

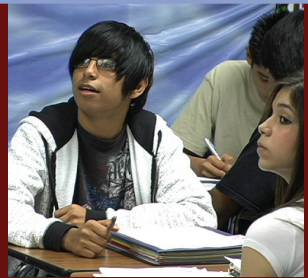
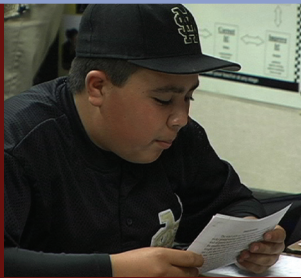
# VIEWING GUIDE

30  
minutes

ROBIN TURNER



## ACADEMIC LITERACY



PREPARING ALL STUDENTS *for* SUCCESS  
*in* COLLEGE *and* BEYOND

*Academic Literacy* was filmed at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, California. Robin Turner is a high school teacher and the author of *Greater Expectations: Teaching Academic Literacy to Underrepresented Students* (Stenhouse, 2008), as well as a teacher leader for colleagues throughout California working with students who are underrepresented in college preparatory programs. The filming took place during an April visit to Turner's tenth- and eleventh-grade English classes.

This guide is designed to help facilitators use the video in workshop settings. The plans provided are flexible, allowing you to tailor the suggestions to the needs of your group.

Support materials for the video segments include questions for discussion and handouts from *Greater Expectations*.

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## Introduction

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In this segment, Robin Turner, students, and parents talk about their experiences at Magnolia High School, as well as the challenges of working with populations that have little or no history of attending college in their families.

To prepare to view the segment, you may want to distribute copies of the Two-Column Notes Form (Figure 1). Participants may also want to read Figure 2: Puente: The Bigger Familia for more background on the Puente program for underrepresented students.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What support is provided to underrepresented students in your school?
2. What are some of the specific needs of underrepresented students that might be targeted in English classrooms?
3. Turner says, “To truly care about adolescents today you have to be realistic with them . . . I’m not a fan of lowering the standards to enable kids to get into an advanced placement class or college, but I am a big fan of interceding early.” Do you agree or disagree with this quote? Why? What types of intercessions do underrepresented students often need?
4. The concept of *familia* is important to students and teachers at this school. How is *familia* integrated into the support provided to students?

## University Essays

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For this assignment, students blend research and autobiographical writing. Students choose a university they are interested in, research the institution, and interview students who attend it.

To prepare to view this segment, you may want to read Figure 4: Familia and Culture at the Beginning of the School Year for more background on how support is put in place for students at the start of the year.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How might the university paper change a student's perception of the college application process?
2. What are the benefits of completing the university paper assignment during the sophomore year in school?
3. Turner talks about the importance of introducing academic literacy in very small chunks. Why might underrepresented students benefit from breaking up instruction into smaller chunks?

## Community Leadership Writing

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In this segment, Robin Turner demonstrates two of the key components of his teaching: 1) using student and literary texts as examples, and 2) integrating academic language into discussions of these texts. Students then attempt to write their own short drafts, and they receive feedback from their peers during the workshop.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Turner chooses to partner or group students to ensure that peers get a range of responses. How do you group students?
2. Do you use peer response groups in your classroom? Why or why not?
3. Turner explains that his role when he circulates among the groups is to respond to work and to look for things that are getting in the way of student success. What is your role as you circulate among groups?

## Lead Sentences

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In this segment, students share just a small chunk of their writing—the lead sentences from their community leadership writing—in groups and with the whole class. More details on the biographical paper assignment are available in Figure 3: Community Leadership Paper.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Turner focuses so much on the lead for this assignment?
2. What is the value of students sharing their writing with the whole class?

## College Bound

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In this segment, students and faculty share how the focused support leads to greater expectations and college achievement.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What are the greatest challenges you face in reaching students who have low aspirations for college?
2. What would an ideal program look like at your school?  
How would it be different from what you have viewed on the video?

### Classroom Extension

To try out some of the teaching methods used by Turner, you might attempt the biographical essay assignment in Figure 3 with your students.

Figure 1: Two-Column Notes Form

What I Notice	What I Wonder

**Figure 2: Puente: The Bigger Familia**

by Robin Turner (excerpt from *Greater Expectations*)

To fully understand the success that my Puente classes have experienced, we need to look at the bigger picture of the organization. I have worked with other educational and college preparatory institutions before but have never experienced anything quite like Puente training. Just as succeeding with underrepresented students requires a different sort of approach, so does training teachers to work successfully with them.

Unlike most training programs, where a presenter leads a group of strangers through a particular teaching technique or set of strategies, the Puente Summer Institute (PSI) always begins with the introduction of the concept of *familia*. From the first moments of a new Puente teacher's or counselor's training, relationships are emphasized, and, just as in the classroom, the assets that each participant brings are valued. The training is planned and implemented by Puente counselors and teachers rather than individuals who are disconnected from the classroom experience. Indeed, this philosophy runs through all of Puente's trainings: teachers and counselors, as professionals, have great awareness of an insight into how to imbue students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. Much of the training asks participants to work alongside one another in the spirit of *familia* in order to plan, develop, and problem-solve their way through the school year.

Throughout the eight days of the Puente Summer Institute (PSI), teachers and counselors develop a sense of *familia*, are introduced to Puente alumni and their parents, examine data regarding underrepresented students in the United States, discover ways to include parents and the community in the education of their students, and, most important, engage in pedagogy that begins with the student and his or her culture(s) through student writing. This approach was summed up by Dr. Claudia Canizales, my co-trainer, as a pedagogy of *cariño*:

For educators, having an asset-based perspective on what Latino students and their families bring to schools, also allows for the development of other pedagogies which have been proven to foster Latino student academic success . . . One such pedagogy is that of *cariño* . . . a pedagogy of *cariño* challenges educators to analyze their perceptions and preconceived notions. [Valenzuela] notes, "a teacher's attitudinal predisposition is essential to caring, for it overtly conveys acceptance and confirmation to the cared-for student."

## Figure 2 (continued)

In a spirit of *cariño*, participants write every day, share their work with the others throughout the institute, and record their reflections in learning logs, just as students would do in a Puente classroom. The writing usually begins with a piece of literature, such as Sandra Cisneros's "Eleven" or Lydia Cortes's "I Remember," that focuses on our own experiences and ideas. We share our writing in groups (trainers write with participants just as teachers write with students in a Puente classroom), enjoying a nurturing environment in which strong lines are pointed out and questions are asked to prompt further development. In short, we experience *familia*, and that drives us to write better.

By sharing the power of creating a sense of *familia* and engaging participants in an academic setting with high expectations, we enable them to truly understand how to run a Puente program on their own campuses and in their own classrooms. One counselor, Rudy, described his understanding of the program in his learning log as follows:

The counselor and English teacher must share the same vision to make sure their students 1) know about college, 2) set high expectations, 3) communicate and mentor using modeling, reflecting, and discussing.

Unlike many training programs, in which the most that one can hope to come away with is a handful of strategies, PSI leaves its participants (and trainers) inspired, conscious of a deeper sense of purpose, connected to a professional *familia* with high expectations, and armed with a handful of strategies. Like students who graduate from a Puente program, participants often are somewhat emotional at the end; tears and hugging take place at our "graduation," where we share our writing and reflect on what the week has meant to us. I have been overwhelmed by the experience of being surrounded with bright, sharp, competent, and caring teachers and counselors, all of whom leave utterly committed to helping the students they serve to achieve their dreams. It is, without a doubt, the best staff development event I have ever participated in—in fact, I cringe when it is referred to as "staff development," because it goes so much deeper than that. Raquel Topete, an experienced teacher with great passion for her students, wrote at the end of the institute that the

. . . whole experience has been phenomenal. I've said this before, but really, I know that I am blessed for not everyone gets to encounter such inspiring, brilliant, and driven individuals all at once. This may sound cheesy, but I have attended MANY trainings, summer institutes, profes-

**Figure 2 (continued)**

sional developments, and although I always gain from them, this is the first time that I will leave with a total sense of empowerment.

This feeling of empowerment is what separates Puente training from so much of the current training aimed at teachers today. The Puente program honors teachers and values their knowledge, experience, and insight into what fuels underrepresented students with motivation and academic skills.

**Figure 3: Community Leadership Paper**

by Robin Turner (excerpt from *Greater Expectations*)

When the word *culture* is used, most people think of race or ethnicity. However, a person is shaped by many cultures that reach far beyond race. Ethnographer Clifford Geertz, in describing culture, uses the metaphor of a web, wherein each strand represents a different factor in a person's makeup: religion, income, geography, education, career, generation, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> All these strands of culture form a very complex mechanism that bears great influence on our actions and beliefs.

In other words, culture isn't limited to ethnicity—a myriad of forces are at play in our lives. For many underrepresented students, investigating and researching those forces can be invigorating. There's just enough of the student involved to appeal to his or her egocentric self, and there's a great deal of analysis and research, which makes it a wonderful academic exercise.

A person's economic class serves as an example of culture that transcends ethnicity. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Orange County called Garden Grove. In my neighborhood, people worked on their cars in the driveways and lawns, shopped at discount stores, and a great number of teenagers smoked. After eighth grade, my parents and I moved to Mission Viejo, a much more affluent area in the southern section of Orange County. There were rules against working on your car in the driveway, no discount stores existed, and smoking was generally looked down upon. Although in the late 1970s both neighborhoods were predominantly white, the cultures of the two neighborhoods were completely different.

The research and sharing of one's culture engages many otherwise disconnected students. For many students, it also transforms a perceived liability into a strength. Because of this built-in interest, I've made use of cultural writing in dealing with underrepresented students and have met with great success.

Now, in the middle of May, I am eager to embark on culture-based writing. The students are acclimated to the constant writing and are beginning to truly see themselves as future university students. Carlos, a senior Puente student, has just been accepted to Stanford University, a feat that only two other students from Magnolia High School have ever achieved—both of them Puente students as well. Frankie, another senior Puente student, has been accepted to the University of California, Berkeley, and about three-quarters of the Puente class of 2007 is heading straight to a four-year university.

The freshmen know all of this, of course. They feel connected to the successes of these senior students, plugged into a *familia*, and many want to follow

1. Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: HarperCollins, 1973.

Figure 3 (continued)

in the footsteps of Carlos, Frankie, and the others. As a result, several are transforming into much more serious students. Sara has been participating in class discussions and staying on task during drafting time in class. Marco has been steadily bringing up his grades in his other classes and asking for help with his writing. The constant focus on my Puente students' eventual goal—the university—has propelled many to work toward straight As in their classes. Destiny, my continuously smiling fountain of happiness; Joanna, all business and solemnity during classwork; Edgar, the soft-spoken academic leader; Johanna, the seemingly sweet band member who is ruthless to those that cross her; Ashley, the shy, always-proper sweetheart; Norma, who is increasingly attracted to the cultural aspects of the class and is in the process of discovering her identity as a Latina; and especially Armando, the cheerful, upbeat class representative who has emerged as a beloved class leader despite a crazy haircut that marks him as a freshman—they all are showing me progress reports of straight As. Any of them could end up at the university of his or her dreams, as long as the Puente team keeps their goals in front of them and develops them into leaders in their community rather than followers of the Magnolia High School adolescent culture, which too often influences students to take the easiest way through school.

Therefore, it is time to begin getting my writers to examine their places in the communities they belong to and the subcultures they identify with.

### **Beginning the Community Leadership Paper**

This concept was developed by Puente teachers and staff over the last several years. I think it is one of the best educational tools I've seen. In a nutshell, it asks students to share their experience with a specific culture (which requires some narrative and descriptive writing), then research and explain (which requires discursive writing) how they see themselves becoming a leader in that particular community or subculture. Students therefore work at weaving together personal connections to their subculture, using a variety of sources and bringing their own voice to the discussion. This paper is powerful because the students are intrinsically connected to the topic they have chosen and because it is fundamentally about them.

Most topics fall into one of three categories: a career, a social issue, or an aspect of a specific community/subculture. I usually write a paper of my own along with the class, letting them see my paper as it unfolds. I look forward to this part of the year because all of the skills that my students have been working on come together in this one paper.

The overall structure of the paper is something like this:

Figure 3: (continued)

- Engage the reader
- Explain the community/subculture
- Explain how you became involved in the community/subculture
- Discuss the aspects of leadership involved in this community/subculture
  - Qualities, skills, characteristics
- Discuss your future in this community/subculture
  - What is the next step in the process of becoming a leader?
- Conclude in a manner that leaves the reader thinking about the thesis

### Brainstorming Topics

Because the concept of community leadership is so multifaceted, I need to get my writers to feel comfortable staking out their own writing focus. To facilitate this, I begin by placing the word *salt* in a circle on the whiteboard. I ask my class to brainstorm what kinds of papers we could write on ordinary table salt.

Having brainstormed the many papers that could be written on something as uninspiring as ordinary table salt, I then erase the whiteboard and begin a new brainstorm: community leadership. Students begin to brainstorm all the possible papers that could be written on this topic, from specific leaders (such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez) to the nature of specific communities (such as cheerleading and band). The paper that I have chosen to write is focused on the world of rock climbing and how one develops into a leader in that community/subculture.

### Getting Started

This is the only paper that I teach starting with the introduction. I refer to the introduction methods discussed in Chapter 2 and have students begin by engaging the reader in the chosen community/subculture. Here is my sample that I share with them:

The wind chills my back as I stare down at the hard, rocky ground waiting ninety feet below me. I scrutinize the wall of granite before me, searching for the slightest crack, the smallest bend, the tiniest sliver of a ledge to support my weight, my life. Finding none close enough to reach, I spot one a few feet above me—and lunge toward it hoping for the best. The stones below seem to laugh in anticipation of greeting my body with a crushing catch.

A simple explanation of the thrills involved in rock-climbing does not exist. It is neither the physical stamina nor the mental fortitude

**Figure 3: (continued)**

required for the sport that makes it the ultimate challenge. True, a good rock climber must use his or her strength and intellect at all times; however, there's much more to the sport than just brawn and brain. There is an emotional struggle as well: by conquering the mountain, you conquer fear.

All of these qualities—strength, intellect, lack of fear—combine to make rock climbing an experience to be savored. I was first introduced to it last summer. Surprisingly, the sport came easily to me. Since that first venture into the world of rock climbing, I have continued practicing and honing my abilities by attempting more challenging outdoor climbs while practicing in an indoor rock-climbing gym. In doing so, I have learned a little about the rock-climbing community and what it takes to become a person that stands out in this small but obsessive group.

Once we've read this, the students write their own introductions, often using much of the imagery and language that they employed in their earlier poems and descriptive pieces. After a day of working on this, we share our introductions and then begin the research.

Before discussing the research methods, though, I'd like to take a moment and focus on what the students are feeling at this point. They have chosen a community to which they feel a sense of belonging, and they are summing up their feelings of excitement, belonging, and attraction in a few paragraphs, hoping to engage the reader in that community. There's an almost evangelistic zeal to writing this section of the paper, and it's exciting to watch the kids put their hearts into writing they truly care about.

Many underrepresented students feel that the world of academics overlooks who they are and what they're about. This focus on community turns that around and empowers students to write about their favorite topic: themselves. Any educator who doesn't believe that teenagers will spend hours writing about themselves should spend a few minutes on MySpace.com to see just how far adolescents will go in articulating who and what they are. This paper merely uses that same drive and places it in an academic forum.

Here's a sample introduction written by a student, Karla:

As I close my eyes, ready to go to sleep, I imagine how my life would change if I could cure the world, not by using the world's latest technology, but by using old Native American herbal recipes. As I am close

Figure 3: (continued)

to the point of sleep, I imagine myself making sure that I relieve people from the common cold by making them a special tea that will make them feel better. I can just see myself knowing what herbs to use and how to combine them to make sure that their purpose is used to the fullest so that it alleviates the individual effectively. As I begin to toss and turn, I open my eyes and realize that it was all a dream, but a dream that I will hopefully make sure will come true.

I first became interested in the art of curing with herbs when I was introduced to the Native American way of life in my eighth grade American History class. I was very intrigued by their ceremonies, strength, and intelligence. A friend of mine was also intrigued by herbs and their healing powers. Since he had a greater knowledge of the herbs, he then taught me a few ways to manipulate the herbs to work for the good of the people, but it was not until I read a Native American medicine book, did I realize how much knowledge it takes to cure illnesses such as headaches and scrapes. The most fascinating fact I did learn as I read the pages of the book was that the whole point of curing an individual was not to think of them as an ill person to cure, but as a whole human being who needs guidance and help. The person needs to be treated as a physical and spiritual being.

As my interest of Native American medicine increased, I realize what it truly takes to be a leader in the Native American community of herbal healers. To be a true leader, the healer must be intelligent, determined, and committed.

Many of the papers follow my structure of engaging the reader, providing appropriate context to the community, and then making a statement of leadership, which becomes the focus of the research. The advantage to including the leadership angle is that it transcends specific communities. In other words, leadership is a quality that, once learned, can be applied just about anywhere. As a student thinks about him- or herself becoming a leader in one community, doors open in other communities. Obviously, this is an important factor to consider if we are preparing students (who have historically avoided college) for university life, where virtually every student needs to be a leader to some degree.

The research stage is always challenging for students. Simply put, research takes a lot of time. A review of how to prepare a "Works Cited" list and in-text documentation is essential; I also monitor their progress using the same daily progress sheets to ensure that they're on track. Along with the traditional

**Figure 3: (continued)**

research tools, I encourage students to interview someone they perceive as being a leader in their community. There are a number of reasons for this, but most important is that the interview allows students a formal “excuse” to talk about leadership with someone who is seen as worth following. At my high school, this conversation doesn’t usually take place—few students ask graduates how to be successful; few freshman soccer players ask varsity players for advice. Teenage culture is too often about ignoring flaws and being unbeatable. To ask for advice runs counter to that culture—unless it’s part of an assignment.

Following are some of the interview questions that I give to the students. We also practice the art of follow-up questions:

- How long have you been involved with \_\_\_\_\_?
- How did you get introduced to \_\_\_\_\_?
- What skills or qualities are needed for \_\_\_\_\_?
- Who are some of the leaders in this area?
- What attributes does a leader need in this area?
- What sacrifices need to be made to become a leader in \_\_\_\_\_?
- What is/are the first step(s) to becoming a leader in \_\_\_\_\_?

The interview also allows students to see that not all leaders are on television or are celebrities. Every subculture has true leaders that are otherwise normal, everyday people—a fact that American culture often overlooks. The interview helps cement an idea that the student can become outstanding in a community.

As students conduct research (including the interview), I share with them the rest of my rough draft and a few samples from past students. We usually spend a couple of days in class on the research; the rest is done as homework. At this stage, I follow all of the same strategies outlined in Chapter 5. I’m careful to make sure that, during our conferences, I hear the students’ voices in the body of their papers. As mentioned before, the tendency is for students to remove their personality when they write with research, so I want to ensure that their commentary conveys their feelings (focusing on verb usage helps accomplish that goal).

During the drafting of the paper, I again become much more of a writing coach for the students. Of all the papers that my students write in a year, this is undoubtedly my favorite. Students write these academic papers about subjects for which they have passion—isn’t that what every English teacher wants?

**Figure 4: Familia and Culture at the Beginning of the School Year**

by Robin Turner (excerpt from *Greater Expectations*)

It is early September as I write this, and school has been in session for two days. During that time I have attempted to create a sense of *familia* in the classroom, emphasizing our common mission: to help the students get into a four-year university and succeed once they get there. This concept of *familia* permeates every activity of the class.

Before my students enter the classroom, I make sure that the room conveys the right message to them. The desks are arranged such that there is no “back of the class”—the thirty-seven desks face one another in a U-shaped configuration that grants me easy access to all of my students. Pictures of students adorn the walls, as do collages from the last sixteen years.

I have also put up Reading Charts (logs of the time students spend reading outside of class), charts that depict the Writing Process, explanatory posters on the domains of writing, various informative charts on college (required courses for California State and University of California schools, scholarships, etc.), and quotations about college from other students.

The message is inescapable here: this is a classroom that celebrates students while focusing intensely on reading, writing, and preparation for university. Indeed, as my freshmen begin to walk in, I watch them study the classroom and me, trying to figure out what the class will be like.

Next, I initiate a major step in the creation of *familia* in the class: I plan to learn the names of all my students by the end of the first class meeting. To begin, I inform them that each desk has a sticky note with a student’s name on it, and their first task is to find their desk. The names are arranged in alphabetical order according to each student’s first name. Once the students are seated, I know that those students to my left have first names from the beginning of the alphabet and that those to my right have names that start with the last few letters. This makes it easy for me to know their names before the end of the class.

I want them to know one another’s names as well. For that reason, I avoid an endless lecture on classroom rules and I do not spend much time on the syllabus during the first class. Instead, we read and write. In groups of three, new students read letters from last year’s students and note what their predecessors have said about the class and how to succeed in it. Each group subsequently shares its findings with the whole class. By the end of the first fifty-minute class, students have begun to know me a little, we have worked together to some degree, they are aware that I know them by name, we have done reading and writing exercises, and we have felt somewhat connected to a classroom that has a legacy of helping students achieve their dreams. By doing so, I have taken the first step toward creating the feeling of *familia*.

Figure 4 (continued)

During the first two weeks, I make sure that we have former students visit at least once to speak briefly to the freshmen. This September, Brenda, a student at Stanford University, visited us. One student reflected on his view of *familia*: “the idea that they [past students] are going to go to college and then come back and help with later generations is emphasized when past students come back to talk to us or e-mail us about college.”

By the end of the second week, my students have heard a great deal from past Puente students. The more my freshmen hear from students who have gone on to be successful, the more they feel plugged into something important and worthwhile. As Jovanna, an enthusiastic freshman, put it,

We speak openly, share thoughts and opinions. We have a sort of confidence to be ourselves and enjoy others. It’s not all education we work together in, although it’s the main reason why we’re here, but it’s the things that come with it, the people you’re surrounded by, the support and the fun and jokes we do to start our day off great.

When students feel valued, and that their voice and their world matter, they feel comfortable enough to take risks they would otherwise not attempt. As one student wrote, “Family doesn’t judge family.” The more my students bring their own home lives into the classroom, the more ownership they feel over the curriculum and their own writing skills. As Edgar, my quiet, studious future college student, says, “We are getting to know each other closely, and we are able to share stories about our lives.”

This, then, is where my Puente class begins: with the underlying assumption that students’ cultural backgrounds matter. The various subcultures that they belong to—pertaining to ethnicity, class, sports, hobbies, music, and so on—and all aspects of their lives matter and should be valued appropriately. The students also know that they are part of a chain of success. Those who have moved on from Magnolia High School and into higher education frequently come back to share their experiences and to provide encouragement and support.

With regard to the concept of establishing a culture of *familia*, Cuper wrote the following:

From my perspective, I think the concept of “familia” is that we are helping each other get toward a university and once we get there, we will come back and help our community and each other once again.

Honestly, what educator wouldn’t want a room full of energetic ninth graders filled with this sense of mission?