

What Students Can Tell Us about the Multicultural Classroom

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Preface

This technical report is the first in a series of informal papers published by the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing at the University of Minnesota. The Center annually funds projects that attempt to study any of the following topics:

- characteristics of writing across the University's curriculum;
- status reports on students' writing ability at the University;
- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing.

We make informal reports on the projects, such as this study conducted by Professor Carol Miller of General College, available directly from grant holders in the form of technical reports. More elaborate reports and extended discussions, refereed by outside critics, are available through our monograph series.

In this case, Miller's project was a blend of several of these categories as she studied the writing histories of students of color, the conditions under which writing helped them to learn, and the conditions for curricular organization that might improve these students' chances for success. A companion report (No.2 in the series) contains an annotated bibliography that was developed over the course of the project. In addition to this brief report and the bibliography, we expect a fuller version that will be published as a part of the Center's monograph series.

One of the Center's goals is to disseminate the results of its funded projects as broadly as possible within the University community and on a national level. We encourage discussion of Professor Miller's findings and interpretations.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Susan Batchelder, Editor
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What Students Can Tell Us About The Multicultural Classroom

Many of us are currently engaged in ongoing discussion about curriculum transformation, about revision of the canon, and especially about the consequences of multicultural education to teaching and learning. We may draw upon a good bit of solid theoretical groundwork—for example, James Banks' (1989) enumeration of several objectives of multicultural education, among them “[t]o transform the educational experience so that male and female students, exceptional students, as well as students from diverse cultural, social-class, racial, and ethnic groups will experience an equal opportunity to learn in school...” (19-20).

The transformation that Banks and others call for is, in effect, a revolution of genuinely equal educational opportunity. This revolution, of course, includes diverse curriculum, but only as one aspect of an academic environment that rejects the norms of some groups or classes at the expense of others. What must come is an environment that assays the complex transactions necessary to enfranchise the individual and cultural diversity of all students who are, at least nominally, invited participants in the educational enterprise of the American democracy.

To some degree, however, theory and vision concerning multiculturalism seem to have outrun implementation and assessment. The controversy at the University of Texas about diversity and composition is an example of a problem in our current approach. Students, and especially students of color, have been and continue to be largely ignored as invaluable sources of primary data in curricular and pedagogical reform. They have had few opportunities or venues to make their uniquely vantaged experience a part of the discussion or to advance by their own responses and testimonies new paradigms of

genuine cultural transaction which might enrich the traditional academic model requiring assimilation to fairly monolithic dominant culture norms.

And this is, after all, no insignificant omission, for, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (1985) has written, literacy “is the emblem that links racial alienation with economic alienation” (6). And race is the invisible quantity, the “dangerous trope” (5)-arguably even more persistent, yet implicit in its effects upon constructions of literacy and language than, as Gates applies it, in its relation to the proper study of literature. To the degree that students of color are rendered invisible and mute against the measures of those constructions, the impoverishing failures that have compromised educational agendas and diminished the learning potential of generations are reinscribed and perpetuated.

A growing body of research and our own experiences in the classroom are beginning to tell us more about the complex variables of student experience and response in classrooms in which multicultural materials and institutional values are implemented. We can generalize that, especially for students from the dominant culture, the infusion of culturally diverse texts and pedagogies may engender resistance related to issues of privilege or threats to privilege. Such infusion or transformation may elicit responses of confusion, defensiveness, guilt, or anger when cultures are treated comparatively; it may result in superficial or misdirected responses, as in the case, for example, of my students’ sympathetic response to the movie “Dances with Wolves” which generated a flurry of often misguided requests to declare majors in American Indian Studies.

Further, we know that for some students of color, especially for the “involuntary minorities,” among African American and Native American groups identified in John

Ogbu's (1990) work and elsewhere, there is another kind of justifiable defensiveness and resistance against performance objectives and expectations that may be antithetical to community identity and culturally influenced learning patterns. Carol Locust (1988), for example, has pointed out how educational objectives and practices can be wounding if they do not take into account personal and community values, which Native students have a right to maintain.

We know also, at least in theoretical ways, that pluralistic curricula may present opportunities that merely create new generalizations about groups and individuals. And such generalizations, however well intentioned, simply re-inscribe hegemonic error in new ways. Individuals within every group, especially as participants in institutions of learning, have the right to be addressed as individuals, rather than as racial or cultural representatives or spokespersons. These issues and many others will certainly be foregrounded in the multicultural classroom, whatever that turns out to be. My point is that we need new and more rigorous information about how and why students perform as they do. To get that information, more effectual methods of inquiry should position students' own testimonies as critical and primary.

In the particular area of composition, scholarly discussion over the past ten years has reflected evolving and increasingly complex conceptualizations of factors relating writing performance and cultural transition. Ten years ago, the discussion was consistently centered on the essentially ethnocentric goal of getting minority students, (and the discussion almost always focused exclusively upon African American students) to "acquire Standard American English." Writing proficiency was simplistically equated with the absence of major syntactic and mechanical infractions. Students, deficiencies

were frequently attributed to a double bind of confusion resulting from students' inability to clarify simultaneous instruction about the need to exhibit competence in Standard English and to write from their own experience in their own voices.

Research over the last ten years reveals an evolution in the terminology of the discussion—from, for example, “Standard English” to “academic discourse” to “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988). A significant piece of that evolution has been the emergence of the social contextual argument and the questioning of models of universal stages of cognitive development that equate difficulty in producing “college-level” writing with cognitive deficiency.

The scholarly discussion, however, rarely examines what students of color themselves can tell us as primary resources about their experience and performance as learning writers. The remainder of this discussion reports on a body of data from just such primary resources: the results of an interview study that examined the composing experience of twenty-one African American, Native American, and Hispanic students. The study was undertaken over the three quarters of 1989-90 and was supported by a grant from the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing at the University of Minnesota.

The project involved a number of components, most centrally a series of progressive interviews of two groups of first-language English-speaking students, one drawn from composition classes in General College, the University's open admissions unit, and the other from College of Liberal Arts composition classes. Of the total number of twenty-one students, ten were African American, seven were American Indian, and

four were Hispanic. The gender mix was ten women and eleven men, and ages ranged from eighteen to forty-seven. The interview instruments focused on four areas of inquiry:

- 1) self-assessment of students' writing histories, processes, and overall competencies;
- 2) hindsight consideration of what worked and didn't work for these students in their completed composition classes;
- 3) relevance of composition course work to writing performance in other University classes; and
- 4) speculation about conflicts for students of color between cultural identity and experience and the dialectics of academic writing within the academic community .

The interviews—thirty-one in all, since ten of our subjects participated in a follow-up interview in the quarter after they had completed their freshman writing requirement—produced a quite sizeable quantity of material. An annotated bibliography is available [*Students of Color in the Writing Classroom: An Annotated Bibliography, No.2 in the series*], and a monograph reporting fully on this study is forthcoming. In the space remaining here, our objective is to highlight some informative data from students of color about their experience as learning writers.

One thing we learned is that theories of cultural or cognitive deficits appear to do less to explain students' lack of skills than the absence of significant writing practice and preparation. Only four of twenty-one students reported writing more than seven papers of any kind in high school in other than creative writing models. Three reported only creative writing experience. And fourteen of twenty-one, two-thirds of our sample, could

report no writing experience at all. These figures suggest that writing deficiencies may be directly attributable to lack of practice and opportunity before students ever get to freshman composition. Especially with basic writers, an over-estimation of the real experience students bring with them to college composition may result in a sort of “blame-the-victim” misconception of students’ genuine instructional needs.

Our interviews also identified a number of areas of mystification for students that have potential at least to complicate or impede their performance but that may never be addressed in even well planned and well-taught composition classes. One was the tendency to conflate terms such as grammar, punctuation, and syntax, and the related belief, especially among the most fragile students, that these surface features not only define what good writing is, but that their mastery represents these students’ notions of how to overcome the primary obstacle to successful performance. The problem here is that students have apparently bought into the tenacious valuation of surface features without really understanding what they do and do not have to do with producing good writing. The assimilative institutional model that mandates acquisition of Standard English as the fundamental feature determining how writing is evaluated continues to be vigorously debated inside and outside our profession, but the consequences for students are cloudy, misinformed, and naive conceptions of what good writing is and how one learns to be a good writer.

Another area of mystification especially relevant to how multicultural texts and instructional strategies affect composition concerned confusion about course objectives and about the purposes of specific materials and assignments. For example, the first course in General College’s freshman composition sequence has “education” as a core

subject matter very deliberately chosen by the writing staff to be meaningful to students' interest and experience. But only one student among the subset of sixteen General College students in our sample was able to identify the core content as education.

Instead, having been asked to read and write about a range of topics including their own educational histories and goals and the educational experiences of others in books such as Kozol's *Illiterate America* and Wright's *Native Son*, students named "racism," "illiteracy," "prejudice," or "minorities" as core topics for writing and discussion. Although some students reacted positively or neutrally to these topics, others, such as Mark below, indicated a strong level of discomfort and even dysfunction.

Int: Can you explain why you were uncomfortable?

Mark: It's the topic. You're sitting in the class and you don't like sitting in class where all the rest of the students are white. They're all from Wisconsin and Minnesota, you know, white kids. You're all talking about racism, about how dumb the niggers was, and so and so. And you're sitting there, you know. "Wow. I don't want to talk this. I don't want to listen."

Int: Did the instructor...know that you were uncomfortable? Did you ever talk?

Mark: No, I just...I didn't want to deal with it I didn't want to talk about it

Int: So did you have trouble writing that paper?

Mark: Yeah. I didn't really want to do it I didn't want to have anything to do with that

Mark's comments, reflecting a level of alienation significant enough to lead him to choose not to participate, apparently result from the dual circumstances of his being the only person of color in his class and of his discomfort with "race" as a subject matter for writing and discussion. Mark was not the only student for whom ambivalence about course substance and objectives, coupled with and perhaps exacerbated by isolation in the community of the classroom, appeared to have potential to affect performance negatively.

The bottom line is that if students are to benefit fully from course objectives, texts, and composing experiences that reflect multicultural educational values, the purposes of and connections among those course components must be made explicitly and thoroughly clear. Instructors may employ a number of strategies to accomplish this, including direct discussion of these issues, clear articulation in syllabi and course descriptions, and perhaps most importantly, particular attention to individual student response.

Which activities did the students in our sample find most useful? Six named the writing practice itself related to written and oral feedback from instructors. Five noted conferences as the single most helpful class activity. In fact, every student but one, who said he had no conferences, noted individual conferencing as useful and important

Seven students noted small-group/peer response activities as most useful, but often for reasons instructors might not have anticipated. Students who expressed lowest confidence in their abilities apparently tended to use small groups not primarily to facilitate revision or to generate ideas but to clarify confusion about what was going on in class, as a place to have peers “translate” what the instructor wanted, what assignments really demanded.

Small groups and peer response were not productive for all students, however. Some students across all three ethnic groups, especially those who expressed the greatest writing confidence, found these activities a “waste of time,” and complained about the unhelpfulness of peer feedback that was uninformed or indiscriminately positive. Two of the American Indian students in the sample were resistant to the function of small groups as occasions to critique the writing of their peers.

Linda: I just don't get anything out of small groups personally. I don't know if it's because I'm not aggressive in making my own opinions or whatever. I just don't. We had evaluation, and I never got anything out of my evaluations at all. Everything was, you're a great writer. Well, I know I'm not a great writer.

Int: Did you do critiques of other people's writing in the small groups?

Linda: Yeah, and I found that extremely difficult because I'm, I don't like it because I'm Native American and the way I believe is that we do not criticize other people's.... Maybe it's my concept of thinking, of not understanding what they want, but to me to criticize is to criticize. So I have difficulty saying that something is wrong.

Int: Would it have been useful, would it have been possible for the instructor to talk about that as help rather than criticism?

Linda: I think if it would've have been presented to me in the fashion that, instead of saying, just interfering with this other person's journey, if they would say, well, what would you do if this was your writing? That would have been more useful to me, just, what would you have done, not what's wrong with it.

Linda's response suggests, when it is posed against almost universal valuing of communal harmony among Native American cultures, that small group peer critique is not a functional strategy for all learners. The particular usefulness of Linda's response is the cue she provides about how peer feedback could be more constructive (and less a strategy for potential resistance from Native students) if it were posed in the context of constructive advice about improvement rather than criticism—what would you do rather than what's wrong.

The wealth of information and perspectives provided by the twenty-one respondents of our study may not be presented fully here. But that richly instructive data from students rather than about them is the point of this discussion, and it leads to some general conclusions. Several genuine "needs" seemed to emerge from our study. One is clearly a need for more theoretical grounding and detailed quantitative examination of how diverse populations learn. Theoretical alternatives to models that posit universal,

undifferentiated stages of cognition need the support of quantitative study that does not proceed from ethnocentric assumptions and that recognizes a multiplicity of distinctions among populations and individuals within those populations.

There is also a need for more qualitative research—interviews, case studies, etc.—to bring into the discussion in much greater numbers many who have so far primarily been talked about rather than talked to. Students of color certainly are among those who have not been much heard except as objects of, rather than partners within, this construction of what seem sometimes to be “pre-fabbed” and fairly monolithic academic edifices.

We also need to re-examine our pedagogical objectives and instructional strategies, especially in their consequences for students who may very logically resist being socially reconstructed when that process involves behaviors of assimilation and acculturation. We need more explicit answers to more explicit questions than we have so far posed. How do so-called “progressive” strategies, or any instructional strategy, really affect students’ abilities to perform as writers? What students are we talking about and under what circumstances? How do we know what we think we know about these students, and whom do we ask?

What the multicultural classroom needs ultimately are new paradigms that negotiate cultural transactions rather than cultural assimilation. What students tell us can and probably must be fundamental to how-and whether-these transactions occur.

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