

Chapter 5. Embracing Diversity in Composition Courses

Rachel McCoppin

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA CROOKSTON

The importance of diversity to a student's college experience is undisputed; countless universities discuss this importance in their mission statements, yet there is often confusion on how to incorporate diversity into the interdisciplinary curriculum and what the particular value of such coursework provides to students. Implementing classroom projects in writing courses that center on diversity is not always easy, but the value of multicultural experiences in college enables students to learn life-long lessons that will guide them in becoming better world citizens and will also aid their professional development. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) 2013 employer survey, "More than 9 out of 10 of those surveyed say it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills, and the capacity for continued new learning." The AACU defines a liberal education as providing the foundation for students to gain experience in practicing "ethical judgment and integrity" in intercultural situations. This chapter will therefore discuss opportunities for bridging intercultural experience with opportunities for ethical value judgment within composition courses in order to help students achieve applied intercultural skills needed for their various disciplines. First this chapter will explore occasions within the composition classroom where students can learn about their peers' background and openly discuss and write about cultural differences, as again the AACU points to a marked employer value of a student's ability to communicate across cultural boundaries. Furthermore, this chapter will offer suggestions to apply service learning opportunities to support composition assignments, as service learning provides not only applied real-world experience desired by many employers; "Employers strongly endorse educational practices that involve students in active, effortful work—practices including collaboration problem-solving. . . and community engagements" (AACU), but it also allows a prime environment to introduce skills needed for intercultural communication. College writing courses allow an excellent environment for practicing service learning assignments that introduce students to *collaboration* and *community engagement* within multicultural situations. Finally, this essay will discuss activities that encourage students to view arguments from their opposition's perspective to further promote skills needed for intercultural communication. These assignments can be incorporated separately or as a series in a composition classroom; it is my belief that if they are taught as a series, students who experience all these activities move from familiarity of others, to sympathy and social responsibility,

and hopefully on towards full empathy for others.

When diversity is reflected upon in the composition classroom, the course dynamic tends to change a great deal. Students interact with one another more often; they tend to be mindful of peers' difficulties and often end up helping one another with course requirements. These multicultural opportunities give students vital intercultural skills that enable them to become more effective students in their various college disciplines, more desirable employees, and conscientious world citizens.

Learning *about* the *Other* through Interviewing

Composition courses are generally required for all college students; although this can serve as a challenge to instructors because of varying student ability and background in writing, composition courses present a unique opportunity. These courses most often assure a diverse student body; students usually differ in majors, but they also undoubtedly come from diverse cultures. Some students will come into composition courses speaking English as a second language, or as international students. This diversity, paired with the nature of writing courses, can create opportunities to explore, question, and research the impact of diversity and intercultural communication in an interdisciplinary context.

Gerald Graff in *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts can Revitalize American Education* expresses the need for instructors to openly teach the conflicts that arise in contemporary society, but what is unique about Graff is that he promotes teaching conflicts that arise within the classroom. Open discussion of differences in the classroom is valued and needed for setting the foundational knowledge of intercultural communication. For instance, to ignore or continue on with the course without acknowledging the challenges some ESL students face in composition is a disservice to international students; likewise it is a disservice to American students to ignore that the course may at times be slowed down due to language issues. In this setting, it is helpful to openly discuss language and cultural differences that exist in the classroom; it is also valuable to include assignments that allow students to learn from each other about their differences, so that acceptance and understanding of diversity will become part of the classroom.

Effective interview skills are an important part of the research process and encourage students to write about topics that are unrelated to themselves. An activity that can be used in composition courses to help break perceived barriers is to assign students a paper where they interview an international student in their class or on campus about his or her background, so that the process of interviewing this student about his or her culture becomes an opportunity to be introduced to diversity and multiculturalism. Students should be paired with an international student they do not yet know; they should then conduct a brief interview asking general questions about their interviewee, including questions related to his or her cultural background. This first interview mainly serves as an opportunity

for students to get to know each other. Students are usually a bit reticent to conduct these interviews, mainly because of a fear of language barriers. In my class, we spend time discussing techniques to prepare for conducting an interview with someone who may speak English as a second language; we discuss the importance of active listening and putting the interviewee at ease through receptive nonverbal language cues. Every time I teach this assignment, it is surprising how fast students become comfortable speaking with one another. Students consistently state that their fears of an inability to communicate immediately dissipated because they were prepared to overcome small language misunderstandings and entered the process with a willingness to engage in a dialogue.

After the first interview, students should then have time to research their interviewee's background, so that a second interview will be more comprehensive. Students can ask more pointed questions directed towards their paper topic, such as implicit and explicit cultural traditions, rules, and beliefs. Students can also use this opportunity to ask issues relating to cultural ethics and morality, and how the interviewee feels he or she fits his or her culture's principles. Usually when I teach this assignment, I ask students to ask their interviewee to answer questions first in their native language, and then state their response again in English. I also suggest that the last ten minutes of the interview be comprised of the interviewee teaching the interviewer some words in his or her language; I stress that the student should repeatedly attempt to say each word until the interviewee feels it is correct. I feel it is important for students to hear another language that they may be unfamiliar with in a dialogue setting and have the experience of trying to speak a few words of the language to a native speaker of the language, so that students understand a small portion of the interview subject's international student experience.

Finally, the students should be expected to construct an informational paper about the interview subject and his or her culture. Students should also incorporate a persuasive purpose of the importance of diversity within their greater college community by including not only a summary about what they have learned from their interviewee but also a discussion of what they specifically learned from participating in this project, including the effectiveness of their initial plan to communicate in an intercultural experience, and whether they had to adapt any of their communication techniques to promote a more successful interview. Students should also discuss their overall experience listening to their interviewee's native language, and also their attempt to speak the language, as they ponder the experience of studying as an international student. They should also include a moment of introspection about what they learned about their interviewee's values and culture that they did not previously know, and a discussion of any of their own personal beliefs or preconceptions that changed because of their experience with their interview subject. Finally, they should conclude with how this experience they had provides evidence that others should pursue intercultural experiences across college disciplines through extending a hand in friendship, studying

abroad, traveling, research, etc.

Class discussion about learning outcomes is essential to the success of this project. Also, a general discussion about the importance of multiculturalism and diversity in all college disciplines is needed throughout the project, so that students may carry their discoveries to their various disciplines. Initially discussion of differences in the classroom and the challenges students face because of their differences can be difficult, but once the project comes to an end, the classroom dynamic changes a great deal. After the project, I consistently find that students are often more willing to discuss issues relating to diversity and are also seemingly more compassionate and understanding toward one another. In addition, they tend to work more readily with each other to understand assignments and course expectations. Again, this assignment provides a platform for students to obtain a meaningful experience of being introduced to another of diverse background.

Experience *with the Other* in Service Learning

Again, service learning opportunities within composition classrooms enable students to gain intercultural communication skills that are highly desirable by many employers, as real-world applications of communication across multicultural boundaries is an applied skill that many college students have not sufficiently met upon graduation (AACU). Service learning opportunities in the composition classroom takes the introduction to diversity to another level by increasing a student's sense of sympathy for others and social responsibility, bridging the use of applied intercultural skills towards an examination of the noted AACU's employer value of "ethical judgment and integrity."

Much research indicates that student acceptance and understanding of diversity is a benefit of service learning: "Service-learning produces a number of positive effects on college students. . . includ[ing] a . . . reduction of stereotypes and better cultural understanding; and development of interpersonal skills, citizenship, social responsibility, critical thinking, and connectedness to college and career" (Worrell-Carlisle 198). Through service learning projects, young writers achieve some of the highest goals college instructors want their students to obtain; they interact with diverse groups of people and often create a project that is centered on a subject matter that was initially unfamiliar to them. They learn skills to cope in a real-world setting, as well as see the advantage of creating an assignment that has a concrete benefit for others. Through service learning activities writers also enact with others of diverse cultures and will enter into experiences that allow them to begin to commiserate with people different than themselves:

Because service encourages students to see themselves as intimately connected to the other, a learning context is created in which the caring self is more likely to emerge. Fostering a sense

of self grounded in an ethic of care is one of the central challenges of education and becomes increasingly important as our society grows more diverse. By fostering an ethic of care, higher education encourages the sense of otherness needed for democracy to service and, indeed, thrive in a complex and fragmented social world. (Rhoads 294)

Composition students can take part in myriad types of service learning projects. I especially feel it is useful to create projects that incorporate interview skills within community service. For example, students can generate local history through interviews of different residents of their community and later publish these papers (“101 Ideas” 5). This service of writing and dissemination of their material benefits students through the interaction they receive with other community members, teaching them a great deal about the different cultural elements within their own community, but it also becomes a service to the larger community because the published papers continue to educate myriad members of the community on a topic that may have gone unnoticed. In addition, community service projects helps students understand the many types of diversity that exist within and sustain a community. Projects should be created to immerse the student in a largely unknown cultural environment than that of his or her previous experience; this can be actualized through introducing students to local groups with a clear cultural focus, such as a local American Indian community. Also, the definition of diversity should be considered through such projects as well, as service learning projects that examine age, gender, sexuality, etc. in the context of diversity can also be beneficial, as many employers again value applied skills that enable employees to effectively and ethically communicate in various diverse situations. For example, a service learning project that focuses on age as a form of diversity and introduces students to a generation different from their own will provide students with applied, cross-generational, communication skills that will meet the needs of many career settings.

In my composition courses, I have students interview residents of a local nursing home about their childhoods and record the stories for preservation efforts of the community. My students write children’s books from the childhood stories provided by the elderly residents, and then they visit an elementary school class where an elementary student illustrates the book. At the end of the project all involved participants meet to read the book and celebrate this accomplishment. This project has proved effective because students learn the importance of capturing stories from an older generation and imparting them to a younger generation. This project is also beneficial because it naturally addresses issues related to diversity; students are given the opportunity to listen to and interact with those of various ages, social class, race, cultural background, etc. Students involved in this project also can grasp the importance of history. This service learning project allows student to capture the local historical stories within their current commu-

nity from the older residents of the nursing home and pass them on to a younger generation, so that these stories do not become forgotten. Finally, students can be challenged to connect the messages or morals of their children's books towards themes of embracing diversity, preserving history, and learning about others; therefore, this project, if the assignments in this paper are taught together as a series, expands upon the skills students obtained in their interviews with international students to more defined experiences of interacting with others for a clear purpose of preserving local history, thus the student, through this project begins to understand the importance of personal responsibility. In addition, I ask students upon completion of this project to write another persuasive paper, with the purpose now of arguing for the value of diversity awareness in the greater community and workforce. Much like their interview paper that examined the process they underwent to interact with an international, this paper largely should focus on the student's reflection of the process, but should finally achieve an argument for carrying the lessons of this project to their future careers.

Elaine Norris in "Age Matters in a Feminist Classroom" discusses a writing project where her class also interviewed elderly residents of a nursing home about issues relating to feminism. The class read many essays that dealt with feminist issues, but it was the actual experience of interviewing these residents about first hand stories of what it was like to live in previous eras that provided an invaluable element. Students also gained perspective on the residents' views of feminism today. In addition, ageism naturally became an issue of discussion and reflection. Norris states that this experience:

transformed our relationships with people. . . . We engaged in learning with our senior partners as interwoven subjects of knowledge. . . . Taking on perspectives of age and of each senior partner specifically prevented us from turning our. . . learning into a self-serving patronizing experience that is ageist and inconsistent with feminist principles. (79)

There are many other service learning projects that can further offer students experiences with the importance of personal responsibility towards others. Service learning can also allow faces and names to be connected to real human rights issues: "immersing themselves in a real world environment helps [students] to see the complexity of situations faced by the people with whom they interact" (Krain & Nurse 193). Robert A. Rhoads in his "In the Service of Citizenship" discusses how the service learning project he conducted in his classroom "forced [his] students to confront generalizations they had of the other. For example, students talked about various stereotypes they held about poor people and how such stereotypes were erased as a result of their service work" (288). Michael D. McNally in "Indigenous Pedagogy in the Classroom" suggests an interview project that involves reading historical pieces that portray the American Indian in racist terms and then visiting with members of a local American Indian tribe to hear a

modernized perspective: “Unlearning racism can seldom if ever happen through book learning and essay writing alone” (606). McNally states that these types of firsthand service learning encounters with the *other* tend to “engineer jarring experiences that stir up the tidiness of categories carried deep within students’ minds” (606). It is precisely the process of having students encounter the *other* on a personal level that serves as a transformative experience for them.

Again, after students partake in the initial interaction with their service learning partners, they should carry these various projects further by writing a persuasive piece that carries the specific project goals to a broader discussion of the importance of diversity within their community, workplace, and the world at large. These papers could be designed to ask readers to reevaluate such issues as feminism, ageism, and racism, and advocate an action step to their readers; for instance, students could visit a local homeless shelter, interview and observe some residents, and then write a persuasive paper advocating others to donate or assist at a local homeless shelter within their own community.

Rhoads contends that “A significant learning experience associated with community service was the opportunity to better understand the lives students worked to serve. Students were able to put faces and names with the alarming statistics and endless policy debates about homelessness as well as rural and urban poverty” (287). When students join in the work of a nonprofit, for example, and write about it as an insider, they create a sense of shared mission that gets them past the *us v. them* mentality that tends to limit our interactions with groups of which we don’t feel ourselves a part. Listening carefully to these stories of others can not only create an acceptance of the *other*, but it may also lead the student to change his or her own previous views. Once again, the class discussion and written assignments that follows these projects is as essential as the project itself. Open dialogue and then written reflection of both the process of interviewing and the feelings and preconceived notions they may have had before beginning the project helps students better grasp the benefit and necessity of personal responsibility to not only learn about those who may be different from oneself but also to feel an obligation of personal responsibility towards issues relating to diversity within their various college disciplines, workplaces, and personal lives.

Experience as the *Other* through Oppositional Exercises

The first two assignments presented in this chapter discussed their goals of providing students the means to learn about those of other cultures and belief systems through interviews, as well as moving on to encourage feelings of sympathy and responsibility towards others through service learning. These goals are important for students to gain an understanding and commiseration of others, but this final activity asks students to further incorporate these intercultural skills by attempting to briefly become their perceived *other*.

The inclusion of the opposition’s arguments is always important to any per-

suasive paper in composition. Ideally, students should incorporate a fair and accurate assessment of the opposition's arguments into papers, but realistically, the logical soundness, accuracy, and fairness of these arguments are often inadequate. Students frequently find it difficult to include detailed oppositional arguments in their papers because they often have a hard time grasping the viewpoint of the *other*. When composition students learn the art of persuasive writing, they learn to become familiar with their opposition's arguments, so they can present and then refute their opposition and then continue on to persuade their audience of their thesis. Arguably, seeking an understanding of their opposition only in order to defeat their points may not be enough to gain an adequate knowledge of the viewpoints of those who disagree with them. Therefore, this assignment encourages students to become, in a sense, their own opposition. This project asks students to take on the viewpoints of their opposition in an in-class debate.

Students first research their opposition's three major arguments against the point of view in their own thesis. To start the students of the class should represent their persuasive thesis to the class. Then the student, now in the role of their own opposition, should present these three oppositional arguments to the class. The rest of the class is then asked to enter into a debate as proponents of the student's original persuasive viewpoint, so the only member representing the opposition will be the student presenter. The student needs to defend his or her opposition's viewpoints to a class of dissenters as if the arguments were his or her own personal viewpoints.

Students initially find this activity difficult, as defending a contrary view to your original beliefs to a whole class of dissenters is not an easy task; it is hard for students to argue from the perspective of their own opposition in the extensive way this activity requires. Many students state their three oppositional arguments very briefly, and when presented with a class of dissenters who are expressing the student's original stance in order to invalidate these oppositional points, the student presenters tend to repeatedly state that they do not agree with these points, so they can't defend them. I like to use this opportunity, which almost always arises in the first few students who present, to express my understanding that it is a difficult assignment. I then tell students that we do this exercise exactly because students find it very hard to accurately and clearly state a belief system that differs from their own, but I restate that academic persuasive papers need to have a strong oppositional component, so that the refutation of these tenets will make the paper even stronger. Moreover, when I teach this assignment, I try to make it a light atmosphere; I laugh a lot and help the students when they stumble in trying to defend their new position as their own opposition. The class, as dissenters, and each as presenters in waiting, picks up on the light and helpful atmosphere and tends to help each other as well. If student presenters are struggling to back up arguments, I often ask the class and the student to switch roles for a moment; the class then becomes a large group of the student's opposition, and the student gets to defend his or her original position, while taking notes of the

points the classmates come up with. This switching of roles also helps students to understand that positions vary among individuals; any argument will always have opponents, and one must be mindful of a diverse audience that represents a wide array of views.

Again, as with all of the assignments discussed in this chapter, classroom dialog should explore the importance of understanding, accepting, and possibly even being changed by the *other*. The struggle that these students go through with this activity provides a great opportunity to discuss the importance of knowing and learning about one's opposition in a thorough way. Only writing briefly about one's opposition does not often allow students to have to apply their opposition's position. Oftentimes, at the close of this oppositional assignment, students end up changing their initial persuasive stance and adopting the arguments of their opposition; this opportunity for change is highly beneficial to the student, and it is one that can serve as a life lesson.

I once had a student who stated that he came from a household where gay marriage, the subject of his persuasive paper, was intolerable; he easily wrote the first draft of his paper defending his thesis against gay marriage. He struggled a great deal with the opposition assignment; he had brief oppositional points, but could not defend the arguments to the class as his own opposition. He stated that he couldn't do the assignment because he did not agree with these views. I stated that agreeing with the views was not the point of the assignment; the purpose was to accurately reflect the views, so that he could refute a clear and accurate opposition. When he still struggled, I asked the class to switch roles and become the opposition of his paper. He furiously began taking notes of the classes arguments they presented to him for gay marriage. Interestingly, I found that this student now struggled to defend his original position to the class. He came up to me the next class period and asked if it would be a problem for him to switch sides in his paper. He said that he was not convinced that his own views on gay marriage had changed, but that the opposition assignment got him thinking about the beliefs of other people. He stated that he thought it would be good for him to try to write the whole paper from the perspective of someone in support of gay marriage. And at the end of the term, his paper indeed was written from this changed perspective. I believe that the paper was quite strong because both his side, in support of gay marriage, and now his opposition's side, against gay marriage, provided clear, accurate representations of this topic, and more so, I felt this change in, at the very least, his willingness to try to explore the views of people opposed to his own beliefs, provided him an invaluable lesson in diversity.

Composition courses allow excellent opportunities for students to learn about and interact with a broad range of diverse people, whether it is with other classmates or members of their community, in order to obtain applied intercultural skills valued by employers. The introduction of these assignments promotes an ideal first step towards understanding diversity. Again, these assignments can be taught separately, but when taught as a series, they allow students the experience

of carrying this first introduction of diversity to the next level of ethical awareness by contemplating, discussing, and producing material that enables students to move towards elements of empathy and social responsibility, and on towards a willingness to be changed by the *other*, so they come to welcome diverse viewpoints in their myriad college disciplines, careers, and personal lives.

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