

Rethinking Language and Culture on the Institutional Borderland

Virginia Crisco

ABSTRACT: Previous ethnographic pedagogical approaches in basic writing classrooms emphasized students' acculturation into academic discourse; however, teachers' critical reflection should also consider how exposure to students' experiences intervenes in and informs pedagogical practices. In this article, I argue that teachers should listen to their students in order to take a critical approach toward institutional change. I focus specifically on a basic writing class composed mostly of Latino students to understand their experiences of being bilingual in the academy. Listening to these students led me to consider not only how to create pedagogical change but also to propose processes for institutional change as well.

If you became too much trapped in this new language, you begin to loose your original language. You will start seeing the world in an Anglo point of view. You will only do things that are considered to be appropriate in the Anglo culture.[. . .] Your old traditions and beliefs might be replaced with new ones. The more and more you speak English the more and more you will start acting like what you consider your peers.

—Jose,¹ basic writing student

So if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.

—Gloria Anzaldúa,
“How to Tame a Wild Tongue” (59)

The epigraphs by Jose, a basic writing student, and Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana writer and poet, call attention to the effects of language and language assimilation on a person's identity and sense of self. Jose equates learning another language and ideology with the “Anglo point of view.” He suggests that when the Anglo ideology is valued too much, a person

Virginia Crisco is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she teaches courses in writing, rhetoric, and English Studies. Her interest in the intersections of ethnicity, language, and Basic Writing started at California State University-Fresno, where she received her Master's degree in Composition Theory. She is currently working on her dissertation, which examines the pedagogical implications for literacy learning through democratic processes that occur in the classroom and the community.

will forget their native culture. He uses the metaphor of being “trapped” to discuss a person’s reaction to conflicting language and viewpoints.

Anzaldúa argues in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” that assimilation creates prejudice and goes on to suggest that prejudice has an effect on Chicano/a identity. She writes, “Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values” (85). Anzaldúa exposes the complex nature of cultural conflict, which may provide some insight into students’ conflict with language and acculturation in the writing classroom.

Teachers and researchers have proposed to address this issue of assimilation by bridging the gap between the student’s home community and the academic community through ethnographic research and writing. As discussed by Shirley Brice Heath and by Eleanor Kutz, Suzie Groden, and Vivian Zamel, ethnographic research and writing ask students to start with what they know and then do research and present that knowledge in a genre of writing that has roots in the academy. As Kutz, Groden, and Zamel hypothesize:

One of our assumptions, and we still believe a correct one, was that we could draw on our students’ knowledge of their experience and their competence with language to establish a base for building new areas of knowledge and competence. A related assumption was that we could elicit that competence directly through the tasks we designed, allowing the students to transfer what they knew from the larger world to the work of the college classroom. (88)

The work of Kutz, Groden, and Zamel is particularly valuable because it asks teachers to recognize students’ competence to think critically in everyday life. Their work is also important because it demonstrates that students can excel at writing by tapping into this competence and shaping it into a form and language that are acceptable to the academic institution. Finally, Kutz and her co-authors also explain how teachers of writing can learn about English language learners’ experiences from their writing and then revise pedagogical approaches to better address students’ needs. More recently, Mary Soliday, in her essay “The Politics of Difference,” considers what literacy narratives can teach teachers about the diverse goals students of color bring into the classroom. She ends her essay by arguing that “In

the classroom, we can best approximate inclusive images of multiculturalism by promoting a dialogue that moves between students' worlds and ours to illuminate connections as well as highlight differences" (272). Soliday's work makes it clear that students have different agendas for their education and thus have different needs in the writing classroom. All of these teacher/scholars advocate for a cultural bridge where students' experiences are valued and necessary to the work of writing.

Too often, though, such pedagogical approaches don't take into account the institutional challenges students face. The assumption that teachers and writers make is that the cultural bridge does not go beyond the classroom or the teacher, and the change that is called for is a pedagogical change focused on how the teacher can work with students more effectively. In this case, the point of "bridging" the writing classroom with what students know, or "building new areas of knowledge" (Kutz et al. 88) is for the student to "transfer what they kn[o]w" (Kutz et al. 88) into academic genres and languages. Soliday, in addition, calls for "inclusive images of multiculturalism," an accounting for difference that blends with the current dominant culture—while leaving the dominant culture the same—instead of changing attitudes about how difference is valued. In fact, Keith Gilyard, in *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*, argues that even with the advent of multicultural education, composition as a field is still working toward anti-racist pedagogies: "Even as our profession largely converted to multiculturalism in the 1980s [. . .] it was apparent that composition instructors as a whole had not confronted deeply enough issues of race, racism, and racialized discourse. [. . .] Multiculturalism, then, with its characteristic emphasis on rather low-level sensitivity training, serves to obscure the problematics of racism [. . .]" (47). If we do not confront the institutional structures that privilege white, English-speaking teachers and students, we will not be able to move forward in our field's desire for welcoming, addressing the needs of, and working toward equality for students of color in college writing classrooms.

This article focuses on the institutional requirements and political contexts in one basic writing classroom at one California State University and on the students' reaction to those requirements and contexts. I draw on a classroom composed mostly of Mexican American² students to illustrate how language, identity, and institutional structures intersect as manifested in these students' ethnographic writing. This intersection not only positions teachers and students to create pedagogical change, but also challenges us to use our respective knowledge about language and rhetoric

to change the institution as well. More specifically, this article will draw on bilingual students' ethnographic essays to demonstrate how their knowledge about language and learning represents their positions in the academic institution. Overall, I propose that students' ethnographic essays provide a dual function: first, they offer opportunities for students to observe cultures in order to better understand and represent them in an academic context; and second, ethnographic writing gives teachers an opportunity to listen—critically—to students, to understand how students are situated in the power structures of our institutions. In the end, the work of this article becomes a call for teachers, not just students, to listen, learn about, and, gradually, change the institutional spaces that dismiss students' differences. Institutional change is one of the hardest tasks to undertake, but change can only happen if we start somewhere and take one step at a time.

Institutions of Language and Writing

Now I have a daughter. She is one year old. I talk to her in both languages. But my social worker asked me in which language do you talk to your girl? I said in both languages, and she told me you should speak to her only in English because we are in America.

—Rosa, basic writing student

Like my mother says, we are in the United States and in order to improve our skills and be successful we need to learn English. [It] is good to learn English but also others need to respect people who speak another language.

—Lupe, basic writing student

Linguistic imperialism has a long history in California and in the public policy and education systems of this region. This history is important to composition because the historical treatment of particular social groups becomes infused in institutions and informs how people are treated long after the particular historical moment is over. One piece of evidence in this regard is the comment by Rosa quoted above. Rosa's social worker expects her to teach her daughter English only "because we are in America." The assumption this social worker makes is that even in the private spaces of the home, Rosa's Spanish language should be pushed aside in favor of the dominant culture's language practices. On the other hand, Lupe's mother believes that Spanish speakers should learn English. But Lupe then argues that speakers of other languages should also be respected,

implying that they currently are not. Rosa's social worker may believe that she has Rosa's daughter's best interests in mind. On the other hand, the social worker might not realize how her response to Rosa reinforces institutional ideas about assimilation. She also might not realize how this response is constructed historically as the only option for speakers of other languages in the United States.

In "Spanish in California: A Historical Perspective," Alexander Sapiens delineates a history of the politics of Spanish speaking and learning from 1769 to the 1970s. Again and again, policy in California was passed that denied Spanish speakers' rights to vote, to become educated, and to become citizens. In fact, Sapiens writes, "The history of education and language policy of the Chicano in California has been dominated by discrimination, segregation, exclusion, and neglect" (81). In 1849, after the Mexican-American war, American public schools replaced the Spanish-language schools within one decade. In 1855, state law required that English was to be the only language used in the public schools, and in 1879, English was declared the official language of California. This history demonstrates California's institutional expectations for Latino/a assimilation to the dominant culture and to the rendering of Spanish signifying practices as impertinent to the institution; all of this occurred despite the fact that, according to Rodolfo Acuña in *Occupied America*, the Mexican American border moved, yet the Mexican people did not.

More recently, California voters decided, once again, to vote for assimilation at the expense of bilingual education. The Unz initiative, passed by a majority of voters in June 1998, states that "All children in California public schools shall be taught English by being taught in English. [...] this shall require that all children be placed in English speaking classrooms." The passing of this proposition represents voters' desire for non-English speakers to assimilate to the "norm" of English speaking in the institutions of the state. But this focus on teaching English Only is not specific to policy. Bruce Horner and John Trimbur argue in a recent *College Composition and Communication* article that courses in college composition have been historically constructed as monolingual as well: "the historical formation of the first-year composition course is tied in tightly to a monolingual and unidirectional language policy that makes English the vehicle for writing instruction in the modern curriculum" (623).

The historical context discussed above is presently enacted in state and educational institutions and creates a conflict for students between their

desire for cultural assimilation and pride in their native culture. Tom Fox characterizes this conflict as a struggle that positions students in particular ways as learners and citizens. He writes, “Examples of powerful writing for social action make the point to students that the opposition between ‘literacy’ and the ‘academy’ is not one of discourse form, nor is the opposition simply ‘oral’ versus ‘literate’ or ‘street’ versus ‘school.’ Instead it is the struggle for equality and access” (102). The struggle for equality and access is represented through laws created to encourage assimilation, laws that force students to learn English in public institutions. This struggle can also be characterized by what is taught in the classroom and what expectations the institution has for its teacher and student participants.

Language and institutional context doubly marginalize Latino basic writers, challenging them to learn the norms of the institution as well as the English language without valuing the diversity and knowledge they bring to the academic context. Basic writing scholars and pedagogues have done their best to subvert this type of marginalization by building on the knowledge students bring and by supporting students with pedagogical approaches that treat them like learners and thinkers. But there is one major component of such theories and approaches toward learning that is missing: students’ experiences of being in the academic institution. What can our students teach us about their language, identity, and institutional context? What is our responsibility, as teachers of writing, to consider students’ perspectives and to act on them in ways that support a critical understanding of difference in our classrooms and our institutions?

A Context for Basic Writing

This history of linguistic domination and institutional assimilation is still felt by the students who come to the university, a place, many argue may be the pinnacle of privileged, English-speaking values. At the university where I taught basic writing, California State University-Fresno, the student population is very diverse. According to the enrollment statistics for the 1999-2000 school year, “Minority groups represent more than half of the CSU student body, double the national average” (California State University Public Affairs Office). California State University-Fresno, otherwise known as Fresno State, is a land-grant institution in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley. The valley, one of the most productive in the world, grows many different vegetables, nuts, and fruits. Because of the amount

of agriculture, there is a high demand for farm labor, bringing in large migrant populations. Most students are from California because, for one thing, the state universities have promised to automatically accept the top one-third of the state's high school graduates. Most of the buildings on campus are made of cement, with the one brick building being the library. The two statues situated outside the library are bronze representations of Caesar Chavez, best known for his activism for migrant labor rights, and Mahatma Gandhi. Students who enroll in the university come from ethnic backgrounds including Mexican, Laotian, Thai, Hmong, Vietnamese, Filipino, Punjabi, African American, Euro-American, Armenian, Native American, and El Salvadorian. International students are present as well from such countries as China, Japan, and Malaysia. Though this article focuses on Latino students, my call for action could benefit students from a variety of cultures.

The particular basic writing class I focus on was made up of 17 students; 13 students identified themselves as having Mexican origins while 4 students identified themselves as having Filipino (1), black (2), and white (1) cultures/races. In relation to the languages spoken by all students, 3 students were born in the United States and spoke English as their native language; 4 students were born in the United States and spoke Spanish as their native language and English as a second language; 7 students were born in Mexico and moved to the United States around high school (they had been learning and practicing English for 6 years or less), and 2 students were born in other countries, specifically, Mexico and the Philippines, and moved to the United States when they were very young. Though the class seemed homogeneous in that the majority of students identified themselves as Mexican Americans, in actuality, there was much diversity in their experiences and thinking about language. For my purposes here, I focus on students who were born in the United States, spoke Spanish as their first language, and learned English in the public school system. These students had had experience in the U.S. education system and had learned and used both languages regularly; they also had definite opinions about educational policy. In addition, these students provided me with the impetus to take responsibility for the cultural information and attitudes I asked students to bring into the classroom.

When students are asked to write ethnographic texts, the teacher has an opportunity to listen to the conflicts students face in the English-speaking institution. As Suresh Canagarajah suggests in *Resisting Linguistic*

Imperialism in English Teaching, ethnographic teacher-research provides teachers with 1) an introduction to students' vernacular; 2) the ability to see one's own culture through students' eyes, and therefore to locate and examine the teacher's or the student's position within the hegemony; and 3) the ability to become a border crosser with students, to confront and negotiate the various discourses and ideologies that a person faces in a multicultural social structure. In the next section, I focus primarily on point number 2: students taught me to see one of the cultures I represent and identify with—Composition and Standard Written English in the academic institution—as they experienced this culture in my classroom; their ethnographic representations helped me to understand the institutional discrimination they faced because of the languages they spoke and the cultures they identified with.

The student writing I consider below represents the attitudes and experiences of Mexican American students who have decided to go to the university, but who also face conflicts between the expectations of the university environment and their ethnic and linguistic background. The students' writing indicates reasons for the existence of this conflict, describes ways students deal with the conflict, and suggests possibilities for facilitating learning between students and teachers. In the end, the information given to me by students caused me to think about how to sponsor larger changes both inside and outside of the classroom.

Students' Experiences of the Academic Institution

The writing that I will draw on in this section comes out of the writing projects students did for the class, four in all. The course topics and corresponding writing projects focused, overall, on the different choices we make with communication. More importantly, I asked students to consider how those choices are connected to language use and are caught up in cultural and social hierarchies. The first assignment was specifically about the folklore of their culture. Students were asked to write and analyze an oral story. Research on this topic included interviewing parents or siblings or observing the kinds of stories told in the student's or perhaps a relative's home. The class read and discussed "Stories" by Phyllis Barber, an essay focusing on the traditions and storytelling that surround Christmas in one particular family, and "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective" by Leslie Marmon Silko, focusing on the

significance of storytelling in Native American culture. Our discussion of these essays related to the types and purposes of oral stories, the communication of oral tradition within a variety of cultures, and the representation of oral stories to the family or other social group. Students were pushed to write an accurate and complete story and to analyze the story by making connections between the context of the story and the relationship of that story to their culture or to storytelling.

The second assignment asked students to research a discourse community they belonged to. In our discussions of oral stories, I introduced the class to the concept of discourse communities and asked them to start thinking about the variety of discourses they come in contact with. I asked students to record or take notes on actual conversations in order to do this work. Students read “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldúa and “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You” by June Jordan. These essays provided names for the different discourse communities people belong to and also modeled the rhetorical process of including written language as evidence in the body of a text. This writing project assignment was designed to get students to name the variety of discourses we learn and use on a regular basis as well as to analyze the power dynamics that are within a group or that put pressure on the group from another discourse community. I asked students to observe and record a conversation to find answers to questions about the language choices other people (and they) make in particular circumstances. Students were encouraged to ask questions about how language works within different contexts and to analyze the effect of their own language choices. In their writing, I asked them to include actual examples of language and pushed them to analyze people’s discourse choices depending on the communication context.

In the third writing project, I wanted students to look more closely at the process and politics of writing. I asked students to collect written artifacts and then analyze written discourse as a form of communication. I encouraged them to search for sources of their own or others’ writing outside of the context of school, but I also suggested that they could reread chat and e-mail transcripts from class and use their observation/reflections for this writing project assignment. As a class, we read Fan Shen’s essay, “The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition,” which focuses on Shen’s observations of different types of acceptable writing in the American and Chinese cultures. We also read an excerpt from Shirley Brice Heath’s book *Ways with Words* to demonstrate

the different types of writing people do; after the students had read this excerpt, I asked them to consider when and why they practice these different kinds of writing and to observe the dynamics of who in the family did the most writing. The excerpt from *Ways with Words* gave us an opportunity to discuss this text rhetorically, as well, to use it to help us further define approaches toward writing ethnographic research. The class discussion focused on how one's education or family influence literacy as well as the changes one necessarily makes when moving into an unfamiliar context. Students were pushed to analyze how we represent ourselves on paper, why we make a choice to communicate through writing, and how we relate to our audience through writing.

Students built on their knowledge of different languages and choices made in written and spoken communication by finally researching how people interact within a community. For the last writing project, I asked students to observe classroom collaborative situations. To set students up for this work, I had them reflect at various moments during the course on the group dynamics they were experiencing in class. In addition, I assigned specific readings to prepare students to think about this work. We discussed gender issues relating to group dynamics in the essays "Anna" by Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, and "Teachers' Classroom Strategies Should Recognize that Men and Women Use Language Differently" by Deborah Tannen. Within the context of the course, we discussed changes in personal behavior within small groups, large groups, chat rooms, various classroom situations, and within culture or gender groups. Students were pushed to recognize what conditions were necessary for group dynamics to work or fail and to analyze how people worked as a group to make changes. The course readings, writing projects, and conversations led us to learn from one another, helped us to understand one another's experiences with language and communication, and, overall, demonstrated to all of us where and how students were situated in the various aspects of their lives.

To begin to understand the cultural and institutional conflicts students face, we should start with the conflict between the English and Spanish languages, an issue which often surfaced in my students' writing projects. Ethnographic writing can be particularly important in identifying and analyzing this conflict because it can position students to draw from their experiences as language users; it can also place those experiences in an academic context and demonstrate how academic language and writing is positioned within their experiences. This gives teachers a window into

the conflict students face in their desire to succeed with academic language in contrast to the desire to respect and hold onto the language of their heritage.

Many of the students' parents do not want to see their children lose their culture, as one of my students observed; so parents expect students to keep their culture by, for example, asking their children to speak only Spanish in the home. Beatrice, for example, wrote an essay about the relationship between writing and culture in which she tells how important her culture is to her family members and articulates how far they would go to keep their culture alive in their children. In this essay, she says that she wishes to show her parents her school writing. She does not, however, because her parents do not speak English. In the following section, she reflects on why her parents have not learned English:

Maybe part of the reason for not doing so was because they thought that by learning a language other than their own, they felt like they would be putting their culture and beliefs aside, that maybe if they did learn a different language they would become Americanized and they didn't want that not from them and especially not from us. That is why my parents have always asked us to speak Spanish in front of them.

Beatrice's writing suggests that language and culture are closely connected. For her parents, she speculates, the choice of using one language instead of another represents a certain loyalty to a particular culture and beliefs. She also makes clear that becoming Americanized is not a valued goal for her and her family members. Beatrice does not want to become Americanized because, to her, that would mean giving up her culture; she wants to be successful in the American culture, but she does not want to give up her Mexican culture. Beatrice's parents are fighting to keep Beatrice and their other children from losing their culture to others' imposed expectations of being a part of the dominant American culture. Implicit in this conflict is the idea that if one is American, one cannot be Mexican. Beatrice's experience indicates the pressure she feels between a desire to be successful in the American educational institution and the desire to identify with her family heritage.

Beatrice's experience is not anomalous. Many students discussed the pressures they felt to respect and hold onto their heritage and to be able to imagine success through conforming to the dominant culture and

language. On the one hand, parents want the younger generation to succeed in the dominant American culture by getting a higher education in English-speaking institutions. They know that the way to imagine a different life for their children is to encourage them to learn English and go to school in the United States. On the other hand, parents don't want their children to believe that their heritage and culture are any less valuable than the dominant culture. In Susana's case, she discusses how these pressures are manifested in her home. In an essay entitled "Another Regular Day," Susana writes about the different language groups she is a part of and how these groups expect different things from her. In the section quoted below, she writes about the language-using practices of her family:

As we sit on the porch of our house having a glass of water, my parents describe to me their exhausted day at work. They are communicating to me in the only language they know, which is Spanish. As we speak we can easily understand and joke about what is being said. "It is important to always keep your culture alive," my mother states. Although my parents are supposed to be supportive of us children, my parents did not have the opportunity to teach me English. As for themselves, working to support the family was their number one concern. It made it harder for me to learn English as I began school. Since they were always busy expecting me to speak to them in Spanish, it never inspired them to learn the English language.

This section of Susana's essay is rife with conflict. Susana's parents want her to keep her culture alive, as her mother says to her explicitly, suggesting that Susana faces the possibility of losing her culture in some way. Susana also seems to be conflicted because she had a hard time learning English and her parents were not able to help her. On the one hand, she suggests that it is because they needed to focus on supporting the family economically; on the other hand, she seems annoyed that they were so caught up in wanting Susana to keep her culture that they were not able to help when she faced the huge challenge of learning English.

What the experiences of Beatrice and Susana demonstrate are the pressures to be both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking, to know the dominant American culture and to know the Mexican culture. Both Beatrice and Susana want to be successful in higher education and want to be able to share their successes with their families. They also want to respect

the culture of their families and demonstrate to their parents that they haven't lost their identity as it is constructed through their heritage and language. Because the academic institution expects students to learn English and become a part of the dominant American culture, and because this institution provides the opportunity for students to imagine a different kind of life from what their parents may have had, students face a conflict as it is represented in language. In this conflict, students feel that they must choose one culture and language over the other. The problem with this scenario is that the richness of students' lives is ignored at the expense of upholding the cultural status quo of the institution. Because students cannot bridge their home community and the academic community easily, a conflict arises that pits the goals of these two language groups against each other.

Because I can mark language terrain as either Spanish or English, as I did above, I am able to talk about the conflict students face in bridging one set of language-using practices with the language-using practices of the academic institution. In reality, language as it is practiced in communities is not necessarily so monolithic, meaning that these communities are not fixed and unified. Instead, I would like to argue that students have multiple identities and have access to various language practices that are not necessarily finite and fixed but rather flexible and overlapping. As I asked students to do ethnographic research on their own language communities, I was able to better understand, from their perspective, the richness of their language experiences and the different rhetorical challenges they faced in the variety of discourse communities to which they belonged. My students' ethnographic writings provided me with insight into the abilities my students had with language in various contexts and demonstrated to me how authority affected those contexts. As I will demonstrate below, language hierarchies, and those who support and enforce hierarchies between languages, do not create productive learning and communication environments and do not allow for the various ways languages can be useful in various contexts.

Most interesting in the students' ethnographic research was an emphasis on the connections between language and how language-using practices are embedded in power structures. Many students spoke about belonging to at least three different language communities involving English, Spanish, and Spanglish. Spanglish, according to Jose, is a language created by the Chicano culture mixing English and Spanish words. Chicanos are people of Mexican descent who are living in America, who want to de-

fine themselves as a group; they are Mexican, and they are American, but they cannot be only one or the other. One problem Chicanos face, according to Jose, relates to the language they use to represent themselves. Jose observes in his ethnographic essay titled “Spanglish” that this language is not valued by the English- or the Spanish-speaking cultures, as it is a mixture of both languages and not a pure form:

[Spanglish] is looked down as, “slang talk”, that is used only by the uneducated and lower class people.[. . .] I remember as a youngster playing marbles with a few of my cousins who had just moved here to California from Mexico. One of them cheated so I called him a chirion. They had never heard that word before so they started laughing. [. . .] As far as I knew it I was speaking in Spanish but to them it did not seem as so. This was the only form of Spanish I knew. So now I found myself trapped between the Spanish and English culture. I was looked down in both the American culture and Mexican culture.

Jose then suggests that some people want Spanglish to be eliminated as a communication style and goes on to write, “stripping one completely of their communication style is like taking their culture away too. [. . .] in many cases this is the only piece of Mexican culture the Chicano people have.” Jose explicitly demonstrates how cultural identifications shift based on context and language-using practices. Importantly, he also discusses the hierarchy involved in cultural identity and language use. The implication of this essay, an implication that Jose argues against, is that the only legitimate form of a language is a “pure” form; thus, the only legitimate form of a culture is a “pure” form. His argument is to legitimize this hybrid language because it represents a particular culture that is important to him and to others; it represents a group of people who have created their own common identity because of their similar circumstances in the in-between spaces of language communities. Certainly, this issue of legitimacy, where teachers, schools, and state law require standard written English only, is also present in academic institutions, specifically basic writing classes, as this is the place where students are to be socialized to become full members of the academic institution.

In their rhetorical essays, students described certain language-using practices as privileged in certain spaces. This demonstrated to me that the decision to shift languages was not always a rhetorical choice; instead these

shifts were based on institutional history of what is acceptable in a certain space. Yasmin reports on three different discourse communities that she belongs to and argues, in her ethnographic essay on language groups, that she feels “split into two different people by speaking one language in one place and having to change my language to English with others.” In the final draft of her essay titled “Two Speech Communities within One,” she writes:

I guess the professor feels that we also should speak a certain language depending on the surroundings. Like if we are with our parents you can speak Spanish. But if we are in the library, we should speak English, because it's disrespectful for those who don't understand the Spanish language. So, I only speak English for everyone at school, so all can understand me.

In this essay, Yasmin articulates how she has been told what language to use by her professor. The professor imposes particular language choices on Yasmin so that others don't feel left out because they can't understand. Yasmin says that this professor's purpose is to get her to be rhetorically effective, to use the language that people understand in a particular context. Interestingly, she says later that being in the library is enough to cause her to speak English only in case others around her don't understand what she is saying. The implication of the professor's statement is that because English is the dominant language, everyone else should speak English. There is no sense that if the professor—or another in the library—wants to understand Spanish, then that person should take it upon him or herself to learn that language. Instead, because the academic institution is regulated and historically constructed as purely English speaking, then the professor has a right to tell Yasmin what language to speak in particular institutional spaces.

Both Jose's and Yasmin's essays discuss how their languages and identities are regulated and informed by those who hold onto hierarchies of language-using practices. In both of these situations, students are put down because of the various languages they have access to. They find that certain language-using practices are not valuable in certain spaces and with certain people. Listening to Yasmin's and Jose's experiences with forms of language use has helped me to understand how dominant ideas about language are manifested in many different contexts. These dominant ideas reproduce institutional notions of appropriate language use and suggest

that there is only one proper way—rather than many—to communicate in different contexts. What would it be like if our institutions of higher education encouraged all students to speak more than one language? What would it be like if institutions of higher education made a space for different identities, languages, and beliefs? What would it be like if the language-using practices sanctioned by the institution really represented rhetorical choice rather than the dominant culture?

Because very narrow visions of culture and language are acceptable in the institution, students feared that they would never be able to meet institutional expectations, and if they tried, they would have to give up part of who they were. The students' ethnographic texts helped me to understand the expectations they faced from the institution as well as how they felt they could meet those expectations. Susana writes about the difficulties non-native speakers of English face when they learn to write in an academic institution. She does this by drawing on Fan Shen's essay "The Classroom and the Wider Culture," and goes on to argue that people who are not from the dominant American culture cannot ever completely assimilate:

Everyone today expects everyone to learn the Anglo-American way of values. It is hard for people to do this especially for people who emigrate from a new country. I feel that only to a certain extent you can learn to think as an Anglo-American, which makes it hard for a person to have good English composition. Still people can learn a lot but if not well known, it will of course never be perfect. Pronunciations and ways of thinking will always be different.

In the first sentence Susana refers to the pervasiveness of the expectations to follow the "Anglo-American way of values." These values are the norm; everyone is expected to know them and abide by them. Basically, these values are defined, in this context, as values that influence writing, thinking, and language use. Susana implies that non-Anglo and non-native speakers of English will never be able to meet the requisite standards of written and spoken English, at least not as manifested at the university. This demonstrates that Susana feels she will never be able to think, write, or speak like a native language user in English-speaking institutions. How hard would it be to know that you could never be as proficient in writing and language use as your Anglo counterparts?

Jose also discusses the difficulties he faces because of not being able to completely assimilate, but then he goes on to argue that in even trying to assume a new set of values, a person necessarily has to give up another part of him or herself. Jose writes about this experience in an essay that explores the relationship of culture to writing. Jose explains the difficulties he faced in moving from the Mexican culture and language to the dominant American culture and language. Moving between two cultures—as they are represented through language—made him question his desire to belong to the dominant community:

When learning the rules of English composition you absorb new values. Maybe the English you learn is a high-class language where high sophisticated words are always used. You begin to use these words too and at the same time learn the new values of high class. You begin to think like they think and see everything the way they see it. Everything they say is true to you because after all they are high class.

Jose understands that language is not monolithic but connects to culture and class. He describes how a person becomes socialized through the language valued by a particular group of people. He relates this perspective with class, calling the language and the people who use the language “high class.” Jose also recognizes that because the people who use this language are high class and sophisticated, what they say seems like truth; it seems that there are no other possibilities for writing and using language legitimately. Jose not only understands the politics of giving up something to get something else, but also understands how such choices are often based in power structures that place language and values within a hierarchy.

Both Susana and Jose recognize the consequences and the reality of trying to assume particular values and trying to replace or augment a previous set of values. Many students want to be successful in the academy but feel that they can never be up to par. Or they feel that in order to be successful they will have to make major sacrifices. Many students don’t even question the values expressed in writing classrooms and educational institutions because these spaces have a kind of status that seems to be beyond criticism. So what would happen if not just Mexican American students, and not just students of color, but all students were asked to give up a part of themselves to be successful in the academy? What would happen if all students and

teachers, in Suresh Canagarajah's terms, had to learn to be "border crossers," had to learn how to "negotiate competing discourses and cultures" (194)? What would happen, finally, if academic institutions were open to—and dependent upon—critique and change?

Overall, the themes students discuss are reminiscent of issues brought up in Gloria Anzaldua's book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldua's answer, to the Chicano, is to embrace the mestiza consciousness, the ambiguity that comes from being a part of two (or more) cultures. More recently, Emma Perez articulates the concept of the decolonial imaginary subject, a subject who finds a third space, a space to negotiate new histories and new identity. In fact, many, such as Michel de Certeau, have argued that being on the borderlands or in a third space can provide students with unique possibilities to fight back and make change. But an essential component to this decolonial imaginary subject is being *heard*. Thus, this is the challenge: how am I, as a teacher, listening to my students? How do I understand what students are telling me about their identity, their experiences with language and learning? In addition, as a white teacher, and as a representative of the institution—a gatekeeper, if you will—I wonder to what extent I am responsible for the issues that students bring up in their writing. How am I also implicated and what is my responsibility in the struggle for student equality through acknowledging and valuing their ethnic identity and language?

Toward Teacher and Student Activism

So what do we do with the writing students bring to the classroom that focuses on their experiences with language and identity? One of my most significant observations about bringing culture into the classroom is that this knowledge does not come wrapped in a tidy package. Students don't just talk about the great food or rituals of their culture; they also bring with them attitudes, assumptions, and accusations that may conflict directly with the institutional values I represent, the standardized written English I am expected to teach. As a teacher, then, how do I respond or act, when Jose, for example, says, "The English only proposition for the government, or whoever supports it, wants to take our culture away," or when Beatrice says, "The only way to learn English is to practice as much as you can, although no one should deny you the right to speak your language," or when Yasmin says, "Our professors say that we need to practice more our English. [. . .] I guess the professor feels that he's being

isolated from this community and wants us to speak in the community he understands: English.” These students all speak with anger about being forced to ignore the discourses they are proud of, to speak the valued languages of the academy only. In the end, I agree with Shari Stenberg, who in her essay “Learning to Change” argues for a pedagogy that is messy rather than neat: “Two-way dynamics, where our students exert pressure on our assumptions, our values, our practices, require constant, messy negotiations. But it is only in this ongoing, mutual mess-making that genuine development—on the part of the teacher, the student, and the pedagogy—occurs” (53).

By both listening to and reflecting on students’ experiences within the institutional contexts of language regulation and acculturation, I have recognized the limits of my knowing. Listening to the students’ experiences and knowledge about language and institutional context has helped me to reflect on what I could do differently in the future. If it is important to me for students to practice the English language and to value that practice, and if it is important for me to respect students’ language and culture, the question becomes how to negotiate these seemingly conflicting viewpoints. Because I believe taking action within the institution helps a person to move beyond authoritative structures that may hold them back, the future of negotiating similar language and cultural conflicts from a critical pedagogical perspective lies in the teacher’s willingness to recognize what she doesn’t know and provide students with an opportunity to learn through their own activism.

In order for the change process to begin, we must consider how teachers’ and students’ work together can be a catalyst in pressing institutional change. As Tom Fox argues, “Solutions to the ‘clash of cultural style’ explanation usually involve new consciousness on the part of the teacher, rather than attending to larger social and political changes” (60). In order to go beyond what the teacher has learned to how the teacher is listening, championing institutional change, and supporting her students in this change process, there are questions that need to be considered. How can classroom actions, teacher awareness, and student and teacher activism lead to bigger societal changes, changes that show respect for other cultures, changes that rethink assimilative mandates that all people who live in the United States must be the same?

Institutional change relies on the actions of the people who participate in the institution, whether they are students, teachers,

administrators, or staff. Bruce Horner and John Trimbur argue that composition courses are important spaces for making institutional change:

Alternatively, we might argue that composition courses and programs provide crucial opportunities for rethinking writing in the academy and elsewhere: spaces and times for students and teachers both to rethink what academic work might mean and be—who is and should be involved, the forms that work might take, the ends it might pursue, the practices that define it and which might be redefined. (621)

Redefining the work that we do in the composition classroom can start with service learning projects that get students—with the teacher's help—out into the community to learn activist literacy processes toward the goal of institutional change. This is not to suggest that students don't already know how to be activists. Instead it is an opportunity for students to develop new processes for activism through writing. As teachers, one way we could support this work is to sponsor community action as a result of the ethnographic work students take on. Currently, I am working with a writing assignment I call a community action project where students use writing to address an issue that is important to them and their community, to weigh in and act on that issue. I preface the community action project with an ethnographic assignment where the purpose is to inquire into an issue facing a community that is important to the students; they are able to observe a community organization, interview people who are affected by this issue, research this issue in newspapers or other local publications. Once their research is done, they can use that research to somehow take action through writing. In my classes, students are strongly encouraged to do this work collaboratively and are given several examples of what they could do—for example, 1) write a letter to the editor, a dean, a congressional representative, 2) write a proposal for an event and then create flyers, signs, and/or press releases to be displayed in a public place, 3) design and write materials (i.e., a newsletter, brochures, promotional or educational letters, manuals, etc.) for an organization, or 4) write a “personal” action that might include writing a letter to people close to you explaining a tough decision you made for yourself.

I encourage students to write in the genre, for the audience, and with a purpose that would be most rhetorically effective in their particular circumstance. The community action project helps students to explore new

territories for democratic participation by finding out who to write to in institutions that represent them and their communities. They figure out which newspapers would have their best audience and how to submit letters to the editor. They look up state laws and learn about university budgets. They present themselves and their arguments for change to new and different groups of people. They consider the arguments of people who don't agree with them. They also find out what kind of impact their writing can have and what venue can be most effective, especially when they get their writing published (or not). Students in the past have written university and local newspapers about, for example, who is allowed to use the word "nigga," budget cuts at the university, and the problems with criticism of gay marriage laws. Students have written and performed slam poetry on losing a girlfriend, and the politics of being a Latino or a woman. Students have written personal actions to their parents asking them to reconsider their opinions about their son's and daughter's interracial relationships, for example.

With the institutional and cultural knowledge teachers have, they can support students in finding the right genres and audiences to get their ideas heard. In addition, students define for themselves what issues they want to focus on and are able to be agents in making that change. In asking students to use writing to make change, I am subverting institutional requirements that ask the teacher to teach students how to write for the academy only, to prepare students, as in the case of basic writers, to succeed in upper division courses.³ Instead, I am asking students to determine what issues are important, tangible, and can be changed. In this way, I am not asking students to appropriate academic discourse(s) in order to come over to "our side." Instead, I become an accomplice in the change process. By listening to students, I help them brainstorm issues that might be important to them. I help them find out whom to write to. I help them to make their arguments more pressing to readers.

But students shouldn't be the only agents of change in the institution. Teachers should work toward change as well.⁴ In my role as an Associate Coordinator of Composition at the University of Nebraska, I have taken my work with basic writing students at California State University at Fresno seriously. As part of the job is to support incoming Teaching Assistants (TAs), some of whom are new to teaching and all of whom want to be successful teachers, I have used my position—in collaboration with Maria Montaperto and Amy Goodburn, Associate Coordinator of Composition and Coordina-

tor of Composition respectively—to put difference at the center of first year writing. One example of this work is the Teaching Assistant sourcebook that all new TAs receive before they begin teaching in the program. Though some of the TAs have been in the department as students, all are new to teaching in this department and are eager to understand what is expected of them in the teaching of writing at this institution. The handbook is also an integral part of a two and half day orientation and a required Composition Theory and Practice course taken by all Teaching Assistants during the fall semester. Both the orientation sessions and the subsequent course reinforce the work we did in the sourcebook. In this text, part of our work was to provide an interpretive framework for teaching that focused on critical language awareness, a term first introduced by Keith Gilyard (*Literacy*), drawing on Romy Clark, Roz Ivani, and their colleagues at Lancaster University. Critical language awareness represents an approach toward teaching and learning that does not tokenize difference but that, instead, centers on difference⁵ so that issues of race and diversity can be threaded through the work of the course. Though we can't say what the new TAs did with the activities and pedagogical support we wrote into the handbook, we feel that revising this text provided a moment, in connection with other programmatic revisions, where institutional change could occur.

Listening to the knowledge students bring with them into the basic writing classroom should mean that the teacher takes that knowledge seriously. As stated above, it is not enough for teachers to change only themselves; changes must now go beyond the classroom to the institution. Ethnographic pedagogy that leads toward activism can be one route toward change; another can be through institutional documents such as the sourcebook for teaching assistants. Though I listed two possible places and methods for working toward change in the institution, they are not the only ones, and we need to be on the lookout for others. In the end, it is important for all teachers of basic writing to listen to their students, learn from their students, and finally be willing to experiment with ways to work toward changing the institution to embrace and find value in cultural and linguistic diversity.

Author's Acknowledgments

I would like, first of all, to thank the students in this basic writing class for being my teachers. I would also like to thank Scott Stevens and Joy Ritchie, who both looked at, and helped me to revise, several versions of this essay. I would like to thank Dora Ramirez Dhoore and Maria Montaperto for the expertise they brought to this piece. I would finally like to thank the *Journal of Basic Writing's* two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, and *JBW's* editors, Rebecca Mlynarczyk and Bonne August, who provided clear guidance for the final revision of this piece.

Notes

1. Students have given me permission to use their writing in this text. Their names have been changed according to their preference as indicated on the consent form.
2. Throughout most of the article I have chosen to refer to my students as Mexican American. Many (but not all) of the students referred to themselves as Mexican American. Some students referred to themselves as Chicano or Chicana, but these terms have political implications that, in my experience, some Latino/as resist. In order to most accurately represent the majority of the students, I chose not to use that term when talking about the students as a group. I also use the term "Latino" in more general contexts referring to people of Mexican origin.
3. I would argue, however, that learning to be an academic writer is about figuring out how to address a rhetorical problem, a central component to the community action project.
4. The following paragraph is a summary of part of a collaborative presentation I made with Maria Montaperto at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in San Antonio, Texas, on March 26, 2004. The title of the presentation was "Institutionalizing Equity: Writing Race and Diversity into the First-Year Composition Handbook."
5. The term "difference" is not meant to suggest focusing the work of the course on "the Other." Instead, instructors of courses concerned with critical awareness should include whiteness as a racial category along with other

racial categories and should focus on the various differences we all bring to the classroom.

Works Cited

- Acuña, Rodolfo. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987. 53-64.
- Barber, Phyllis. "Stories." *Frame Work: Culture, Storytelling, and College Writing*. Ed. Gary Colombo, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano. Boston: Bedford, 1997. 42-49.
- California State University. *Fresno General Catalogue 1999-2000*.
- California State University Public Affairs Office. "CSU Enrollment Increases for Fifth Straight Year." December 8, 1999. <http://www.calstate.edu/pa/news/1999/Enroll99.shtml>.
- Canagarajah, Suresh A. *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*. Oxford UP, 1999.
- Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth. "Anna." *Signs of Life in the USA*. Ed. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon. Boston: Bedford, 1994. 635-42.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: California UP, 1984.
- Fox, Tom. *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999.
- Gilyard, Keith. *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999.
- _____. "Literacy, Identity, Imagination, Flight." *College Composition and Communication* 52.2 (December 2000): 260-72.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Horner, Bruce, and John Trimbur. "English Only and U.S. College Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 53.4 (June 2002): 594-630.
- Jordan, June. "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." *Frame Work: Culture, Storytelling, and College Writing*. Ed. Gary Colombo, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano. Boston: Bedford, 1997. 273-87.

- Kutz, Eleanor, Suzy Q. Groden, and Vivian Zamel. *The Discovery of Competence: Teaching and Learning with Diverse Student Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1993.
- Perez, Emma. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999.
- Sapiens, Alexander. "Spanish in California: A Historical Perspective." *Journal of Communication* 29.2 (Spring 1979): 72-83.
- Shen, Fan. "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition." *Frame Work: Culture, Storytelling, and College Writing*. Ed. Gary Colombo, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano. Boston: Bedford, 1997. 175-85.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective." *Frame Work: Culture, Storytelling, and College Writing*. Ed. Gary Colombo, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano. Boston,; Bedford, 1997. 21-30.
- Soliday, Mary. "The Politics of Difference: Toward a Pedagogy of Reciprocity." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Ed. Carol Severino, Juan Guerra, and Johnella Butler. New York: MLA, 1997. 261-72.
- Stenberg, Shari. "Learning to Change: The Development of a (Basic) Writer and Her Teacher." *Journal of Basic Writing* 21.2 (2002): 37-55.
- Tannen, Deborah. "Teachers' Classroom Strategies Should Recognize that Men and Women Use Language Differently." *From Community to College: Reading and Writing Across Diverse Contexts*. Ed. Jeff Sommers and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson. New York: St. Martin's, 1996. 458-63.
- Unz, Ron K., and Gloria Matta Tuchman. "The Unz Initiative." November 8, 1997. <http://www.catesol.org/unztext.html>.