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ABSTRACT

Autobiography is now debated as ultimately problematic, a charge that may impede the growth of a growing cultural pedagogy. As a tool in the classroom, it is under siege for many reasons: because it does not teach "real-world" skills; because in asking students to deal with painful memories, it may impede intellectual and emotional growth; and because the personal essay is archaic, given modern notions about the self. However, would it be such a bad thing for students to acknowledge timely, painful issues that demand their attention? Even a newly conceived self that is not necessarily autonomous, but socially constructed, can hurt and suffer. Furthermore, student autobiographical writing can become valuable to teachers seriously concerned with advancing multicultural literacy. Students previously unaware of authors like Toni Morrison and Gabriel Garcia Marquez may become initiated into a world of literacy that is not exclusively Eurocentric. Let them work with writing that has cultural relevance for them, each of them, as they learn to negotiate the distances between cultures. (TB)

Autobiography and the Ascent of Multiculturalism: A Negotiation

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Cultural workers encourage nutlicultural literacy. Some believe that a discursive forum that addresses social, cultural and political issues exposes students to challenging ideas that foster critical and analytical thinking skills even as they learn academic discourse. Multicultural studies fit this description and have thus become the trend in first-year writing programs. Students work with notions of the self as they examine power structures that shape and influence in ways contingent upon how an individual is socially constructed within the confines of a language that depends upon difference in the making of meaning. Coming into an understanding of one's subject position, relative to forces that shape that position, students may feel more of an investment in their work. Multicultural studies increases that investment across the board. But one pedagogical tool that seems paramount to the success of multicultural literacy is currently under attack--autobiography.

Autobiography is now debated as ultimately problematic, a charge that may impede the growth of our growing cultural pedagogy. It is under siege for many reasons. Some believe that we should be about the business of teaching students "real-world" skills, and that somehow self-knowledge and exploration is not relevant to the development of literacy. Others claim that asking students to write autobiographical essays ushers in a host of painful memories that upset the emotional and intellectual growth of students--the counseling centers are flooded. This argument proceeds to note how students are coerced into writing about often difficult topics, and some are even lead to lie, believing that the most revealing narrative, addressing the most traumatic memory, will be valued higher than a less conspicuous piece. Still others argue that contemporary notions of self have changed, forcing the personal essay into an archaic realm that dates us in its insistence on the myth of individualism.

Now let's examine what we claim to know. We know that students can write much about their experiences. We know that engaging in the writing process can lead to a degree of verbal competence. We know that over time, through revision, individual attention, and peer editing, students can develop personal essays into relatively clear prose that approximates the type of

coherent writing valued in the academy. We also know that self-discovery is often painful and enlightening in positive, therapeutic ways. Would it be such a very bad thing if students acknowledged issues that demand attention at this time, as they learn to formulate or understand their world view as well as their self? Even a newly-conceived self that is not necessarily autonomous, but socially constructed, can hurt and suffer, especially as it attempts to navigate unfamiliar territory. It will either express or repress. And only one of these choices will prove beneficial in terms of advancing a pluralistic literacy that hears all and silences none. Autobiographical writing and the study of autobiographical models encourages expression and self-discovery that is crucial to the individual attempting to negotiate a subject position in an oppressive world.

The world of the academy can be conceived as oppressive. It is a world driven by theory and policed through various expressions of authority. Authority is one concern theorists struggle with in the debate over autobiography. Who has the authority to implement changes (valorizing or negating autobiography) in curriculum? Do writing teachers have the authority to require autobiographical essays from students, especially given that autobiography is often emotionally charged and may prove biased in favor of some students' stories? How can we vary assigned topics to avoid gender or cultural bias?

Some questions seem more approachable than others. Concerning the issue of authority relevant to multiculturalism, we might look to Patricia Bizzell's work. Bizzell exposes the negotiation of authority that occurs in the classroom. Her comments call attention to an existing process that precedes, as a whisper, the growing call for a progressive move away from a transmission model of teaching to a more democratic construct that seems appropriate for the multicultural classroom. She says that

> Teaching academic literacy becomes a process of constructing academic literacy, creating it anew in each class through the interaction of the professor's and the students' cultural resources. (150)

Bizzell notes a collaboration between teachers and students that is contingent upon local knowledge. The student's role must be underscored here, in terms of autobiography. Purposeful student autobiographical writing is not unproblematic, but examined and scrutinized as valuable.

Student autobiographical writing can become even more valuable to teachers seriously concerned with advancing multicultural literacy. These teachers might consider a curriculum that first seeks to provide students, with their diverse cultural knowledge, with an element of power in shaping the course of study. Why not ask students to write about their first experiences with reading, to reflect upon their favorite types of writing, including favorite authors and books? This may promote powerful writing and prompt thoughtful journal entries. The "person who has had some impact on my life" essay can turn into the "author," or "genre," or "book that has affected me" essay. Students previously unaware of authors like Toni Morrison or Gabriel Garcia Marquez may become initiated into a world of literacy that is not exclusively Eurocentric. Students know what they like. Let them work with writing that interests them; writing that has cultural relevance for them, each of them, as they learn to negotiate the distances between cultures, as they learn to cross borders into each others' territory.

Directing journal topics to encompass discussions of student experiences with language could mean that the basic request that students keep journals, or that they recall past experiences (both autobiographical, in nature) opens a channel of communication through which students may enter into a democratic forum that shapes the curriculum for the course. This may help dispel controversies over authority by allowing students to provide some input concerning what they read. It may also help to address concerns over autobiography not directly related to the ascendency of multiculturalism. By directing journal topics, calling upon students to reflect in a focused way, in a way that does not privilege *the rape story* over *the trip to the mall story*, teachers may be able to integrate students' lived experience with pedagogical intent, incorporating experience into their accumulation of rhetorical skills, offering them an understanding that their lives and voices count, but not in a way that creates a hierarchy of value according to the level of self-disclosure. Perhaps most importantly, it may empower students, allowing them to experience feelings of equality with teachers and peers during a time of change that is marked by conflict, as they negotiate between "their" language and "ours." As instructors, offering this power to our students, we also negotiate that space that distances us from them.

Theoretical debate over autobiography must give way, at least in part, to practical concerns. Only through active pursuit can we create and promote a diverse canon, a multiplicity of voices and a curriculum of inclusion.

Autobiography belongs in the first-year writing classroom. Denying the power of personal reflection presupposes a world in which meaning is determined for us. We know that this is not our world. We understand that knowledge is something we make, individually and collectively.

Cultural workers are successfully articulating notions of power that are now problematized rather than passively accepted as "the way things are." Within a context that addresses power issues, students are expressing personal awareness of subject positions that are forming under scrutiny. No longer naive concerning social conditioning that slots individuals as minority or majority, black, white, poor, female, or whatever, students who are engaged in personal reflection problematize notions of self even as they form. In an academic world that has long privileged the utterances and expressions of white, middle and upper class society, this reconfiguration of subject position challenges notions of privilege and demands action toward erasing inequities that marginalize and oppress the other.

Only by insisting that all voices are heard can we achieve a truly radical democracy in the classroom. Only through recognition of the power of personal reflection can we reach this goal. Only by creating a meaningful, reasonable, and responsible application of autobiography can we hope to hear all voices and to value all cultures in the move toward mutlicultural literacy.

WORKS CITED

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