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CULTURE AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE IN THE MULTIETHNIC COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT: *This paper argues that the diversity of backgrounds and academic preparations ESL composition teachers encounter in their classrooms can enhance instruction. The paper takes as its premise a situated theory of language use, and draws out how students and teachers may benefit from understanding the cultural and sociolinguistic practices within which writing traditions are embedded. It outlines how writing teachers can elicit and make use of 1) the usually tacit theories that both student and academic discourse communities have regarding academic prose; and 2) their experiences with and approaches to literacy. The very diversity characterizing the multiethnic composition classroom virtually guarantees that contrasting beliefs and practices will be formulated. These become the basis for a teacher-guided exploration of writing standards and their social origin, and student assignments designed to inform about, as well as train in, various academic discourse styles. Teaching activities that unravel writing theories are described for practitioners. The pedagogical practices advocated here help teachers to understand student beliefs about reading and writing, and thus to adapt instructional material to student perspectives.*

Introduction

Cultural difference can become the starting point for a rich and rewarding exchange between writing students and their teachers.

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Many of the basic writing courses into which budding college students are inducted are grappling with a growing influx of students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The presence of different voices and visions of the world can be transformed into an instructional resource, a bridge between teachers and students. A careful, well-structured exploration of student and student-teacher differences can provide a curriculum that pulls in, validates, and ultimately builds on the divergent points of view about writing that need to converge to fulfill the basic writing course's mission. It is this curriculum we hope to describe here, a curriculum we have developed over the course of several years of teaching culturally and ethnically diverse basic college writing courses.

Because of the changing ethnic make-up of many basic college writing classes, their standardizing purpose is taking on a problematic character. Indeed, whether basic composition courses ought to teach only one particular essayist standard is increasingly being called into question on both practical and ethical grounds. In practical terms, it is hardly the case that only one essayist writing standard exists across disciplines. More difficult still are the potential ethical problems associated with the imposition of one such standard on students who may be unfamiliar with and/or marginalized by that standard. Yet the traditional function of basic college writing courses—establishing a hegemonic, dominant mainstream "discourse" (Gee 1991) at the expense of others—has not really changed. The essayist standard may be unraveling empirically, but institutional writing curricula with well-defined performance criteria and exit exams spell out rather clearly that there still are standards to be met. Composition teachers are left facing a dilemma: On the one hand, a plethora of student-centered pedagogical approaches claim to provide a better instructional alternative because they validate student views and student writing. They are in fact so popular that they may be officially endorsed by writing programs.[1] On the other hand, students whose writing styles fall outside of the enduring canons of their institutions are usually penalized for it. Teachers are to embrace diversity, but deliver conformity. This dilemma can be especially acute in a multiethnic composition classroom.

Old and deep-seated beliefs rooted in a racist and xenophobic ideology from the turn of the century decry cultural diversity as divisive and dangerous for both nations and individuals (Cummins 1981; Kloss 1977). These beliefs persist in spite of more recent protestations to the contrary.[2] Framed thusly, cultural difference becomes a liability for students, who have to overcome language or

cultural "barriers" in their educational quest (Sue and Padilla 1986; Suarez-Orosco 1989: 22–48); and it is a challenge for the instructional infrastructure in charge of "assisting" such students (Rumberger 1989). Cultural difference is said essentially to impede the work and eventual success of students and teachers alike.

To help instructors mediate between the contradictory requirements of their multiethnic basic writing classes, we advocate a pedagogy that develops and encourages essayist literacy *in concert with* rather than at the expense of student voices. Drawing on the insights of educational critics like Freire (1982), the Vygotskyan school of psycholinguistics (1962; 1978; cf., Engeström 1986) and the Bakhtin circle (1981; cf., Todorov 1985), we have attempted to implement a curriculum that capitalizes on cultural diversity. Ours is a curriculum for practitioners, an attempt to flesh out student-centered principles that have been mulled over in the composition teaching community for quite some time, but that have not often been found relevant by teachers. Our experience in inner-city and ESL basic writing classes provides the observational and testimonial support on which our findings are based. We want to stress that this experience informs our effort as much as the theoretical work from which we draw. Just as we propose to construct a bridge between students and teachers, so too do we hope to build an equally crucial bridge between practitioners and the body of research and theory meant to guide their efforts.[3]

Traditional Theoretical Approaches to Literacy Education

Several leading metaphors have greatly influenced how writing education is conceptualized and undertaken in North American education. The deconstruction of these metaphors unravels both misguided (but robust) theories about learning and the metaphors' disempowering impact on the work of both students and teachers.

Learning how to read and write, or how to do a better job of it, is commonly considered the acquisition of "skills" that are transmitted from teacher to student. In his 1988 book *Joining the Literacy Club,* Frank Smith argues against this view. The "skills acquisition" metaphor revolves around the notion of *information transfer* from one person to another (or others). Smith points out that this view, when applied to literacy instruction, overlooks the true nature of literacy activities:

> The danger in using the word skill in conjunction with reading and writing is that it can justify teaching blindly through instruction and drill. Literacy is a matter not of

> honing skills but of increasing confidence, familiarity, and understanding, all consequences of meaningful use. (103)

Moreover, when we let the metaphors of "information transfer" and "skills acquisition" inform our teaching, we, as teachers, are tacitly endorsing what Freire (1982) calls the "banking concept of education." Information and skills take on the characteristics of commodities. Teachers become the vendors of these commodities, and the academic success of students hinges on their consumption of such commodities.

In a dehumanizing cycle, students become "objects of assistance" within a system that denies that their own experiences and views have any value. In order to receive this assistance, they are frequently asked to repudiate their own ways of expression and are offered the controlled discourse of an elite as a replacement. That discourse reflects and privileges elite views, disparaging all others as simply not up to standard. Under these conditions, if students are to succeed, and become "good" readers and writers, they must learn the "correct" way to engage the world and the world of print; that is, the hegemonic discourse of the elite.

In the United States, the basic writing course often continues to focus on teaching remedial students the "skills" they are lacking, thus endorsing a "banking" view of education. This has not helped bilingual/bicultural students, who find themselves in remedial education in disproportionate numbers. Given the theory of literacy underlying "banking" education, this is an entirely predictable result. It is their difference which, after all, makes so many bicultural/bilingual students candidates for remediation. The liability represented by that difference is then often compounded: Encouraged to adopt elite views in order to conform to the writing norms of essayist literacy, students may come to disparage their own cultural origins while finding themselves simultaneously barred from elite membership. The banking view can become psychologically devastating.

To develop a different instructional approach, we have turned to Freire's alternative educational philosophy of "problem-posing" education. Working primarily in pre- and post-revolutionary Latin American contexts characterized by extreme class differences and explicit elite domination, Freire argues that the only way to deal with the literacy needs of oppressed populations is to create a form of education that would expose the elite-dominated values inherent in most available literacy materials and practices. To do so, he would ask his classes to ponder the origins of such problems as bad housing. While students might at first blame themselves or their

neighbors for the dilapidated state of their own neighborhoods, they would soon discuss bad services and their origins. Problem-posing literacy education takes as its starting point the learner's historicity, stimulating self-reflection and an awareness of the social production of history and oppression. It views the learner's own life and experiences as valuable resources with which to counter the elite view of the world. In this manner, elite values can be seen as the cultural practices they are and the "false consciousness" they engender can be confronted with a more critical one.

We propose to apply Freire's problem-posing philosophy to the teaching of basic college writing in a multiethnic setting. We aim to counter the prevailing view of cultural and linguistic difference as a liability by encouraging a new consciousness about cultural and linguistic variability. The Bakhtin circle, empirically supported by sociolinguistic research, provides an alternative view through which literacy practices can be redefined.

The Bakhtin circle contends that "language," and by extension "literacy," is a heterogeneous collection of "voices" from which language and literacy users continuously draw to engage with their worlds. If linguistic heterogeneity is the rule rather than the exception, cultural diversity cannot be a deviation from a homogeneous norm. Brought to the fore in the basic writing classroom, this view of language forces a reconsideration of the "norm" that can be highly beneficial. This norm is, in fact, nothing more or less than a set of writing *conventions* endorsed by a particular discourse community. Other communities, such as the bicultural students' communities of origin, endorse different sets of conventions that express different communicative preferences. Ideally, bilingual/bicultural students learn from unraveling the norm that "different" is not synonymous with "deficit," and that their language abilities are not deficient. Rather, they have a considerable store from which to draw in order to acquire new forms of expression, including the forms they will need as college students.

A Bakhtinian reading of the phenomenon of language allows one to (re)define literacy as the situated practices involving print of particular discourse communities. These communities use print for very specific, historically grounded communicative reasons. Essayist literacy is usually a benefit of membership in a distinct, definable discourse community, which socializes its members in its particular expressive tradition. Learning it, as well as other, even more specific discourse styles, is a function of that membership. *All novices* are socialized into literacy practices, regardless of their

ethnic background, which does not affect the literacy learning process, but rather access to membership.

A growing body of sociolinguistic research into situated linguistic and literacy practices lends strong empirical evidence to both Freire's analysis of traditional literacy instruction and to the Bakhtin circle's conceptualization of language. Literacy research not only owes empirical debts to that research, but also some important conceptual ones. Recent literacy research aims to reach a socioculturally grounded understanding of the uses and purposes of literacy practices. To do so, it has adopted and adapted some key notions from sociolinguistic theory, foremost among them those of *speech communities* and *speech events* (Gumperz and Hymes 1964; 1972).

The first of these notions denotes the existence of a shared system of linguistic behaviors and beliefs amongst a group of people. For as many different sets of behaviors and beliefs as there are in the world, there are an equal number of such communities. According to Gumperz and Hymes (1972), speech events are "certain communicative routines" which members of a given speech community recognize on the basis of their "special rules of speech and nonverbal behavior." Thus, a given speech community will have many different speech events that help to define it as a particular community. One becomes a member of a speech community through meaningful apprenticeship, by participating in the speech practices of the community. There is an indexical relationship between speech practices and group membership so that to engage in the practices effectively signals affiliation.

Applied to the context of literacy, speech communities comprise a shared set of behaviors, values, and norms revolving around print. Like a speech event, a *literacy event* (Heath 1982) is characterized by socially organized communicative routines, but these are centered on print rather than oral discourse. The 1985 *Journal of Education* collection of literacy papers as well as the work of Heath (1983), Cook-Gumperz (1986), Scollon and Scollon (1981), and Gee (1991) are all exemplary of the recent merging of literacy research and sociolinguistic analysis. According to these researchers, learning to read and write requires socialization into a set of values, beliefs and ways of doing, in short into a *discourse style* that will in turn index group membership in a given literacy or discourse community. And literacy practices are just as multifaceted and cross-culturally variable as speech practices, requiring close, meaningful contact and eventual participation on the part of novices in order to become accessible.

These findings lend empirical weight to Freire's analysis of

traditional literacy as a set of practices aimed to validate elite perceptions. A dominant discourse is as much a cultural product as other discourse styles, and it originates in its own discourse community. If students are to master that discourse, they need access to its community of origin, and such access is problematic, at best. As pointed out by Gee (1991), hegemonic discourses bode ill for nontraditional students, for there is an inherent contradiction in assuming the trappings of a group from which one is excluded *a priori*. It should not be surprising that such efforts result in feelings of inadequacy and alienation.

Sociolinguistic research offers argumentative and methodological models that can be adapted for problem-posing, and thus can become part of a potential solution to this dilemma. Just like sociolinguists, students can observe their own and their institution's literacy practices in order to see the correspondences between social setting and language choices. Our claim is that the acquisition of literacy practices is a function of membership. By encouraging our students to become participant-observers of the discourse communities' engendering practices they are supposed to master, we are trying to provide them with an alternative writing apprenticeship, in effect an alternative means to membership.

In addition, accumulated student observations will bear out the Bakhtin circle's finding that, with respect to speech and literacy practices, heterogeneity (and thus cultural diversity) is in fact the norm. This should unmask the fact that any norm represented by a hegemonic discourse is a false norm. And once the acquisition of schooled or essayist discourse styles is redefined as a specialized apprenticeship, the crucial factors leading to that acquisition is no longer linguistic or cultural homogeneity, but meaningful participation in an inclusive discourse community.

This is where the multiethnic classroom presents something of an advantage. That classroom is already heterogeneous, and the connection between community of origin and discourse styles is quite apparent to any serious observer. Our curriculum takes advantage of this linguistic wealth. It explores the voices of different student discourse communities, and juxtaposes them with voices from the academic discourse community. We hope that this double exploration brings about the kind of meaningful engagement with print that our students need to become members of the literacy club.

Theory into Practice

The criticism and research reviewed thus far provide insights into the roots of the discourse problems faced by a culturally diverse stu-

dent body and yield some promising alternative starting points for instruction in the basic college writing classroom. Like most critical and investigative work, however, it has yet to engage in true dialogue with practitioners. Establishing such a dialogue is our project. Having drawn practical conclusions from research and criticism for three years, we have begun to flesh out an applied program for teachers. Our program, developed within the general spirit of problem-posing education, aims to establish a classroom "zone of proximal development." Following Vygotsky's pioneering framework, it is a curriculum that challenges all students to break beyond their actual level of performance to a more developed one with expert guidance (1978, 86). In addition, it challenges teachers to let students guide them to a better understanding of their needs and abilities.

Vygotsky concluded sixty years ago that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which [novices] grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, 88). He argued that instruction "must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions" of these novices (1962, 104). While one is learning to become literate, the key social process is meaningful participation in an inclusive discourse community. In a classroom, such a community can provide novice writers informed access to their target discourses. Our curriculum attempts to create one by examining and analyzing potential target discourses through a problem-posing frame, and by pulling the students into that analysis at every step. Culturally diverse students can become a true asset for such a project: They turn the classroom into a truly heteroglossic one, and thus help foreground the (seemingly transparent) cultural roots and interpretive processes at the basis of all discourse practices.

A number of principles have guided our adaptation of problem-posing education to basic writing instruction in the inner city. Three years of *field testing* in a number of inner-city composition classrooms have so far confirmed their usefulness. These *field-tested* principles can be summarized as follows:

1. Instructional activities are integrated around a central communicative or discourse problem that is analyzed through a problem-posing frame. In order to turn the classroom into a community of practice, direct instruction is balanced with repeated and intensive workshops, and the student voices need to be alternated with voices from the target academic discourse.
2. Integration and balance between student and teacher expertise is achieved with assignments that:
   a. focus on and take advantage of students' strengths:

their knowledge of their own world and of their own beliefs;

b. encourage the students to engage with their new college discourse community, especially through print;

c. demonstrate to the students the *functions* of different essay writing conventions and styles. For example, the function of a cause and effect analysis is to find or argue about responsibilities for changes.

3. The analytical thrust of each unit is maintained through the use of two central questions about text. These foreground the fact that texts are human products and that their use entails shared values. They are:

   a. What is the author communicating to you? (What are you trying to communicate?)

   b. How do you know? (How would your audience know?)

   When considering these two questions, students usually discover that authors often shape and manipulate language to appeal to their audiences, and that students can do the same.

Compared to Freire's original project, our work is a modest form of problem-posing education. Freire sought to give his students a better understanding of the historical and human origin of their circumstances. That understanding presumably included knowledge of how to effect changes. We seek to give our students a better understanding of the historical and human origin of various discourse practices, and hope to gain a better understanding about their ideas and forms of expression in return. The knowledge we offer includes information about essayist literacy as hegemonic discourse, and of the students' own position with respect to that discourse.[4] In the knowledge we gain, we usually find the basis for joint educational activities. On the whole, we hope to give our students more power over their own or their second language.

Working in the Multiethnic Classroom

Students from linguistic and ethnic minorities are often considered *least likely to succeed* in mainstream institutions. As members of nondominant speech communities, they usually lack the kind of literacy experiences that would have socialized them into a mainstream, essayist discourse. In Gee's words, facility in mainstream discourse is "a product of acquisition, that is, it requires exposure to models in natural, meaningful, and functional settings and teaching is not liable to be very successful" (1991, 28). But essay writing may be neither natural nor meaningful in the lives

of most minority students, whose classroom experiences have often not been terribly functional. Conversely, our own expectations about writing within our academic discourse communities have often been shaped by a lifetime's worth of professional experiences with text and literacy that few of our students have shared.

In order to start one functional cycle and to begin bridging the gap in experience at the start of a composition classroom, one can begin with what Gee calls "metaknowledge." New college writers are made conscious of what is expected of them as future members of academic discourse communities through joint consciousness-raising rooted in historical and contextual analysis. An important first step is to have students focus on themselves, their writing histories and beliefs about essay writing. This follows from Smith's (1988) contention that students, especially those marginalized by the dominant discourse, "need to find sense and relevance in the situation they are in" (54). As a way to start, the students can be asked to discuss what they think a "good essay" should be, and that discussion can form the basis for a first assignment and a first instructional unit.

Even if students are unfamiliar with essays, they often have their own (and sometimes their former teachers') folk theories about such texts. These folk theories can be elicited in a discussion format and/or in writing, the objective being to get students to be as explicit as possible. This exercise will yield a number of interesting but often vague and underelaborated theories of the good essay. For example, many students will say that a *good essay* has a strong beginning, and the instructor can press further by asking: "What do you mean by strong?" Ultimately, several rounds of questions like these produce an extensive dialogue through which a more fully elaborated theory is constructed. The student also begins to explicate and perhaps even analyze his/her beliefs about literacy practices.

The analysis of the students' folk theories will eventually lead to their deconstruction, as can be documented by one of the present authors. Having been told that a *good essay* should "cover all possible sides of a given issue or topic," she pressed on and forced a more thorough analysis of both this belief and its origin. She asked the students if it were ever possible to cover "all sides" of an issue in a single essay, and started to list some of the sides to cover for a particular topic. Students soon realized that it was not possible, some with obvious relief. Through this questioning, they were also coming to realize that some of the ideas they had assimilated from past instructional practices were not written in stone. In fact, they began to sense that writing successfully had less to do with innate

ability or deficit and more to do with working on and negotiating joint meaning through print.

A second way to raise consciousness about the relationship between writing and its origin and use is to have new college writers collect information about particular contexts. These student *mini-ethnographies of print* can start with a thorough accounting of the uses of writing at work or at home.[5] They then become the raw material with which to begin an analysis of the relationship between form and function. Students who often initially insist that "we don't read or write anything where I work" find an amazing array of print and almost universally conclude that "reading and writing is really important." They also come to understand *why* print may be important in a given context. A construction worker's account of written safety instructions, for example, drove that point home while at the same time leading to a more detailed and thorough discussion of the conventions of safety signs. Since the size and color of safety signs vary considerably cross-culturally, opening the discussion up to the whole class brought out their variability, and the local human conventions governing their make-up.

The articulation of local rules and standards, whether prompted by definitions of the *good essay* or descriptions of the uses of print in a variety of contexts, forms the basis for a reconsideration of essay writing in general. This reconsideration stresses the human origin of essay writing practices, and emphasizes active negotiation. Student participation in these activities serves to overcome the "student-as-objects-of-assistance" mindset common in banking forms of education. The articulation of the rules and standards of different essay writing traditions can also lead to a historical review for our students, and to an analysis of their present situation. If they are in remedial writing classes, for example, questions soon arise about the process and the criteria by which they came to be labeled "at risk." Students may also ask themselves why, in a world full of heterogeneity and "minority" peoples, they are considered the "minority" writers and the rather small community of English teachers represents the mainstream. Such students may even put the many labels that permeate their lives into perspective, and in deconstructing them, may gain some independence from their "institutional grip" (Douglas 1986).

The Teacher as Mediator

While it is necessary to have students explore their own beliefs about essay writing and other literacy events, it is equally important

that they gain some insights into the values and beliefs of target discourses. They need "inside information" about future discourse communities that have not been too welcoming, and English teachers are an ideal source of such information. Teachers need to strike a delicate balance here. They have genuine authority over the subject matter, and they do know the standards to which their students will be held. But too much emphasis on standards and authority will quickly degenerate into a unidirectional, "banking" exchange. This conundrum can become especially acute when the teacher is responding to student work. How does one discuss difference when that difference is clearly stigmatized outside the classroom?

To achieve a balance of sorts, we have found it helpful first to discuss the values attached to accepted writing standards, and to follow up these discussions with informational lectures about the cultural values reflected in key college writing traditions. Essentially, either of the two initial units described above will, sooner or later, lead straight to values. Classroom discussions can touch on the historical basis of composition requirements in the United States (Heath 1981), or on the present testing rage that is sweeping higher education. But in order to lead an informed discussion, it is often helpful for the teacher again to begin by eliciting information about essay testing experiences from the students, and to probe student theories about successes or failures. While it is often true that students are mystified about why they might have aced one exam and failed another (an experience both present authors share!), they can usually recall whether or not an exam was "easy" or "hard," and they often have insight into what made it easy or hard for them.

Many new writers in multiethnic basic writing classes often come from communicative traditions that differ radically from those of their new discourse communities. The essayist tradition, for example, is one shaped by Anglo values requiring explicitness and decontextualization, both hallmarks of a "society of strangers" (Gee 1985). It requires a fictionalization of the self and of one's audience, but is otherwise marked by formality and restraint (Scollon and Scollon 1981). It strives for objectivity and a kind of cold passion that is uniquely North American and which, as Carlos Fuentes has observed, is obsessed with success and the realization of a utopian society. A second Anglo writing tradition, scientific report writing, embodies many of the same values, but it has been influenced by a greater need for conventions and cross-cultural transparency (Atkinson 1991).

To complicate matters further, marginalized groups in the

United States have developed traditions of their own, emphasizing *the plain truth* in a society that wraps discriminatory and oppressive practices in legalistic language reminiscent of essayist literacy. This is why an information *exchange* between students and teacher is particularly important. In order to establish the right contrasts between the communicative epistemologies that guide academic and student writings, teachers need to generate a great deal of information. This enables them to calibrate lectures about alternative epistemologies and writing traditions and to introduce unfamiliar ones. The two processes, raising the students' consciousness about theories of writing and communication, and the introduction of essayist or other institutionally determined norms, work in concert to sensitize new college writers to the communicative forms they need to master.

As teachers and students exchange information about communicative styles, the instructor's feedback becomes increasingly important. In order for discussions and lectures to pay off, students have to start engaging in their own essayist practice. Frequently, "getting it right" requires coaching, and it is at this point that a good teacher is indispensable. Responding to student papers, orally and/or in writing, the instructor can relate the standards that students are expected to meet in their future work. For instance, when minority students were asked to write about their experiences with discrimination, they would start out with "discrimination hurts us" without specifying who "us" was. Another common feature in writings on the topic would be for ESL students to say "in my country" without every specifying what their country was. They had a very hard time with the conventional fiction required in much essay writing, namely the pretense that their teacher who, after all, had given them the very assignment they were completing, would not know what they were writing about or who they meant. It is precisely at points like these that they could be reminded of their greater or potential audience, and that this notion could be made more real to them. The teacher could respond with something akin to, "You must pretend that your audience is a stranger and knows nothing about you," and thus lecture, discussion, and written practice dovetail.

Integrating Problem-Posing with Traditional Assignments

A final consideration in adapting a composition course to the needs of basic writers in the multiethnic classroom is how to tackle traditional rhetorical patterns. Often, composition teachers are constrained by their institution to adhere to certain instructional

goals. They are expected to develop assignments that fit a particular curriculum and to use certain institutionally sanctioned materials. In such cases, the goal becomes once again to find a means to take advantage of student knowledge while introducing institutional requirements. This can be where a true meeting of mainstream expectations and student experiences takes place. The institution rarely dominates the day-to-day implementation of its material, and it is frequently possible to find the space for student experiences even in a prescribed curriculum.

During the Spring semester of 1990, one of the present authors was strongly encouraged by her institution to use literary texts chosen from a pre-established list of works. She was working with new writers from a number of Latin American and Asian countries in an ESL class for which George Orwell's *Animal Farm* was strongly recommended. It was read and discussed over the course of several weeks. It soon became clear that the book touched on a number of sensitive issues for most students. Many of them came from politically repressive systems, and they were reluctant to approach the political implications of Orwell's book. Instead of coercing them into a political analysis, the teacher chose to frame the discussion as one centered on the realizability of utopian systems. The discussion included family systems, college systems, or even economic systems. The assignment that was ultimately developed (see Appendix A) allowed the students to write about whether they thought utopian systems were possible. It asked point blank: "Can there be a perfect family, or a perfect school system, or a perfect economic system?" Only then were students asked to consider Orwell's text, and then in concert with their own experiences.

We cannot really do justice to the many successful papers this assignment led to, but two cases were particularly gratifying: A student from Nicaragua (and former economist for the Sandinistas) chose to write about the impossibility of a "perfect economic system." Her paper discussed how the Sandinistas had tried to develop such a system and ultimately failed due to external pressures from the United States. Another Central American student chose to write about the inherent difficulties of trying to maintain "the perfect Latino family" in the United States. The following is his thesis:

> The ideal utopian family system is where the father, mother and children live together happy. But with the present American and Latino people these ideals are impossible to

> achieve because a lot of people have changed their beliefs about marriage, and education for their family.

He went on to discuss how North American social influences, such as a high divorce rate and the necessity of two parental incomes, tend to conflict with and sometimes supplant Latino family values of parents remaining married and someone staying home to care for the children.

It was interesting to note that few of the students actually discussed Orwell or his book in their papers. But instead of expecting such a discussion, the teacher felt it was more important for them to have absorbed the overarching theme of the text—an anti-utopian critique of communism—and to have applied it to their own lives and experiences. They were receiving the required exposure to a text privileged by the academic discourse community, yet they were not compelled to remain within its confines. Rather, they could draw on their own lives and experiences in relation to dominant themes within the text.

While not forced outright into this kind of creativity, the second author has struggled for a number of semesters to familiarize her students with such traditional essayist staples as the description, compare-and-contrast or cause-and-effect essay in remedial writing courses. An instructional unit centered on "neighborhood problems" was found to be particularly successful in teaching one of these forms, the cause-and-effect essay. Simply put, the students were asked to describe in detail a problem from their own lives or in their neighborhoods. They were then encouraged to provide as complete a list of causes for this problem as they could muster, and to relate the different causes to each other (see Appendix B).

The problems described and discussed by the mostly immigrant and African-American students in her class tended to fall into two types, which could be called "problems in the home country" and "problems in the new one." Central American students would write about the civil wars in Central America, while Mexican and Korean students would focus on corruption. Inner-city immigrants and their African-American peers would find a lot to say about the drug wars in their neighborhoods, or discuss the heavy MedFly Spraying schedule to which they had been subjected.[6]

In order for the assignment to lead to a successful conclusion, students were specifically asked to link causes and effects. They were also asked to identify responsible parties, if possible, at a later stage of their analyses. It was reasoned that some genuine insight into the problems under analysis might result from such a format. The two tasks turned out to be very challenging, requiring a mix of

abstract thinking and real information that was new to the majority of students. The task also brought to light how little some of them valued their own knowledge. They were gunshy, meeting discussion questions and requests for elaboration with persistent silence, choosing not to divulge their own feelings on issues they themselves had chosen. They brought the instructor face to face with the "hidden injuries of class" Sennett and Cobb identified two decades ago (1973).

On a more positive note, the assignment also yielded some very successful papers by "new experts" who took to the investigative component in the assignment. A particularly memorable one examined the negative effects of year-round schooling[7] and offered this final analysis of the mode of instruction and its results:

> Students are treated as numbers not people. Year round school is at a much faster pace. The teacher has a series of books, programs and tests, they must conduct in a certain time frame. They have pressure. That pressure goes to the students. And the motif seems to be how many graduate not what grades did they graduate with? To develop this idea, I will quote my younger brother who graduated a year ago: "I can't believe 'Benny Martinez' made it. He couldn't read or write without messing up! He just got lucky, or they felt sorry for him too." I personally believe that the high school let go of students because it was afraid "Benny" would be there as long as they forced him to be there. They needed the room for new students, they decided to let him go. The problem is there are more than 1000 "Bennys" who graduate each year.

The student who wrote this had obviously pondered this problem, and had come to some conclusions about teaching that, we are sure, strike responsive chords in all of us.

Concluding Thoughts: Benefits and Limitations

Ultimately, the method advocated here should benefit teachers as well as students. No longer will teachers suffer the burden of being the sole providers of instructional resources, since multicultural diversity brought to the fore of the composition classroom ensures against this. Moreover, students and teachers alike, through a continual exchange of cultural values and beliefs on both sides, are opening a joint forum for much needed communication. This, in turn, narrows the gap between one of the dominant discourses of the academic community and more marginalized discourses. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the gap between theory and practice

is narrowed. Teachers begin to see for themselves how diverse, but connected, theories of learning, literacy, and sociolinguistics can work in concert with actual classroom practice.

Nevertheless, our approach is not without potential problems. Students may resist when asked to bring their own experiences with and theories about writing into the classroom. This can become especially troublesome when students wholeheartedly endorse a view of themselves as "objects" and teachers as "bankers," and dealing with this kind of resistance is not easy. However, teachers can at least begin to diverge from a disempowering educational model by asking students why they view their own education in this manner. Moreover, we have presented our method in a rather top-down fashion, starting with theories and beliefs and then shifting to specific literacy practices. Not all students or classes are ideally suited for such an approach, and some students may respond much more favorably to a bottom-up, exploratory classroom style. Working with the ideas we have outlined calls for *artful implementation* and sensitivity to the unique dynamics of each classroom. Each teacher ultimately needs to make his or her own decisions, based on his or her own understanding of the new writers' needs, implementing our suggestions in a manner most suitable for his/her particular population of students.

Appendix A

English 85 Gergen

Assignment #5 (in class) and #6 (out of class)

Title: Perfection in a less than perfect world

Background

George Orwell's book, Animal Farm, describes a situation where an attempt to create an ideal political and economic situation (a farm owned and run exclusively by animals) fails. Many feel that Orwell was right and that there can never be a successful revolution. For failed political and economic revolutions, people may point to the Soviet Union, certain countries in Central America or even the United States (where all men are created equal is an ideal, not a reality). What all of this implies is that utopias (systems that are perfect, i.e. no crime, no discrimination, equal rights for everybody, and the list goes on) are impossible to achieve in reality.

While Orwell's book focuses mainly on political and economic aspects, we could extend the notion of utopias to other systems beyond that of an entire country (or farm for that matter). For example, we could think of the educational system, in particular the community college system. What would the perfect community college system look like? We could even extend the idea of utopias to relationships and families. Is it possible to have the "perfect family"?

Assignment

What I would like for you to do in this assignment is to address the following question:

Are utopian systems possible in today's world? Why or why not?

In addressing this question, I want you to focus on one particular system. In other words, you can answer this question with respect to education (community colleges perhaps?), family, national or economic systems. I do not want you to try and talk about all of these different systems, just choose one! You also will want to have specific examples to support your thesis.

Hints

When you begin your paper, you might want to think about what a perfect family, school, political or economic system would be like. You ought to first write about this and then discuss whether or not this ideal is possible. Your answer to this will become your thesis. A good thesis will also be one that says why your answer is what it is.

Appendix B

English 31/86 Patthey-Chavez

Assignment #4: Cause and Effect Analysis

Now that you have heard how skillful descriptions can carry a convincing and powerful argument, I want you to apply your descriptive and organizational skills to your next assignment. This assignment will be a cause-and-effect analysis. I want you to use the second type of cause-and-effect organization we have discussed: Start with an effect, describe it, and then investigate the many causes that have led to it.

The topic of this essay is:

A problem in my neighborhood

Choose a problem that you are really concerned about (get as real as you can), and then follow these steps:

1. Describe the problem;
2. Identify as many causes of this problem as you can; this will probably involve assigning responsibility for the problem to various groups of people;
3. Rank the causes, and see if any of them are related;
4. Write a point sentence about the main cause(s); organize all the causes into superordinate and subordinate causes (big boss causes and contributing ones).
6. Organize all these causes into a rough outline and use roughly one it to organize your paper. A good rule of thumb would be to devote paragraph to each subordinate cause.
7. Show us, through description and full elaboration, that your analysis is right, and that the cause(s) you identify as the main cause(s) do have the predicted effect(s), i.e. the problem you started out with.

You will see that even in an essay that is not meant to be descriptive, you can make use of both good organization and good descriptions to support your analysis. If readers becomes engrossed in your writing, they are much more likely to entertain the point you are trying to make than if they are bored. Your readers are much more likely to agree with you that something is a big problem if you show destructive effects than if you merely name it. For those of you with a creative spark, description is the one part of the essay where you can shine: Make your text come to life, make your readers understand the depth of your convictions by illustrating them vividly and skillfully.

I would like you to refrain from developing or even suggesting any solutions. Instead, I want you to convince your readers that the problem you are addressing is indeed a problem. Show them, clearly and vividly, the destructive effects of this problem. Show them, again clearly and vividly, how the problem you are describing affects different groups of people--the people concerned, yourselves, your kid-brothers and sisters . . .

Notes

[1] All three writing programs for which the authors have worked so far espoused a student-centered teaching philosophy.

[2] Nothing exemplifies the persistence of this country's xenophobic legacy better than the current controversy about political correctness. Using "PC-excesses" like labeling the handicapped "differently abled" or setting

up an Afrocentric curriculum of "questionable historical and scientific validity," the bitter polemics surrounding PC are setting up an irreconcilable conflict between inclusive curriculum efforts and "the American (educational) tradition." The conflict and the contrast it sets up perpetuates a view of "American" as homogeneously White, and a view of diversity as irreconcilably alien. One of the most comprehensive discussions of the phenomenon can be found in the July/August 1991 issue of the *Utne Reader.*

[3] Another way to put this is that we are trying to reconcile two generally hostile constituencies, composition theorists/researchers, and composition teachers. The latter, faced with the immediate concerns of writing classes, find the work of the former overly abstract or obtuse. Teachers with whom we have worked, for example, have repeatedly asked for concrete, "hands on" ideas, while almost shrugging aside the more general principles underlying these ideas. Researchers and theorists, meanwhile, find the teachers' repeated calls to "get real" insufficiently principled or orderly (i.e., unscientific), and dismiss classroom experience as "anecdotal." Perhaps because our experience spans both worlds, we feel the two groups have much to offer each other, and would like to see a *bidirectional* exchange replace this mutual hostility.

[4] At the same time, it is important to let the students decide whether or not they accept the views we present about hegemonic discourse. It is very easy to turn our ideas into an alternate dogma, and simply to replace one set of views about literacy with another. One way to avoid this is to start with student-experiences with print and with schooling. These may bear out our views, or they may not. Many of our students have articulated analyses of language use by particular discourse communities that echo our own. For example, they see California's English-Only movement as a way to victimize them by excluding them from employment. Others tell us that they are grateful for past opportunities to learn "proper" English in order to get ahead. Unlike some proponents of problem-posing education, we do not advocate challenging such an opinion. Instead, we might encourage the student who holds it to try and investigate the English they think will help them.

[5] The typical student at the site for which this assignment was developed is older, gainfully employed, and often has family responsibilities. No doubt the assignment would have to be adapted to a younger student population more exclusively dedicated to college studies.

[6] In 1989 and 1990, parts of Los Angeles were subjected to monthly aerial sprayings of a toxic pesticide in response to an "agricultural emergency," an infestation by an agricultural pest known as the Mediterranean Fruit Fly. Most of the people on the receiving end of the sprayings were from immigrant or minority backgrounds. The disparity between the heavy sprayings of their neighborhoods and the light spraying ordered for richer neighborhoods (if any spraying was ordered at all) was not lost on them.

[7] In the last decade, immigration has greatly swelled the enrollment of urban California school districts. Neither school funding nor teacher training has kept pace with this rising enrollment, and many school districts have found themselves in the position of having to do more with less. In order to relieve overcrowding, they have frequently opted for year-round schooling. In such a system, schools are kept open year-round, and students are divided into several tracks with rotating schedules. Since

not all children are in school at the same time, more students can be accommodated by the same facilities. For the most part, these students have shorter school years and longer school days.

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