

TEACHING IN THE “CONTACT ZONE”: WRITING ASSIGNMENTS TO COUNTER RESISTANCE TO MULTICULTURAL READINGS

Ellen Andrews Knodt

Many college composition programs adopt anthologies of readings defined as “multicultural” in an attempt to expose students to the diversity of cultures present at their colleges and in society. Multicultural selections are usually defined as those written by authors who are perceived to belong to a marginalized group, due to their ethnicity, religion, race, gender, social class, or sexual preference. Some examples of these texts include *Border Texts* (Houghton Mifflin 1999); *Across Cultures*, 4th edition (Allyn and Bacon 1999) and my own *Understanding Ourselves* (Longman 1996). High school teachers, too, are using texts with far more diverse selections than would have been common ten or more years ago.

However, instructors have reported at conferences or in articles that students do not always accept multicultural perspectives and that classroom discussions sometimes are marred by hostility and resistance that often take one of two forms: first, students in racially or ethnically mixed classes refuse to discuss such sensitive issues as affirmative action, welfare reform, or immigration restrictions or, second, the readings trigger angry outbursts, racist statements, and other evidence of closed minds. One must, of course, acknowledge that students may refuse to discuss any text—sensitive or not—or may show hostility to the whole process of reading and discussing. The resistance I am discussing here is deep, not amenable to the usual techniques of

fostering conversation, such as asking open-ended questions or finding debatable, contradictory points within or between reading selections. Sometimes, students say to the teacher after class that they are sorry they aren't participating but the subject of racial quotas in jobs or schools or the problem of religious discrimination in social clubs is just too "embarrassing" to talk about. Some minority students say that they do not want to be "poster children" (not their words) for their minority group, so the teacher is just going to have to discuss the issues by herself. Less frequently, a student walking out the door says something like, "You can make me read this stuff, but I don't have to believe it!" While some discomfort might provoke a real examination of issues and lead to a greater appreciation of others' points of view, if a class totally shuts down and the teacher is perceived to be the carrier of a political correctness agenda, I question whether learning is taking place. In her study of student attitudes in composition classes, Candace Spigelman reported the disquieting (but not unexpected) finding that students will discover what the teacher wants them to believe and will write to order, *but will not necessarily change their views of the subject.*

My purpose in this paper is to discuss the resistance sometimes encountered in what Mary Louise Pratt has called the "contact zone," her term "for social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power"(34) and to suggest a way that writing assignments may be used to counter that resistance and open a class to freer discussion.

Pratt describes her experience with a new course at Stanford in Cultures, Ideas and Values which "put ideas and identities on the line" and in which "all the students saw their roots traced back to legacies of both glory and shame"(39). She acknowledges "rage, incomprehension and pain," but also "mutual understanding and new wisdom"(39), but does not tell us how that new understanding was accomplished. Pratt acknowledges the intensity of such multicultural courses and advocates "safe houses" of ethnic or women's studies courses where groups can get "protection

against legacies of oppression”(40). She also admits “looking for the pedagogical arts of the contact zone,” which she feels will include “exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others”(40). It is with the “pedagogical arts of the contact zone”(40) that I am particularly interested because of my belief we must both create a multicultural curriculum and also devise ways for that curriculum to be studied.

Joseph Harris, in *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, addresses his similar concern with Pratt’s concept of a “contact zone” by raising the problem of either the passive resistance of silence or the active resistance of outwardly expressed hostility:

What she [Pratt] seems to end up doing is, in effect, importing difference into her classroom through assigning a number of readings from diverse cultures. At no point does she speak of how she tries to get students to articulate or negotiate the differences among themselves. Students are thus brought “in contact” with writing from various cultures, but it remains unclear what sorts of talk about these texts occurs among and across the various groupings of students that make up the class. How, for instance, do white students speak with their black classmates about a text written by an African author? What forms of evasion, politeness, resistance, hostility, boredom, or incomprehension interfere with their talk? (118)

What Harris advocates is a different way of looking at what we do in the classroom. He feels that “the goal of pedagogies in the contact zone, of conflict, becomes not the forcing of a certain ‘multicultural’ agenda through an assigned set of readings or lectures but the creating of a forum where students themselves can articulate (and thus perhaps become more responsive to) differences among themselves”(129). I agree with Harris that perhaps our efforts to diversify the curriculum have outstripped

our pedagogical techniques of handling sensitive material in the classroom.

Several contributors to the recent book *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, edited by Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnella Butler, raise the same specter of resistance and the need for effective pedagogies to counter it. In her essay, “Writing Identities: The Essence of Difference in Multicultural Classrooms,” Wendy Hesford argues that merely assigning readings may not accomplish real change:

There is a danger in thinking that new content is liberating for students in and of itself—add more spices, stir, and everything will be fine. Curricular-reform initiatives in composition that are preoccupied with the integration of new material (namely, the published autobiographies of writers from diverse backgrounds) may universalize students as readers and writers and cultivate simplistic pluralist notions of voice and free expression without openly acknowledging principles of power, access and privilege operative in the classroom. (135)

We must recognize that students don’t read texts from the same experience and perspective as their instructors or their fellow students do. Richard E. Miller also points out that “the classroom does not . . . automatically function as a contact zone in the positive ways Pratt discovered in the Stanford course” (399).

As a case in point, Virginia Chappell discusses the surprising resistance that she found to a reading in *Farewell to Manzanar* about the relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Chappell points out that instructors proceeding from their own set of readings and experiences that conclude that the internment of Japanese-Americans was unjustified and racist may be taken aback when they confront their students’ views that the internment was somehow justifiable as a necessity of war. She urges teachers to adopt pedagogies that respect (but not give in to) students’ “monocultural inexperience and naivete”(187) by

constructing reading journal and other writing assignments that explore their changing views as they read, research, and discuss a text. To emphasize the malleable views of many students, she points out work of psychologist Fletcher Blanchard, who reported that “students walking between classes voiced opinions about racism that reflected whatever views a third person, an undercover member of a research team,” had just said (187). Chappell’s strategy involves exposing students to opinions and research which allow them time to think and reformulate their attitudes and world views. (See also Virginia Anderson’s 1997 article “Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice.”)

To create the kind of “forum” advocated by Harris or “invitation . . . to inquiry” sought by Chappell, I have successfully used interview assignments for a number of years in several different types of courses. Such assignments serve multiple purposes, not the least of which is preparing students for discussion of multicultural readings. Let me explain the context of my classroom so that you may judge whether this approach may meet your needs. I teach at the Abington campus of Penn State University in a suburb of Philadelphia. All students commute from their homes in many geographical areas of the city and its suburbs. Philadelphia is a city of neighborhoods which historically have been ethnically homogeneous, with Italians in South Philly, Jews in the Greater Northeast, and African Americans in the North and West. Newcomers of Asian, Hispanic, and Russian descent typically concentrate in their own enclaves. Suburban students are typically but not always white and middle class. With the campus population 22% minority, it is a virtual certainty that each class will have representatives from all these groups, with most of them not having had much friendly contact with representatives from other groups. Since these students do not live together on campus, there is little occasion except for student government and some clubs for them to interact with each other. The cafeteria is typically as balkanized as the neighborhoods from which the students come and to which they return each day.

My experiences with reading about and discussing multicultural issues in my classes were often ones of resistance: total silence in response to my questions about a text or, if students were pressed, short answers confined to the “facts” of the text. In short, my students clearly conveyed to me that they would read the assignments but weren’t about to buy what they perceived as my liberal “multicultural agenda.” In essence, my experience corroborates Hesford’s idea that simply assigning multicultural readings and hoping for the best is not a good pedagogical strategy.

Because I had had good luck with interview assignments for a number of years, I decided to adopt a strategy using such assignments to bring students closer to the issues they were resistant to discussing. In the Severino et.al. anthology mentioned above, I was pleased to see that Bonnie Lisle and Sandra Mano found value in such an assignment in their article “Embracing a Multicultural Rhetoric”: “One assignment, for example, asks students to interview someone whose background is significantly different from their own and to write a profile of that person, discussing how the subject’s experiences or opinions challenge, complicate or confirm the writer’s own views”(22).

In my experience, interview assignments are effective for several reasons. First, interviews produce stories: what Pratt suggests in her call for “pedagogical arts of the contact zone”(40) as “exercises in storytelling and in identifying with the ideas, histories, and attitudes of others”(40). The immediacy of talking with a person about his or her experiences can remove a barrier to acceptance that a printed page creates. The interview can provide a context for later reading because the interview subject explains the situation as he or she experienced it. For example, one could assign an interview to explore what an immigrant has experienced before the class reads essays on immigration policy, or what a person has experienced concerning anti-Semitism or racial discrimination before readings on those topics. Sometimes, classes can be divided in groups with different subjects and different readings, as I did with an American studies class, which had one

group working on American policy toward Cuba, another group working on affirmative action policy as an outgrowth of civil rights struggles, and another working on women's rights issues. (See appendix for sample assignments.)

Let me explain at this juncture that a student's choosing an interview subject might produce ethical concerns in some by raising issues of exploitation of subjects by more "privileged" high school or college students. Since my student population is so diverse, and most students choose to interview people in their own families, neighborhoods, places of work, or even on the campus itself, there is rarely a major disjunction in status between interviewer and interviewee. (On the occasion that students have had problems finding an interview subject, I have found willing participants on campus.) Moreover, most interview subjects express in their interviews (in notes or on tapes I have heard) their delight in someone wanting to hear their story. Frequently, such contacts between students and interview subjects lead to greater understanding of the problems the subject had growing up, or getting started in business, or in adjusting to life in America. However, depending on the students involved, the assignment, and the prospective group of interviewees, these concerns should be addressed. Some have suggested that if such an assignment were part of a service learning program it would "give something back to the subject."

Furthermore, since at least one goal of a composition or writing intensive class is to improve the ability of students to write analytical papers about the multicultural readings, the interview assignment proves to be an effective precursor to assignments that require the use of secondary sources. The interview process requires several steps and involves the students more directly with their subject matter than does the reading of an essay in a text. After identifying an interview subject, students need to draw up the questions they will ask (with some help in class). Open-ended questions that encourage a subject to elaborate on answers and not just reply with one word answers are encouraged. Teachers can preview questions to assure completeness and to guard against

naïve or insensitively-worded questions. Then students conduct the interview, taking notes or recording the responses. The notes are their raw data, which then need to be shaped into a coherent essay. This step requires some class discussion of how to determine a thesis, how to organize material, how to leave out material that does not relate to the overall point of the essay, and how to determine the need to re-interview a subject to get more details on a specific point. In this process, students face some of the same tasks of writing a research paper: finding material, using quotations responsibly, and working quoted material into their own texts.

Once the interview has been conducted and the papers written, the last and most important aspect is the in-class report. Students frequently have become fascinated with the stories they have heard from their interviewees and share them willingly with the class. The focus is now not on the student's opinion of affirmative action or the student's embarrassment at discussing interracial marriage, but on what the interview subject said. There is the authenticity of "I have talked to this person, and I believe him or her." Skeptics may raise the "it's only one case" argument, but the cumulative effect of many stories, especially if they are passionate, usually wins the day. Groups that were once lumped as "them" have now got individual names, faces, and stories. If the class turns to readings that discuss the same issues, students are now able to evaluate the writer's viewpoint based on the class interviews, comparing and contrasting the experiences and seeing a writer as one of many voices discussing an issue, not the only voice.

Let me illustrate this combination interview and reading assignment by describing excerpts from my classes. (All names are fictional.) In response to an assignment on poverty and the inner city, a first-year student writes:

The poor of the city—each has a story, a motive and an attitude. There are those who are strong with a hopeful, caring generous disposition which helps them to cope with

their environment. They are the idols of others in the same situation who have neither the courage nor the strength to face the problems alone

Mary is a “giver.” She lives on the third floor of an inner city tenement with her German Shepherd, Macarthur. She is blinded by mature cataracts and recently widowed by her common-law husband, Russell. Mary is the “mother hen” of the tenement. She houses homeless friends, settles disputes, and spends her days in lonely darkness, groping through flyers and newspapers, probing for perforated lines, pulling out coupons to send to the Sisters of Mercy Hospice.

Mary is in the middle of a serious crisis. Her dirty dilapidated apartment building has been bought by an entrepreneur who plans on renovating the building and renting it out to a wealthier class of people. Mary’s rent has already been raised several times and soon it will be too much for her to pay.

Students, hearing this paper, begin discussing the problems of the poor from a new perspective. They begin to see that the poor are not a monolithic entity that can be dealt with easily by simply enacting welfare reforms. They notice how landlords may exacerbate the problems of poor, disabled people like Mary, who may be providing needed social “services” for the neighborhood. The faceless poor have now a face and a name.

Another student responded to an assignment to interview a member of a religious or racial minority different from his or her own religious or racial group:

My grandmother lives in a quiet old neighborhood in Union, New Jersey. The inhabitants of her street come from all different types of places, religions, and cultures. They all seem to be living a wonderfully placid lifestyle, where not many foolish issues of society pollute the atmosphere. It seems as if my grandmother and her neighbors were never exposed to any other way of life.

Unfortunately, for the woman who lives two doors from my grandmother, life was not always this glorious. Ruth was not always an American citizen, and her life at one time was anything but peaceful. Ruth and her family were prisoners of the Nazis along with hundreds of other innocent Jews during World War II in the infamous concentration camps. My interview revealed the following comments and observations of one woman's assimilation into American life.

This is the first time in many years that I have been asked to speak about the unspeakable. When I emigrated to the United States, I hoped that I would be able to forget my past. . . . For many years I have tried to hide my horrid experience as a child, praying that it would somehow just disappear. It has taken me this long to accept my past and continue to live a normal, free life.

I was put into a concentration camp with my entire family during the Holocaust: my mother, father, two sisters, two brothers, and grandmother. You may think it odd how much I remember, considering I was only about eleven or twelve years of age. . . . Let me tell you what a day was like for me in the camp. I remember being awakened while it was still dark outside. I can still recall smelling food, but we were never allowed to eat any of it. All that we were given was bread and water and occasionally some beans. I can still feel myself shivering in the cold air before we had to go to work. Yes, even the children had to work. There was no such thing as "play" in the camp.

I watched my elders struggle to comply with the Commandant's orders, breaking rocks and carrying heavy loads of gravel. . . . I saw my father beaten by the soldiers for no reason at all. . . . Innocent people were being shot while the rest of us looked on. It became a part of the daily routine to hear gunfire and horrible screams.

This reading produced very fruitful discussion of what is now being called "ethnic cleansing." Further, students were intrigued

by the fact that the interviewee chose to speak to their classmate when she hadn't spoken about this experience in years. Though many students had read about the Holocaust, many had not realized the extent of its barbarity or the human face that the statistics could not show.

While not all interviews yield stories as dramatic as these two excerpts, the papers as a whole have an immediacy and a vitality that engage the student who writes the paper and those in the class who listen to it. My experience has been that after this kind of assignment, students are more open to the readings in the text and use the interviews they have heard as evidence to measure the authenticity of the text essays.

In a partial answer to Joseph Harris' questions posed at the beginning of this article, let me share some of the "talk" that ensued in one class after students had written interview assignments and when we turned to discussing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, often anthologized. In this class, an African-American student had reported on an interview with his aunt who had been a college student participant at a sit-in at a previously segregated lunch counter during the civil rights movement of the 1960's. The aunt told her nephew of her fear as she and others sat at the lunch counter, at the jibes and threats she heard from white people who had gathered, and at being arrested. White students listening to his account were horrified and fascinated with what they only vaguely knew from history.

The student's account of his interview gave the other students a context in which to read King and a vocabulary to discuss it. Instead of the African-American student being singled out as a representative of his race because of the color of his skin, he became a source of historical detail because of his interview. While this distinction may appear thin and legalistic, it made a real difference in the discussion. He was proud of his aunt's struggle, and other students felt that they could talk about discrimination between blacks and whites more directly because the subject had been raised in his interview report. Often students don't want to be the first to even mention "difference," based on race or

religion, but once the ice is broken by *someone in the class*, rather than by a *lifeless text*, many students will engage the issues.

In their reaction to King's speech in their textbooks, students picked up on King's images of the continuing injustices to African-Americans, his images of "manacles," "chains," "lonely exile to ghettos of poverty," and the like. They were more willing to assess the effectiveness of his rhetorical techniques in reaching his audience. Discussion of his speech led to how circumstances had changed since 1963 and what the future of affirmative action might be, but the talk was far less polarized in that class than in classes in which I had taught King's essay without a previous interview subject's story. Obviously, to take advantage of an interview countering resistance, an instructor has to assign texts to read *after* she knows what the interview subjects will be. Fortunately, many multicultural anthologies will have a variety of texts written by a variety of authors to enable selecting appropriate texts following the interview reports.

This article does not claim that using such an assignment will sway all minds and counter all resistance, only that it might provide one strategy to enable better dialogue among class members in a multicultural setting. Since they have even for a short time "walked in others' shoes," students seem less resistant to considering the lives and ideas of people that they previously thought of as the "other," wholly different from themselves. The classroom comes closer to what Joseph Harris envisions as "a different sort of social space where people have *reason* to come into contact with each other because they have claims or interests that extend beyond the borders of their own safe houses, neighborhoods, disciplines, or communities"(124).

Sample Interview Assignments

1. Interview someone who was born in another country about his/her experiences upon first arriving in the U.S., what difficulties s/he had adjusting to the culture, what discrimination

s/he experienced if any, what illusions s/he had about the U.S. and how those illusions may have been affected by the experiences s/he had in this country.

Note: Depending on the readings being assigned, this topic may be made more specific to people from Asian countries, from Spanish-speaking nations representing many different cultures, from African nations, India, and the like. Issues specific to those groups may be added to the questions to ask an interview subject.

2. Interview a person who belongs to a racial or religious group perceived to be in the minority in American culture. What difficulties, if any, has the person experienced in childhood, in school, on the job, or in the larger society? If the person is older, try to ascertain if s/he feels that conditions for the particular group s/he represents are better now than they were some years ago, the same, or worse, and what the reasons are for this assessment.

3. Interview a woman about her experiences growing up and as an adult. What inequalities, if any, has she experienced in school, in her family, on the job, or in the larger society? What were her family's expectations for her when she was young? What were her expectations? Discuss any differences in expectations and which prevailed and why. What role has the larger culture (TV, film, magazines, peers) played in her image of herself and in her setting goals for herself?

4. Interview a person who is on welfare, receives unemployment benefits, or has received these types of benefits in the past about their attitudes toward receiving financial help from local, state, or federal agencies, their ambitions for themselves and their families, and their ideas of the role of the individual and the larger society in helping people overcome financial problems.

Note: If the class will be reading selections concerning other social issues, similar assignments for interviewing appropriate subjects can be constructed.

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