National Writing Project's Multimodal Literacies and Teacher Collaboration: Enhanced Student Learning on Global Social Issues

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Abstract

Iyengar and Hood, both teacher consultants with the San Antonio Writing Project (SAWP), and instructors of an undergraduate society and social issues class, collaborated to enhance their undergraduate students' writing experiences using the National Writing Project model (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Iyengar and Hood used strategies such as reflective essay writing, web-based tools (Hyler & Hicks, 2014), debate groups, and a research paper. Traditionally, the course required students to read chapters and report on the topics of the course. By adapting the National Writing Project's teaching strategy of writing and multimodal writing workshop, we made the course student-led and thus more engaging. This project was conducted at a major Hispanic serving institution of higher education in the Southwest of the US during the spring semester of 2016 and involved 220 students from four different sections of the course. The course was designed for education majors; all of the three courses were taught using classroom instruction with supplemental online resources. The paper argues that writing workshop method and multimodal literacies along with teacher collaboration enabled heightened student learning of a variety of global issues. The researchers used pre and post-test surveys addressing students' responses to social justice issues. The post survey narrative responses indicated greater consciousness of the course concepts related to social issues.

Keywords: National Writing Project, multimodal literacies, teacher collaboration, social justice

Educators play a vital role in leading sustained efforts to improve learning in schools and communities. National Writing Project (NWP) leaders study and share effective practices that enhance youth writing and learning, work collaboratively with other educators, design resources, and take on new roles in effecting positive change (NWP).

An interdisciplinary studies course, Society and Social Issues, is an optional class offered campus wide for undergraduate students interested in pursuing careers in the humanities, especially education. Two instructors of the course are teacher consultants of the National Writing Project (NWP) site at the institution where they teach; both encourage their students to learn about global issues through different kinds of writing assignments. Through a diagnostic writing assignment, Iyengar and Hood learned that their students were not aware of a variety of social justice issues and their impact on the global community. For example, the topic of surrogacy was unknown to many students. They were alarmed to learn that the practice of hiring a womb existed not only in other parts of the world, but also in the United States.

We wanted to provide students with an opportunity to delve into these issues and share their thoughts with their peers. Thus the collaboration began. Both of us enjoyed the learning experience. We found that our teaching methods changed greatly because of our desire to use the writing project model to enable students to articulate their views in writing based on their own revelations. The examples of this project consisted of the different writing assignments and included essays, presentations, debates, and multimodal projects that students produced throughout the Spring semester after reading assigned material and sharing thoughts and in-class discussions.

Iyengar and Hood also realized that they were not always the more knowledgeable others because of student led efforts where the class was engaged in sharing and learning about each other, along with the sensitive issues discussed throughout the semester. The students were generators of anecdotes of family history and personal experiences that grounded and extended everyone's understanding of global social issues. We both implemented strategies from the National Writing Project to make our classes collaborative and productive.

NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT (NWP)

The National Writing Project (NWP), a network of university-based sites that has offered professional development to teachers of writing across the curriculum since 1974, is a federally funded organization with more than 200 sites all over the United States. James Gray and colleagues in Berkley California developed the NWP to take advantage of the knowledge of practicing teachers. According to Lieberman and Wood (2003), the NWP sought to (a) provide opportunities for teachers to teach and support one another, (b) learn and conduct research, and (c) write and share in response groups.

Furthermore, a core value of NWP states that

The National Writing Project believes that access to high-quality educational experiences is a basic right of all learners and a cornerstone of equity. We work in partnership with institutions, organizations, and communities to develop and sustain leadership for educational improvement. Throughout our work, we value and seek diversity—our own as well as that of our students and their

communities—and recognize that practice is strengthened when we incorporate multiple ways of knowing that are informed by culture and experience (NWP, para. 5).

The San Antonio Writing Project (SAWP) is one of the 200-plus site networks of the National Writing Project; it is anchored in the department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Every summer, SAWP invites about fifteen teachers across the curriculum to engage in professional development activities focusing on the teaching of writing. SAWP is built on practicing teachers sharing their knowledge with other teachers in a community of practice. The SAWP Invitational Summer Institute provides teachers with an opportunity to engage in professional development activities and to be with a cadre of writers who have also experienced the human condition. Teacher consultants who teach take their experiences with writing and technology integration to their classes. The researchers of this article implemented one of the writing project models – the writing workshop through collaboration.

THE WRITING WORKSHOP MODEL

Atwell (1987), Graves (1990), Calkins (1986), and Murray (1968) recommend the writer's workshop model as an effective way to teach writing. The writer's workshop also follows Calkins's (1986) writing process workshop. According to Calkins (1986)

"Writing Process Workshop is an instructional model that views writing as an ongoing process in which students follow a given set of procedures for planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their writing" (p.1). Students are at different stages of writing and the traditional classroom instruction involving all of the students at once may be detrimental to their progress. Atwell built on Calkins' model and posited that students needed ownership and blocks of time to become successful and confident writers. Atwell later invented the mini-lesson concept to help student writers. Taylor (2000) finds Atwell's writer's workshop model effective because, "By focusing on balancing the tensions in the workshop rather than focusing on rigid rules, Atwell offers a new kind of flexibility" (p. 50).

The core of writer's workshop is to teach using mini-lessons conferencing with students. Attending to writing conventions is considered at the end of the workshop. Most importantly, giving freedom to students to choose their own topics so they can find their own voice in their writing is emphasized in the workshop (Taylor, 2000 & Graves, 1990). Graves (1990) further invites teachers to examine their own literacy practices before teaching students. He emphasizes that reading, listening, and writing with students is fundamental to becoming a successful writing teacher. Graves acknowledges Atwell and explains how teacher's literacy practices impact their students' literacy skills.

Writer's workshop is based on five components that facilitate successful and confident writing strategies. According to Peha (2010), the five different steps used in a writer's workshop are: mini-lesson, status of the class, writing time, conferencing, and sharing. A *mini-lesson* is designed to help students deal with topics that are problematic and are put forward by the students. The mini-lesson

is taught in the situation of realistic writing contexts. The most important criterion of a workable mini-lesson is for the teacher to model the lesson being taught. A method we used was Neito's (2015) vignettes by teachers, which provided a framework for narrative writing.

Second, the *status of the class* determines the students' activities for that particular day. Some of the ways to assess the status of the class are when students (a) vocalize to the teacher what they are working on *out loud*, (b) point out where they are in the writing process *visually*, and (c) write down what they are working on that is *recorded on paper* (Peha, 2009). These steps work well if they are conducted regularly and are shared in an open class, and, most importantly, when students choose their own topics and methods of writing.

Third, the heart of the writer's workshop is the *writing time*. During the writing time, students write uninterrupted while the teacher may consider the following: modeling, conferences, small group mini-lessons, and catching up with classroom management. The teachers model writing by working on topics they want to share with their students. Letting students see what the teacher has written may be significant for students because such an activity allows students to relate to any problem areas they may be struggling with themselves. Conferencing is allowing individual students to voice their own problem areas; the teacher deals with those issues where the student is comfortable. Small group mini-lessons can be done with a selected group while the rest of the class is writing. Catching up is taking time to take care of unfinished business in the classroom. *Writing time* is best done when students have a thorough understanding of the classroom practices, and students writing regularly, consistently, and for a prolonged period of time. The teacher also writes alongside the students whenever possible.

Fourth, *conferencing* is usually conducted when the students are writing in class. Conferences help individual students with particular problems they may have. This strategy works well if done on a regular basis (Elbow, 2012). The two steps involved in successful conferencing are management and execution. Management is letting students know the teacher's availability, along with making sure the instructional items are readily available before conferencing. This step is successful if students understand the procedure, the teacher is focused on the topic in discussion, and it is less than five minutes in length. It is also important to ascertain whether the students are applying the topics that were addressed in conferences. Application can be verified by evaluating students' work.

Finally, *sharing* plays an important role in the writer's workshop because the students have an opportunity to seek opinions from their peers (Atwell, 2015). Sharing can be implemented in three different ways: in whole class, in a small group, and with a partner. Whole class sharing is valuable for establishing a community of writers. It may take longer with just a few students sharing at a time. Small group sharing can be chaotic given that several share simultaneously. The teacher has to take turns between the groups. Sharing with partners may not be wasteful in the sense that the students will have the attention of other students, but the responses may not be helpful because it is only one student's feedback. However, sharing can be effective if it is intentional with a part of the longer write-ups shared, and the students are listeners, readers, and writers. In addition, students must offer positive comments, and students must seek information without being critical of other

shared pieces. These learning methods may facilitate culturally proactive teaching (Garcia & O'Donnell-Allen, 2016). One of the tenets of Culturally Proactive Teaching is fostering, "framing your teaching around a commitment to praxis and questioning existing inequities in schooling and society" (p. 18).

IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT MODEL

INITIAL COLLABORATION

Iyengar and Hood collaborated to create the first student experiences with global social issues such as colonialism, surrogacy, electronic waste, and commodification of women's bodies. We met each week for an hour during the 2016 spring semester to design the curriculum, which would include videos, talks, movies, web pages, and radio interviews. Hyler and Hicks (2014) advocate for a curriculum that uses technology to create enhanced student engagement and a fostering of better citizens. Along with the practical application of Hyler and Hicks, Gee (2013) also strongly influenced the principles of learning that we practiced and modeled for students. For example, we realized design principles were critical in development of multimodal instruction, and the way students interacted, both in person and online, needed to model the multitude of learning principles brought forth in gaming design (Gee, 2013). Multimodal literacies use a variety of means to communicate an understanding of the importance of technology integration and web-based tools and how these literacies impact and interact with the social world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

 By using an inductive approach, where we discussed sociological and psychological constructs through a variety of materials, we introduced the students to various theories and course content before we asked them to discuss (small and large group), write, and reflect on the complex issues. As an example, before discussing colonialism, we showed the following videos to the classes and asked students to discuss what they had inferred, both in small groups and as a class. After the discussion, they wrote their first of many reflective essays on a variety of hegemonic movements across the globe. We used a video and a lecture to provide students with a variety. The videos used were,

- Babakueria (video enactment of reversal of power structures of Australians) (Featherstone, 1986).

- Shashi Tharoor Oxford lecture (asking the British for retribution for atrocities in India during the colonial period) (Tharoor, 2015).

Next, we decided to collaborate again to engage undergraduate students in producing quality essays where the students would reflect, critique, and summarize global issues. We brought in our writing project experiences with teaching writing to implement a writing workshop model to help students produce a variety of literacy products (i.e. videos, essays, web-based products, presentations, and debates). We drew from the NWP's use of professional community, and we also

tried to invent that same sense of community of practice with our students (Lieberman & Wood, 2013).

We tried to implement the writer's workshop model in our discussion, and we later encouraged students to write reflective essays based on the course constructs. It was dynamic. A few concepts that the students enjoyed learning about were (a) Islamophobia (*My name is Khan*) (Johar & Khan, 2010), (b) Colorism (*A Class Divided*) (Peters, 1985), (c) Surrogacy (Ted Talk) **(**Krishnan, 2009), (d) Commodification of women's bodies (advertisements from across the world), and (e) Maquiladoras and sweat shops (Nike monopoly and Mexican farm workers).

With every writing assignment, students had the autonomy to write on any topic of their choice. We provided topics as reference points, but we were not prescriptive with any assignment. The following table is an illustration of the schedule for writer's workshop activity (See Table 1).

Table 1
Writing Workshop Topic and Supplemental Material

Course Concept	Supplemental Material	Essay Topic Prompts
1. Islamophobia	*My Name is Khan*	Do you think we can afford to hate people and create a polarized society? Explain.
2. Colorism	*Blue Eyes and Brown Eyes*	What are the psychological impacts of colorism?
3. Surrogacy	Ted Talk by Sunitha Krishnan	Is surrogacy ethical? Describe with examples.
4. Commodification of Women's Bodies	Advertisements from around the world	What do you think we as citizens, parents, friends, and human beings do to confront this issue that denigrates and defaces young women?
5. Electronic Waste	*Story of Stuff* Documentary	What do you do with the cellular phone chargers, batteries, and other electronic waste? Do you know what happens to them if discarded improperly?

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION (WEB-BASED TOOLS)

The twenty-first century requires that people understand not only how to consume a variety of literacies, but also how to produce and critique those same types of literacies. Luke (2008) describes basic elements of literacies:

- A blending of print and digital literacies

- Design as a unifying principle across technologies

- A pedagogy pattern on teacher-learner interaction

- Focus on youth and technological cultures

There are disadvantages of allowing only one mode of literacy in a class that is asking students to engage in complex thought. Hull (2005) claims that if students are allowed to work with technology that is relevant in their lives, they may be successful in creating a voice and developing understandings that were unexplored previously. A variety of modes enable students to communicate a multitude of understandings from lessons that would not be available if they were only to write essays and take quizzes or exams (Gardner, 2008). Web-based tools enable students to interact with the material in more meaningful ways (Hyler & Hicks, 2014). By this we mean that students can incorporate video links, images, web sites, along with texts and other print media that is typically used in most written responses.

The following figure is an illustration of student use of variety of modes using web-based tools to share knowledge of discrimination in schools (racism, colorism, 'othering'). This example incorporates student reflection, links to videos and webpages, and images to illustrate a deep understanding of the course material (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Interactive collage (Benjo & Scotta, 2008)

Students have a wide variety of skill levels with digital literacies. The National Writing Project and the Writing Workshop model helped scaffold and create valuable experiences for students who varied from being digital experts to novices and non-digital users. This supports Mills (2010) framework for incorporating multiliteracies, where students can utilize technology tools to write and collaborate.

ESSAY WRITING

The National Writing Project incorporates the use of reflective writing on a daily basis during its summer invitational institutes. This idea of reflection allows the writer to share personal responses to new experiences and materials. The reflection is a way for writers to revisit, analyze, think, learn, and share issues they are attempting to deconstruct (Mezirow, 1990; Schon, 1987; Brookefield, 1987). Furthermore, "…teachers read, discuss, and analyze research, reforms, and other literature" (Lieberman & Wood, 2003, p. 26). The core of reflective writing came from our weekly routine, which consisted of

    a.   Reading and watching new material

    b.   Small group discussion of issues

    c.   Whole class presentation of the same issues

    d.   Reflective writing based on the discussion and material

READING OR WATCHING NEW MATERIAL

The class watched part of the movie *My Name is Khan.* The film is about an autistic young man from Pakistan who immigrates to the U.S. before September 11, 2001 and succumbs to discrimination, vengeance, and ostracism because of his religious background. One student, after viewing and discussing the movie with classmates in class, wrote

People look at my boyfriend, who is Muslim, and all they see is "terrorist." They do not see him for the kind hearted, selfless, loving, and harmless person that he is. They see him walk in airport and they all stare, and give him dirty looks assuming that he is there to hurt them. These assumptions are all wrong and are only a couple of examples of discrimination that me and my loved ones face day to day.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Each week the class watched videos, listened to audio files, and read text book chapters on global social issues. At the conclusion of the video or audio, the class would break into small groups and share their thoughts and findings before convening as a whole group to discuss and incorporate their findings with other groups' ideas. We provided students with model questions to stimulate conversation. However, students were free to generate their own questions for discussion. The following is an example of group discussion questions based on a chapter from the prescribed textbook (see Table 2).
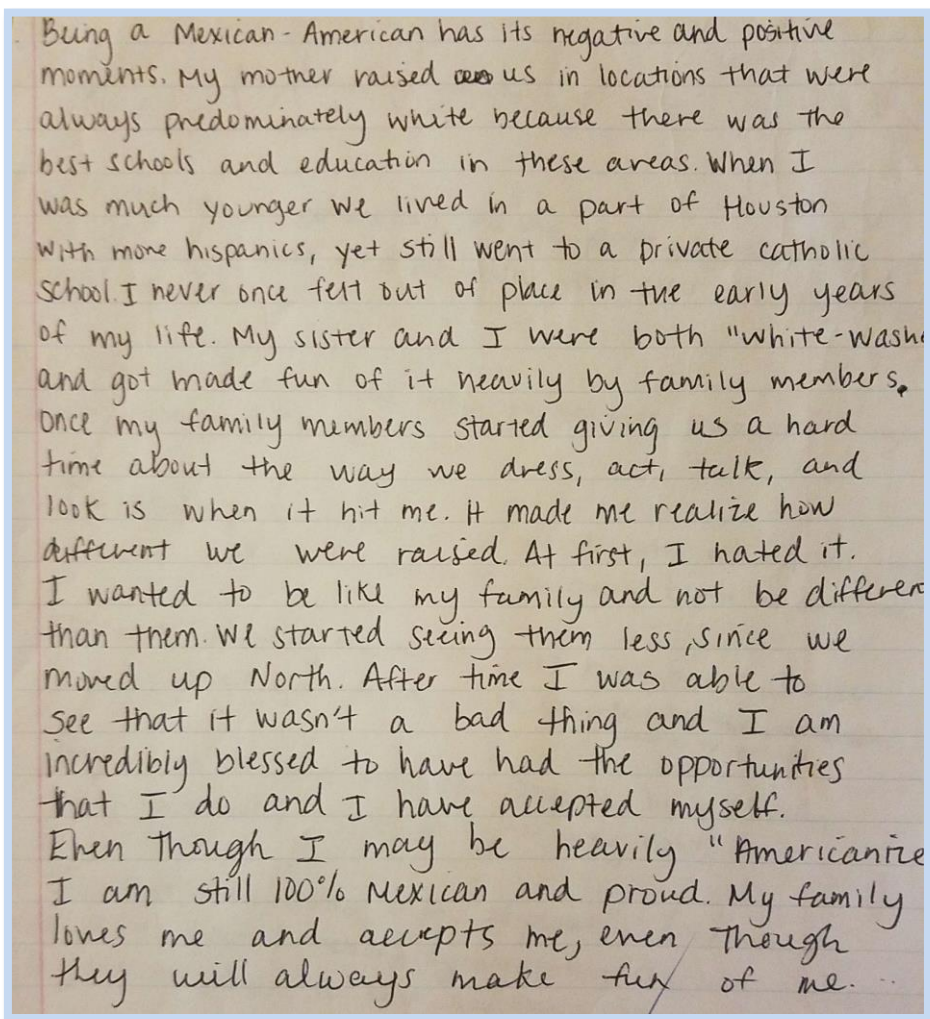
Table 2
Questions

Questions for Group Discussion

1. How do supremacists interpret differences?

2. What are the different forms of oppression and exploitation that Memmi discusses in the chapter, "Assigning Value to Difference"?

3. Define racism with examples from the chapter by Memmi and from your own lives

4. What are the differences between the accuser and his victim? Explain.

5. Describe the section on "placing a value on the difference" on page 175.

6. How is the difference generalized and how is the difference final according to Memmi?

7. Explain the two phenomena (the scapegoat, and the foreigner corrupting the national soul)" from your reading of the text.

8. How is injustice justified? Give an example from your life or movie you watched or a book you have read.

9. Final comments from the groups.

EXCERPT FROM STUDENT DISCUSSION. Answering Question 3 (see Table 2) in groups, students reflected in the following ways. Figure 2 is an example of a personalized reaction to Memmi's chapter on "assigning value to difference" (Memmi, 2015).

> Being a Mexican-American has its negative and positive moments. My mother raised us in locations that were always predominately white because there was the best schools and education in these areas. When I was much younger we lived in a part of Houston with more hispanics, yet still went to a private catholic school. I never once felt out of place in the early years of my life. My sister and I were both "white-wash and got made fun of it heavily by family members. Once my family members started giving us a hard time about the way we dress, act, talk, and look is when it hit me. It made me realize how different we were raised. At first, I hated it. I wanted to be like my family and not be differen than them. We started seeing them less, since we moved up North. After time I was able to see that it wasn't a bad thing and I am incredibly blessed to have had the opportunities that I do and I have accepted myself. Even though I may be heavily "Americanize I am still 100% Mexican and proud. My family loves me and accepts me, even though they will always make fun of me...

Figure 2. Student response.

After this student personalized the definition of "assigning value," many students shared their own narratives of how they had experienced "othering"/ "outsider," and "commodified." Such discussion enabled students to share their own stories of frustration, discrimination and other instances of injustice in society.

Reflective Essay

The following section is a sample reflective essay from one of the students in the interdisciplinary studies course, who clearly articulated his/her lack of awareness about the noxious effects of electronic waste issue, especially in western countries. The students read a chapter from the prescribed textbook, watched a documentary titled, "The Story of Stuff " by Anne Lenard, engaged in small group discussion, and later on shared their findings with the entire class. Next, they wrote a reflective essay incorporating their new discoveries. The reflective essay writing was one of the key pieces to students developing a critical consciousness and a heightened learning experience.

After reading the section about global trade of electronic waste I was shocked. This is a business that I had no idea in which existed or even affected the human population in places where it is sent to. In complete, electronic waste is an informal name for electronic products nearing the end of their usefulness. Computers, TV's, and cell phones are the common electronic products that are sold through this electronic waste business. Many of these products can be reused, refurbished, or recycled. When it is recycled though, it could be rather pricy.

To start the chapter off, the author begins by saying that people who live in poverty offer the back sides of their homes to let the E-Waste users use them and receive some kind of payment in return (Kroll 2009, p. 247). As I continue to move forward in the reading, I come to find out that most equipment involved in electronic waste is coming from the United States and exported to China (Grossman 2006, p. 248). The reason I find out why the United States sends this waste over to China upsets me but also makes sense with everything else the United States is accustomed to doing.

This waste gets sent off to China so laborers can work inexpensively and makes it convenient for the Unites States to save money when it comes to this business (Grossman 2006, p. 248). China also does not have very pretty rural areas, so this waste goes there. Further on in the section, Grossman explains that low-wage countries are the ones who are exploited to all of this electronic waste to be dumped in (Grossman 2006, p. 250). It is convenient to put what the United States does not want into another location without them truly being able to do something about it. Continuing, Grossman starts talking about the locations of countries who are ready to receive these scrap and reuse electronics. These countries include places such as China, Eastern Europe, and Africa (Grossman 2006, p. 251).

From common knowledge, one knows that these countries are not the poorest but are definitely not the countries way up in the high end, again exploitation comes to play in the sense that it is easier for the United States to send their scraps to these locations. Positively though, some of the united states electronic waste is used for good and donated to schools for their students. This usually happens in non-profit for the benefit of the schools. Whatever is then left extra is donated to the "General Services Administration" (Grossman 2006, p. 252). With all of this going on regarding electronic waste though has still not been regulated by congress. No legislation in regards to this exporting trade has still not been introduced. "There is a desperate need for order and without there being some sort of legislation on this trade, manufacturers and consumers will continue to stay confused" (Grossman 2006, p. 254).

I am not sure what will happen in the future in regards to this electronic waste situation but I hope to see it better and have some sort of organization as well as better environment in which the waste is going to.

Kroll, G. 2009. *Global Trade of Electronic Waste. In World in Motion: The Environmental Reader*

Grossman, E. 2006. *Where Computers go to Die – and Kill*

DISCUSSION

As instructors invested in an interdisciplinary approach to teaching, Dr. Iyengar and Mr. Hood collaborated to research and write manuscripts and engage in professional development. In order to provide students with innovative approaches to literacy and learning course materials, they introduced students to the National Writing Project's large umbrella of writing workshop methods and ways to incorporate all literacies, not just linguistic intelligence. Both of us attributed our commitment to embracing all people and their variety of knowledges to our experiences within the National Writing Project, San Antonio Writing Project, Sam Houston Writing Project, English Language Teaching Community (Bengaluru, India), and the many professional development activities we have attended and led over the years during our teaching careers.

Our beliefs about literacy's ability to transform the world were practiced, modified, and ultimately justified through the experiences students had, as they become future teacher leaders of diverse student populations and global participants. Along with literacies, teacher collaboration was pivotal to self-improvement, student engagement, and modeling of real life learning situations.

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