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ABSTRACT

Cultural interference in writing classrooms includes linguistic and social differences that lead to mixed signals both for students and teachers and unshared expectations among this community of learners. This can be seen particularly at a place like the University of Texas at El Paso, where the Hispanic community of students comprises approximately 60% of the student body. Despite the dramatic increase in minority enrollment nationwide, these students experience problems such as prejudice, interaction difficulties, and cultural gaps. For example, Hispanic students may not share simple expectations about reading or the structure of written work as held by American educated students. Case studies of two Hispanic students, Rene and Rocio, demonstrate essential concerns. Rene's case study exemplifies numerous instances where cultural interference caused frustration. His attempt to make excuses for late assignments due to illness was viewed suspiciously by the instructor. Rocio's work was late because she had to take her mother somewhere. Both of these excuses are routine priorities in Hispanic culture and show more respect for the person in authority in these students' view than if they had said truthfully that they missed the deadlines for no good reason. In written and spoken comments about peer writing, Hispanics tend to be timid and complimentary. Non-Hispanic students are more reserved in their praise and more specific with their comments. A language should be viewed as a cultural mirror reflecting the culture it represents, so that English teachers also must become more aware that to teach English for the 21st century is to learn and teach culture as well. (HB)

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CONTEXTS FOR WRITING ON THE BORDER: The Community and The Constraints of Hispanic Freshman Writers

Maggy Smith
CCCC 1992 Presentation draft copy: do not quote

Really the title of my paper--not formulated early enough to get into the program--is

MIXED SIGNALS/UNSHARED EXPECTATIONS: Building Bridges Between Cultural Differences

These are exciting times to be teaching: issues of diversity, multiculturalism, bilingualism, and so on provide extraordinary situations in which to teach writing. This excitement is--for me--made all the greater by actually teaching at a university on the US-Mexico border where cultural diversity is living and breathing everywhere. At UTEP, for example, our student body is approximately 60% Hispanic, making UTEP the largest minority-majority institution in the country. Most of our students are entering college as first-generation college goers, and will become the first in their families to actually be a college graduate.

Teaching writing to such a diverse group of students creates a stimulating laboratory in which to study how culture and language interact. Even though our population is truly **unlike** more universities than it is **like**, at UTEP we continue to use composition pedagogies as if we were "LIKE" all the rest. Paradoxically, the "others" are becoming more like us--culturally diverse, with an especially high percentage of Hispanic students. The unlikeness, though, is what has given rise to the research I'll talk about today. I am going to claim that **cultural interference** in our classrooms include linguistic and social differences that lead to **mixed signals** both for students and for teachers and **unshared expectations** among t[illegible]

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community of learners.

I am going to talk today about the Hispanic community of learners at the University of Texas at El Paso, especially 2 students from a qualitative study and survey responses to show you the **mixed signals** and **unshared expectations** that surround their learning and our teaching.

As I continue, let me contextualize my remarks within the framework of a changing national and educational community. First, the US community is described by Collier and Powell, as experiencing major shifts in its demographic make-up. This change is not about to subside. LINDEN, in June 1991, writes, "Over the last 10 years, while the total US population grew by slightly more than 10%, the number of Hispanics has increased some 4 times as fast. In the course of the current decade, the US population is projected to increase by about 19 million, of which some 8 million will be of Hispanic origin.

Besides reporting that ". . . Ethnic groups such as Latinos . . . are becoming the numerical majority," Collier and Powell say that ". . . Increasing cultural diversity and pluralism, rather than assimilation or the melting pot idea, characterize such demographic change in the US."

How, then, do these changes affect us in higher education? In no other institution, Collier and Powell go on to indicate, is cultural diversity so apparent as it is in the educational community. For example, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (3/88) reported that between 1976 and 1986 the number of minority students enrolled in colleges and universities increased by 33%. The fall 1991 *Chronicle* reported that between 1978 and 1988 figures specifically for Hispanic students rose from **3.7%** of the total student population to **5.2%**. This represents a **63%** increase in Hispanic enrollment (417,000 in 1978; 680,000

in 1988).

Let me explain some problems that occur for these students right off the bat. **First,** students experience academic prejudice because they lack the benefit of a cultural evaluation in the educational community. **Second,** they also fare poorly in ordinary interactions because their culture structures what is acceptable and what is not acceptable somewhat differently from ours.

Third, Hispanic students--and others like them--are often deprived because, historically culture has been used against students. ROBINSON & ROBINSON, in *The Mexican American: A Critical Guide to Research Aids*, report that "Most early works, published prior to WW II, established rationales for the failures of Mex-Ams in the schools by pointing to their cultural values, attitudes, and intellectual deficiencies. These were then used to formulate policies that were detrimental to the educational achievement of students of Mex heritage." Hopefully, today, I'd like to think that we are looking for ways to build bridges between cultures, and, as Ross Winterowd recommends, to "ground teaching in the everyday life of learners."

How and where do we begin to unravel the cultural differences and understand how the very way we lead our lives can cause crossed signals. How do we bridge this problem when our students' culture does not meet our own? When it interferes fairly dramatically in their evaluation before they ever appear in our classes?

For one thing, we don't share simple expectations about reading or about the structure of written work. If educated in Mexico, the students have probably not read extensively even in their native language. We know that, according to UTEP linguist Phinney, reading

is not valued in their culture. The cost of books is prohibitive, so even schools don't have enough books to go around. The fact that students come from an environment where they are expected to do a minimal amount of reading, where the teacher lectures from the text, and where too few copies of the texts exist, ends up in little or no homework--especially reading. Hispanics are, then, initially surprised when the teachers don't lecture from the textbook and that the students must actually read.

Likewise, the structure of the written languages is different, prompting different--unshared--expectations about the final product in a writing class. For example, the English language is much more linear in structure than Spanish, where the beauty of language itself is valued above anything else. English uses logic and precision, clarity and brevity, while Spanish, like other romance languages, places the emphasis on the style and the beauty of the language and its presentation. This means that much digression in personal terms and personal support for arguments is acceptable.

With these essential concerns about this community of learners out on the table, I am going to spend the rest of my time today outlining some of the research I have been doing. To do this, I'm going to share with you salient points from a case study of two students--Rene and Rocio--and survey responses.

To begin with, the case study of Rene exemplifies a number of instances where cultural interference caused us--Rene and I--to experience frustrating interactions because we did not share expectations and so our signals got crossed. Rene is a student who describes himself as Hispanic, and who claims that his first language is English, though his parents are from Mexico and he speaks to them in Spanish--which you probably know linguistically

means that actually Spanish is his first language. Rene is a sharp fellow, who owns his own small gift-wrapping business and "straddles" the border in a number of personal, professional, and academic ways.

I'd like to share with you some of the episodes of dialogue that Rene and I engaged in that underscore the persistent difficulty in understanding that can occur when cultural interference is at work.

Let me contextualize this first comment of Rene's before I continue. Hispanic students often call their female professors "Miss." Since the Spanish "i" is pronounced as a long "e," this results in a pronunciation or "mees." Initially, I found this form of address a bit disconcerting and disrespectful. This, of course, I have come to understand is not derogatory. As I read the dialogue, I'll interject some of Rene's pronunciation and especially his intonation, which, of course, also varies from culture to culture.

Rene came up to me after class one day and said, "Miss, here is my [assignment]." I replied by saying, "Rene, that was due last Tuesday and you know my policy on late work." Rene continues: "But, Miss," he says, "I was so-o-o sick on Tuesday," as he holds his stomach and shakes his head. "I nearly died, and I almost had to have an operation. What was I to do. I was so-o-oo sick." I said, "Rene, you should have sent it with a friend." "But, Miss, I don't have any friends who come by here." "Rene, what has happened to the whole week in between last Tuesday and this Tuesday? You have three phone numbers and at least 2 addresses for me."

"I'm sorry, Miss," says Rene, "I tried, but no one could find you."

By this time, being a transplanted Northeastern myself, I have forgotten the careful

poise I try to maintain in this culturally diverse setting, and I begin to lose my "cool." I remind Rene, "Last time a project was due you came limping in after the class was dismissed, having injured your foot and having spent the morning at the Emergency Room." "Ah, Miss, I did and I was so sick, I'm really sorry. I can get you a doctor's note," says Rene. He continues, as I notice another student waiting behind him: Rene says "Jose, here, he has his [assignment] too."

I completely forget my locale, abruptly take the [assignments], and gruffly say "Rene, **DON'T** call me Miss. Come to class and get your work in on time and we won't have any problems." "Miss, I will, I am so sorry. It won't happen again, I promise." I shake my head, pack my bag, and leave the class room somewhat irritated at both myself and Rene.

Two weeks later, in conference with Rene's group about their final project, a collaborative one, I mention that the other group members and I talked about the paper's audience, purpose, and its best organizational strategy given the audience & purpose on Tuesday when Rene was absent. Mind you, by this time, Rene and I are on friendly terms again, his innate intelligence and his high-quality contributions to the class winning me over, so this was just a statement on my part. "Oh yes, Miss," says Rene, " I was a little late on Tuesday, but then we--me and Jose and Henry here--talked about that." The truth of the matter is Rene never came to class on Tuesday.

This case study of Rene, and others like it, begins to tell us important information about teaching in a hispanic majority institution, especially Hispanic students in general, about "cultural" interference, about unshared expectations, and about crossed signals?

This behavior of Rene's is easy to dismiss as "just a student who believes that he can

charm or outwit the teacher." Is this a simple problem, of comprehension and acceptance--a problem for which I tend to want to repeat the words again only louder, thinking that will make them clearer, as if that will build a bridge and create "shared understanding" between the cultural crossed signals here. Should I be suspicious? Does Rene, after all, really believe that he does not have to play by my rules? Does Rene simply not share my expectations as a result of his own cultural context? At times, I know even Rene is confused by my demands when he has what he considers such reasonable excuses. Because Rene has lots of confidence and is remarkably bright, despite the cultural interference, he has done well at UTEP and will survive these cultural value differences. He will probably leave UTEP never realizing that he and I did not share the same set of expectations about what constitutes a rule or an excuse.

Beyond students like Rene, though, lay many others. My concern is for these more average Hispanic students who run the risk of being misunderstood as being dishonest or lazy; whose writing progress is seriously derailed by these misunderstandings about what is expected.

For example, the more timid Hispanic students in this study seldom speak out. They don't speak the language clearly, and they don't understand the expectations. For example, "Rocio" is a lovely young Hispanic woman, who never spoke out in class unless I asked her to. When her assignment was due, she was absent. The following class period she brought it in to me, handed it to me, and assumed that her reasoning, "I couldn't get in on Tuesday because I had to take my mother back to Juarez," was perfectly acceptable, in fact ordinary. When I said, "I'm sorry. You should have had someone bring it in for you," she was

surprised. I asked her if she had read the syllabus and policy statement. She said, "yes, but my mother." Family, in her culture, takes priority over all other matters. Our expectations were not shared, and she was not a happy student that day. Typically, if this scenario occurs with an "Anglo" student, s/he argues vehemently, even angrily for the fairness of the actual issue: late work or absence, for example. She focuses on this directly, not on health or family, both of which take precedence over all else in the Hispanic culture.

According to Ana Semiday, Linguistics instructor and teacher of Spanish as a Second Language at UTEP, these expectations of Rene's and Rocio's should not be interpreted as untruths at all or even excuses, but actually as routine explanations. They would never risk insulting someone who is in authority by just missing class or deadlines without a seemingly very important reason. Their culture mandates that I am in authority, and by virtue of the hierarchy, am given respect. This means telling this small untruth because for either to say s/he just didn't come is to insult me, but to blame it on health or family is absolutely acceptable.

How can we contextualize the problem, then? The linguist Chomsky talks about situations such as this one in terms of communicative competence. Chomsky indicates that communicative competence is an unconscious, tacit kind of knowledge acquired from experience in a variety of situations; thus, direct instruction alone will not lead to its development--hence, my syllabus was not enough. Students must know, besides the conventions of language, when and how to use the rules and structure--this also proven out here by the interactions between Rene and me or between Rocio and me.

Rene's case also supports what Fishman says about language, culture, and thought.

The structuring of verbal interaction, unrelated to grammatical structure, varies greatly and affects behavior and thought from one culture to the next. In this example, Rene and I did not share these same expectations, nor did Rocio and I, about the rules governing the class and their communicative roles in the class. Furthermore, our attempts to clarify our positions orally resulted in failure--crossed signals.

This suggests yet another instance when unshared expectations can occur in this environment: Our process oriented classes, collaborative in nature, really cause crossed signals and create deep unshared expectations. Basil Berenstein's research on **elaborated** and **restricted** codes is useful in understanding why this is so. Thompson describes these differences in this way: elaborated codes are person-centered and are independent of a context for their usefulness, while restricted codes are tied to both position and context.

Thompson continues, "Like the families who use elaborated codes, the process classroom is "person-centered" rather than positional. It moves away from a curriculum based upon clearly bounded or defined subskills, types of writing assignments, and categories of error, all under the direct control of a teacher . . . toward a curriculum that integrates many components of the writing process and evaluation, with the teacher serving as facilitator of a cooperative effort." This situation presents yet another unshared expectation: class itself can be difficult for Hispanic learners because they expect the teacher to lecture, direct, and define exact boundaries, not to turn learning over to the students.

This barrier--which exemplifies the difference between restrictive and elaborated codes--also makes such classwork as peer review of one another's work a difficulty. Judging each other's work constructively and honestly, in peer response groups, for example, is

easily viewed as an insult by Hispanic students and they do not want to insult their friends, nor do they expect to be insulted. So, they say each other's work is "excellent."

Students in this study listened to a piece that their instructor read aloud to the class. Then they were asked to complete a series of questions about it. They were asked an open ended question directing the respondents to "Give this person advice about his/her writing. How could it be improved? What is the likelihood that it will win the Pulitzer Prize [a vote by another class that the piece is the best of our class's work]?" Let me describe differences in those survey results:

Put in the position of evaluating someone's work, Hispanic students made general remarks and positive evaluations about the likelihood of its winning the PP: "I really did like the essay and I feel it is very possible it will win the PP. It gives a great description." Another response uses the class vocabulary to do essentially the same thing: "Too much telling in this one, and not enough showing. Very good chance at PP . . ." "The writing can be more descriptive." This last example is a long answer that says little more: "The only way I can see that this paper be improved is to give more information of how she requested the horse to respond to her commands. I believe that it has a good chance of winning the PP because it explained . . . very clearly." Many of the Hispanic respondents simply left this blank.

On the other hand, the non-hispanic respondents, however, had more to say, being specific and concrete about their comments. For example, one student responds specifically about a point in the essay: "Perhaps by telling WHY she didn't want to admit never having ridden a horse before." Or another response, "It could be more showing or involving.

Bring the readers into his world and share the excitement with them. I don't think it will get the PP because it's not moving enough. It's enjoyable but somehow lacking." A very specific response says, "I like her examples and quotes, but there was something about the sentence structure which caught my attention. There was something wrong with it." And, "It needs more adjectives about his feelings at first. We didn't know if he/she was afraid. It will probably not win the PP because of his chosen thesis . . .there seems to be better stories to learn a lesson like this to write about." And last, a particularly long non-hispanic response, concludes: "I enjoyed the essay. The style of the essay put me in a mood that is created when someone reads a story. I liked the descriptions (horses legs were like concrete). I think a little more detail may be good (about the house, grandma, etc) but this depends on whether or not these additions would flow well with the rest of the work. I also liked the organization of the work. I believe that this work has a chance to win the PP . . . [and he continues at some length about this]." You can see that most of the hispanic students said that the paper would win, while the non-hispanics were more reserved in their praise; in fact, most of them aid it was unlikely that the essay would win the PP.

What are the implications of all of this for us as teachers in multicultural environments: For starters

- First, we must be teachers and learners of multiculturalism as we prepare teachers and researchers of the future. It is not sufficient to know that this exists. It is becoming an integral part of our classrooms on a regular basis. Thus, we must begin to address in our classes and in our texts specific cultural differences.
- Second, teach students of obvious international status how to read and how to write

for the contexts in which they are operating. This means that multicultural reading and writing strategies need to become an integral part of our work. To do this, for example, we might demonstrate exactly how to read, what to look for, and so on. We also might explain the rhetorical structure of a text. We might explain to the students that they should be reading for both vocabulary and details.

- Last, as we teach students how to analyze audience and purpose for their writing and speaking assignments, we must ask them to address questions of cultural difference and multiculturalism for their own audiences as a means to make them more sensitive to these issues too.

In conclusion, Terpstra (1978) suggests that each language should be viewed as a cultural mirror because it reflects the content and nature of the culture it represents. He implies that to learn a language well, one must actually learn the culture. To teach our language for the 21st century, we too must learn and teach culture.

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