

TEACHING MULTICULTURAL ISSUES IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: A REVIEW OF RECENT PRACTICE

Umeeta Sadarangani

In a composition class that I taught a couple of years ago, one student wrote to offer solutions to the problem of racism. Another detailed the often unpleasant experience of growing up in the only Indian family in a small Pennsylvania town. A heterosexual student who has lesbian, gay, and bisexual friends discussed homophobia on campus, while a Jamaican student told readers that the island was more than what they see on television commercials. Yet another student illustrated in a narrative how stereotypes of Mexico created by the media were destroyed by her visit to that country. And these are students not from an inner-city campus or from an ESL course but from a typical first-year composition class at what is often referred to as a "white-bread" university: only 9.4 percent of the over 38,000 students at Penn State's University Park Campus belong to racial minorities. ¹ My students' papers illustrated for me the increasingly diverse issues now being addressed in the college composition classroom and raised for me a number of questions: How can I further encourage my students to explore in their writing their diverse experiences as well as prepare them for the diversity they encounter around them? The differences between the students' educational backgrounds also mean that some of them will be in a better position than others to successfully engage in academic discourse. How can I address these differences?

As I read what other teachers have been writing, as I spoke with some of them, and as I studied a number of new textbooks

which focus on multicultural issues, I found an interesting conversation in progress. In this essay I wish to share what I have learned with other teachers of composition who are likely facing some of the same questions I did. The strategies that I discuss here are not mutually exclusive; there is some overlap. I have chosen to discuss them because they are representative of the approaches being tried in composition classrooms today in an effort to address the needs of students living in an increasingly multicultural society.²

The Increasingly Diverse American Classroom

In the fall of 1989, "for the first time, undergraduate enrollment in the University of California at Berkeley and at Los Angeles was more than 50 percent nonwhite" (Lanham 29). While that figure obviously does not reflect the situation at most institutions of higher learning, it is a sign of the demographic change that has been taking place in this country and its universities. Richard Lanham observes that "American minorities hitherto excluded from higher education have demanded access to it, and a new influx of immigrants has joined them" (29). The tide of immigration is illustrated by the statistics Lanham quotes: "Over six hundred thousand immigrants came to this country in 1987—probably more than to all the other countries in the world put together" (29). In the past, immigrants came to the United States "in successive waves that left time for assimilation, and they came into an agrarian and then into an industrial society. Today's immigrants come from dozens of cultures and languages all at once, and into an information society which rewards linguistic competence more than willing hands" (Lanham 29).

These changes from without and within have altered the makeup of the American classroom. Mary Louise Gomez and Carl A. Grant, who teach in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin, point out that "United States classrooms at all levels of schooling, kindergarten through college, are increasingly filled with diverse learners—students who are poor, who have limited English proficiency, and those who are people of color" (31). At the same time, "the majority of U. S. teachers at every level are

middle-class and white" (32). While there are certainly differences *within* that group of white, middle-class teachers, there are still larger differences between the experiences of the students and those of the teachers. Because it is unrealistic to expect that students of diverse backgrounds will be taught by teachers who share that diversity, and because these diverse learners are too often failing in our schools, Gomez and Grant stress the need for change in teaching practices (32, 31). Considering broader relationships of power, Henry Giroux, too, calls for change. He expresses the concern that while, at least in some big cities, due to an increase in their numbers "people of color are redrawing the cultural demographic boundaries of the urban centers, the boundaries of power appear to be solidifying in favor of rich, white, middle and upper classes" (217-18). He sees educators as playing an important role in correcting this imbalance and in establishing a "democratic public life and critical citizenship" (245).

Becoming aware of the inadequacy of the existing system of education and knowing that "ultimately, writing (and reading) are not matters of grammar or syntax; rather, they are the business of culture" (Hsu 4), teachers of writing have proposed strategies to implement the necessary changes. For the purposes of this discussion I have divided these strategies into two broad groups. The first emphasizes interactive writing, in which students learn to negotiate between a variety of texts and to position themselves in relation to continuing and conflicting discourses. The focus here is on the interaction between students and texts, and the goal is to involve students in academic discourse.³ The second group shares the goal of the first but tries to achieve it by concentrating on the students' experiences. Teachers assign culturally-oriented writing topics, discourse analysis, and ethnographic research projects. Proponents of both approaches also engage students in collaborative learning to enable them to interact with each other, thus encouraging them to acknowledge and benefit from the different perspectives in the classroom. After elaborating on these two strategies, I will discuss the use of textbooks which emphasize multiculturalism in their contents and exercises, and then share with you the results of trying some multicultural approaches in the classroom.

Interactive Writing and Academic Discourse

Students today enter college with varying degrees of familiarity with the discourses of academic disciplines. These differences stem from a variety of factors like growing up in a home where two languages are spoken, speaking a dialect, or having limited exposure to academic discourse in school. Some teachers feel that introducing students to academic discourse, thus enabling them to enter the dominant discourse community, is the way to help them succeed. However, others, like Marilyn Cooper, object to this because it often reduces English classes to a series of exercises, especially for basic writers (Cooper 48–49). In an essay entitled "Unhappy Consciousness in First-Year English: How to Figure Things Out for Yourself," Cooper says that first-year students, and especially basic writers, "need to know that writing is a way of acting on the world, not a mechanical skill to be acquired as an admission ticket to white-collar employment" (49).

However, Cooper does not altogether dismiss the need for familiarizing students with academic discourses; rather, she qualifies this need. She sees a problem with writing classes which "assume that [students] must first master the appropriate discourse practices before they can take on the purposes of the community" (48). She prefers to recognize that the class is "a particular discourse community with particular discourse practices that serve particular purposes" (48). Recognizing this, she believes, can help students understand the workings of discourse communities because they are participating in one. Cooper recommends the community of nonfiction writers as an ideal one for writing classes, especially for classes where principles of research are to be taught. The genre of nonfiction is not aligned with a single academic discipline; it is "a genre that college-educated people are supposed to be comfortable with, and it is a genre that allows students in writing classes to move beyond the bounds of their personal experience" (51–53).

Cooper's approach is based on the premise that as teachers we want our students "to join us, to be part of one of our communities" (Cooper 54). Cooper reminds her readers that students have to be convinced of the values of our communities, that one must answer the question: "Why are

these things valuable to us and to our students?" (55) Her answer focuses on the importance of generating alternative ways of thinking based partly on Herbert Marcuse's argument in *One-Dimensional Man*, a text particularly appropriate for students at Cooper's Michigan Technological University.

While Cooper recognizes that students come from a variety of backgrounds (as evidenced by her essay "The Ecology of Writing" in the same collection), she sees their success in the academic world as dependent upon their ability to take part in discourse communities. In fact, although differences in students' backgrounds have some impact on their participation in collaborative learning, Cooper's approach for the most part downplays differences between students as they adjust to the discourse community of the classroom. The discourse in the classroom is one that is, as Cooper says, dictated by the values of the academic world; when Cooper says students must see writing as a way to act on the world, she is referring to writing derived from academic models.

Although the idea of academic discourse communities is a useful one, it is important to recognize that our students come from discourse communities. Joseph Harris believes that the recent debate about whether we ought "to respect our students' 'right to their own language' or to teach them the ways and forms of 'academic discourse'" is based on a flawed premise. He sees the belief that "we have 'our' academic discourse and they have 'their own' 'common' (?) ones" as founded on "opposing fictions" (19).

The "languages" that our students bring to us cannot but have been shaped, at least in part, by their experiences in school and thus must, in some ways, already be "academic." Similarly, our teaching will and should always be affected by a host of beliefs and values that we hold regardless of our role as academics. What we see in the classroom, then, are not two coherent and competing discourses but many overlapping and conflicting ones. Our students are no more wholly "outside" the discourse of the university than we are wholly "within" it. We are all at once both insiders and outsiders. (19)

Harris does not see it necessary for us "to initiate our students into the values and practices of some new community, but to offer them the chance to reflect critically on those discourses—of home, school, work, the media, and the like—to which they already belong" (19). Being aware of these different discourses helps in part to legitimize the students' own discourses and also leads them to question the assumptions of all discourses.

Diverse Experiences

While approaches like Cooper's focus on introducing students to the academic discourse community, several other teachers choose to emphasize the students' own experiences. Terry Dean, a teacher of ESL and basic writing at the University of California, Davis, provides support for the latter strategy by raising the question: "What if, after acquiring the power [of communicating in the world of academic discourse] our students feel more has been lost than gained? . . . Entering freshmen are often unaware of the erosion of their culture until they become seniors or even later . . . [M]any students do not fully realize what they have lost until it is too late to regain it" (24). This loss of cultural identity is not unlike the experience of Dee in Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use." Upon going away to college, Dee for the first time becomes aware of the heritage of her home community. But, because she has distanced herself from it, she is unable to appreciate the everyday objects of that culture except as artifacts—she sees them the way one would if one were outside the culture, the way in which the people she encounters in college would see them. In an effort to prevent such a separation from the home culture, Dean suggests a pedagogy which asks students to explore their diverse heritage. After all, as James Cummins suggests, students who are ambivalent about their cultural identity tend to do poorly, while those who view themselves as equal to the dominant group and who "are not alienated from their own cultural values" are not as likely to fail (22).

One of the ways to get students to explore their own backgrounds and to educate them about the diversity around them is through the choice of writing topics. Dean suggests culturally oriented topics such as comparisons of different

rituals, like marriages or New Year's, as a way of introducing students to analytic writing. "Students can use their own experience, interview relatives, and read scholarly articles. Reading these papers to peer response groups gives students additional insights into rituals in their own culture as well as making them aware of similarities and differences with other groups" (28). Susan Jarratt, in a proposal for a revised composition curriculum at Miami University, also lists writing assignments which require students to think about cultural differences and to "locate themselves in relation to social groups" (Memo 3); here is an example: "Recount your first experience with racial (gender, age, sexual orientation, ability) difference" (Memo 3). This assignment, which belongs in the first of five units in Jarratt's course plan, is supplemented by a selection of readings for students and a list of resources for teachers on the subject of using personal experience in writing and on the way language constructs personal experience. When I discussed the course with Jarratt, she agreed that it has a political agenda and added that it is about social change; it doesn't claim to be politically neutral.

Anne J. Herrington and Marcia Curtis of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst implemented a similar change in their curriculum in 1986. The change was motivated by the realization that, by designing the basic writing curriculum to reflect the image of the University rather than that of their more diverse students, and by remaining silent on the issue of diversity in their classrooms, they "had been complicit in marginalizing [their] students' voices, despite [their] conscious efforts to construct a 'student-centered' discourse" (490). They decided to construct the new curriculum in the image of their students by "bringing their varied cultures and life experiences from the margin into the center of the course," thus attempting to erode the "false [academic] boundary and the institutionally constructed impediment to education it represents" (490-91). They chose texts that reflect the experiences of their students and aimed to educate students who could "as active thinkers and writers . . . formulate their own ideas and use their own voices in active, albeit silent dialogue with the texts before them" (491). The readings that Herrington and Curtis chose, most by African-American, Mexican-American, and Asian-

American writers, "deal with the acculturation process that occurs as groups and individuals fight to accommodate new ways while preserving old identities" (491), a process which most of their students engage in. One might think that these approaches which emphasize difference and which place previously marginalized issues, experiences and writers at the center would be seen as a threat by some English-speaking Anglo-Americans. But Herrington and Curtis observe that, for the most part, mainstream students willingly enter the world of non-mainstream writers (494). Sometimes the new approach results in the mainstream students discovering what it is like to be in the minority for the first time; in other instances they identify an aspect of their experience that places them in a minority group, albeit not a racial one. Terry Dean stresses that "Cultural topics are equally important, if not more so, for students from the mainstream culture" because for many of them the university may provide their first exposure to a racially diverse population (30). "Their sense of cultural shock can be as profound as that of the ESL basic writer" (Dean 30).

A different approach that nevertheless involves students' awareness of their own backgrounds as well as makes them aware of the diversity around them is discourse analysis. Assignments requiring students to analyze discourses other than their own are often used in conjunction with the more personal assignments described above.

Patricia Bizzell argues that exercises in discourse analysis can "foster responsible inspection of the politically loaded hidden curriculum" (238). While she believes that knowledge of academic discourse is useful to students from all communities, and that there is no way to make schools ideologically neutral places, she sees a danger in blindly accepting the status quo. The dominant community's discourse, if left unquestioned, is believed to mirror reality, thus denying the validity of the experiences of those outside that community. By analyzing the dominant discourse, Bizzell hopes that

. . . perhaps we can break up the failure/deracination dilemma for students from communities at a distance from academe. Through discourse analysis we might offer them an understanding of their school difficulties as the

problems of a traveler to an unfamiliar country—yet a country in which it is possible to learn the language and the manners and even "go native" while still remembering the land from which one has come. (238)

The course that Susan Jarratt proposed consequently requires students to undertake discourse analysis with the aim that they "observe the ways language contains and constructs social difference" (Memo 3). Assignments may include asking students to analyze some piece of discourse—such as single-gender groups, dorm conversations, or professors' lectures—and to draw conclusions about difference. Another aim of the course is "that students learn and practice the ways knowledge is constructed by discourse in socially, institutionally, and culturally specific contexts" (Memo 4). Students may be asked to "compare the treatment of the same current issue in two different news sources" or they may have to interview a specialist about the decisions made in the process of publishing in a particular field (Memo 4). In fulfilling such assignments, students have to critique what they may otherwise see as an authority (for example, the media). Upon learning that discourses vary in different contexts, students are more likely to realize that the dominant discourse does not represent "Reality" but rather "a reality," and that if the students' own worlds are not represented by this discourse, it does not necessarily mean those worlds are any less valid. Undertaking this critique encourages students to see how the dominant discourse attempts to control their world; knowing this they may become less subject to the way that discourse defines them.

James Zebroski considers this awareness vital and calls for "a critical study of life and literacy in oppressor communities. How do Exxon or the news media or the federal government use literacy and for what ends? What are the reading and writing practices of the powerful?" (85). He makes such writing research the theme of his composition courses in order to understand how those in power create and sustain their worlds. The awareness his class gains from such research helps him resist becoming an agent of the status quo and helps his students understand why they are not part of the power elite.

(An extended example of an assignment that involves discourse analysis appears in the last section of this essay.)

A method closely related to discourse analysis that also offers a means of increasing student awareness and addressing the diverse cultures of the students in our writing classrooms is the use of "ethnography, which would take as its subject the communities from which these students have come" (Tinberg 79). This approach has a more local focus than discourse analysis; students study their own use of language and the way language is used in the world immediately around them. They also learn ethnographic techniques of gathering data that are similar to techniques used by anthropologists.⁴

Ethnography in the classroom is recommended by Suzy Groden, Eleanor Kutz, and Vivian Zamel at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and by Howard Tinberg at Bristol Community College, among others. The assignments focus on language, and the goal is for students to learn about language in the contexts in which it is used, to become conscious through their own research of the rules that govern language, and to become aware of and able to use a wide range of language strategies. Ethnographic research is especially useful for students who speak nonstandard dialects; at UMass-Boston, the students "discovered that they could study their language in relation to social and cultural roles, and that their language behavior was, indeed, rule-governed" (Groden 138). This discovery was important for students who may in the past have thought that the surface problems in their language use would make success in school unlikely (Groden 138).

Assignments in ethnographic classrooms include research focusing on differences between oral and written language and differences between formal and informal uses of language (Groden 134). For example, at UMass-Boston, the teachers taped and the students transcribed "their oral telling of stories and then compared these to their written versions of the same stories"; or the students "taped a family member or a friend trying to get someone to do something within the family, then taped the same person trying to get something accomplished over the phone with someone less familiar, and finally compared the two versions" (Groden 134). The students were involved in the "observation and collection of data on language

use in particular contexts, such as their workplace, or the classroom, and reporting on their observations" (Grodén 134). At the same time, students read about language and ethnography, "and they read literature which provided a basis for further comparisons of different styles of language" (Grodén 134).

In addition to language, students can study the texts of a culture. For instance, as Howard Tinberg suggests, they "can go out into a community to study its customs and rituals (a weekly bingo contest at the 'Y' or a bar mitzvah)" (80). Another version of this assignment is to ask students to reflect in writing on a ritual that they know well. Their essay could incorporate secondary research on the ritual and its history as well as interviews with community members (Tinberg 80–81). These are short essays that Tinberg assigns after he has introduced his students to "two important and related concepts: (1) that speaking and, to a lesser degree, writing are shaped by the context or situation in which they occur, and (2) that successful communication derives from a knowledge of rules governing such situations" (79–80). An assignment that would help students understand these concepts would ask them "to discover and describe a speech situation in which they were 'at a loss,' either unfamiliar with speech conventions or uncomfortable with them. In the process, students may define their own expectations in such a speech situation" (80).

After they have written the short essays, students can take on a larger ethnographic project which requires an extended study of a community's ways and that uses both primary and secondary research. One of his students, Veronica, studied an island community near her Maine hometown. While Veronica felt a bond with the people of the island, she noticed that their customs and language seemed distinct. Her objective was to find out how the island was able to keep its community intact while also attracting new residents. She decided to interview a wide range of residents, read church bulletins and the local newspaper, as well as consult historical works about the island. Veronica's research showed her that the island was able to withstand the threat from the outside because of its dialect as well as the occupation—fishing—its residents had in common.

"So compelling are the island's traditions, Veronica concludes, that even the land developers must give way" (Tinberg 81-82).

Whatever the assignment, Tinberg says:

It is important to emphasize that in "doing ethnography" students . . . are actively and genuinely doing research and that they are connected to the research they do. Moreover, in using ethnography teachers send a clear message to students that their communities are worthy of study even in, of all places, the classroom. (82)

Projects like the one Veronica undertook clearly encourage an understanding of discourse communities as well as involve engaging in research. The difference between approaches like ethnography and discourse analysis and Cooper's approach is that the former bring the students' experiences into the classroom and relate them to the discourse of the academic world. Unlike Cooper's approach, these methods do not make a case for leaving personal experiences behind. Students are asked to question their own communities and values; but because students are in the position of experts of a sort, they find themselves able to offer authoritative readings.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning plays a role in all the strategies I have discussed so far. Terry Dean, a proponent of this approach, contends that because students work in small groups where they are more comfortable, they are more likely to bring up culturally sensitive issues than they would in a discussion with an entire class (32). They may also feel a sense of community which is often lacking elsewhere at large universities, especially during the first year.

Like some others, Joy Ritchie, Co-Director of the Nebraska Writing Project at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, takes the idea of collaborative learning one step further by saying that the entire writing course should be structured as a writing workshop. The teacher must be seen by students as not only an authority figure but also a writer who brings drafts to class and shares the problems she may be having in the process of

writing. Such an environment, Ritchie asserts, helps bring students' backgrounds into play as they interact with each other and with the instructor; it also often puts students in a position where they have to justify their values and arguments. Having observed a class where such an approach was used, Ritchie describes the experience of one of the students, Becky. The class made it necessary for Becky to write about something she knew well—the experience of growing up on a farm—for readers who questioned her and asked her to rethink her experiences so that she could explain them to an audience unfamiliar with rural life. Ritchie explains that Becky's writing for this class

. . . became a process of exploring her own identity and ordering her own experience In each revision she tried on different voices and identities; she revealed more about the kind of person she was; and she complicated and affirmed the uniqueness of her rural life. (166)

Through collaborative learning, Becky gained a deeper understanding of herself and provided insight into rural life for those alien to it.

A different kind of collaborative learning is practiced by Terry Dean in his composition classes: the production of class newsletters. Dean writes:

I use brief 20-minute in-class writing assignments on differences between the university and home, or how high school is different from the university, or ways in which the university is or is not sensitive to cultural differences on campus. These short paragraphs serve as introductions to issues of cultural transition, and when published, generate class discussions and give ideas for students who are ready to pursue the topic in more detail Students who feel comfortable discussing ethnic or cultural tensions establish a forum for those students whose initial response would be one of denial. (33)

Probably the greatest advantage of Dean's use of the newsletter to generate class discussion is that the topics come from the students themselves; the teacher does direct the class to write

about difference, but the actual issues raised are those that are on the minds of the students. Such an approach validates the students' experiences while inviting them to compare these experiences with those of their classmates.

Nevertheless, collaborative learning is not flawless. Even Dean, who recommends it so enthusiastically, admits that "peer response groups have limitations, need structure, and can be abused by students and teachers alike" (32).⁵

Multicultural Textbooks: A Cautionary Note

All of the strategies discussed above are supplemented by outside readings. A number of textbooks have been published in response to the recent interest in multiculturalism. The following three anthologies represent some of the choices available to composition teachers who, like me, notice the diversity in their classrooms and look for tools to engage their students' varying perspectives and to prepare their students to deal with the diversity around them.⁶ But these textbooks, and others with similar contents, should be used with care.

Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing (1992), edited by Diana George and John Trimbur, "takes the view that writing courses might find their proper 'content' right under their own noses—in the cultural practices students engage in to make sense of their worlds and their social experience" (IM-1). The text aims to introduce students to the way meaning is organized in everyday life; it invites them to engage in cultural analysis of contemporary America. The readings cover issues relevant to American life today and are followed by topics for discussion. The editors want students also "to learn how to gain a critical distance on their experience—not to replace it but to explain it" (IM-2).

The focus of *One World, Many Cultures* (1992), edited by Stuart Hirschberg, is rather different. Its readings reflect global rather than American culture and explore cultural differences and displacement in relation to race, class, gender, region, and nation. The writing assignments on the readings ask students to locate what their experiences have in common with the experiences of others in radically different cultural circumstances. Each reading is preceded by background

information including a brief history of the country (or countries) relevant to the reading. It is not unusual to find a footnote such as "(For more information on Iraq, see p. 389)." Rather than drawing students' attention to how meaning is organized in their own society, the text takes students into societies foreign to most of them. The emphasis is on the interconnectedness of diverse cultures.

Also focused on foreign cultures is Marilyn Smith Layton's *Intercultural Journeys through Reading and Writing* (1991). The purpose of the readings in this text is to enable the readers to travel to different cultures. Many of the anthologized pieces depict individuals involved in such intercultural encounters. While this text, too, invites students to find parallels in their own lives, its main metaphor is that of travel, as the title indicates. The questions for discussion and writing that follow fictional works concentrate for the most part on comprehension and analysis closely related to the text. Not always is there a question that requires students to see a connection between their own world and that of the writer.

While these texts may appear to be created to address cultural diversity, there is a danger in depending on them exclusively. Sandra Jamieson argues that most "multicultural" readers are constructed on a "mainstream/margin" model which means that "someone must remain on the margins" (11). Even as these texts appear to challenge the status quo, they perpetuate the existing structures of dominance (Jamieson 4). For example, Jamieson notes that in the biographies of authors that precede the works:

. . . we are only told the race of the author if she is American but not Caucasian. Further, Americans of color tend to be described by their racial group rather than their nationality while foreigners are described by their nationality but not their race. Those given national identity thus appear to speak on behalf of a nation of people "just like them" while American people of color speak only for their race White Americans are never described as offering the white/Caucasian/Anglo-Saxon perspective on issues or explaining what it means to be a white American, while Americans of color are only called upon

to describe their Otherness. The implication, then, is that white American (or English) writers speak for "humanity." (7)

These texts may encourage readers to look at the world from the perspective of the white American; they do not acknowledge or encourage other points of view from which the works can be read. They also suggest that foreign cultures are easily knowable through short pieces of writing, often ignoring the complexities of those cultures. While one may suggest that these problems are difficult to avoid when trying to include a variety of cultures in about seven hundred pages, Jamieson argues, "It is time for us to call for readers and policies on 'diversity' which move beyond the simple model of numerical inclusion and business as usual" (14). Until such readers are produced, however, we can, as teachers, take steps towards creating classrooms where a variety of perspectives are recognized and welcome. One of the ways to do this is to be "hyperconscious of the power relations of the textbook and the classroom" (Jamieson 14). For example, we can note the fact that textbooks usually don't deal with white privilege, instead discussing only its flip side, racial victimization. We can also address the implications of our roles as teachers and evaluators. Involving ourselves in the discussion means taking some risks, but these risks are often necessary in order to create an awareness of the diversity of positions within the classroom.⁷

Conclusion: Multiculturalism in Praxis

What happens when one incorporates a variety of these approaches into a composition classroom at a "white-bread" university? Do students welcome the emphasis on diversity? Let me share with you briefly what happened when I tried some of these approaches in one classroom at Penn State University.

I was assigned to teach a section of Honors Composition. Most of my twenty students were from the University's honors program; a couple had "tested into" the class. I had chosen as texts for the course a packet of readings I had collected, most of which were editorials from recent periodicals. I had purposely

chosen issues like immigration, sexual conduct in the military, the aftermath of the riots in Los Angeles, the presidential campaign, gay rights and coming out, rap music, sexist language, the role of television, and the courts' decisions on the abortion issue, and I excerpted these articles from periodicals at various points on the political spectrum. The packet also included readings on rhetorical strategies and chapters on tone, paragraphs, etc. In addition, the students bought and read from Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* and from *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa.

Only the first of the five major assignments forced the students to deal with an issue of diversity: they were to write a narrative in which they recalled one of their first experiences of racial difference.⁸ They read some narratives on the topic as they prepared their own. Seventeen of the twenty students were Caucasian; one of those was a British national, and another was a few years older than the rest of the class and had recently left the military. Of the three others, one was African American, one Indian American, and one Taiwanese American. The narratives that these students produced were thoughtful, and, I must admit, they surprised me with their frankness and self-reflection. What was noteworthy was what happened *after* this assignment.

The second assignment asked them to dispel a stereotype without creating another one in its place. Many students chose topics that were close to home, and they began to explore their diverse backgrounds *without being specifically told to do so*. They took on cultural and religious stereotypes (atheists, Jewish females, Indians, Asian Americans, rude Parisians, American tourists); stereotypes related to economic and geographic background (welfare recipients, the homeless, rural communities); and those related to political causes and practices and other interests (vegetarians, environmentalists, hunters, cheerleaders). They also, inevitably, discussed gender issues (college men, military men) as well as discussing those who experience challenges and trauma (people with cancer and their families, rape survivors).

I found that the students became more and more interested in writing about current and controversial issues as

well as studying their own positions in relation to these issues. I believe that the readings provided a context for them, and that the class discussions of the readings and of each other's papers helped them to develop and try out their ideas. Perhaps it was because the articles we read approached the issues from various positions; but, whatever the reason, students were willing to disagree openly with each other and would even on occasion ask to work with someone writing from an opposing point of view when they exchanged rough drafts.

This group of students, more so than other composition classes I have come across, shared their personal experiences with me and with each other, in their writing and their discussions. For instance, my African American student would step in during a discussion about attitudes towards young black men and tell his classmates what it is like being one; the rest of us did not demand this from him, but when he shared his experience, we listened. He also chose race-related topics for four of the five papers he wrote for the class. And there was a student who later came out to me as bisexual, who was the first to bring up the position of bisexuals during a lively discussion about what it would be like to be heterosexual in a predominantly homosexual society. These contributions seemed to me to stem at least partly from the feeling that their personal experiences counted and were part of the "real business" of the composition classroom. I think they learned that they had to be aware of their positions when they spoke and wrote.

During the course of the semester students also became aware of the discourses around them. The assignment in which this was particularly evident was the one where they had to analyze a half-hour television news show and then decide what they would write and to whom; some suggestions included writing an evaluation, proposal and/or cultural critique. One student watched two successive hours of CNN's *Headline News* and then wrote a letter to CNN pointing out that a half hour of *Headline News* did not take us "around the world in 30 minutes." Not the same world anyway, she argued, because the "top story" during each half hour was different, and sometimes was barely mentioned in the subsequent half hour; sports on the other hand got the same amount of time and was pretty

consistent each half hour. She questioned the priorities of the show's producers. Another student wrote a satire in which an alien arrives on earth and happens upon a television set just in time for *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*. The alien wonders why all the people on the news show have such light skin and why they all wear ties (this picture doesn't fit his previous knowledge of the planet). He is also amused at the susceptibility of the audience as revealed by the commercials. Writing such a critique meant that the student had to become aware of and learn to question discourses around her.

Even in an honors course there was a range of writing ability, and not everyone's needs could be addressed in the classroom. I found that giving students opportunities to discuss their writing with me informally outside of class addressed at least some of the differences and helped all the students to continue to take part in the ongoing conversation in the classroom.

These multicultural approaches worked well in my honors course, showing that multicultural readers and courses need not assume basic writers as they tend to do. I have since used the same assignments and many of the same readings when teaching other composition classes, spending a little more time in class on writing strategies; students have been receptive and have produced some fine papers. We can apply what Mike Rose has said about basic writing to the composition classes that the average first-year student takes: "What would happen if we thought of our students' needs and goals in light of the comprehensive and ambitious program structures more often reserved for the elite?" (194). My honors students' response to Rose's chapter "The Politics of Remediation" suggests that Rose is on the right track; my students said, "We can relate to the students in the Tutorial Center! Everyone ought to read this so they know they aren't alone." Maybe the distance between honors students and basic writers isn't as great as we think. Maybe it is time all our students were challenged to think in the ways demanded by a multicultural curriculum.

NOTES

¹ These statistics for the 1994 Fall semester, provided by the office of the Vice Provost for Educational Equity at Penn State, do not include international students, nearly all of whom are graduate students.

² For a broader, interdisciplinary survey, see Grant and Sleeter: they present a comprehensive review of articles on multicultural education published in English-speaking journals worldwide. Topics covered include, among others, national and local policy, purposes and goals of multicultural education, models for organizing instructional programs, curricular change, instructional processes, teacher education, and attacks against multicultural education.

³ This approach is particularly useful for a classroom where students bring varying familiarity with academic discourse to the course. The approach does not so much suggest how to discuss multicultural issues in the composition classroom as it shows how composition might be taught in a multicultural classroom. I include it here because it will be useful to teachers reading this essay with a multicultural classroom in mind.

⁴ Ethnographic research is, of course, also used to study composition classrooms. For an overview of the method used by composition researchers and a discussion of its advantages and disadvantages, see the chapter on "Ethnographies" in Lauer and Asher.

⁵ John Trimbur provides an analysis of the debate about the drawbacks of collaborative learning in "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning." He focuses on the notion of consensus and examines criticism from both the right and the left. He then revises the idea of consensus "as a step toward developing a critical practice of collaborative learning" (603). Trimbur argues that "The politics of consensus depends on the teacher's practice . . . [Consensus] can be a powerful instrument for students to generate differences, to identify the systems of authority that organize these differences, and to transform the relations of power that determine who may speak and what counts as a meaningful statement" (603).

⁶ This is by no means a comprehensive survey; I have chosen these textbooks only to illustrate the choices available to the composition teacher. Other multicultural readers include Colombo, Cullen, and Lisle; Evans, Gleason, and Wiley; Gillespie and Singleton; Holeton; Knepler and Knepler; laGuardia and Guth; Madden-Simpson and Blake; Rico and Mano; Stanford; and Verburg.

⁷ I would like to thank Sandra Jamieson for sharing her research with me and also for the extensive conversation that helped me clarify some of my ideas. Her presentation entitled "Repackaging America: Multi-cultural Composition Readers and the Construction of the Other," presented at the Eleventh Annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition in July, 1992, first made me reevaluate my position on multicultural textbooks.

⁸ My thanks to Susan Jarratt for sharing this assignment with me.

WORKS CITED

- Bizzell, Patricia. "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing." *Pre/Text* 3 (1982): 213-242.
- Colombo, Gary, Robert Cullen, and Bonnie Lisle, eds. *Rereading America: Cultural Contexts for Critical Thinking and Writing*. 2nd ed. New York: Bedford-St. Martin's, 1992.
- Cooper, Marilyn M., and Michael Holzman. *Writing as Social Action*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1989.
- Cummins, James. "Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention." *Harvard Educational Review* 56 (1986): 18-36.
- Dean, Terry. "Multicultural Classrooms, Monocultural Teachers." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 23-37.
- Evans, Faun Bernbach, Barbara Gleason, and Mark Wiley, eds. *Cultural Tapestry: Readings for a Pluralistic Society*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- George, Diana, and John Trimbur, eds. *Reading Culture: Contexts for Critical Reading and Writing*. Instructor's ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- Gillespie, Sheena, and Robert Singleton, eds. *Across Cultures: A Reader for Writers*. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993.
- Giroux, Henry A. "Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity." *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries*. Ed. Henry A. Giroux. Albany, New York: State U of New York P, 1991. 217-256.
- Gomez, Mary Louise, and Carl A. Grant. "A Case for Teaching Writing—in the Belly of the Story." *The Writing Instructor* 10.1 (1990): 29-41.
- Grant, Carl A., and Christine E. Sleeter. "The Literature on Multicultural Education: Review and Analysis." *Educational Review* 37 (1985): 97-118.
- Groden, Suzy, Eleanor Kutz, and Vivian Zamel. "Students as Ethnographers: Investigating Language Use as a Way to Learn to Use the Language." *The Writing Instructor* 6.3-4 (1987): 132-140.
- Harris, Joseph. "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 11-22.
- Herrington, Anne J., and Marcia Curtis. "Basic Writing: Moving the Voices on the Margin to the Center." *Harvard Educational Review* 60.4 (1990): 489-496.
- Hirschberg, Stuart, ed. *One World, Many Cultures*. Newark, NJ: Rutgers, 1992.
- Holeton, Richard, ed. *Encountering Cultures: Reading and Writing in a Changing World*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992.
- Hsu, Ruth. "Letter to Readers: Culture/Politics in the Writing Classroom." *The Writing Instructor* 10.1 (1990): 4-6.
- Jamieson, Sandra. "The United Colors of Multiculturalism: Rereading Composition Textbooks in the 90s." Unpublished essay, 1991.
- Jarratt, Susan. Memo to the College Composition Committee, Miami University, Ohio. 13 April 1992.
- . Personal Conversation. 10 April 1992.
- Knepler, Henry, and Myrna Knepler, eds. *Crossing Cultures: Readings for Composition*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1991.

- laGuardia, Dolores, and Hans P. Guth, eds. *American Voices: Multicultural Literacy and Critical Thinking*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1993.
- Lanham, Richard A. "The Extraordinary Convergence: Democracy, Technology, Theory, and the University Curriculum." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 89.1 (1990): 27-50.
- Lauer, Janice M., and J. William Asher. *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Layton, Marilyn Smith, ed. *Intercultural Journeys through Reading and Writing*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.
- Madden-Simpson, Janet, and Sara M. Blake, eds. *Emerging Voices: A Cross-Cultural Reader*. Fort Worth: Holt Rinehart Winston, 1990.
- Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*. 2nd ed. New York: Kitchen Table-Women of Color P, 1983.
- Rico, Barbara Roche, and Sandra Mano, eds. *American Mosaic: Multicultural Readings in Context*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991.
- Ritchie, Joy S. "Beginning Writers: Diverse Writers and Individual Identity." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 152-174.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educational Underclass*. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- Stanford, Judith A., ed. *Connections: A Multicultural Reader for Writers*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1993.
- Tinberg, Howard B. "Ethnography in the Writing Classroom." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 79-82.
- Trimbur, John. "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning." *College English* 51 (1989): 602-16.
- Verburg, Carol J., ed. *Ourselves Among Others: Cross-Cultural Readings for Writers*. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford-St. Martin's, 1991.
- Walker, Alice. "Everyday Use." *Conversations: Readings for Writing*. Ed. Jack Selzer. New York: Macmillan, 1991. 56-64.
- Zebrowski, James Thomas. "The English Department and Social Class: Resisting Writing." *The Right to Literacy*. Ed. Andrea A. Lunsford, Helene Moglen, and James Slevin. New York: The MLA of America, 1990. 81-87.