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ABSTRACT

For some instructors, the use of students' own experiences has proven to be an extremely useful starting point in the college composition classroom. In a first semester freshman composition course, students wrote autobiographies in which they examined different perspectives of the many communities in which they lived. Students then used the collection of their essays in an ethnographic study of the social construction of groups and the nature of relationships. In a second semester research-based writing course, students built upon communication skills worked on during the first semester. After 2 weeks of introductory discussion of the theme and critical reading, students wrote a reflective autobiographical work concerning contemporary issues. They then participated in group discussion and collaborative evaluation of each others' papers. In subsequent assignments, students reexamined issues raised, analyzing cause and effect relationships or proposing solutions. As final projects, students took and supported informed positions on issues. Working in research teams, students were more willing to do field interviews, gather information, and share what they had learned. Finished research projects were bound for concluding class discussions. Student retention, attendance, and course evaluations were high, and participants found relevance in relating their research to their own lives. (SG)

Autobiographical Writing and the Building of a Freshman Composition Research Community

by

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Autobiographical Writing and the Building of a Freshman Composition Research Community

The use of students' own experiences has proven, at least for me, to be an extremely useful starting point in the college composition classroom. The autobiographical approach to writing has a strong theoretical basis. James Moffett in his book Teaching The Universe of Discourse discusses the importance of helping students decenter from their often egocentric frame of reference in order to move into a community of discourse. Bartholomae and Petrosky in Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts describe how student autobiographical texts fit into the composition curriculum. Their studies indicate that by grounding a writing course in real life experiences, students are guided to a critical awareness of their own background and knowledge through issues raised in the course. The ultimate objective of this approach is to engender in students an understanding of how academic discourse is created and used at the college and university. Such a method seems to achieve a composition objective that Moffett calls for. He maintains that student-centered writing allows the writer to go

> ...from first person to third person; the student as writer learns to transform the implicit to explicit, ethnocentric to individualistic, [thus] increasing choice, increasing abstractness of conception, increasing consciousness of abstracting, increasing elaboration. (Moffett 132)

Reflective, socially contextualized learning situations--what Ira Shor has called "situated study" (Shor and Freire 104)--lead to heightened critical thinking on the part of students.

Using the Student Autobiography as a Tool for Academic Access

With these theoretical ideas as a basis, I have come to use the autobiography extensively in the composition classes that I teach, particularly in my first-semester freshman courses. Student autobiographies are usually written within the context of a broader course theme--one that asks them to look at different perspectives of the many communities in which they live. Past themes have explored such ideas as cultural diversity and how one moves between different cultures. After the autobiographies are written, the individual texts are bound into a collection that serves as the primary reading during the remainder of the course. By using the collection as an ethnographic study of the culture of the particular classroom, students can then analyze and theorize about the social construction of groups of people and about the nature of social relationships.

This approach has been successful in getting students to look more critically at the world around them. Richard Paul in his book Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs To Survive In A Rapidly Changing World strongly advocates the teaching of critical thinking skills within a social context. He points out that critical thought requires the development of methods to enable students to probe and plumb and explore the multi-layered nature of knowledge and meaning. The process engenders in students a spirit of "principled thinking...within multiple points of view and frames of reference..[which] yields

genuine knowledge rather than mere recall" (Paul 62). This learning process is not discrete, but must be considered within the context of social interactions. Paul also maintains that intellectual growth "presupposes increased reflective and critical thought about deep-seated problems of human relations... personal goals and ideological conflict" (46).

Such an approach necessarily adopts a pedagogy that works against strictly knowledge-based teaching, that which Paulo Freire calls in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed "the banking concept of education" (58). Reflective discourse encourages students to connect their own lives and backgrounds with the broader context of society, and to thus learn and use the power of their own discourse. And by using what Freire calls "problem-posing" contexts (66), teachers provide the dynamics for "generative themes" (86) which ultimately create a "cultural synthesis" within the classroom (180).

The two-year college is a particularly rich environment for this cultural synthesis. Generally speaking, the community college classroom is comprised of a diverse community of learners: they all have varied economic, social, and ethnic backgrounds, as well as varying degrees of language skills. These students also have many similarities: they often don't have a good feeling about writing; in many cases, they have not read extensively; and they have not usually been provided with the opportunity of creating and expressing their own ideas and opinions. The autobiography therefore builds upon their

diversities and affinities by providing a common ground for communication and an access point into the creation of academic discourse. The dynamics of an autobiographically based curriculum allow students to work through conflicts and towards personal goals as they go through the reflective process of composition and learning.

Creating a Research Community: Moving from Private to Public

Based upon these assumptions and experiences, I adapted and expanded the autobiographical approach for use in a second semester, research-based writing class that I was teaching during the spring semester of last year. The course was the second semester segment of the two-semester Freshman English requirement at the college; the curriculum was built around the use of extended research to enhance and expand the communication skills that the students had worked on in the first semester composition course.

In the introduction to the class, the students were told that the communication activities of the course would be incorporated into a broader context. The "generative theme" of the course was: What is the relationship of the individual to the broader communities in which he or she functions? The students were challenged with the notion of using reading, writing, speaking and listening to consider and explore the topics, issues, and problems involved in on-going social interactions. The distinction was made that the approach would provide them with a broad foundation for looking "critically"

at various aspects of the world around them--not "critically" in the sense of continually finding fault, but "critically" in the spirit of questioning and analyzing the underlying assumptions that they brought to the class.

To reinforce the theme of the course, the textbook Reading Critically, Writing Well, edited by Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper, was used as the reader. This particular textbook served several different purposes. The articles contained in the edition, both professional and student essays, dealt with contemporary issues and problems in American society. Essays such as Jonathan Kozol's "The Human Cost of an Illiterate Society," K.C. Cole's "Why Are There So Few Women in Science?", and Richard Rodriguez' "My Parents" provided the basis for strong class discussion. In addition, the text provided articles constructed around the sub-theme of civil disobedience, which further extended and reinforced the overall theme of the course. Lastly, the teaching of critical reading and writing skills was built into the text, and this blended nicely with the course curriculum.

The first two weeks of the class were spent in a general discussion of the theme of the course and in a close, critical reading of the essays "When Rights Collide," by Amitai Etzioni, and "Letter from Birmingham Jail," by Martin Luther King, Jr. During these initial sessions, the students were provided with a list of contradictory, even controversial statements (see Appendix A); this list was used for journal freewriting and

to generate initial class discussion. Also during this time the students began their first writing assignment (see Appendix A). They were asked to write a reflective essay--an autobiographical work--in which they were to discuss a time in their lives when they faced or experienced firsthand one of the numerous social or cultural problems or controversies confronting people today.

The assignment proved to be somewhat of a difficult departure point for the students. Jorge wanted to talk about his failure in high school due to language differences; Marlene felt the need to write about Vietnam and her husband's death as a result of the war; Betty began to write about the financial and emotional struggles involved in her husband's successful battle with cancer. Most of the students found that they had many important life experiences to share. But they had a great deal of difficulty in putting those experiences into words, and in connecting their discourse to the broader world.

The assignment took longer than expected; the completion of the project required a good deal of individual conferencing, an extended number of groupwork sessions, and extensive rewrites. Yet these finished autobiographies provided a firm foundation for subsequent assignments. The remaining writing requirements (see Appendix A) were built upon the first and were intended to be what Moffett calls "chain-reaction assignments" (200) in which one paper is adapted into and builds upon the previous.

The completed papers were grouped into similar subjects and issues, in sets of three, and returned to the students. Based upon their reading of each others' papers, and on their small-group discussions, the students then collaboratively evaluated and critiqued an outside article that was common to the issues each group was dealing with. This established a collaborative grouping for the students during their research activities. Subsequent writing assignments asked them, sometimes individually and sometimes collectively, to analyze a cause and/or effect of the issue, then to propose a possible solution, and then, as the final project, to take and support an informed position on an aspect of that issue. Arranging the writing assignments in this manner required the students to continually "re-see" the issue they were dealing with.

The collaborative effort during the initial phase of the research allowed the students to form research teams. During the research phase, the students continued to gather, synthesize, and exchange information by working cooperatively with others that shared like interests or who were working on similar issues. Research became an on-going process of accumulating and sharing resources. Working in conjunction with others also allowed the students to seek information beyond the confines of the library. The students were much more willing to do fieldwork in terms of interviews and information gathering in the outside community, and to exchange this information with each other.

Also during that time, class discussion was purposefully brought back to one of the main themes of the course: the exploration of the ways in which individuals become responsible for, and eventually negotiate, change in the broader community. The students were continually asked to look at the complexities of the issue they were dealing with, were asked to reflect on the multiple perspectives and possibilities presented to them.

Results and Interpretations

At the end of the course, all of the finished research projects were bound into a class essay publication. This collaborative publication served as the basis for the concluding class discussions. These talks centered around analyzing and theorizing about the role of the individual within the larger society. The collection itself represented the varying degrees of success of the project. Some of the essays started no where and went no where; some showed glimmers of an awareness of a complex world; others surpassed my expectations. In the cases where the students allowed themselves to move beyond the obvious, their research questions and activities seemed to have much more meaning and significance.

Jorge, whose original autobiography involved education and language barriers, constructed his research paper around what corporations are doing to fight illiteracy in the work place. Marlene researched the Agent Orange issue; in so doing she was able to further pursue her entitlement to compensation because her husband died as a result of exposure to the chemical.

Betty, whose autobiography involved her husband's successful struggle with cancer, wrote about current scientific research that is being done in the dietary prevention of the disease. Their voices were strongly present in their finished projects.

More still needs to be done with the course in terms of integrating the autobiography into the other writing activities, and with establishing the research groups earlier on in the term. Yet I did perceive success. Both student retention and attendance for the class were remarkably high. The numerical rating from the students' course evaluations was quite good. Additionaly, many of the students' written comments concerned the freedom they felt in expressing their ideas, both in writing and in class discussions. In the same vain, I feel success in that I was a learner along with the students: I learned with the sustained interest they had in their topics; with their willingness to pursue difficult questions; with the relevance they found in relating their research work to their own lives.

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