DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 764 FL 024 074

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TITLE The "Mentor Paper" Writing Assignment in One Community College Puente Class: Preliminary Report from a Participant Observer.
PUB DATE 10 Apr 96
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Classroom Techniques; *Community Colleges; Dropout Prevention; Educational Strategies; *High Risk Students; Instructional Effectiveness; *Mentors; Mexican Americans; *Personal Narratives; Two Year Colleges; Two Year College Students; *Writing Exercises; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Puente Project CA

ABSTRACT

An educator participating in a community college Puente class as both participant and observer analyzes the structure and experience of one writing assignment representative of the program's objectives. The Puente program combines teaching, counseling, and mentoring to California community college students as a means of promoting learning, academic persistence, and transfer to 4-year colleges among Mexican American students. Each student is paired with a mentor, a Mexican American community leader who is a college graduate, usually on the basis of the student's current occupational interest. One writing assignment is to report on the mentor experience, which includes a group breakfast and interview to be used as the basis for the paper. Analysis (with examples) of other students' writing revealed common features such as narrative about experiences shared by all students (classroom preparation, breakfast, telephone calls, interview), use of sensory details, and inclusion of personal feelings and impressions. It is concluded that in the Puente program, the relationship between program goals and text forms is emphasized, and writing assignments serve multiple purposes. In this case, the personal narrative both validates the past and helps students envision the future. Appended notes explain the Puente program. (MSE)

The "Mentor Paper" Writing Assignment in one Community College Puente Class: Preliminary Report from a Participant Observer

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Paper presented at a panel discussion on "Fourteen years of research on a college-community collaboration: What works for at-risk community college students?", American Educational Research Association convention, New York City, April 10, 1996.

This paper assumes the information on Puente's history, design, and overall success presented by the first three panel speakers: Puente founders and co-directors Patricia McGrath and Feliz Galaviz, University of California; and director of Puente's training programs Mary K. Healy, University of California, Berkeley. (For those readers new to Puente, see Appendix.)

I am grateful to all members of the Puente "familia" for their welcome, and to the Spencer Foundation for research support.

The "mentor paper" writing assignment in one community college Puente class: Preliminary report from a participant observer

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More than a year ago, I asked Patricia McGrath and Feliz Galaviz if I could spend the 95-96 school year with Puente in order to understand from inside the classroom how this demonstrably successful program works. With their welcome, I attended the 9-day training institute for new teachers and counselors last July, joined one Puente class in the San Francisco Bay area when it began in August, and joined a second when it began in January. I will speak today only about the first class, where I have now been with students, teacher, and counselor for eight months.

In all three settings--the institute and two classes--I have been a participant observer. Because that term is used for many different research relationships, it's important to be specific about how I did and didn't act. As part of my learning, I wanted to do the assigned readings and writings. Since Puente teachers are encouraged to write with their students, my doing the same would not be unusual. Moreover, since the Puente teaching philosophy depends so much on small group work, especially for peer response to student texts, I realized I could only gain access to those groups in a non-eavesdropping, non-voyeur way if I did the writing and read my drafts aloud as the students did. This writing, reading, and responding became my "participation."

Otherwise, in large group sessions, I took notes as a silent observer.

As far as I can tell, this combination of roles has worked in my relationship with the students, surprising as that may seem, given our differences in age, ethnicity, and education background. Since there's nobody to investigate the investigator, my only evidence is that in December, when I asked the students for permission to xerox papers from the portfolios they would be handing in at the end of the semester, 17 students present of the original 20 registered gave their permission immediately. Fortunately, with one exception, those 17 are the 17 registered and attending now, six weeks before the end of the two-semester school year.

Because I am still a daily participant observer in two Puente classes, I have only begun analyses of student texts and my field notes, and will report here on just one assignment, the "mentor paper." I have selected this text for first analysis not only because it is the last and the longest of the five assigned papers during the first semester in this Puente class. More importantly, in both the experience it reports and in the reporting process itself, the mentor paper seems to epitomize, or better to crystallize, the integration of academic skill development and broader socialization that are the goals of the Puente Project as a whole.

Before the mentor paper, the students had done a lot of in-class writing, and had completed four assignments that went through drafts and peer response: about the neighborhood they had

grown up in; a relative from whom they had learned an important lesson; their ethnic identity; and their response to El Indio, a history of Mexico in fictional form. All these assignments were designed to call attention to, and validate, their past experiences and continuing identity as Mexican Americans. The mentor paper had a different purpose: building on that validation, it focused attention on a potential, and realizable, future.

In each Puente class, the counselor matches each student with a mentor, a Mexican American community leader who is a college graduate, usually on the basis of the student's present occupational interests. In each class, one of the writing assignments is to write about this mentor experience. My initial assumption was that the mentor paper assignment was a clever way of attaching the student/mentor relationship to an academic requirement, thereby guaranteeing that all students would do their part to make that relationship happen: calling for an appointment, being sure to keep it, etc. Without much thought, I assumed--wrongly, I realized later--that the value of the writing for Puente's academic goals, and the value of the mentor relationship for Puente's socialization goals (toward a four-year-college degree and community leadership) were separate goals, though both furthered in this one assignment.

So that I could do the writing, I asked the Puente counselor for the name of a mentor whom I could interview, and was given the name of an early childhood administrator, whom I will call Ms. D, who has been a mentor for several years. With the

students, I attended the mentor/mentee breakfast, beautifully organized by the Puente counselor at a Mexican restaurant in mid-October, introduced myself to Ms. D, and made an appointment to meet her a couple of weeks later in her Head Start office. I taped that interview (which students were not expected to do), and had a short first draft ready by the assigned date in mid-November.

When that day came, only a few students had drafts in hand. So instead of organizing us into small groups, the teacher asked those with drafts to read them aloud for comments by the group as a whole. Because this was a large group activity, I was only observer and did not read mine. But I am convinced that the fact that I had written it made me attend in a special way to differences between my draft and the students'. Three students read what were not surprisingly only the beginnings of a full mentor paper. One of those beginnings contrasted so vividly with my own that it made me rethink my assumptions about relationships betweeen textual form and Puente goals.

Here is the beginning of my draft:

> _____ _____ D_____ is from the first generation of her family born in this country, and the first generation to go to college. Her parents were both born in Mexico. Her mother came to the US when she was 13 and worked as a mother's helper; her father came as a baby when his father got a job in the steel mills in Indiana.
>
> Ms. D spoke more about her father, who seems to have been an especially powerful influence. He always said, "There is not anything you can't do" and "You can't just take; you have to give back." She always understood that her education was not just about herself, but about her responsibility to her community.

Here is the beginning of the paper read by one student whom I'll

call Se:

> As I walked through the door of the little restaurant on Main and Mission I could hear my heart beat. My hands were sweaty and I was nervous. What will my mentor look like, what will he say, what will we talk about, will he be intimidating, will I say something stupid, all of these things ran through my mind as I walked around the restaurant. When I had received the envelope from R [the Puente counselor] the day beforehand, I knew only three things: his name, what profession he was in, and his telephone number. R invited us to get something to eat and sit down and he would get us if our mentor showed up. I got a plate, sat down, and began to eat my breakfast which consisted of huevos, arroz, papas, frijoles, and tortillas. I began to eat and when I was about half way done I heard R call my name. It came out to me as if he had said it in slow motion. I got up and walked over to R and he introduced me to my mentor Dr. _____ C_____. We met and he asked me to get my plate and join him at his table. I said OK, went to get my plate and sat down with him in the corner of the restaurant. It was the moment of truth.

My notes from that day include Se's memorable opening and closing phrases--from his "sweaty hands" to "the moment of truth" --and that paragraph remains as the first paragraph of the final version in Se's portfolio. The final paper recounts the hour-long talk with his mentor in the restaurant, his visit to Dr. D's office as a college dean of students--an office so large that it both "shocked" and "impressed", details of his job and his biography starting with "picking with the farm workers", and Dr. D's advice: "to learn the system, give myself chances, get to know myself as far as strengths and weaknesses and finally to keep moving and never give up." Se's final paper ends with this paragraph, which explains the paper's title, "Giving Back":

> After sitting down and talking with _____ for an hour and a half I was very confident and I felt good and proud not so much because he has made it and is successful but because he has taken time for me and is giving me hope, courage and support so that I can one

day make it and be successful and also give back to La Raza.

Where I had written only about the mentor, Se wrote about his experience. I could have done the same. Arriving at the Head Start program to meet Ms. D brought back many memories of the late 60's and early 70's when I too was professionally active in early childhood education as a language development researcher. And when Ms. D spoke eloquently of how her professional life continues to evolve and change, I felt a similarity to my own career evolution in this, my first year of retirement. But it had not occurred to me to include these more personal connections in the written text. My purpose in talking to one mentor was to understand the mentor process and more of the culture of the larger Puente `familia', the term so frequently used for the local community of past and present students, staff and mentors.

In contrast to my purpose, the teacher made her purpose clear when the three students finished reading their drafts:

"All this stuff about your experience is not off the track; it <u>is</u> the track."

The following chart shows the similarities in overall structure among the final mentor papers for the class as a whole. Although 17 students had given me permission to xerox their writings, one portfolio was late so I ended with 16:

List of topics, without exception in this order, and number of students who include each topic:

a. orientation: 14

b. mentor-mentee breakfast (10/19/95): 16

c. meeting with mentor at breakfast: 8

d. events between c-e (mostly by tel.) 16

e. meeting with mentor 16
(11 at work; 4 at work and rest't or car; 1 rest't only)

f. reflections 14
(1 none; 1 page missing in xerox)

Note features of this sequential structure: 14 of the 16 students, not including Se, had an opening paragraph of pre-restaurant orientation about how they didn't understand the term `mentor', or how they felt in class when R handed them their mentor's name and picture. All described the mentor/mentee breakfast, even though only half the group met their mentors at that time. (Because of the excellent seating arrangements arranged by R at tables for 6, all students sat with somebody's mentor.) The events between the breakfast and the later individually-arranged meetings were mostly a series of successful or unsuccessful telephone calls. All of the students did have such meetings, almost all visiting their mentors' workplaces. 14 out of 16 ended, as Se did, with a final reflection on the whole mentor experience.

This sequential structure was consistent across the papers. Also consistent was the inclusion of details of personal experience, which I have exemplified only in Se's first paragraph

but which are in all the other papers as well. Included in most as both external experiences like the food at the breakfast or the looks of the mentor's office, and internal experiences, such as feelings of anxiousness when entering the restaurant and again on telephoning for an appointment or entering the mentor's workplace, and then of excitement, increased confidence and appreciation toward the end.

What accounts for these shared features? First, there is the shared series of events: preparation by the counselor in the classroom, breakfast, telephone calls, and meeting. Of course, the order of narration need not match the order of events being narrated. But no mention had been made in class of that possibility, and retaining event sequence in the telling is the easiest option. Second, writing exercises earlier in the semester had emphasized the value of sensory details: e.g. recording ten minutes of sights, sounds and feelings somewhere during one weekend. Third, the teacher's strong statement after the first draft readings--"All this stuff about your experience is not off the track; it <u>is</u> the track."--and her follow-up reminders on later days to be sure and include details about the mentor and his job, and about "your own impressions and feelings." Eventually, writers of personal experience essays learn to select details for their significance to a point (the looks of the mentor's workplace, perhaps, but not the breakfast food). But in the first semester of Puente's two-semester sequence, fluency and confidence in writing are more important goals.

The value of both these characteristics of the student texts--narrative structure and concrete details--are controversial in discussions of college composition goals and means. Encouraging students to write narratives, some arguments go, only delays their learning to write the expository forms required in other college courses. And attention to more micro concrete details, so other arguments go, detracts student attention from more macro social and critical analyses that are important for citizenship as well as for college requirements.

I am sympathetic to these arguments, and came to Puente with a strong interest in just how Puente teachers do teach expository forms. So I want to be clear that such forms are taught. During the second semester, this same Puente class has had many analytical assignments in response to readings. For example, after reading short selections by Native American Chief Seattle, Mexican American Hector Calderon, and E.M. Forster, students were asked to analyse either colonialism or environmental issues in at least two of these three authors. And the mentor paper assignment for this semester will be topically organized around conceptions of success: the student's, the mentor's, and a comparison of the two. A list of questions students should ask their mentors includes:

> How do you measure success, whether your own or someone else's
>
> Over the years, has your concept of success changed? If so, how and why?
>
> Do you see any attitudes or situations (such as various kinds of oppressive behavior) that have made achieving success especially difficult for you? How have you overcome them?

Moreover, Mary K. Healy's next workshop for Puente teachers, to be held over four days at the beginning of May, will focus on this expository writing goal.

What I have only slowly come to understand is that over the 14 years of designing, enacting, reflecting and redesigning Puente, a lot of thought has been given not just to the importance of writing in achieving overall program goals, but to specific relationships between program goals and text forms. In Puente, narratives of personal experience, one kind of text form, serve two functions. First, writing, reading aloud, sharing and discussing narratives about the past validate that past. Instead of being at best ignored, and at worst actively silenced in their earlier education, perhaps especially in English classes, here in this temporarily ethnically homogeneous safe space, the students' past experiences and continuing identity as Mexican Americans are validated, even celebrated. Second, narratives can look forward as well as back, envisioning a future and reconceiving one's own identity in the process. As one writer about life-span psychology puts it, personal narratives are

> The most internally consistent interpretation of presently understood past, experienced present, and anticipated future...[because they] parallel the approach actually used by persons in the successive interpretations or reconstructions of their own history as a personal narrative across the course of life (Cohler, 1982; quoted in Mishler, 1995).

As I understand Puente's goals and means, it engages students through all its carefully designed experiences in evolving reconstructions of their personal narratives that serve both to validate the positive power of their Mexican

Americanness, and make increasingly realistic a new future of college graduation and community leadership, all the while building the academic skills and habits of life necessary to make that future a reality. The first semester mentor paper in this one Puente class can be read as one integrated means of working toward these combined goals.

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Appendix

Puente, Spanish for `bridge', is a California community college program designed for Mexican American students, a group significantly under-represented in high education. Now in 32 community colleges across the state, it has been dramatically successful in raising the rate of transfer to four-year colleges and universities from 2% to over 40%..

The Puente program combines teaching, counseling, and mentoring. In the two-semester English (not ESL) course, the Puente teachers (of any ethnicity) create a textual bridge through literature, in the first semester emphasizing Mexican American authors. The Puente counselors (always Mexican Americans) participate actively in the English class and create a human bridge through themselves: emphasizing the importance of managing time for study; giving explicit guidance for how to use the college as a resource for learning and which courses count toward transfer; and often commenting on classroom topics from the experience they share with the students as Mexican Americans. They also build another human bridge by connecting each student with a community mentor of the same ethnicity and occupational interest who is a college graduate and community leader. In both semesters, writing is the core of the academic program.

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