

## Abstract

This paper presents a review of twelve studies on the effectiveness of international service-learning projects. The purpose of this review is to analyze, through the use of themes, the goals and issues affecting outcomes of such programs in order to evaluate the current uses of international service-learning within multiple fields. International service-learning goals range from producing a sense of civic engagement to transformational pedagogy and should be examined for their effectiveness within higher education. This study was conducted in the form of a literature review focusing on international service-learning research taken from the early 2000's to the present. Data focusing on program goals and outcomes was collected, and the findings suggest that international service-learning programs must focus on more than critical reflection in order to produce change in its participants—both students and community members. The findings also suggest that programs set goals that are not always readily met, and therefore, a few recommendations have been made for program improvement.

## ***International Service-Learning: Common Goals and Issues Among Programs Across Disciplines***

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### **Introduction**

Service-learning pedagogy has been implemented in different disciplines throughout the years. Researchers have often argued whether service-learning should be considered a field or social movement and state that, despite being implemented in a variety of disciplines, service-learning is moving toward a field of its own due to its common body of knowledge produced as its research and theory develops (Giles, 1994). Implemented with the intent of extending service-learning across the globe in order to promote understanding and communication between nations, international service-learning research calls for an even more solid theoretical framework, as well as practice, as we consider the potential impact international service-learning can have on many disciplines around the world. Since international service-learning is interdisciplinary, there are many different goals for these programs throughout the world. However, the majority of programs implementing international service-learning as pedagogy state that civic engagement, critical reflection, and social awareness are goals that should be met through the program.

Service-learning projects hope to meet these goals through pedagogy that is both reflective and experiential. With different international service-learning programs within a variety of fields, it is important to have an understanding of the purpose and relevance of international service-learning in order to unearth effective executions of service projects on an international scale. While there have been literature reviews conducted on international service-learning literature and pedagogy (Crabtree, 2008), there still remains a need to focus on common goals and issues that arise during international service-learning projects—in all disciplines.

As a result, the purpose of this literature review is to present findings from twelve studies on international service-learning that articulate common goals and issues that arise in meeting outcomes in order to recommend improvement for future programs.

## **International Service-Learning Scholarship**

### **Scope of This Review**

This review was conducted to analyze the goals of twelve international service-learning projects in relation to issues that arose in meeting the outcomes of the projects as detailed from the studies. The overall goal of this review is to provide information on international service-learning so that an interested reader has enough information to see common goals between programs and understand what could be deterring the programs from meeting those goals in order to better comprehend service-learning in an international context. In order to meet the goals of this literature review, the following methods were used to locate and choose appropriate data sources.

#### *Data Collection*

For the purpose of this review, twelve case studies focusing on international service-learning were chosen because they involved student and faculty experience working within an international context as service was conducted for course credit. The purpose behind this restriction in the data collection was to ensure that the themes derived from the data analysis were emerging from similar studies in order to have continuity and consistency, especially since these studies were conducted across different disciplines. More specifically, the following criteria were used to distinguish appropriate studies to include in this review: 1. The studies must be published in academic, peer-reviewed journals. 2. The studies must be conducted on international service-learning projects as opposed to domestic service-learning projects. 3. The studies must be empirical—including qualitative or quantitative data focusing on the goals, issues, and outcomes of the international service-learning projects.

In order to meet the criteria restrictions, I looked for studies in academic databases such as JSTOR and ERIC, as well as online journals focusing on service-learning such as the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* and *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. The following keywords were implemented in my search for appropriate studies: international service-learning, goals, outcomes, and case study. The articles that were initially listed as relevant were then collected and the abstracts were read to continue narrowing down relevant sources for this study. As a result, twelve articles met all of the above criteria and were used in conducting this review.

#### *Data Analysis*

After the collection of appropriate sources for this study was complete, a content analysis of the data was conducted in order to identify themes across the different studies. This was beneficial because the studies were taken from a variety of disciplines with only the overarching focus of international service-learning in common. Therefore,

the results of this analysis provide a deeper understanding of the goals and outcomes of international service-learning programs and projects within a variety of different disciplines, places, and types of service. By conducting a content analysis on these different studies, themes emerged that provide a greater understanding of the role international service-learning plays in higher education.

The analysis process for the studies was as follows. The studies were each read once for understanding. As this was done, open-coding was used to find relevant themes in each article. Since open-coding was used initially, any information regarding the project's goals, issues, or outcomes was noted in the margins of the article. Then, after analyzing all of the articles' open codes, the codes were collected and put into larger themed codes for deeper analysis within the study as a whole. The codes that emerged dealt with project goals, issues, and recommendations for further research. Each of these themes will be expanded further in the results section of this paper. The studies used were as follows:

**Figure 1**

<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Focus</b>
<i>Prins &amp; Webster</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>Examines student cross-cultural learning and interactions while in Belize</i>
<i>Acquaye &amp; Crewe</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>Emphasizes how a social work program at Howard University resulted in increased participation for students of color</i>
<i>Liu &amp; Lee</i>	<i>2011</i>	<i>Explores cross-cultural experiences of college students performing international service-learning in Myanmar</i>
<i>Miller &amp; Gonzalez</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>Explores pre-service teacher outcomes in domestic and international service-learning contexts</i>
<i>Kiely</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>Provides a longitudinal case study from service-learning projects in Guatemala in order to provide a model for transformational pedagogy in international service-learning</i>
<i>Amerson</i>	<i>2012</i>	<i>Explores how an international service-learning (ISL) project fostered transcultural self-efficacy in nursing students participating in the project</i>
<i>Cabrera &amp; Anastasi</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>Explores whether transborder service-learning would develop a greater understanding of transborder issues and a sense of responsibility to help fix them</i>
<i>Crabtree</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>Focuses on both positive and negative outcomes of a recent service-learning trip in Nicaragua</i>
<i>Ducate</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>Describes a 4-week-long English class in Germany and provides student feedback on the ISL experience</i>

<i>Greenburg</i>	2008	<i>Discusses the author's experiences as he partnered, developed, and implemented an ISL project in Latin America</i>
<i>Taylor</i>	2009	<i>Examines student and teacher experiences during an ISL project in Guatemala</i>
<i>King</i>	2004	<i>Explores how students learn to critically examine self and society after engaging in an ISL project</i>

\*All focuses taken directly from studies

### **Focus Questions**

The questions that guided this review are as follows:

1. What are the goals of international service-learning projects, and how are these projects designed to meet their goals?
2. What issues arose within projects, and did these issues affect the project outcomes?
3. How is international service-learning research developing through these studies? What recommendations for further research were given?

### **Results**

The results of the analysis show themes that emerged from the twelve studies on international service-learning. As a result, these themes represent commonalities in program goals, issues relative to program outcomes, and suggestions for improvement in future international service-learning programs.

### ***Importance of Research***

International service-learning scholars have stated the importance of having a research agenda, especially as service-learning moves into a field of its own (Kiely, 2005; Giles, 1994; Ver Beek, 2002; Crabtree, 2013). The importance of continued research within international service-learning stems from the need to have solid theory that guides pedagogical practice (Kiely, 2005; Giles, 1994). Therefore, international service-learning researchers state that research must be conducted in at least two areas: extensive research within the field and research conducted specifically for each service project (Giles, 1994; Crabtree, 2013; Kiely, 2005; Ver Beek, 2002). The difference between these two types of research is that research within the field focuses on theory, case studies, pedagogy, etc., while project-specific research includes learning about the community in order to further aid its needs (Ver Beek, 2002). Ver Beek (2002) states that projects must seek to understand the issues they come into contact with to a greater degree in order to be effective (62). Therefore, learning about a community before engaging in a service project allows service teams to better meet the needs of the community. On the other hand, learning about the project through qualitative and quantitative research allows members of the field to learn more about international service-learning's role in the community and education itself. Overall, international

service-learning must have a strong research agenda in order to continue improving theory and practice, which is reflected in many of the articles used in this study.

### ***Goals for International Service-Learning***

#### *a. International Service-Learning as Civic Engagement*

A major goal of service-learning has been to promote civic engagement and social awareness to students participants. International service-learning reflects these ideals as trips to other countries are used to instruct students how to analyze social dimensions through critical reflection and collaboration with the community in which they are working. Green (2003) states that service-learning has always been more than “doing good” (276), and therefore, we must instruct students in a way that allows them to develop a need for social awareness and civic engagement. Civic engagement and social awareness are goals for every one of the programs studied within this review. Not only are these goals sought for the students as they interact with community members, but the goals are also for faculty and staff as they develop a team of students for these projects. Acquaye and Crewe (2012) state that international service-learning teams often underrepresent students of color and that, as a goal of international service-learning, social justice should be met by all. Therefore, in order for international service-learning to accomplish its goal of civic engagement, all students and staff must develop awareness of social inequalities and injustices and then work alongside community members to produce change for good (Amerson, 2012). Furthermore, international service-learning encourages examining one’s own values, culture, and country in order to engage in civic action on a global scale. Since service-learning is not merely community service, the goal of such programs becomes civic engagement that is born out of students’ desires to see change in a community they have come to relate to or appreciate through their time spent within the service project (Kiely, 2004, 2005; Ver Beek, 2002).

#### *b. International Service-Learning as a Transformative Experience*

International service-learning has the ability to engage students in transformational learning as they participate in a service project that aims to change their worldview. Mezirow (1991) created a model that has helped recent international service-learning researchers explore the implications of service-learning as transformative pedagogy. This model focuses on enabling students to see the social dimensions of their own communities in light of the problems occurring in the communities they interact with in their time of service. The model’s results suggest that “well-integrated service-learning programs focusing on social change, and emphasizing quality community placements, reflection, community voice, and diversity into their pedagogy are more apt to lead to transformative learning outcomes” (as cited in Kiely, 2004). Therefore, in order to be effective, transformative pedagogy through international service-learning focuses on enabling students to relate to the community through experience in order to promote transformation and understanding. In order to accomplish transformation, this theory focuses on how students learn as opposed to what they learn and also seeks student understanding during the process of both serving and learning (Kiely, 2005). As a result, it is the process of learning about the

community that provides transformation and a desire to continue aiding through service and civic engagement.

Furthermore, the studies call for service-learning as a transformative experience in a variety of different areas. While researchers like Kiely (2004, 2005) call for learning that is transformative for the students, others call for experiences that promote transformation in the community, in social dimensions, and in the type of reflection that leads to action within the service team. Kiely (2005) states that transformative learning extends well beyond critical reflection in a way that promotes lasting change in the mindset of the students engaging in the service work. He proposes that transformation moves beyond reflection through dissonance, personalizing, processing, and connecting (12). Dissonance refers to a student's realization of the inconsistencies of his or her previous frame of reference versus the contextual factors he or she sees during the length of the project (Kiely, 2005). Through dissonance, students begin a repositioning process that allows them to rethink assumptions about class and privilege as they deal with these aspects on a personal level as well as through self-examination during the service project (Kiely, 2005). Finally, as students connect with the community and project, their mindsets are transformed as they desire to contribute to lasting change through reflection and action.

### *c. Critical Reflection*

A major focus of international service-learning pedagogy is on critical reflection that leads to action. While Miller and Gonzalez's (2010) study showed that critical reflection paired with course themes led to students' adopting career-related outcomes after their service projects (32), others have noted that critical reflection must be monitored through classroom activities with the intent of helping students move past reflection into action (Kiely, 2004, 2005; King, 2004). Furthermore, research on service-learning indicates that, while critical reflection is useful, it is not the only means necessary to developing critical consciousness within the students as they interact with the community. King (2004) discusses the defamiliarization students go through as they learn to identify more closely with community members' perspectives as opposed to their prior beliefs and assumptions (132). Through the notion of caring for the community members, students were able to defamiliarize themselves from what they thought they knew to what they saw, which allowed them to critically reflect on their preconceived notions, as well as the issues surrounding the community. However, while all of the studies represented here call for critical reflection, they all relay the importance of reflection that leads to awareness and then action—not reflection that does not move forward. The goal of service-learning is to enable students to question preconceived notions about society. As students see the contrast between their own lives versus what they witness on site during their service, they begin to question as they critically reflect on the reasons for these stark differences. Ruo-Lan and Hsin-Hua (2011) state that this reflection must be ongoing in order for students to truly learn.

Much of the critical reflection seen in these articles is through the medium of writing. The majority of international service-learning projects require students to reflect on their experiences through dialoging or writing in journals. Acquaye and Crewe (2012) assigned guided journaling after their students returned home while Greenburg (2008) and Cabrera and Anastasi (2008) required questions and journals. Jacoby (2009) states that reflection through writing should be a focus for learning in these service projects.

Therefore, it is through writing and dialoging that students are able to voice their critical reflections in a way that leads to their action.

*d. Nonreflective Modes of Learning*

Kiely (2005) argues for the inclusion of nonreflective modes of learning within international service-learning projects. He states that these types of learning, such as collaboration with the community, caring, relating, and listening are ways of connecting with a community that do not require critical reflection (11). While Kiely argues that many service-learning projects value critical reflection over nonreflective modes of learning, there remains a need for these types of nonreflective learning in the literature used in this study. King (2004), a critical pedagogue analyzing the extent that privilege plays a role in service-learning projects, argues that collaboration and caring are two of the top priorities in any service-learning project. Green (2003) states this personal connection is what can aid students as they attempt to bridge their experiences with what they see at the service site (283). While many researchers have stated the need for critical reflection in order to help students identify and relate to the community members, King (2004) states that the students in his international service-learning project in Tijuana, Mexico did not need to critically reflect on the situation to understand how their experience “fundamentally differed” from the children’s (130). Furthermore, Ver Beek (2002) asks service-learning educators to remember that more than a superficial understanding of the “served” community is needed in order to provide sustainable service-learning projects. In order to be effective, an international service-learning project must allow students to relate and collaborate with community members on a different level than through critical reflection alone.

Service-learning researchers have struggled with constructivist-led critical reflection as the sole means of promoting action because critical reflection is often done in the classroom away from the community (Kiely, 2005). However, nonreflective modes of learning within the field of practice paired with critical reflection can lead to action as students relate, listen, and learn to care for the community members they come into contact with. Since the goal of international service-learning is to provide communities across the world with aid and empowerment, it is important that service-learning pedagogues and researchers remember that interpersonal collaboration between students and the community can lead to caring and empowerment—with a smaller chance of privilege from either side (King, 2004).

*e. Sustainability*

International service-learning has been used throughout so many disciplines that the types of service-learning opportunities are almost endless. However, while there are many types of services being conducted globally, not all of them are as useful to community members as they could be. Ver Beek (2002) notes that international service-learning pedagogues must ask whether each project, “will be sustainable given the human, environmental and economic resources available locally” (64). It is with this issue of sustainability that most international service-learning advocates struggle, and it is also the reason behind the need for long-term service projects. The studies used in this literature review consistently state that long-term projects are ideal because they promote sustainability as the community members and project staff members work together to enact change that is lasting (Ver Beek; 2002; Kiely, 2004, 2005; Crabtree, 2013; Taylor; 2009). Furthermore, sustainability is a long-term goal of international

service-learning projects, especially when the projects deal with environmental work. Therefore, researchers state that, in order to be truly effective, service-learning projects must be sustainable in order to enrich the community rather than burden it further (Ver Beek, 2002).

## ***Issues***

### ***a. The Label “Tourist” Versus Having a Tourist Gaze***

As an international practice, service-learning requires students to leave the country that they are most familiar with in order to travel to another country in order to conduct service. As a result, students are often placed in hotels and hostels and can be mistaken for tourists instead of community members. Prins and Webster’s (2010) study analyzes the effect the term “tourist” had on students working on a service-learning project in Belize. Prins and Webster (2010) note that tourists are usually in a foreign country due to leisurely activities while international service-learning projects require students to work hard in order to receive academic credit (8). Researchers note that a fundamental aspect of international service-learning is collaboration with community members (Kiely, 2005; Annette, 2002; Ver Beek, 2002; Prins and Webster, 2010; King, 2004; Taylor, 2009). While the tourist label may not hinder students’ ability to work with community members, it can be noted that the term tourist can conjure negative stereotypes in the community about privileged Americans on vacation instead of being willing to communicate and collaborate for change (Prins and Webster, 2010). Not only does the term tourist have the power to evoke negative emotions in community members, but this term can also produce negative feelings in the students who want to relate to the community members in order to aid and empower them (Ver Beek, 2010). Furthermore, the term tourist, paired with the notion of privilege, can further burden the barriers of culture, language, and race that are already present in these projects (Green, 2003).

On the other hand, while students do not want to be labeled tourists and will often go out of their way to dispel stereotypes, they often struggle with viewing the community from a “tourist gaze” versus from a critically reflective stance. Students working on a service project in an international context often feel they must adapt to the environment and can look at their new surroundings from a non-native or tourist perspective (Prins and Webster, 2010; Annette, 2002; Kiely, 2004, 2005; Amerson, 2012; Ruo-Lan & Hsin-Hua, 2011; Ducate, 2009). The goal is not to get students to see from a community member’s stance, but rather, to instruct students how to see the social inequalities present in the community through time spent with members as well as critical reflection. If students can see past the “tourist gaze” then they are better able to work alongside the community instead of for it (Prins and Webster, 2010). Overall, while a tourist gaze can hinder the service project, students usually are able to overcome feeling out of place through interaction with community members. As students interact with community members, relationships that are mutually respectful have the chance of forming as students see that they need the help of the community members as well to effectively complete the service project (Prins and Webster, 2010).

### ***b. Who Benefits?***

While international service-learning projects are intended to provide service and awareness of unequal social dimensions, data from the studies consistently show the need to understand who is benefiting from the service. According to Ver Beek (2002), many international service-learning projects do not fully understand the “true dilemmas of poverty and consequently provide little or no lasting benefit” (55). Like Ver Beek (2002), others have commented on the notion of “spring break projects” and short-term projects that may provide little, if no help at all (to the students and community) (Kiely, 2004; Ver Beek, 2002). Furthermore, King (2004) states that international service-learning can serve as the parallel to Freire’s term *extension*. This term means that the person with the expertise (in this case the service) can lend the receiver powerless (123). Ver Beek (2002) also acknowledges this distinction and states that service projects must be designed so that “all should be contributing and benefitting from the relationships [developed during the project] (58).” Therefore, the goal is to have students learning with and from the community, and then the service project becomes more than just service to a community. The project becomes a relationship-forming task that allows all involved to learn about each other and work together so that those “serving” understand that they do not have all the resources and answers. In order to be effective, international service-learning must incorporate observation of, and communication with, the community.

Not only can there be an unbalanced power dynamic between provider and receiver, but there can also be power struggles within the confines of the service-learning team itself. Higher education is still primarily dominated by the white, middle class (Green, 2003), and this notion is often reflected in project teams for service-learning. As a result, Acquaye and Crewe (2012) studied an international service-learning program dedicated to including students of color as they advocated human rights and social justice through the international service-learning project. In the same regard, Green (2003) states the need for instructors to include “difficult stories” that detail social inequalities and injustices when teaching service-learning pedagogy so that the underprivileged do not remain so. In each of these studies, the researchers expressed the need for critical reflection and action in their students in order to create opportunities for social change. However, researchers are also careful to point out that an American group dominated by privileged white students does not always suggest social change. Instead, international service-learning should include students from many different backgrounds in order to ensure the validity of the reflection and action. Finally, the studies suggest that reflective action from the students must be coupled with those in the community in order to be effective and in order to create a program structure that does not place those being “served” as inferior to the “servers.”

### *c. Tensions in Moving From Awareness to Action*

Researchers have noted the tensions students feel as they gain a more thorough awareness of social issues that extend beyond national borders. Kiely (2004) and Cabrera & Anastasi (2008) both state that students often find themselves in a strange place between awareness and action as they realize the need for change within a community but struggle with enacting that change through what they learned during their service projects. Kiely (2004) labels this struggle the *chameleon complex* and states that a disconnect can arise out of what students aim to do with the knowledge and awareness they have gleaned from the experience versus what they actually do

(16). Along with the frustration in how little students feel they accomplish, Taylor (2009) states that many service projects are under time constraints that can add pressure to those involved. Many projects are conducted over spring break and last little over a week. Other projects last much longer, but students still feel pressure if not given the right resources. Therefore, while students deal with frustrations, they can often be offset if given the right curriculum that focuses on pairing with the community, and then the proper outlet for reflection at the end of the project.

### ***Recommendations for further research***

The twelve studies used in this literature review provide valuable information on the current uses of international service-learning within the field. Each study focuses on the objectives of the service programs in order to assess whether the outcomes meet these objectives, and if not, what changes need to be made. Therefore, researchers suggest implementing their recommendations in the future for further success in international service-learning programs. Some of the recommendations are: focus on relational aspects of service-learning (Crabtree, 2013), come to learn (Ver Beek, 2002), and tell the difficult stories (Green, 2003).

Researchers have stated that the relational aspects of service-learning projects are of utmost importance because they encourage communication and understanding between project members and community members. Crabtree (2013) notes that in order to be effective, service-learning must promote the relationship between project and community members so that learning that is two-way and promotes change can happen. King (2004) states that the best way to accomplish this is through caring and cooperation and that continued research in this area is beneficial for all involved in these projects.

Ver Beek (2002) suggests that further research be conducted on the difference between projects that “come to serve” versus those that “come to learn.” While he briefly shows the difference between the two, he states that continued analysis of the benefits of learning from the community is important because it creates project members that value and empower those they are working with through the service. Service projects that come to learn allow mutual-respect relationships (Prins and Webster, 2010) to form as students realize how much they can learn from the community.

Finally, Green (2003) states that in order to advance the field of service-learning, the difficult stories involving class and race must be spoken of when teaching a service-learning course. She states that white, middle class students have been taught to silence those difficult stories, but if service-learning wishes to improve and advance, then these stories must be dealt with in order to enact change in both the service projects and the community members themselves.

Each of these areas for further research were recommended by the articles used in this study with the intent of extending the field of international service-learning and improving its implementation within a variety of fields. Also, further research can be conducted on the theoretical foundations of service-learning so that we have a greater understanding of the reasoning behind the current practices of international service-learning. Annette (2002) states that international service-learning no longer only

includes U.S. or U.K. students, but rather, has truly extended around the globe as instructors see the value in fostering social justice agendas in service-learning pedagogy. However, many studies continue to focus on American international service-learning projects and programs. Therefore, it would be beneficial if future research included studies on international service-learning from a variety of countries.

### **Limitations**

As Kraft (2002) and Kiely (2004) note, a large portion of international service-learning research is anecdotal in nature. The nature of this research has been beneficial for the purpose of this article; however, this study does contain limitations due to the parameters that were set in this particular context. As noted above, this study was conducted using case studies as a primary method of data collection. As a result, the majority of the data collected was qualitative in nature, which makes it more difficult to gather themes that translate over disciplines and populations. While, it provides interesting findings, a larger study will be necessary for more cohesiveness in the field of international service-learning.

### **Conclusion**

International service-learning is a fast-developing field that is widespread across disciplines. With a focus on civic engagement, transformative learning, critical reflection, and caring for communities, international service-learning has the potential to impact students across the world if implemented correctly. The studies used in this literature review reveal valuable information about current international service-learning projects implemented in many different countries. These studies have shown that while critical reflection is useful, international service-learning must become more than an intellectual project to be effective. International service-learning projects must emphasize partnerships between the projects and communities, and students must understand their role in enacting change in the community in order to be truly effective in meeting the goals of international service-learning projects.

### **Future Research**

As international service-learning scholarship progresses, the field has the opportunity to move in a variety of directions that will aid students in their development of civic engagement for social justice. As can be seen from this study, many service-learning programs implement writing journals as a means of developing reflective action; however, there are very few studies that focus on writing development within the entire international service-learning project in order to promote literacy development. Therefore, I believe that future research within international service-learning should explore the relationship between reflection and literacy—both for the students and community members—in order to align international service-learning with composition studies. Compositionist Claude Hurlbert (2012) also urges the field of composition to consider teaching from an international perspective; “one informed by international connection, dialogues, and exchanges and that has the possibility to take us beyond

national and cultural boundaries that currently limit our vision and practices” (51). While he calls for international learning in the field of composition, there remains a lack of literature dedicated to international learning within composition at this point in time. Out of the literature found for this study, only three articles were written primarily for the field of composition. While the studies used detailed the use of journals and writing for critical reflection development, none of the articles focused on how the students’ writing developed throughout the entirety of the service program. Therefore, in my future research, I would like to link international service-learning to literacy development and explore the relationship between writing at all stages of the service project in order to develop literacy skills within a multilingual composition classroom.

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