

From the Margins to the Center

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For years I had created composition courses that explored a particular area of content, based on the conviction that language was best acquired in the context of using it to make sense of rich and complex subject matter. As I planned these courses, I had repeatedly returned to considering content that would deal more explicitly with the situations of my particular students, students who had shared with me the difficulties they had experienced as a result of their minority status, their inability to use English as well as their native speaker counterparts, their sense that they were invisible both at UMass/Boston and within the larger society. My thinking about this was informed by the same conviction that shaped my decisions about other thematically based courses I had created: if students' language and writing are promoted as a result of their engagement with issues they view as intriguing, illuminating, and authentic, then a course that places their realities at the center rather than on the margins would be all the more dramatic in its impact. Yet I continued to shy away from the idea of such a curriculum, afraid of what might happen if we overtly addressed these issues, afraid that this material was far too disturbing, too risky. In retrospect, I realize that this fear stemmed not just from how I thought my students would react to this material but from a concern with how I might be drawn into the center of a course that focused on issues inextricably connected to my life.

The more, however, my students' experiences as outsiders seemed to affect their lives, the more I was drawn to reconsider taking the risk. At the

same time, incidents of racism and discrimination at UMass/Boston were on the rise, and the UMass/Boston community was beginning to explore how it could address this problem through its policies and through curricular changes. With these efforts came the institutionalization of a diversity requirement and attempts to create courses that would explicitly acknowledge the "differences" our students brought with them. The combination of these factors gave me the courage to deal directly with the realities that were too often left unrecognized and unrepresented, the voices that had too often been silenced, and the stories that had too often been left untold.

The freshman composition course that evolved was one in which students explored the myth and reality of the American Dream, a dream that almost all of them had embraced uncritically, despite the everyday tensions that seemed to chafe against it. They examined the extent to which the promises of America applied to their realities and raised questions about incidents and events that revealed "broken promises." They tried to come to terms with the factors that had marginalized them, thus allowing them to see that their situations were not just the result of some personal difficulty or problem but were interwoven with larger and far more complex conditions. And given these realizations, they began to understand the ways in which they could transcend their voicelessness, their invisibility, so that rather than being appropriated by the institutions they came in contact with, they could transform them in the same way that all participants in a culture contribute to and shape that culture.

In the context of this course, students read, examined closely, and wrote about key documents and court decisions. They read newspaper accounts and analyzed reports in the media related to immigration experiences and issues. They read pieces by authors (Maxine Hong Kingston and Richard Rodriguez, for example) that uncover issues of identity, loss of a first language, assimilation, and the relationship between language, culture, and authority. One student, Fukiko, created a dialogue with herself in the context of writing her first paper on language, culture, and identity.

A: Why do you suffer with English?

Al: I have freedom of choice. I mean I could go back to Japan anytime, also I can stay in this country.

A: OK, you should go back to Japan. Your English is no good.

Al: I know, but I want to try how much to improve my English. Now I go to school and study English every day.

A: No, No I don't think so. You married with American over ten years. You had lots of chance to practice English until then.

Al: But we never speak English with each other. I was not planning to live in this country, so I didn't need to learn English. I thought, but my husband

died so I have to think my own life and I have to bring up our son by myself. Maybe I will go back to Japan after I finish school.

A: Listen! You are not young. You should decide quickly. Don't waste time for learning English.

Al: But I have my child. I'm single mother. It seems more comfortable to live in this country than Japan. I don't know.

A: Are you OK? you will struggle with English whole your life in this country.

While the paper in which this dialogue appeared was problematic from the standpoint of the assignment, it told movingly of the tensions and struggles Fukiko was experiencing and became the basis for her subsequent revision.

Students read revealing interviews in Studs Terkel's *American Dreams: Lost and Found* and conducted interviews of their own. They read poetry by Langston Hughes, selected work by Martin Luther King, Jr., and autobiographical pieces by Ann Moody and Audre Lourde, and considered the civil rights movement in light of the promises of the American Dream. As the notion of the American Dream was (re)considered, questioned, and (re)constructed, they looked at the way racism had manifested itself with respect to the ethnic groups represented by the students in the classroom, reading and writing about the work of authors from these groups. Students kept observational notebooks in which they recorded events that reflected the ways in which people are marginalized in different settings—the home, the educational institution, and the workplace. In these notebooks students described their observations and recorded their responses to these observations, making connections between the course work and the variety of cultures they inhabit. Students also participated in a semester-long correspondence with a class of graduate students, most of whom were teachers in urban schools who had enrolled in a course on the importance of multiculturalism in education. At some point during this correspondence, the two groups of students met in order to interview one another, and the data collected during these interviews were included in their subsequent papers. Through all of this work, which immersed students in a rich and deep study of these issues, I invited students' reactions, analyses and interpretations, and the connections they made between their work and their own experiences and assumptions.

Organic to this work was a sequence of reading, writing, and firsthand research that built on itself, so that as the semester progressed, students referred back to previous work, both the texts they were assigned to read and those they themselves had written, in order to demonstrate the knowledge they brought with them as well as their growing expertise. This did not produce neat and predictable essays that could be plotted against

When I was growing up,
 I was so proud of having dark hair.
 Small eyes. Yellow and short.
 When I came to America,
 I couldn't be proud of
 My dark hair, yellow skin, and small eyes
 Anymore.
 It seems white skin was best in this country.
 How sad!
 I wonder why we can't be proud
 Of our own country and figure.

When I was growing up,
 I had to play with dolls and not with cars.
 With dolls that were white with blue eyes
 And beautiful dresses. I never had a black one.
 I did not know why!
 Dancing and singing around girls.

When I was growing up,
 During my kindergarten,
 I painted a picture
 That was a boy; but the color I put in
 His face was yellow, and the nun erased it. . . .

When I was growing up,
 I found myself in this strange land,
 With a small portion of yellow people
 Living in a little town.

When I was growing up,
 All I saw was white in the walls, lights,
 Schools, Presidents, media,
 And even the clouds. . . .

When I was growing up,
 My parents' language, their accents,
 Their quaint ways
 Shamed me.
 I craved sameness,
 I longed to belong.
 I changed names.
 Was that so wrong?
 Now I embrace
 My life on the margin.
 Now I trace
 My roots, my beginnings.
 Now I can face
 Aviva.

some standardized continuum. Instead, this kind of work generated compelling and memorable pieces that reflected the questions and issues students were grappling with, their active engagement with the material, and their use of the material to think about the world around them. They became authors alongside the authors they read, thus reclaiming authority for themselves. In short, their work represented their own dialectical interplay with the course content, which clearly spoke to complex issues and questions of central concern to them and allowed them to speak back. As the material exerted an impact on them, they contributed to and transformed it in some fundamental way.

A powerful illustration of the ways in which this dialectical transformation took place was the class poem that we generated after reading Nellie Wong's "When I Was Growing Up," a poem that movingly tells of Wong's desire as a girl "to be white," to be American. Both the students and I could immediately identify with Wong's recollections, and all of us wrote at least one verse reflecting individual responses the poem had triggered. Mine, which revealed some of the conflicts in my own history, including the moment when my name changed from Aviva to Vivian, is the next to the last verse.

When I was growing up,
 I dreamed to become a millionaire.
 I wanted to come to a place
 Where is called Gold Mountain and
 Melting Pot.
 People could mingle together, hand
 By hand, swarm by swarm.
 Let us go to pick gold on the street. . . .

When I was growing up
 My own language,
 I don't know how to write.
 My aunt told me, my skin color
 Will color all my English.
 Perhaps, she has seen who I am
 In insulting eyes of my friends parents. . . .

When I was growing up,
 I saw western movies.
 I saw the white gentlemen behave
 Dignified, humorous, and brave.
 The white women are pretty and well-treated.
 The scenes were so beautiful that
 I wanted to be a part of them. . . .

I don't want to be white.
 Did I disappoint you?
 I feel comfortable being a palette's painting
 Where everybody has their stains,
 A crop with different grains.
 A bearable rainbow through the rain
 An accidental landscape
 Where the shades have a freeway.
 I crave the dawn,
 The marriage between the night and the day,
 And the childbirth of the dawn.
 The sunrise red
 The Indian's race.
 Did I disappoint you?
 Did I give you enough reason?
 I'm sorry, but I want to be what I am.
 The union of all human beings.

As is obvious even in this excerpt, the poem is full of powerful images that reflect the ways in which we were coming to terms with both our childhood expectations and our realizations about these expectations. Some of these images commented on Nellie Wong's experiences, others referred to pieces we read earlier in the semester, still others allowed students to transcend Wong's worldview.

Other texts students composed were essays that revealed their ability to write about the readings and use them to make meaning for themselves. These texts were as variable as the students' individual voices and perspectives, each representing their original ways of (re)composing these issues. In one text, Thao, influenced no doubt by the number of readings that used the images of color and paintings to refer to the experience of acculturation, began by creating a metaphor that reflected the role that color played in her framework of understanding:

Coming to campus everyday, have you ever paid attention to the blocks of colored stone on the driveway near the bus stop? And shopping over weekend, have you ever concerned about color of clothes? In my country, no one ever think of coloring a rock and you could rarely find any multicolored, gaudy clothes in the stores. But in this country, colors are extraordinary, so important and so troublesome as well. Colors themselves have their own meaning. And no matter on a piece of cloth, on a painting, or in the society, while colors blend in themselves, they fight to each other so strongly. That is what Sasaki once ironically said: "America was creating a masterpiece and did not want their color." Yes, "America is great because it is composed of almost every race in the world," as Nakasian said. So a masterpiece that Americans made was wonderful because it combines any colors. But since there were people "dirty," "humble and mean," a masterpiece got stained and its color was disliked.

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After beginning in this way, she introduced verses from the class poem we had written:

Colors of this masterpiece! Obviously, we all know that
 "It seems white skin was best in this country,"
 and
 "When I was growing up
 All I saw was white in the walls, lights,
 Schools, Presidents, media,
 And even the clouds . . ."
 (When I was growing up—My class's poem)

She went on to discuss research findings that students had read and written about, shifted again to another verse from the class poem, referred to some of the autobiographical pieces that had been assigned, quoted a verse from Nellie Wong's poem, and then discussed the other readings before returning to the metaphor of color in her final section. This open-ended and recursive movement reflected her impressive ability to shuttle back and forth not only between different texts but between different types of texts. And the connections she was able to make between such disparate pieces, the ways in which she was able to integrate research findings with poetry, for example, resulted in a piece not just *about* multiculturalism, but one that in its very voice, tone, and content *was* multicultural.

Yet another illustration of the kinds of texts students created as they were addressing these critical issues is this one, written later in the semester by Fukiko, which begins powerfully by confronting the reader with a set of troubling questions:

Who is marginalized in the United States? It is ethnic group and women. Who has pushed them away to the margin? It is people who have power. Who has power in the United States? Usually these people are white, rich males and they never know how it feels to be marginalized so that they don't care about marginalized people. It seems that ethnic groups have been marginalized since their childhood schooling. According to Sonia Nieto in *Affirming Diversity*, she reported, "Teachers tend to pay more attention to their white students than to their students of color." Several of the authors we have read this semester deal with the issue of marginalization in education. I want to discuss how ethnic children are marginalized by teachers at their schools in the U.S.

Fukiko went on to a full discussion of the extent to which Nieto's report is corroborated by some of the accounts of schooling experiences that the class had been assigned to read, after which she turned to the ways in which this issue is related to her own experiences:

From what I have observed in my class at U.Mass, When I am in E.S.L. class, I am so comfortable because E.S.L. teachers know the students' diversity or they try to understand about students' diversity. On the other hand, I feel that I am isolated from the majority of students. When I am in the non-E.S.L. class. However, I realize often minority students are alienated by themselves in their class and don't communicate in the class with teachers. Usually they don't speak out, and sit in the corner of the classroom. Nieto points out, "Relationships between teachers and students also bear out these findings." Many teachers do not discriminate against ethnic students on purpose. Most teachers want to be a good teacher for every student. But many teachers are uncomfortable about students' diversity. This reminds me of Takaki's excerpt. He said, "My teachers and text books didn't explain our diversity."

Note the relationships Fukiko saw between the research findings reported in the readings and her own world of experiences. Note, too, that she was not just drawing on her experiences to support what other "experts" had found, but was also foregrounding her own findings and using one of these "experts" to reinforce her own claims. She went on to conclude her paper this way:

I think teachers should teach more on our diversity than any subject. We must think and educate for generations "what America is." Do we have specific ideas to eradicate marginalization for people of color? Yes, we have one. It is to educate teachers in multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in education is the key that will open the magical doors to equal society.

In the course of writing this paper Fukiko offers a solution to the disturbing and complex problems the class has been grappling with, the very solution that faculty across the curriculum at UMass/Boston and other institutions are trying to enact in their own teaching.

Toward the end of the semester, Fukiko returned to the issue of language and identity as she reacted to the texts of two authors who describe growing up with mothers who were perceived as limited and incapable because of the ways they spoke English. After tracing her own troubling experiences with the English language, explaining how easily she could identify with these women, Fukiko concluded:

Both Amy Tan's and Manjarrez's mothers are so strong as compared with me. Because I always escaped all trouble in my life. May be I should confront all trouble by myself in this country. As long as I live in this country I have to deal with identity, language and culture every day. If so, I should enjoy two identities, two languages, and two cultures. May be I might be one lucky persons because I could live with two worlds.

Fukiko has moved dramatically from her initial position, revealed by the dialogue in her earlier paper. She has stopped questioning whether she

ought to return to Japan because of her "struggle with English" and has begun to see her "two identities, two languages, and two cultures" as "lucky." She has transcended what she had viewed earlier as her limitations and now values what both a first and a second language, both her own and another perspective, make possible, choosing to embrace multiculturalism as a way of life. Although Fukiko's initial texts were so problematic that I questioned whether she should have been admitted to the course, the strength of her later writing demonstrates what can happen when students are invited into the center of work, when they are recognized as knowers, when their perspectives are not only acknowledged but viewed as essential to our own. It speaks not only to the ways in which educational institutions can foster the language and critical thinking of students but also to the ways in which these students, with their multicultures and their multivoices, can contribute to and transform the very institutions they inhabit and thereby enrich the lives of all of us who work there.

ENRICHING ESOL PEDAGOGY
Readings and Activities for
Engagement, Reflection, and Inquiry

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