

Title:

A Confluence of Voices Negotiating Identity: An East Coast-West Coast Exchange of Ideas on Writing, Culture, and Self

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“Identity is dynamic, and it is something that is presented and re-presented, constructed and reconstructed in interaction (including written communication)” (Rubin 9).

Introduction

This study involved a bicoastal project between four composition classes, two in California and two in Pennsylvania. The focus was on how students read, write, and converse about ethnic and spiritual distinctiveness and the role of writing in identity development. Because of geographical logistics, all negotiation of ideas took place through written communication (readings, papers, email, blog postings), which enabled us to study how the act of sharing one’s writing can be used as a tool to further examine the writer’s identity.

We set out to:

- (1) embrace the idea of intellectual, spiritual, and academic sharing as a community of learners;
- (2) provide exposure to other ideas/multicultural experiences from across the country;
- (3) encourage more time investment in writing since unknown peers read ideas, not just the teacher;
- (4) present students with opportunities (online and in class) to give and receive honest non-evaluative feedback for reading responses and writing assignments.

The concept of multiculturalism is as diverse as the people who attempt to define it. For the sake of this study, when we refer to multiculturalism, we draw upon Martinez Aleman’s description of “Deweyan multiculturalism,” which uses the pragmatic work of John Dewey as a theoretical guide. Deweyan multiculturalism is:

...a framework in which difference is the means of thinking, a means that provides opportunities for the effective communication of difference, a means that stimulates the intellectual growth necessary for community. In "Deweyan multiculturalism" difference and sameness alter each other, serving to promote the growth of community. Individuals are not isolated, nor are their interactions restricted as a consequence of a broader and more inclusive communicative environment. In Deweyan multiculturalism, because individuals are understood as contextual and historic, meaning is communicated as a result of "mindfulness reflective of experience. (Martinez Aleman and Salkever par. 18)

Drawing on the work of literacy researchers such as Sunstein and Chiseri-Strator who urged educators to encourage students to “act on ideas of diversity and multiculturalism rather than just read about those ideas,” (vii) we exercised a variety of methods (diverse readings, classroom/online discussions, and writing projects) to help our students see how their multiple cultures are enacted, shaped, and strengthened in their own lives. This

knowledge was used as a tool to strengthen students' literacy skills and to attempt in creating cultural awareness and connection beyond the English classroom.

“[It] is through communications and interactions with others in [situated] environments that learners negotiate and co-construct their views of themselves and the world” (Hawkins 61).

To examine the relationship between reading, writing, and identity formation, the presenters draw from McAdams' life story model of identity. He argues that identity itself takes the form of a story, with a setting, scene, character, plot, and theme, which take the form of 'life stories' (101). Through the telling of stories, one's identity can emerge or become evident to oneself as well as to the listener. Moreover, "a person's evolving and dynamic life story is a key component of what constitutes the individuality of that particular person [...]" (101). It then becomes clear that examining the context of our lives yields greater insight into the role that literacy and culture play in establishing identity.

The Self is actually a transactional relationship between a speaker and an Other, formed through the telling of stories, through dialogue: “Is it not a way of framing one's consciousness, one's position, one's identity, one's commitment with respect to another? Self. . .becomes 'dialogue dependent,' designed as much for the recipient of our discourse as for intrapsychic purpose” (Bruner 101).

We also find it interesting to note how one's identity is shaped by the act of "speaking" it into existence. By asking students to share stories about themselves, they examine and reestablish their identities, based on what they share and how they wish to shape themselves in their writing.

Research Questions

RQ1: Can reading, writing, and conversing about ethnic and spiritual distinctiveness enhance multicultural understanding and interest among our composition class students?

RQ2: Can reading, writing, and conversing about ethnic and spiritual distinctiveness help in student identity development?

RQ3: How does the act of writing enhance one's identity development?

Data Collection Tools:

- Questionnaires (open and closed questions)
- Shared multicultural readings by published authors (*Many Voices: A Multicultural Reader*)
- Web discussions
- Peer feedback paper assignments (literacy autobiographies and culture-related research papers)

Technology Integration:

The chief premise behind our use of technology is the belief that technology can be used as a tool to facilitate discussion about culture and identity. "The medium is the message" is a central maxim to McLuhan's (1964) theory of communication. The statement refers to the use of technology as an extension of self, an extension of the human capacity to communicate. A lot has changed since McLuhan's statement. The use of communication technology has reached unforeseeable heights. According to an October 2006 report by The Radicati Group, a market research firm, approximately 183 billion emails were sent each day in 2006. MySpace is the largest online social networking portal on the web with approximately 50 million visitors per month (MarketWatch, 2006). Statistics indicate that web-related technology is used pervasively by the current generation of college students to communicate with one another. Tapping into the trend, this investigation combines traditional pedagogical strategies (readings and paper assignments) with electronic pedagogical strategies (email and blogs) to increase opportunities for significant discourse and interaction about culture and identity.

Analysis & Coding Procedures:

The primary goal of this process was to locate valid and useful information. Using a triangulation of written questionnaires, asynchronous online discussions, and evaluative peer feedback on papers, qualitative data was analyzed using a four step process:

1. reading and rereading collected data;
2. drawing connections and distinctions among data;
3. identifying and interpreting emergent themes;
4. evaluating validity of findings in relation to integrity of the data collection tool (asked multiple questions similarly to establish consistency; sample was representative of the population)

Step I: the reading and rereading stage, important ideas and key words, phrases, and sentences were highlighted within the raw data.

Step II: drew connections and distinctions, the data from step one was coded into categories to assist in establishing connections and distinctions between and among the responses.

Step III: identified and interpreted emergent themes. The themes that “emerged” from the raw data necessitated the creation of a chart.

Step IV: we stepped back from the data, physically and chronemically (took time away from data), to reassess the findings and recapture a broad perspective. By creating brief “distance,” we could look at the findings and the data instrument with “fresh eyes” and more accurately assess contextual variables that may have influenced the research.

Findings

Web Discussions Chart

In what way(s) does reading literature such as that in this class enhance multicultural understanding or openness?	What do you perceive as the benefits to reading and writing about multicultural issues?	What do you perceive as the drawbacks to reading and writing about multicultural issues?
“the more we read these types of literature the more we attain knowledge of different multicultural situations”	“learning and gaining knowledge about multicultural issues is its own benefit”	“You can read biased accounts and think that they are right.”
“people are afraid to attack the issues of race and disturbing actions. In this class, we attack these issues head on.”	“the more I get to know about multicultural issues the more I gain insight in other cultures and I appreciate my own culture”	“The drawbacks of reading these issues in a class setting, is that there may be people that have no interest or desire to open up and learn about these things, so as a result they may find it boring and tune it out, or lose interest in the material or course.”
“knowledge we obtain from multicultural literature forces [people] to open up the mind to different situations”	“Some people are just so sheltered that they don't get to experience anything past their own front yard.”	“As judgmental people in our society we may become racist and form issues on a culture that we may have no idea what it is actually like because we have never experienced it first hand.”

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Some of your course assignments required you to reflect on your identity. In what way(s) has your writing and research within these assignments influenced your perception of your identity?

“Identity is very powerful and by searching for your own identity you can find more meaning in your life.”

“it has helped me better understand my heritage and culture”

Reflective Response for Peer Writing

Do you see any value in exchanging essays such as these? Please explain.	
Benefits/Value Found:	Objections to the process:
Experience different, wider variety of cultures and religious views and ideas from “the world outside Adventism” to help open minds on both sides.	I don’t like reading research papers and want to focus only on interesting cultural narratives.
Able to learn about another by using written word and other people’s writing styles.	It seemed like a lot of effort for the teachers.
Fewer reservations about being honest in feedback to strangers or people they’ll never meet. No retribution to be truthful.	Reminded me of pen-pals in elementary school—we only did it for a month and then stopped because we both got busy or forgot about each other. I wanted it to last longer than just a few weeks and establish a more meaningful dialogue one-on-one with the students across the country.
Opportunity to see if writing is understood outside own social/academic/religious circle.	
Able to see that others share same struggles and to read something on their level of understanding or interest (not just famous authors’ works) “For once, we actually get to read something that is written on our level without having to feel the need of a deeper understanding of symbolism or elements of fiction.	
Nice change from usual routine—added some anticipation and suspense to process of writing (i.e. waiting for responses from others).	
Writing process felt more real because the audience was more than the teacher. Put forth a little more effort (in some cases).	

Conclusions

As the results indicate, the process of discussing, reading, and writing about multicultural issues can (eliminate students’ ideas or reduce students’ perceptions) that the academic writing process is meaningless, distant and remote. By changing how literacy is viewed and taught, students are better equipped to personally understand the role of culture and literacy in their lives and the world. Engaging in such activities can broaden students’ and teachers’ worlds beyond their own sometimes isolated campuses (especially with parochial schools!). Students can realize that it is possible for learning to take place in spaces and places other than when on their own campus and with the people they see on a daily basis.

For educators, addressing ethnic multiplicity, spiritual diversity, and identity development can be risky. Ignorance and stereotypes still exist, and some discussions and assignments have the potential to get heated and thorny. This does not mean that educators should shy away from these issues because discourse allows for “ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values,

beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes, [...] [creating] opportunities for people to be and recognize certain kinds of people” (Gee 127-128).

We found that through investigations such as this one, writing courses can be a dynamic tool for exploring community, and ethnicity, so that teachers can create within students a unique and sustained interest in culture and classroom learning, which students can use to explore and to empower their own and others’ cultural identity and traditions. This deeper understanding enlivens literacy for them and creates “emergent moments.” These emergent moments are “point[s] at which the personal, the critical, and the rhetorical intersect in a text, a point at which the student can hold multiple perspectives simultaneously and reflexively” (Harris 403).

Teachers are not excluded from contributing to and examining their identity, culture and literacy in this process. Teachers can benefit from multicultural readings and discussions by evaluating their own cultural experiences to gain added insight into their own identities and motivations. These insights may help educators develop new and interesting teaching strategies and projects to make classrooms more diverse and inclusive for students.

Limitations

No long-term follow up.

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Appendix

Participants:

Forty five students from the West Coast and thirty three students from East Coast participated in this project. All students were enrolled in freshman composition classes in the fall of 2006, although not all students were freshman.

Demographics

West Coast:

Year in School (Fall)	Age:	Gender	Religious Affiliation
First Year: 3	18-25 years old: 42	Female: 22	Roman Catholic: 5
Second Year: 18	26-35 years old: 3	Male: 23	Seventh-day Adventist: 34
Third year: 20			Jewish: 1
Fourth year: 3			Protestant/Christian: 2
Fifth year: 1			Lutheran: 1
			Other: 2 (1 none; 1 undecided)

East Coast:

Year in School	Age:	Gender	Religious Affiliation
First Year: 27	18-25 years old: 31	Female: 18	Roman Catholic: 17
Second Year: 6	26-35 years old: 2	Male: 15	Seventh-day Adventist: 0
Third year: 1			Jewish: 1
Fourth year: 0			Protestant/Christian: 8
Fifth year: 0			Lutheran: 5
			Other: 2 (undecided)

We did not provide ethnicity categories for students to group. Instead, we allowed them to identify their own ethnicities. Students identified their ethnicities in the following ways:

WEST COAST ETHNICITY

24 Asians	6 Hispanics	2 Indians	2 Blacks	9 Caucasians
1 Hmong 1 Vietnamese 1 Caucasian/Filipino 1 Chinese 10 Filipino 10 Korean	4 Hispanic 1 Hispanic/Haitian 1 Hispanic/Caucasian	1 Indian 1 Indian/Irish	1 African-American 1 Kenyan	

EAST COAST ETHNICITY

1 Asians	8 Hispanics	1 Indians	5 Black	18 Caucasian
1 Chinese	6 Hispanic 1 Hispanic/Black 1 Hispanic/Irish	1 Indian/Irish	2 African-American 2 Kenyan 1 African-American/Asian	