

Strategies for Teaching Critical Thinking/Composition

Using Multicultural Contexts

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Background

Many classrooms in the United States reflect a multicultural mix of students. This is especially true in the state of California, which probably reflects the most culturally diversified population in the nation. We, as writing instructors, are faced with the difficult challenge of developing teaching strategies that will not just help assimilate multilingual students, but will also forge a connection between the diverse racial and cultural groups that are represented in an individual classroom. Can certain strategies increase communication between diverse cultural groups? Can creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding and cultural appreciation of diversity, using these strategies, then stimulate students to write with increased depth and meaning? As a TESOL professional and fellow participant in this CATESOL conference, I have sought the answers to these important pedagogical questions.

Within the fields of linguistics, education, and ESL pedagogy there are varying opinions regarding approaches to teaching writing in a multicultural classroom. There seems to be agreement on several major points regarding objectives for the multicultural classroom.

Teacher Understanding of Multicultural Diversity

Writing must be “properly taught by persons understanding their students’ strengths, varying backgrounds, potential for learning, and who take into account historical, socioeconomic, psychological, and linguistic barriers” (Hollie, 2001, p. 57).

Student-centered/Cross-cultural Assignments

The classroom environment must be student-centered, and writing taught as a developmental process. Writing assignments should address issues which exist within the diverse communities in which we live. Students must learn to think critically about America’s changing multicultural society with the objective of increasing understanding and breaking down cultural barriers. Assignments should raise critical multicultural issues of race, class, gender, religion,

and other socio- political determinants, followed by student-centered discussion and analysis which connects the individual, place and power.

Use of Multicultural Texts Which Celebrate Diversity

Students should read and analyze literary texts which accurately represent and celebrate the diversity which exists in our college classrooms, and our American society as a whole. Hazel Rochman states in her book *Against Borders*:

There's no doubt that some kinds of Eurocentric books have dominated the mainstream for a long time and that some cultures have been largely ignored. But the best way to promote them is together; not patronizingly, as something cute and exotic and apart, but as good books. Likewise, the best anthologies or collective biographies or studies across cultures have a point of view that shapes the rich diversity and connects people everywhere by common experience. Multiculturalism means across cultures, against borders; Multiculturalism doesn't mean only people of color (Rochman, 1993, p.12).

Increased Diversity in CCC Classrooms

When we examine changes in student enrollment by ethnicity in the California Community College System (CCC) between 1992 and 2004, we see that white-non Hispanic students are no longer the majority enrolled. Instead there has been a steady increase in minority cultural groups –the largest increase being among Hispanic students, both male and female (Hyperian, 2005). In California, the demographics of the average college classroom is not only increasingly multicultural, but reflects a wide range of English language literacy levels, including international students, 1.5 generation students, ESL learners from immigrant populations, and native speakers. Most students come from a mixed cultural/ethnic background, giving our classrooms a richness and diversity which truly defines our American culture and is reflected in our American literature. Guidelines proposed by both the National Council of Teachers of

English (1970, 1972, 1980, 1986, 1999, 2001) and the California State Chancellor's Office have continually called for greater emphasis on the needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

Objectives of Multicultural Education

In 1995, the Academic Senate published the following definition of multicultural education as an objective:

A view of education that envisions and encourages a curriculum reflective of the society and the world in which we live. It embraces and accepts the interdependence of the many cultural ethnic groups within our society and the world. It recognizes that individuals do not divest themselves of their heritage, and values similarities and differences in all persons (<http://academicsenate.cc.ca.us>).

Unfortunately, we often do not use this diversity as the textual core for basic English courses. Instead, we turn to the familiar canon of established classics and traditional British and Anglo-Saxon authors, supplemented with token representations of "minority" writers.

We need to increase emphasis on Cultural Diversity/Pluralism courses. The majority of California colleges have added an American Cultural Diversity /Ethnicity course to their requirements for graduation, but few English departments offer courses that meet the requirement by exploring a representative range of cultures.

Use of Multicultural Texts in Composition Courses

College English departments could better stimulate critical thinking about cultural awareness through composition/literary response classes which use a more authentic representation of culturally diverse literary texts. Literature reflects the cultural values and conflicts of a society in flux. Closely examining issues of culture, race, and ethnicity can do much to increase understanding and cooperation between the many cultures which form our American heritage. Reading and responding critically to a variety of texts which represent

diverse American ethnic and cultural groups can help students build a bridge of understanding between the diverse groups which make up our expanding global community.

Cross-cultural Classroom Activities

Classroom discussions and study group activities can connect with writing assignments that ask students to explore contributions made by members of all cultural and ethnic groups represented within the class, including their own. These types of assignments will stimulate pride and interest in the “voice” of diverse cultural groups. Instructors should establish a writing workshop environment in a critical thinking and analysis composition classroom, which can stimulate learners to cross cultural boundaries and share ideas about living in an increasingly “global community.” This type of learning environment will empower and validate multilingual learners, while making native English speakers more aware of the cross-cultural makeup of the community they are all a part of. If the course is presented as an exploration of students’ cultural literary traditions from a personal context, combined with a core of representational multi-cultural texts, students will be more inclined to write responses that are stimulated by critical thinking and analysis because they are personally invested and involved. Writing portfolios would include essays which address themes, including: cultural traditions, the immigrant experience, issues of race and prejudice, social inequality, and family gender roles.

Conclusion

By incorporating a multicultural approach to composition course design, diversity within the classroom would then become a positive source of knowledge for students who could enrich each other with their cultural traditions; all students should feel empowered in this type of classroom, regardless of cultural background level. The writing classroom should be a place of enjoyment and healthy interaction. The diversity of a true multi-cultural classroom should be a positive stimulant for the writing process. Members of a true multicultural class should possess equal value, without power divisions between “us” and “them” (Said, 1994, Introduction).

“Teachers need to be able to prepare students to live in an increasingly multi-cultural society and global community” (Sleeter, 1993, p. 148).

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