I started getting like the sense 'oh.. school is important'.. so.. right now I don't see myself very far.. but just for now.. it's trying to finish this school [community college] off..

(Michael, p.2, bottom)

During the first PALC meeting Michael participated in, he talked about his lack of excitement about engagement in the college. In the following section he addressed how he in spite of his pursuit of the college degree still is not convinced that putting work in or trying to get on the dean's list by getting good grades is important to him.

N: mm.. mm.. okay, so what are some of the things that you most enjoy doing?

M: well for me is literally not putting in work (laughs)

N: is not what?

M: is not working (...) trying to like get the easy way out of stuff when I shouldn't yeah.. but that's my habit.. like if I have to do work, then I'll try to find like the easiest stuff.. and then pull that off.. and in the meantime I'll either be sleeping or.. doing stupid stuff on the internet

N: mm.. and why do you think that is?

M: because I'm being lazy (laughs) basically..

N: what does that mean

M: well.. .. back in the high school people.. well actually teachers always yell.. yelled at me saying like.. I should be doing better.. they say that I should be honors student or something.. something high.. class.. yeah I never did it, cause.. I thought it was a waste of time cause.. it's to me.. going to something like that is like just a title, like... here [at the college] there's like a dean's list.. which is nice to be on it, cause it's like a status thing.. but that's only.. that's the only way I see it.. it's a status (Michael, p.1-2)

For Michael, making sense of learning was primarily done from an external point of view, namely as something important to others (his teachers, his family). In addition, Michael described his own lack of engagement as equal to being lazy. Many of the students both during group sessions and in individual interviews talked about themselves as being lazy, when reviewing their positionings towards learning and as such individualized the responsibility for their own lack of engagement in the academic learning.

Like Chris and Michael, Ling, a Chinese-American woman who was struggling to become financially independent in order to move out of her foster-care home, also brought up how she initially pursued a degree in nursing with a primary focus on achieving a stable and financially secure job.

L: .. like I only wanted to do [nursing] for its financial reasons and things like that.. (line 197)

Ling was struggling financially, and desperately wanted to move out of her foster care home. A few weeks prior to the interview, Ling had received a letter from the nursing program letting her know that she again had been put on the waiting list. In making sense of this event, Ling – similarly to Michael in making sense of why he was not doing well academically - connected her being ‘lazy’ as one of the reasons that she had not made it into the nursing program.

L: yeah.. like I think.. I could have definitely tried harder.. in most of my classes.. like I was like really lazy.. in a way.. (...) like.. also like.. the study habits I had.. I would really procrastinate in a lot .. especially with English I would just write the paper before and then hand it in.. knowing that my grammar isn't like perfect.. so yeah.. I paid for it.. I mean I'm gonna learn from my mistakes..

N: and this has now informed your choice of like completely abandoning nursing and then moving

L: it's just cause..like I realized that I really didn't want to do that job.. cause that job was kind of told by me by somebody and then they were like ' you know it's a really good idea...and it can help you with your future and your life in that format and '.. so that plan was kind of like not my own (Ling, line 347)

Ling also here argued that her decision to pursue nursing had not primarily been driven by her own desire but rather by a more pragmatic approach to pursuing a career that would allow her to become financially independent quickly. Similar to Chris, Ling also identified a diminished excitement and motivation for engaging in the learning in the college; a tendency that she had a hard time explaining.

N: so going back to how you are as a student .. you said your study habits are bad.. that you cram things 'cause you're busy .. besides from that?

L: but now it's just it gotten into a habit .. it's .. like even if I'm not busy I will still cram like.. I can.. I can sit there for seven hours and study (laughs) (...) which is not good to do (...) but yeah..

N: are you very active in classes or are you participating in a more quiet way.. how do you ..

L: I mean in the beginning I.. I was participating like [in] my first classes.. but by the time my second semester came in the spring.. I was just like ‘whatever.. like I don't really need to participate .. this is..

N: why?

L: (inaudible)

N: what did that come from?

L: I don't know.. I guess like.. I just wasn't as motivated in school.. like my motivation was.. like I lost it.. and like it was there my first semester but the second semester I was just like .. just to like speak out in class just didn't really intrigue me.. (Ling, line 252)

Like Chris, Ling seemed to explain her own challenges to engagement in the learning in the college in terms of having developed ‘bad habits’, loss of ‘motivation’ or being ‘lazy’ and thus like Chris placed primarily an individual responsibility for not performing at her full potential in her classes. While Ling’s career goals were unclear, she expressed (when asked about where she saw herself in the future) a desire to work

for non-profits to improve conditions for children and youth in foster-care home and thus also engaged the third discourse (wanting to help others, make a contribution) by expressing a desire to help others who were experiencing the struggles that she was experiencing.

L: I mean that's the reason why I really feel passionate about trying to change the foster care system (...) it's like .. other people.. other kids going through the same thing as me and that's terrible .. and like how it's just getting worse and worse.. when it should be getting better.. so.. I'd definitely like if I ever do become successful .. or even like in a mild sense I'd always like to help (Ling, line 573)

Ling here seemed to express the view that before being able to engage in the meaningful work of transforming the foster care system, she would first have to become financially successful. Thus, it seemed that for Ling engaging both the first pattern, the vocational approach as well as the third pattern, moving beyond individual focus, were in opposition to each other, or at least one had to be pursued before the other.

Generally, it seemed that the students' goals and motivations for pursuing a college education, not surprisingly, were quite complex. Six out of the nine students drew primarily on the vocational discourse in talking about the meaning of the pursuit of a community college degree. While most of the students would emphasize the goal of achieving financial stability, they would also express a desire to pursue a meaningful career that they would be excited about, 'motivated' by, where they could 'help' others and thereby make a contribution. It appears that students have to negotiate the requirement of pursuing education with the aim of preparing themselves for the marketplace marked by a concern with their employability (their future exchange value) while at the same time having expectations and desires to feel motivated and excited about their pursuit of education as meaningful and allowing them to facilitate change as they see needed.

While the emphasis on achieving financial stability is not surprising, particularly considering the students working class and immigrant backgrounds in which expectations of significantly contributing to the household were commonplace, what is central here is how the focus on achieving financial stability (the vocational approach to education) seemed to be related to a particular positioning towards learning characterized by lack of excitement and motivation for participation in the academic learning. Rote learning practices are characterized by the view that knowledge and the process of learning occurs independently of who the learner is, that is, learning is not enacted as a process interspersed with the goals of personal becoming (who the learner is) and who the learner wants to become in mind.

For many of the students their strife for financial security seemed to be their primary emphasis before engaging their other desires beyond the vocational approach (helping others, doing activist work, etc.). For Ling, for example, her desire to advocate for foster care children was something she saw as temporally sequenced; something that could only be pursued once financial security had been established. This sequencing in the sense making of pursuing education seems to be detrimental for students in that it dehumanizes the learning process by making it primarily a process engaged in for the sake of future employability. For Ling this temporal sequencing of first achieving financial security (becoming a nurse) in order to later pursue a – to her - more meaningful agenda (seeking to transform the foster care system), paradoxically then

meant that she struggled to be achieving either. It seems therefore that students in the community college are being afforded certain types of subjectivities; pursuing education primarily with a vocational impetus. The vocational approach is not only individualizing, but it also seems to possibly have detrimental effects on students' motivation for engaging in the academic learning. Following this brief discussion, we might ask how first-generation and immigrant community college students' imagination about their future pursuits are challenged by a pressing need for more here-and-now goals of achieving financial stability.

The stigmatized community college and transitional positioning

Public discourse about the community college has historically been laden with negative images of the community college as lacking academic rigor (Beach, 2011). Students in this study seemed to embody this discourse by either resisting it or reproducing it, which for some of them also meant embodying a contradiction: being immersed in an educational institution, which requires engagement, while at the same time resisting the institution and thus not engaging due to the stigma attached. This transitional positioning was not unconnected to the students' overall vocational approach to the pursuit of education, but indeed should be understood in light of the vocational discourses about education that community college students in particular are being afforded.

During the many meetings as well as during the interviews, the topic of how students experience having been positioned as learners came up. In particular, one topic that emerged was students' responses to being positioned as certain types of learners qua being community college students. Hector, a 24-year-old American man of Dominican descent described a situation in which a professor questioned that he had actually written a paper that he had handed in. He reported how the teacher argued that the level of the paper was above her assumptions about his abilities and had argued that his "caliber of student" would not be able to perform at the level of the paper.

N: what did you understand was implied [when she used the word 'your caliber of student']?

H: well.. I think that she was saying.. that because I am a community college student.. I am not able to come up with this kind of work.. and... that's not true.. this isn't a third range place.. (...) a two year college doesn't mean that you can't be.. a certain kind of writer.. or a certain kind of analyst.. or any of that.. (Hector, line 90)

Seven out of the nine students in this study brought up the discourse about the community college as a less academically rigorous institution compared to other institutions and were responding to either other people's negative stereotypes about the college as an institution (high school teachers, family, professors at the college) or their own notions of this negative stereotype. In talking about her experiences at the college, Ling brought up how the conception of community college in her family was quite negative,

L: cause it was .. you know the name.. like a community college .. and I was raised in an Asian family and Asian people are like very umm.. uh... uh.. well prestigious I guess.. they want their children to go to the best schools so the relatives and my mom .. my relatives.. so they send their children to all like.. [Ivy League universities] and stuff like that.. and for them to hear 'oh you are going to community college'.. you know you are like rock bottom.. (Ling, line 200)

In this excerpt, Ling also showed how the meaning of being a community college student for her was constructed at the intersection of race/ethnicity. For Ling the stigma of being in the community college appeared stronger because being Asian according to her was contradictory with being a community college student in accordance with a discourse of Asians as being certain kinds of people who primarily go to ‘good’ schools, not community colleges. While Ling was resisting her family’s positioning of community colleges as less academically rigorous and prestigious institutions by arguing that she did not look down on community colleges, she contrarily suggested that the level of academic performance required was lower at the community college. This made her rationalize that it was great for her to go to a community college because she could get higher grades there compared to a four-year college.

L: especially because this is like a community college you don't really feel so competitive (Ling, line 289)

In contrast, Ling however also spoke about how she had not been getting very high grades and how she in fact due to a lower GPA (grade point average) than required did not get accepted into the nursing program.

L: um.. well.. last semester I actually kind of quit my job because it was kind of interfering.. like I was working in the fall in a doctor’s office but I was like 'ohh'.. it was too much and I wanted to get an A *and I didn't get an A* [whispers] but yeah..

N: you didn't get an A?

L: no (...) not in my anatomy and physiology class.. which was the first class I took in the semester .. it really shocked me.. that was the first tough class..

N: it shocked you that you didn't get an A?

L: no it shocked me how tough that class was.. (...) like I wasn't expecting .. I was expecting it to still be like science in high school (...) so then when I came here and I was taking like uh.. some of the tests I was like 'okay this is college level'.. (Ling, line 221)

Thus, for Ling it seemed that making sense of her own positioning in the college required her to negotiate different and seemingly contradictory discourses: the community college as being equal to having “hit rock bottom” where Asian students are not supposed to be (“Asian people [...] want their children to go to the best schools”), the community college as a place where it was easy to get good grades (“because this is like a community college you don't really feel so competitive”) and finally the community college as a place with a higher academic level than high school (“it shocked me how tough that class was”). For Ling it therefore also seemed that the negative stigma attached to the institution disallowed her to fully commit to the place as well as made her experience of not getting into the nursing program even worse. Thus, it seems that community college students find themselves in a particularly challenging process of making sense of their learning experiences in the college in light of the negative stereotypes attached to the institution that they are aware of and even accept to a significant degree. Michael, a Korean-American student also expressed that it is a common discourse that community colleges do not have a high rigorous academic standing, and that prior to coming to the college he indeed expected that the level would be that of high school.

M: yeah.. I thought that college.. especially [this college] cause you know you hear stories of [this community college] is not that great ... so I thought that

N: where did you hear that?

M: it's like a.. it's a short story that every high school kids learn about community colleges.. are not great.. so they.. they say it's like a basically.. high school again.. all over again.. high school (...) for two-three years.. so with that impression I was like.. (...) I could possibly do the same thing.. probably a little bit more effort.. but same thing.. (...) and then I learned.. you can't do that (laughs) (Michael, p.5)

It seems that in part the negative image of the community college as being similar to high school in academic performance requirements both for Michael and Ling meant that they got caught by surprise when according to both of them more than high school level performance was required of them. In fact, they both attributed their low GPAs in their first semester to their initial low expectations of the level of academic performance required in the community college. Students' expressed negative views of the community college seemed to be paired up with a fantasy of four-year colleges. When speaking about four-year colleges, Chris seemed to be drawing on a discourse about four-year colleges that resemble the stereotypical college experience represented in movies and popular media,

C: ... people in [this college] they kind of like take their classes and go home.. there is not really, not really... a unity in [this college] (...) you see people hanging out side and stuff but there is not really.. like I.. sometimes I visit [this four-year college] and there is like... like I feel like there is a connection with everybody...you know people, you know there is a team spirit and everything.. people wearing... their home... sweaters and everything.

(Chris, line 230)

Ling also compared the experience of being a community college student with what she imagined a four-year college experience might be.

L: like it's not a place like 'oh let's go hang out in the college.. cause it's so fun and cool'.. definitely not.. (...) like **I guess in a four year school you get that more sense of closure** .. (Ling, line 654, my emphasis)

Related to student's comparisons of the community college as similar to high school and the negative discourses of the community college as compared to the four-year college, another pattern developed across a number of the interviews, namely expressing a desire to exit out of the institution without an emphasis of anchoring in it, or to "get the hell out". Ling particularly brought up how she in part viewed her experience of being a community college student merely as a quick stepping stone to either a job or a four-year college,

L: it's like 'oh we're just here' you know.. it's like .. it's like high school.. **you're just here to learn and get out**.. (...) yeah.. and I was an A student [in highschool].. that's another reason why coming here was kind of like.. (sighs) like I don't know.. (...) it was a tough decision.. but

N: but you made it for several reasons.. partly also because you were in the city and you wanted to stay in the city?

L: and I wanted to graduate so then I can have a job.. and then by then if I.. well.. okay this is.. to get the nursing job.. and then once I get the nursing job I'll be employed and I can pay my own rent for more and have health insurance and also depending on the hospital.. they can pay to further my education.. (Ling, line 302, my emphasis)

Generally, the expressed desire to get out of the college seemed to be linked with the stigma attached to the institution. Students were expressing a desire to exit out of the institution and emphasized the temporary nature of their stay in the college when talking about the negative stigma attached to the institution. Students' discourse about the community college seemed largely to be infused by the negative discourse that surrounds the community college in public discourse (Dietrich, 1996; Tucciarone, 2007). Thus the *transitional positioning* as I name this particular time positioning by the students characterized by the desire to exit the institution quickly appeared to be impacted by their view of the community college as an undesirable institution to find oneself in. This entailed the ontological challenge for students of belonging to an educational institution while at the same time seeking to negate this belongingness. As mentioned earlier, recent developments in the retention literature has pointed to the need for focusing on students' sense of belonging as an integral element for bolstering against the high dropout rates. While this study points in a similar direction, a more critical investigation of how to conceptualize belonging is needed. Rodgers and Summers (2008) summarize that a sense of belongingness has been associated with many positive outcomes such as students' social acceptance as well as adaptive motivation for achievement, however a more critical conceptualization of belongingness has yet to be developed. Much of the theorizing about belongingness is still defined in passive terms, thereby neglecting to address the core issues that the learning identity literature (Lave, 1991, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Stetsenko, 2010, Nasir, 2009a, 2009b) identifies as crucial for successful learning settings to take place, namely the active participation and co-construction by and of the students in the teaching-learning practices. On the contrary, much of the retention literature (Tinto, 1988; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Summer & Rodgers, 2008) instead seems to be narrowly concerned with the mere process of retaining as many students as possible, as if the number of retained bodies in the institution was the primary goal of education in and of itself. Identifying the need for integrating belongingness into retention models (Summer & Rodgers, 2008) is rationalized in the retention literature more as a strategic move supported by the evidence of the positive outcomes it is associated with, rather than from a theoretical, ethical and actual standpoint in recognition of the importance of belongingness when belongingness is defined not only in passive terms.

Conclusion

The findings from this study point to several interesting and important insights with regard to how first generation community college students make sense of their pursuit of post-secondary education as they participate in an extra-curricular learning community. Very few studies have taken an in-depth look at how community college students make sense of their experiences as learners. The knowledge gained from this study could therefore be critical for further interventions in the community college in a time where new ways of understanding the educational crisis in the U.S. of the massive dropout rates in post-secondary education seems ever more pressings. Based on in-depth interviews with students participating in an extra-curricular learning community (PALC), one of the main insights from the present study is that students' primary vocational reasoning behind pursuing post-secondary education was related to a rote approach to learning, which for several of the students seemed to be detrimental to their

engagement in the academic learning in the college. This finding supports recent theorizing in the cultural historical framework suggesting that learning never happens apart from who the learner is and who the learner is becoming and that practices that do not take this into account such as the rote learning approach, will not be successful in promoting learning and development nor in increasing retention rates in community colleges. A critical examination and deconstruction of the dichotomous discourse of vocational training versus liberal arts aim of education seems pertinent in critically reviewing community college practices, particularly given the individualistic focus that both seem to promote: pursuing education for *own financial gains* or *own personal development*. Recent advancements in the cultural historical framework argues that learning and identity should be understood as collaborative pursuits of social transformation (Stetsenko, 2009; 2010). This notion of learning and identity thereby moves beyond the vocational framework that much of educational practices and theorizing is still steeped in, and instead places emphasis on the social and transformational qualities of learning and education. While the recent emphasis on the vocational purpose of the education is not surprising and should be understood in the wake of the current economic crisis, it fails to address the question about how education should be about more than preparing future workers in an already failing economy. Instead, by drawing on these recent advances in the field of learning and identity, it seems that community colleges' teaching and learning practices need to focus on how students can be afforded critical tools needed for participation in collaborative transformations of society. Stetsenko (2008) writes,

education is not about acquiring knowledge for the sake of knowing, but an active project of becoming human, a process that drives development and makes it possible (very much in line with the critical pedagogy's stance). Learning then appears as the pathway to creating one's identity by finding one's place among other people and, ultimately, finding a way to contribute to the continuous flow of sociocultural practices." (p.487)

In line with this formulation of what the meaning of education is, namely to allow people to become human through developing meaningful standpoints, making contributions and participating in the transformation of societal practices, we need to revise the educational teaching-learning practices currently undertaken in the community college. Furthermore, the paper illuminated how the continued stigmatization of the community college for many students was connected with a transitional positioning towards the pursuit of the associates degree as well as connected to a lack of belongingness to the institution. While most current theorizing in the field of education around the concept of belongingness in education still primarily draws on discourses of adaptation and fitting in I argue that grounded in the framework of CHAT we need to reconceptualize belongingness beyond this more adaptationist framework. Through the notion of the transformative activist stance defined as the process of developing an authentic and meaningful stance in a given practice, belongingness in educational practices and beyond should be about the dialectical process and possibly seeming contradiction of belonging to something in order to change that which one belongs to.

Appendix

Constructs used to read the data

Table 1 Constructs used to read the data

Construct	Operationalization
Discourses about the community college	I sought to identify students' expressions about how they viewed the community college and what kinds of meaning they attached to the institution. This included identifying how they spoke about it in general terms (prompted by my questions about what they thought it meant to be a community college student) as well as stories about particular experiences with peers and professors in the institution.
Positionings towards the meaning of learning and the pursuit of academic learning	Identifying how students position themselves towards the pursuit of post-secondary education as well as academic learning in the college as they speak about this in the interview. In recognition of the ongoing process of becoming (self and identity) I sought to identify multiple, parallel and competing positionings towards their pursuit of education and learning.
Competing and contradicting discourses about education and the community college	Identifying multiplicity of and contradictions between various positionings students embodied or expressed in relation to learning, the pursuit of education and the community college. Identifying the various discourses students engaged was a key element of investigating how students negotiated competing and contradicting discourses about the meaning of learning, education and the community college.

List of themes

Table 2 List of Themes

Themes	Definition	Examples
Meaning making of the pursuit of education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>vocationalism and the need for financial security</i> • <i>the desire for personal development</i> • <i>wanting to help others</i> 	Students ventriloquated several discourses. Ling e.g. talked about the need for gaining financial security as well as a desire for wanting to be motivated and excited about her career, as well as wanting to use her career for the purpose of helping others.
The negative image of the community college	<i>Students expressed negative attitudes towards the community college as an institution lacking academic rigor or accounted of other people holding such negative conceptions.</i>	Hector talked about experiencing that his professor had low expectations to him because he was a community college student.

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About the author

Naja Berg Hougaard is currently based at the CUNY Graduate Center pursuing her doctoral degree in the field of human development with an emphasis on the cultural historical activity theory tradition. Her research centres on the emancipatory potential of critical-theoretical teaching and learning in public higher education settings.

Contact: Department of Human Development, CUNY Graduate Center, Email: nhougaard@gc.cuny.edu