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LANGUAGE AND AUTHORITY: SHIFTING THE PRIVILEGE

ABSTRACT: *Although most basic writing faculty select varied and representative reading and writing topics that draw on the richness of their students' linguistic diversity, they usually conduct classes in which collaboration moves but one way. Most class texts merely nod pleasantly at linguistic diversity rather than embrace it, tolerating rather than engaging difference. The authors describe an assignment that uses Spanish, Chinese, and French texts in addition to the customary English texts, which allows class members to share students' languages, embrace diversity, and shift privilege. They propose that this move foregrounds oppositional discourse for both students and faculty, creating classrooms in which "right thinking is not the possession of one and merely the aspiration of others."*

Immersed in postmodern literary and cultural theory and committed to educational openness and equity, most basic writing faculty are far less elitist than some of their colleagues in other literature and composition fields. These basic writing faculty members tend to select more varied, representative, and relevant reading and writing topics, to incorporate the richness of their students' experiences, and to be quite open to linguistic

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diversity. However, most instructors have continued to insist that language sharing be largely one-way, with faculty members as the purveyors of standard written English, which they hope their students will acquire quickly enough to survive as writers of academic English.

As we considered our philosophical and theoretical commitments to inclusiveness and collaboration, we began to recognize how limited that inclusiveness and collaboration was, particularly with the non-native speakers we have in our fairly typical Southern California basic writing classes: a mix of white, African American, Latino, Asian, and American Indian native speakers as well as Latino and Asian non-native speakers who have scored in the lower half on California State University's English Placement Test and are enrolled for one, two, or three quarters of prefreshman composition instruction. We recognized that while we chose texts that might appeal to a multilinguistic and multicultural group, the texts themselves remained singular—standard academic English—that while we had welcomed linguistic diversity, we had not really embraced it or attempted to see what value that diversity might have for all our basic writers. Even though we agreed with Hannah Arendt's observation that "for excellence...the presence of others is always required," (49) we often allowed ourselves to use others' presence to highlight individual excellence or, more benignly, simply to be content with the others' presence, forgetting how much more we could gain from reciprocal activity. We remained stalled at the level Henry Giroux describes as tolerating differences but not engaging them.

We decided to test the value of using other languages in our teaching, not because we rejected the value a common language might provide or because we advocated bilingual basic writing instruction but because we wanted to work toward creating more truly shared language communities. From our classrooms in San Bernardino, California, this meant including some Spanish, French, and Chinese, or other Asian language texts as part of the readings in our basic writing classes, which were two of the twenty basic writing sections offered each quarter.

Certainly one response to such a choice might be alarm—alarm that in reading Chinese or Spanish texts, we would neglect English and create even slower entrance into the academy for students who already feel behind in some respects. However, this response rests on the assumption that to value one language is to devalue the other. Such an assumption grows out

of the thinking of the traditional order, an order that tends to view sharing as diminishing its own share of privilege or authority.

However, a second response grows out of postmodern and feminist theorists who suggest that sharing power increases power. Thus, rather than worrying that sharing language might involve relinquishing language, we chose to believe that sharing language would generate, would multiply that language facility, so that we could embrace the linguistic richness residing in our classes and gain, while losing nothing.

With these commitments to greater diversity, inclusiveness, and collaboration, along with a desire to use the linguistic variety in our classes as the context, we would like to describe a composite of eighteen basic writing classes in which, in addition to our usual reading of English language essays, poetry, and short stories, students used magazines written in Spanish, French, and Chinese as stimuli for writing. We hope to demonstrate how this choice embraced the classes' linguistic diversity; how it shifted or expanded privilege in the class, giving voice and authority to often silent students; and how it led students to read and write texts more globally and collaboratively.

Our aim was to use texts written in a language other than English to tap the linguistic diversity in our class and to have everyone in the class benefit from that diversity in as many ways as possible. Thus, on the first day of class, we polled students for non-English reading competence. In each of our classes, we had students who reported some level of reading comprehension in Spanish, French, and Chinese as well as in English. Based on these self-reported competencies, we purchased contemporary magazines in the three languages: *Imagen*, published in Spanish in Puerto Rico, *Le Figaro*, published in French in Paris, and *The Observer* and *Commonwealth*, both published in Chinese in Taiwan.

To prepare the class for using these texts, we began by discussing how readers from other countries might gain different information and perspectives about the United States by reading the magazines they might find either at an airport or a typical mall bookstore. For example, we had students put the names of as many different magazines on the board as they could recall. As we grouped those magazines by subject matter, students were readily able to see that readers would get very different impressions of the United States from looking at *Mother*

Earth News, Better Homes and Gardens, Time, GQ, and *Architectural Digest.* If the magazines happened to be *Soldier of Fortune, The National Enquirer,* or *Wrestling USA,* the impression would shift radically again.

Following this exercise, we arranged students in groups of five. In each group, we placed two or more ESL students who had reading competence in the target language. The remainder of each group was a mixture of abilities and languages. We considered writing ability and assertiveness as well as a number of other factors in trying to create a setting for productive work groups. We then gave each group one of the three texts, asking that they designate group leaders and recorders and that they rotate those roles each class meeting.

Their assignment, which occupied three weeks of the ten-week quarter, was to investigate collaboratively what they could learn about the country the magazine represented, creating as rich a communal data base as possible, and then to write papers responding to the question, "What can you know about this country from the magazine we've given you?" In some classes, we had students write individual papers, and in others we had them write group papers.

Following their normal strategies, students wanted to gather information by reading text. Some were annoyed, others embarrassed or inhibited, by their inability to read the text. As the groups turned to those students who could read the text, some students were startled as they realized that students who had appeared to struggle the hardest with their writing and speaking in English (the ESL students) were best equipped for this assignment. The tacit assumption that those students were not as able had to be reevaluated in light of their obvious competence in this new arena. The privilege visibly shifted as the more capable writers of English realized that they needed their peers to do this assignment.

In addition to reading text, they developed a second strategy, approaching and defining reading in a larger sense, and some groups began by "reading" the ads, the cartoons, and the photographs, noting that even the advertisements (BMW, Jaguar, Rolex) revealed socioeconomic information about the French readers of *Le Figaro.* The large number of ads for wedding apparel along with pictures of debutantes, weddings, baptisms, and family reunions in *Imagen* suggested the importance of the family in Puerto Rico. Students could "read" the Chinese-captioned cartoons in *Commonwealth* because they could see how

the caricatures of American, European, and Asian politicians illustrated Taiwan's political concerns.

By the second day of collaboration, most groups began to pull together. This was a pleasant surprise because in many collaborative assignments, students merely size up the tasks, divide them, and then work individually. This assignment, however, required real collaboration, and our students began to recognize that when each of them contributed different observations, together they could write richer, fuller papers than any of them could produce individually. The joining of forces enriched rather than diluted their efforts. For example, we were intrigued as we watched Peggy and Michele, a Taiwanese and an African American, read together, translating Chinese into English, creating language and knowledge about marriage in Taiwan, as they pieced together the story of an elderly tycoon who left his first wife to marry a younger woman. Neither student was patient with the tycoon, and both expanded their thinking about marriage relationships, family, and language as they worked together to understand and explain the story.

We then set students to using their collected observations to create generalizations about the countries represented by their magazines. These generalizations reflected the particular magazines each group used. *Imagen* and *Le Figaro,* both upscale magazines, led students to generalizations about the wealthy in Puerto Rico and France. *The Observer* was largely political, so the students in that group spoke about the Taiwanese as being very sober and male-oriented.

Once the students had collected and shared data, they began to draft their papers. These drafts then moved through a series of usual workshop activities involving peer review and response and finally emerged as finished papers that we reproduced for the entire class to read.

We have observed a variety of outcomes from this assignment for our students, for us as teachers, and for the linguistic community. Among the results for the students, the social implications are of considerable importance. First of all, our ESL students gained stature in the class. They became leaders in their groups because they were the literate ones. Often these were the same students who previously had spoken only when directly called upon. As we watched the groups explore their magazines, we saw native students asking questions of the ESL students about matters outside the scope of the magazines. The ESL students responded very positively to their new roles, and

some of them participated in the class in ways we had not seen before.

Another outcome is that students engaged in real, not pseudo, collaboration. As we noted earlier, this full investment is difficult to generate. Initially, students felt constrained by efficiency, fear of exposure, and individualism. They were wary of trusting their peers—even in a small class. Those writing individual papers worried that if they contributed to the communal data bank, some other writer would "take all their good stuff." However, most came to see working with others as community interaction, not dependence, to see that they were members of a large club who feared others looking at their writing, and to see that, even though they sprang from a shared text, their papers were surprisingly different. Those writing group papers noted that they had fewer problems generating text—that rather than having to pad their papers to fill enough pages, they were able to be selective as they edited. Thus they experienced real collaboration and found it productive.

A third outcome for the students was a greater use of their imagination and resourcefulness. Many of our students had learned to suppress their personalities and ideas in order to survive in writing classes. Urging them to call on other skills to decode the assigned material boosted their beliefs that they could do college level work, even in a writing class. For example, when we watched students solve the puzzles that emerged as they wrote on computers and experimented with different printers, we saw the quality of their imaginations at work. In this assignment, we wanted to invite students to use as many means as they had at their disposal to solve the puzzles we had set out for them. When they widened their repertoires, they "read" texts in a variety of ways.

Fourth, the native students learned things about their ESL peers that they might not otherwise have been interested in learning. We overheard discussions about language and customs. The students talked about the geographical, political, and social differences they saw in other countries. Not all of what they learned was significant, but much of it was eye-opening. For example, one quarter it took most students several minutes to discover that they were looking at the Taiwanese magazine backwards. What they considered the front of the magazine was, of course, the back because, as the Taiwanese students gently told them, the text was printed in the opposite direction from English. This discovery generated a thoughtful explora-

tion of the left to right and top to bottom American print conventions, particularly as they argued about what made text readable and "right." In another class section, students argued vigorously about representations of women, basing their assertions on the clothing women wore in the advertising and other situations in which they were pictured. As students interpreted these drawings and photographs, they examined the differing cultural perspectives they and the text brought to the debate.

A final sensory-rich outcome from one of the classes extended the process of learning from the text to the potluck lunch table. Each student brought food typical of his or her country. We had Jordanian, Thai, Chinese, Mexican, and American food, everything from spring rolls to mole to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Students were particularly interested in the ingredients common to so many different diets (flour, tomatoes, nuts, cheese, and greens).

Finally, student writing has improved. In the nine quarters that we have used this writing project, the grades for these papers, whether group or individual, uniformly have been among the highest of the term, very often fully one letter grade higher than their earlier assignments. Papers have responded clearly to the writing assignment, have supported generalizations with details, have been visibly organized, and have been carefully edited. And, at no stage have the groups' best writers simply taken charge. Rather, the papers represented the groups' best joint efforts as the students drew on diverse abilities. For example, in the several stages of paper production, we saw students clustered around a single computer, arguing about details, coherence, and verb endings. With few other assignments have we seen students challenge each other about whether a paragraph hangs together or whether a string of words is a sentence or a fragment or, even more surprisingly, whether they have fully and fairly interrogated the text, whether they have explored conflicting viewpoints and been faithful to the observations of all group members. In one class, four group members spent several class sessions arguing about whether their conclusions about Taiwan were drawn from their magazine or from two of the group members' experiences in Taiwan; one member was Taiwanese and another had visited on a band tour. Their exchanges produced important self-discoveries about the difficulty writers experience as they bring existing opinions or data to an assignment or writing group that challenge their ideas and beliefs. The Taiwanese student, particularly, had difficulty

allowing her group to write what she saw as an inaccurate representation of Taiwan because she was offended by the magazine's picture of her country; as a group, however, they were able to write a paper that focused on the magazine's perspective but ended with a well-specified assertion that the magazine presented but one view. At the end of the quarter, the Taiwanese student contributed an additional Taiwanese magazine to our supply, urging us to let the next term's students see a more balanced picture. Her group's willingness to let their ideas clash allowed them to think carefully about assignments, using rather than silencing oppositional discourse. Thus, in addition to meeting traditional grading criteria, our students have shown us what engaged voices can produce: lively prose, full of detail and energy, contextualized within the writers' lives yet generalized to their readers' worlds.

Yet, this assignment did more than benefit our students. At a greater level than ever before, we began to share power and privilege with our students. With most reading assignments, the text is wholly familiar to us. We have read it before, and both we and the students know that any questions we ask about that text are questions more for them than for us. In this assignment, we were not the experts; like most members of the class, we did not read Chinese. Our skills in French and Spanish certainly were weaker than our ESL students' skills in English. We were, therefore, also collaborators with our students in making meaning. The classroom became, for this assignment, a Bakhtinian dialogue, a place where everyone, the teacher included, could learn.

Equally important, this way of teaching writing has begun to change our writing practices as well as our students'. Four years ago as we set out jointly to author a paper, we responded just as our students had to such tasks: we divided the writing and went off to our respective computers to write, hoping the seams wouldn't be too obvious. To compose this text, we, too, hunched together over a single keyboard, arguing, interrupting, amending, despairing, and dancing when our single text began to emerge. And, we believe that our text, as our students', is the richer for this fuller collaboration.

Thus, this assignment takes a step toward the kind of wider inclusiveness composition teachers have long advocated. It acknowledges that all of us belong here and that each of us can contribute in valuable ways to the whole. It models that thinking and provides one enactment of it.

While creating a successful writing experience for our students is important, we are equally concerned with expanding the boundaries of our own terms and assumptions, particularly those cutting-edge terms and assumptions that seduce us with their currency. "Collaboration" and "welcoming diversity" are such terms. Collaboration appears to be widely accepted and practiced, clearly occupying a place in the educational spotlight; indeed, in the last several years' CCCC sessions, nearly one hundred titles refer to collaboration. Equally clear, however, is the dramatic variation in the meaning of collaboration.

Similarly, welcoming diversity was the theme of the 1990 CCCC Annual Convention, and diversity has been included in a large number of subsequent session titles. But, welcoming can be little more than the perfunctory plastic smile and handshake of tolerance that people receive at obligatory social occasions or students receive as they enter classrooms. And, it can remain stalled at toleration rather than growing into engagement.

As we pushed our own definitions of collaboration and welcoming diversity, we saw that both were thin, that collaboration must entail giving and learning and changing as much ourselves as we expected our students to change. We recognized that welcoming diversity was more than smiling warily at it; it meant greeting it expectantly, hoping that it would shape our lives and praxis as well as our students' lives. Nan Johnson, a keynote Young Rhetoricians' Conference speaker, eloquently told how as teachers of writing we change students' lives, buttressing her assertion with powerful illustrations of students' writing. We would like to press that a step farther and suggest that while what we do with our students is critical, our understanding of the theories that underpin these choices is equally important. We begin to understand collaboration, authority, privilege, and diversity not when we direct others in those activities but only as we participate in them ourselves. We begin when we insert ourselves, along with our students, into the rich unknown of Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone, "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power," (34) and when we acknowledge and participate in the struggles that their oppositional discourses produce (Miller, 399). We begin when we recognize the truth of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's definition of situated learning in which students and teachers are at least equally transformed. We begin when, as Shyh-chyi Wey, one of our ESL tutors, puts it, we make our classrooms

and offices "environment[s] where right thinking is not the possession of one and merely the aspiration of others."

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