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Despite numerous studies attributing socioeconomic and cultural origins to this phenomenon, the actual reality of this ethnic/racial division was staggering. Even more daunting is the fact that this ethnic division of basic and regular composition courses doesn't appear to have changed through the years. At the University of Illinois at Chicago, for example, it is interesting to note that Latinos comprise 10.1% of the undergraduate student population at UIC, yet Latinos made up 26% of students enrolled in Basic Writing (UIC Student Data Book 1989-1993). At the University of Massachusetts Boston, student placement mirrors this demographic distribution, while research conducted at other institutions nationwide confirm the reality of this disturbing pattern.

Several questions emerge in analyzing placement patterns in Basic Writing courses. Why are Latino students placed in larger numbers in Basic Writing courses than other groups in composition courses? Equally perplexing, why do these students not matriculate into the credit bearing courses in numbers that reflect their distribution in the university? Furthermore, considering that many Latinos, after twelve years of schooling, apparently fail to perform at the levels expected of them, how does placement in Basic Writing courses affect Latino students even beyond factors such as individual self-esteem?

Understanding why Latino students do poorly in writing courses is becoming an ever more important issue because Latinos are the fastest growing group in the United States. With the increasing Latino population, one would assume that we would see a corresponding increase in Latino college completion rates, but unfortunately the opposite is true (Ybarra, *Latino Students* 51). Indeed, current census data show that the retention rate for Latinos at all levels of schooling is decreasing, and the prediction is that this trend is going to continue (*Digest of Educational Statistics*, 1999). Moreover, the statistics do not identify or apparently explain the problem of the disproportionate placement of Latino students in Basic Writing and their limited success in producing acceptable academic writing. As both a Chicano and as a composition specialist trying to reverse such statistics, this bothers me tremendously.

These deplorable statistical realities of Latino student concerns warrant serious investigations. However, due to the centrality of ethnicity in this study, the research methods employed must necessarily include what is often labeled as sociological data and deemed irrelevant to educational research; that is to say, qualitative methods that locate students' attitudes, cultural backgrounds, ethnic patterns of expression and thought, and other cultural information. Indeed, the prevalence of failure among Latino students in particular in Basic Writing courses suggests a (dis)connection – or dissonance – between the cultural backgrounds and corresponding thought processes of Latino

students in the learning environment in the composition classroom. To date, research in this area is virtually nonexistent most likely due to the interdisciplinary nature of such research that must necessarily borrow from education, sociological cultural studies, and linguistic investigative methods. Once composition specialists are able to identify the cultural tropes which I suggest herein conflict with the cultural and cognitive assumptions embedded within academic writing structure, we can then adapt to make such tropes conscious and use them to help us revise our pedagogical assumptions and apply them in Basic Writing courses.

II. Overview of Research

This paper is based on a much larger ethnographic study.¹ The purpose of this study was to assess whether pedagogical assumptions and practices together with the communication patterns of Basic Writing instructors toward their Latino students affected writing performance. Since student placement statistics reveal that a disproportionate number of students placed in Basic Writing courses are Latino, Basic Writing classrooms were thus chosen as the sites for the study. For the purposes of this article and to illustrate the cultural complexities involved in the seemingly higher ratio of failure among Latino students than other ethnic groups in Basic Writing classes, I shall focus on this one particular course.

Overview of Basic Writing Course

The purpose of Basic Writing at the University of Illinois at Chicago, as stated by Downs et al. in the "Content Guidelines" for teaching Basic Writing, is not so much "to teach students how to write, but to help students understand how writing works in the world, especially the world of the university":

Remember that the goal is not to turn students into expert critics but rather to give them a sense of confidence by helping them realize that each piece of writing is produced by a human being for some purpose in the real world, a world of which they are a part. (5)

Thus, the focus of Basic Writing, though still a preparatory course, is not on skills, but rather on understanding the writing process as a whole, from the beginning stages of ideas to the final product. Instructors of Basic Writing at UIC are encouraged to assign their students a significant amount of reading and writing, drafting and revising (both the in-class essays and out-of-class essays), and conferencing with students (Downs et al. 4-9). By steering students through a series

of revisions, the students will not only create their own models of writing, “but will learn academic discourse through using it” (Farr and Daniels 81; Downs et al. 32).

Students

In this particular class, three students (out of the fourteen) self reported their identities as Latino.² Connie (all the names of the students and instructor have been changed), an entering freshman and eighteen years of age, categorized herself ethnically as half Ecuadorian and half Argentinian though neither parent had been back to their respective countries for more than twenty-five years. She did not speak Spanish except for a word here and there. Born and raised in the U.S. and attending both public and private schools, Connie never left the Cicero area.³ She took advanced English courses in high school, yet she scored low enough on her placement test to be placed in Basic Writing.

Letty, another eighteen-year-old entering freshman, categorized herself as Mexican. While Letty’s parents were born and raised in Mexico and immigrated to the U.S. a year before Letty was born, Letty was born in the U.S. and attended school in both California and Chicago. She and her parents travel to Mexico on a regular basis, at least once a year. Letty did not score high enough on the written portion of her placement exam to take the required college level composition class.

Joe turned out to be a perplexing anomaly. An entering freshman, Joe categorized himself as Hispanic. Through his continued silence and frequent absences, Joe communicated his response to his placement. Joe’s eventual withdrawal from the course, at the urge of his instructor, is representative of a significant percentage of Latino students to the cultural dissonance that emerges between Basic Writing requirements and the culturally encoded discourse patterns of Latino students.

Research Methodology

Once I identified my subjects, I followed them throughout the term and continued to collect data through audio-taping, interviews, and my fieldnotes. I audio-taped many of the class sessions. Additionally, throughout the semester, I interviewed or talked to the students and the instructor periodically (audio-taping whenever I could). After each of the class sessions, I would review the audio tapes and make any adjustments in my field notes I felt were necessary for the identification of the tapes and interpretation of the data.

Background of Instructor

The instructor whom I shall call Pat came to this course with the requisite background in composition teaching. Having taught college level writing courses at two other urban institutions (De Paul and Loyola Universities) she was entering her second year teaching Basic Writing at UIC. She also held the reputation of being considered one of the better instructors in the program due to her energetic style of teaching and her propensity for encouraging lively discussions among her students. From such indicators Pat appeared to be a successful instructor for Basic Writing students. I thus predicted that I would witness a positive impact of her pedagogical practices and interaction with her Latino students on their written performance.

Pedagogical Assumptions and Practices

Pat's presentation of her Basic Writing course unequivocally located her position in what might be termed the conventional academic standards camp: the tri-partite structure. This pattern of academic written discourse is termed "essayist literacy" by scholars such as Scollon and Scollon and Heath.⁴ This pattern can be described simply as a beginning, middle, and an end pattern—although I do want to stress it is not simple by any means. This, as Farr ("Essayist Literacy"), Heath, and Scollon and Scollon argue, is a way of cognitively structuring and viewing the world around components of threes. Members of this society in general, and college students in particular, must internalize this tri-partite structure in order to "progress upwards educationally and, in many cases, economically" (Farr, *Oral Texts* 9). The possible link between these structural schemata and a host of culturally embedded dominant ideologically implied assumptions they may endorse suggest a rationale for the pervasiveness and function of this tripartite structure in education. To assess how the teaching of this culturally-dominant structure affects the performance of culturally marginalized students, in particular, Latino students, I analyzed the instructor's syllabus, since as Stock and Robinson argue, a syllabus reflects an instructor's "beliefs about learning" (315).

In the introduction to the course syllabus, the instructor announced, among others things, office hours and location since she expected to confer with her students individually periodically throughout the semester. She also expressed her interest in having students seek out her help during office hours in addition to individual conferences.

In the "Aims of the Course" Pat described her expectations of what she wished her students to accomplish:

1. To develop clarity of thought by reading, thinking, and rethinking, redrafting, revising, editing, and polishing prose;
2. To organize and develop ideas in coherent writing;
3. To become confident in writing academic discourse.

It is important that I note the extent to which the instructor set up through the announcement of these course objectives the tri-partite structure and the corresponding culturally-dominant ideological assumptions embedded within it. First, note that the objectives mirror the tri-partite structure not only in number (three objectives) but also in their relational interfacing with one another. "To develop clarity of thought..." parallels the introduction of an essay where ideas and points are initially made (just as the second objective by underscoring organization and development of ideas mirrors the body and development of the thesis in an essay, while the third objective as the outcome of one and two, mirrors the outcome of the conclusion of an essay which is a result of the introduction and the body.)

Pat's objective by the end of the semester was to get her students to write in academic discourse. Although Pat did not state this directly, the implication is made quite clear by her stated three goals of her syllabus: "To develop clarity of thought" meaning to write clearly, and directly, and concisely to avoid any "unnecessary complex prose" (*The Practical English Handbook*); "To organize and develop ideas" meaning to shape the ideas "to the larger intentions of the paper," organization and cohesion, without sacrificing clarity (*The Practical English Handbook*); finally, in the goal "to become confident in writing academic discourse."

Pat was suggesting to her students that if they did what she asked them to do, they should be well on their way to writing academic prose on their own. This is important because Pat was letting her students know that she was aware that the students must, in time, produce text that the academic community wants. As Bartholomae writes in "Inventing the University," the student "has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy . . ." (274). To acculturate her students into the academic community, this instructor knew that the students "must speak and write. . . toward such familiarity" (Stock and Robinson 318).

In the middle section of the syllabus entitled "the conduct of the course," the instructor explained the procedures she would employ in getting the students to write according to the expected standards. Here, the instructor stated that the essay writing in this course would be personally focused and conform to a narrative structure that is mirrored in the assigned personal readings. The self-focused writing expectation required of the students reveals the course theme as well as the underlying ideological assumptions and expectations.

The purpose of the course was for the students to focus on themselves, their families, and cultural backgrounds with a shift to the internal struggles and conflicts they might have experienced in being asked to conform to externally imposed expectations. The pedagogical assumption here underlying the course theme was the hypothesis that in writing about personal experiences, the students would be more likely to participate in written form because they would start with what they know. Many writing specialists believe that approaching writing with what the students know "is a workable concept which can help us teach writing. . . .It taps the intuitive communication strategies writers already have, but are not adequately using" (Flower 77). By trying, by participating, and by emulating the students would in time produce the type of text acceptable to the academic community.

The ideological assumptions underlying the tripartite structure imply a homogeneity of experiencing and articulating experiences. Pat expects the student then to encode experiential information into this tripartite structure; moreover, she expects the Latino students to write about their cultural backgrounds coupled with issues of identity. There are, however, two levels of cultural dissonance associated with these requirements: 1. The cultural background of Latino students that involves what might be described as circular discourse patterns is not easily translatable into the tripartite structure; 2. Due to sociological complexities, the stress on singular identities is culturally confusing and emotionally disconcerting for students who often feel they cannot articulate a specific identity for themselves as requested.

Here is where we see that, although Pat has a broad understanding of essayist literacy, she has a somewhat ineffective interpretation of it. But is this all there is to learning how to write, memorizing the rules of academic discourse? Obviously, the answer is no. For if this were the case, then we wouldn't have, what Pat Bizzell describes as discrepancies in helping students to successfully complete composition courses. She points out that while some students are familiar and comfortable with academic discourse and excel in writing courses, others are not so familiar with this writing style and are even resistant to learning it.

Student Responses

When expected to write about their cultural backgrounds, the Latino students experienced considerable difficulty. The required tripartite structure conflicts with the oral discourse patterns which are influenced by Spanish syntax, discourse rules, and cadence. Equally problematic are the complex issues of identity for Latinos, many of whom have considerable trouble labeling themselves with distinct iden-

tities. The tensions are compounded because these same students do not understand why they are having so much difficulty with writing; they do not and cannot understand why they have so many mistakes in their essays. As a result, for example, Letty, though not angry, remained very suspicious about the Basic Writing course and struggled with both the instructor and with the tripartite structure required of her writing, often refusing to complete essay assignments that forced these pedagogical issues and cultural patterns to the writing surface. Connie, on the other hand, because of her struggles did show her anger and frustration. Though she continued the course, she was subsequently dismissed as "hostile" by the instructor who, in turn, refused to help this student any further, assigning me the task instead. What happens with many students like Letty and Connie is that their struggles with writing do not stop even though they may have successfully completed the Basic Writing course.

For an all too significant cadre of Latino students, however, the response is what Derrida calls the "gap in the text;" namely the silent response that emerges with Latino students is simply that they drop the course or drop out of college as a result, as in the case of Joe. Due to the cultural disrespect and sociological discrimination Latinos experience in the U.S. , Latinos are reluctant to call themselves American. Labeling themselves with the national origins of their parents and/or grandparents is equally problematic since they did not actually come from those Latin countries of origin and often do not speak the language. This explains why ethnic descriptions such as "Chicano" have arisen to distinguish children (and/or grandchildren) of Mexican immigrants who were born in the U.S..

Joe

The only time Joe spoke in class was the Monday of week three--he had missed four consecutive class sessions when Pat directed a comment/question to him about his irregular class attendance. Pat began the session by taking attendance. She stopped when she got to Joe's name and the following exchanged ensued:

Pat: You look like you slept well Joe. No more partying, or are you taking care of yourself?
Joe: Yeah, no more partying.

Although this interaction was very short and took place in a humorous tone and the class laughed at Joe's response, I commented in my notes that Joe himself did not laugh; instead, he appeared agitated. At the end of this dialogue, he just looked down at his notes. Pat also

did not appear surprised by his response. She just returned to taking roll, calling out the names of the other students. For the rest of the class session, Joe remained silent and did not participate in the work of the class.

When Pat relayed to me that she had spoken to Joe about his absences and had warned him about the consequences that would develop because of them, I was surprised given the agreement we had about observing (and also taping) the individual student conferences. Although she had informed me about and invited me to attend other student conferences, she did not inform me about her meeting with Joe, nor did she talk to me about what transpired in her conference with Joe, and through this reluctance to discuss another Latino student response to her instruction, she signaled her discomfort with and misunderstanding of the cultural contents of those responses of Latino Students.

Then in week five, Joe attended class again. Pat began the class session by taking roll. She appeared surprised that Joe was in class. When told to pair up, Joe just sat in his seat looking at his paper and occasionally looking at the questions Pat had written on the chalkboard to help the students analyze their papers. I decided to pair up with him. I was also pleased because this was my first opportunity to find out more about Joe. However, just as we started working, Pat asked to talk to me outside the classroom. After we had both walked out into the hallway, Pat – after taking a couple of deep breaths – asked me to convince Joe to drop the course because of his absences.

I was hesitant to get directly involved in handling the situation, but Pat felt I would be better suited talking to Joe because of his and my similar cultural background, i.e., we were both Latino. Pat felt that I was better prepared to avert a confrontation. As I suspected, Joe responded angrily to my suggestion that he drop the course. He felt that he was not being given a fair chance. Although I agreed with him, I did not tell him so because of my professional responsibility to the other instructor. I repeated to him several times that this was only a suggestion. I explained to him again that he was being asked to drop because of the number of absences he had and nothing else. If he felt strongly enough, he could stay in the course. No one could force him to drop.

He kept insisting, however, that we were unfairly singling him out. After about five to ten minutes, Joe did agree to dropping the course, but he stated that he was not happy with what I was telling him, and that he was going to relay all this, all that we had discussed, to his advisor. I told him that would be an excellent idea.

I had a very difficult time dealing with Joe dropping the course. I hated that I was the one to ask Joe to drop the course, but I was more upset that the instructor had put me in such a position. Although Pat

was present during the entire interaction, she kept quiet. Afterwards, I did tell Pat that I wanted to talk to her about Joe, about what transpired, and about how I could have handled the situation differently. Although Pat never outright told me that she did not want to talk to me about what happened or about Joe, she always managed to evade discussing the incident.

As far as Joe was concerned, his suspicions were confirmed – he did not belong – he was not welcomed in this classroom. A few days after this incident, I attempted to contact Joe at his home, but I received no response to the messages and letters I sent him. Later, I found that Joe not only dropped the class, but also dropped out of college completely.

Looking back at this scenario, I realized that the instructor had adapted a strategy in which she thought she was helping the student without considering how deeply this way of thinking was entrenched in her psyche and how this had manifested itself in the classroom, in her teaching, and in her evaluation of Joe. All she saw were the absences, the missed classes. She did not see Joe; she did not know who he was nor understood why he was missing class.

It is obvious that we failed helping Joe, and fail in helping many students like Joe, because we do not take the time to find out what the dissonances are between their own cultural communication patterns and those required in academic writing. This is a phenomenon distinctive to Latino/a students – differing from, for example, white working-class students' learning from a white middle-class teacher. Too many Latino students like Joe withdraw from Basic Writing and even more disturbing, drop out of college in record numbers.

III. Accounting for Student Dissonance

The current research theories on Latino student retention rates in Basic Writing courses has not yet accounted for this disturbing phenomenon. In the previous pages, and elsewhere, I used excerpts of conversations between Joe and the instructor to show how pedagogical practices contributed to a lack of confidence and mistrust on the part of Latino students, which in the case of Joe ultimately removed him from the classroom. We also don't fully understand why many of these students struggle or where their difficulty originates though we can see this lack of understanding in the case of the instructor, Pat, who did not understand who Joe was, where he came from, and why he was absent so many times. This left Joe feeling like he was being targeted unfairly resulting in his complete withdrawal from college.

Ogbu argues that the reason for the dissonance between students and instructors as well as between cultural discourse and academic

structure is not as much the differences in culture (D'Amato 185, and Ogbu, "Frame-Work Variability" 241), as in how the schools are structured that lead to the deep mistrust on the part of both students and instructors. In "Opportunity Structure, Cultural Boundaries, and Literacy," Ogbu writes about how many schools perceive ethnic students as having low levels of intelligence because of linguistic and cultural differences and thus place such students in remedial courses. As Erickson notes, many educators make assumptions about the students' performance based on their poor attitudes about school. This is supported by Matute-Bianchi who claims that many Latinos, especially U.S. born immigrants, are seen as "less motivated," and "more irresponsible" (225).

These negative assumptions can only have negative affects on these students. Thus, Latino students (and many other minority students), by the time they get to college, have repeatedly been faced with being seen as unintelligent or as low achievers (Erickson 41). Erickson offers a theoretical explanation that suggests that as these students grow older "and experience repeated failure and repeated negative encounters" with teachers, instead of developing patterns that are consonant "with the dominant culture, they develop oppositional cultural patterns," similar to what happened to Joe (Erickson 41). Moreover, these students see school as trying to change them, but the personal costs of learning to become members of the school culture are too high (Farr and Daniels; Ogbu, "Minority Status and Literacy in Comparative Perspective").

However, while the resistance framework charts minority student failure in terms of oppositional identities and resistant stances (as further argued by such scholars Min-Zhan Lu, Henry Giroux, and others), it does not fully explain Joe's reaction. Joe knew who he was—Hispanic—and he wanted to continue with college. So what was the problem?

Valenzuela argues that many students, particularly U.S.-born youth, do not necessarily oppose school, rather "They oppose a schooling process that disrespects them; they oppose not education, but schooling" (5). They oppose how education "is offered to them" (19). Valenzuela refers to this process as "subtractive schooling," a process by which school creates "social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the students and between the students and [teachers]" (5), "to the extent that relationships with teachers affect students' schooling orientations and achievement" (30). The result is that we end up with students who are suspicious and angry because they feel disaffiliated from school. Thus, they distance themselves even more. As Erickson notes:

The more alienated the students become, the less they persist in doing schoolwork. Thus they fall farther and farther be-

hind in academic achievement. The student becomes either actively resistant--seen as salient and incorrigible--or passively resistant--fading into the woodwork as an anonymous well-behaved, low achieving student. (41)

Furthermore, as David Bartholomae, Mina Shaughnessy, and Mike Rose all suggest in their research, many of these students feel as though something is wrong with them, but no one is willing to tell them what that is.

Being placed in Basic Writing, for many of these Latino students, only reinforces the idea that they are not good enough to enter the required composition course, which adds to the suspicions many Latino students already have toward mainstream culture and/or vice versa (Ogbu; Valverde; Jacob and Jordan). One student, a Latina, once described her placement into Basic Writing to me as "going backwards." In one sense, this is also what I felt when I was forced to take Basic Writing as an undergraduate myself, and what I speculate Joe felt.

Where does this suspicion and anger come from? I suggest that it stems in part from the confusion Latino students have about education, about what is happening to them, and what is expected of them. I support Eisenhart and Graue's claim that "minority children often have trouble understanding what is expected of them and how to interpret what happens to them at school" (165). This lack of understanding could well originate in the cultural and linguistic dissonance that arises between Latino discourse patterns used by most Latino students and academic patterns of writing. It is most likely that it comes from this lack of understanding, which researchers have not yet explored. Since instructors do not appear to understand the differences Latino students bring with them in their discourse and ways of thinking, they interpret the defensive posturing of these Latino students as not wanting to be in the class, not interested in learning to write, and even possibly not possessing expected levels of intelligence required to succeed in academic writing. The instructors then dismiss these students by encouraging them to withdraw from the course.

IV. Conclusion

Is this what happened to Joe? Although I cannot speak for Joe directly because I do not have enough data on him to come up with a conclusion, I can present another perspective. Moreover, looking closely at this incident has made me more conscious of my own teaching, of how I interact with students, specifically Latino students. I do not want happening to my students what had happened to Joe. I do not want the students in my class to feel like they do not belong. I

want all my students to speak out in my classes as suggested by bell hooks in *Teaching To Transgress*, by the authors of *Discovery of Competence*, and by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Hence, my role as a writing expert is to actively seek out those students who are having trouble, who are absent from class, and who are struggling with writing, who are in danger of "fading into the woodwork" (Erickson 41)." My role as a writing teacher is finding ways to get students to come to class and motivate them to participate. I use my authority to continuously encourage students to talk and to ask questions because I want them to practice speaking (and writing) with authority (Ybarra, "Latino Students").

As a Latina student once told me, one evening after class, she liked the dialogue and the interaction that took place in my class. She liked that she could speak without fearing that she would be humiliated because of giving a wrong answer. As an instructor, I was not going to allow anyone to laugh at her. Even if she gave a wrong answer, she still felt "good" because she understood that I was not so much interested in the *correctness* of the answer, but that she was practicing speaking academic discourse. As David Bartholomae writes, "To speak with authority that reveals the self-assured person we presume them to be" (31). This is what was important to this young Latina.

It is this type of environment that I want to create in all my classes. I realize creating this type of environment takes a lot of time and energy, and it is demoralizing when the student still leaves, but if we are to reverse the high attrition rates, especially among Latino students, then not only do we need to continue doing more of this type of engagement, but we need to find other means of helping students overcome their feeling of disaffiliation with school.

Notes

1. See Raul Ybarra, "Latino Students and Anglo-mainstream Instruction: An Ethnographic Study of Classroom Communication," Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Illinois at Chicago, 1997.

2. To help in the identification of Latinos I relied on Marin and Marin's (1991) definition: any student who referred to himself or herself as a person of "Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race," I included as belonging to the general group "Latino" (23).

3. A suburb of Chicago.

4. See Ybarra, "Latino Students," 1997, pp. 55-56.

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