

AMPLIFYING STUDENT VOICE: CULTURALLY RELEVANT WRITING PEDAGOGY IN AN ENGLISH I CLASSROOM

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Abstract: Schools are becoming increasingly diverse, and teachers must recognize the social, cultural, and personal experiences that students bring to the classroom and must leverage this knowledge to develop curriculum and instructional strategies to meet the needs of a growing, diverse student population. The author uses Winn and Johnson's (2011) framework to plan and facilitate culturally relevant poetry instruction with a focus on building students' poetry writing capacity. The findings reveal that culturally relevant poetry writing has the potential to amplify students' voices, increase their writing self-efficacy, and support them in exploring their cultural backgrounds and the backgrounds of others.

Keywords: writing instruction, culturally relevant writing pedagogy, poetry pedagogy, diverse student populations

"The poetry writing instruction opened my eyes up to my family's history. I was able to look back on my family's past experiences and traditions making up an original poetry product. I asked questions that go deep into their life such as coming to a new country and their religious viewpoints. The [writing] instruction allowed me to reflect on what my family is made up [of], not scientifically, but instead our identities." —Jorge, Student¹

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) maintains that despite research on writing instruction, there are still misunderstandings about writing and its purpose in schools (Calhoun-Dillahunt et al., 2022). As a result, NCTE and constituent groups developed recommendations for writing

¹All student names have been de-identified in accordance with the exemption determined by the Texas A&M University Division of Research.

instruction for both administrators and policymakers. One of the resounding themes of the statements is that writing in schools should promote student voice as well as use their own language to express their family and community identity. Furthermore, scholars (Cox et al., 2009; Graham, 2008; Winn & Johnson, 2011) have used the terms *meaningful*, *real-world*, and *culturally relevant writing pedagogy* to characterize effective approaches to writing instruction. Culturally relevant writing pedagogy is an instructional approach for amplifying the voices of students to take on issues that reflect their own social, cultural, and personal experiences.

The Assignment

A three-week writing unit was assigned to 63 students enrolled in an English I course. The demographics of the students included 60.4% African American, 25% Hispanic, 6.5% White, 4.3% two or more races, and 3.2% Asian. The culturally relevant poetry assignment was selected because writing poetry gives students the opportunity to express themselves artistically and creatively (Wiseman, 2010), and the reading and writing of poetry is often neglected in the English classroom (Taylor, 2020). The assignment components focused on students completing a reading and writing interest form, responding to a questionnaire, annotating a poem, engaging in literary analysis of their selected text using a modified TPCASTT (Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude, Shift, Title again, and Theme; College Entrance Examination Board, 2002), and creating an original poem that was relevant to their lives and experiences.

Steps of Culturally Relevant Writing Pedagogy

Winn and Johnson (2011) maintain that there are four primary steps in employing culturally relevant writing pedagogy. These steps include creating a playlist, managing content, syncing, and sharing your music. Winn and Johnson's framework was used to plan and facilitate culturally relevant poetry instruction with the hope of giving credence to the importance of using culturally relevant approaches to writing instruction to amplify students' voices in the English classroom.



Create a Playlist

The first step in delivering culturally relevant writing pedagogy is to “create a playlist.” Winn and Johnson (2011) used a musical playlist as a metaphor to illustrate the process for planning and facilitating writing in a culturally relevant manner. This process involves considering “the subject matter, curriculum, and genre” (p. 45). In other words, the playlist is the curriculum tool used to plan instruction. Developing the poetry lesson involved identifying the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) students were expected to master.

For each standard, an “Unpacking the TEKS” graphic organizer was completed to support in creating objectives for the lesson. The following components were analyzed for each standard: knowledge/skill, standard content vocabulary, verbs, subject matter, and genre. According to Laidlaw-Alamguer (2012), deconstructing a standard to develop mastery objectives is an essential part of lesson planning and engaging in this process ensures that lesson objectives are aligned to the cognitive level of the learning standard.

Additionally, creating a playlist involved collecting data through a reading/writing interest form used to capture students’ reading/writing preferences and the activities students engaged in after school. Assessing students’ interests at the beginning of the lesson helped students to share their experiences, resources, and ideas related to their lives, and this data was used to select poetry that was relevant to the cultures represented in the classroom. After identifying the TEKS and surveying students for their reading/writing preferences, the subject matter and content to be taught could be identified.

Managing the Content

Once the playlist is created, the second step is to “manage the content” or “provide students literature, media, and examples that can inform their writing” (Winn & Johnson, 2011, p. 45). At the beginning of the writing lesson, students completed a questionnaire as a homework assignment. They were given the option to complete it independently or to interview a member of their immediate family (e.g., mother or father) or extended family (e.g., grandfather, grandmother, uncle, or aunt) who is familiar with their cultural background. The purpose of the questionnaire is for students to collect cultural background information about their family to use in creating their poems.

Next, the data from the reading/writing interest form was used to select culturally relevant poetry. As reported by Au (2001), integrating literature that connects with students’ lives “may help them gain insight about themselves and their families and discover the value of their own experiences” (p. 7). Other researchers (Au & Gourd, 2013; Gorecki, 2014; Johnson & Eubanks, 2015; Newman & Fink, 2012) suggest that integrating literature about students’ lives, experiences, and perspectives can be used as a bridge to build student writing capacity around issues and topics important to them. It was imperative to select texts that represented students’ cultural backgrounds and diverse cultures because the texts served as writing models as students created their own poetry (Murphy & Murphy, 2016). One student, Jonathan, agreed with the benefit of using culturally relevant literature. He asserted, “By witnessing the ways in which varying authors of varying backgrounds who hold varying beliefs lay out their thoughts with words and illustrate the symbolism of poetic work, we expand our knowledge of what poetry should look like.” Here, Jonathan recognizes the importance of reading mentor poems and understands that these texts provide an example of how poetry should look and feel. Table 1 shows the author, title of the text, and the year of publication for each poem option provided for students.

| Author | Title of Text |
|--|---|
| Gabriel El-Registan and Sergey Mikhalkov | “The Hymn of the Soviet Union” (1938) |
| Joy Harjo | “Remember” (1983) |
| Pat Mora | “Immigrants” (1984) |
| George Lyon | “Where I’m From” (1993) |
| Naomi Shihab Nye | “Different Ways to Pray” (1995) |
| Gwendolyn Brooks | “Kojo-I AM BLACK” (2005) |
| Jose Rizal | “Our Mother Tongue” (1867) |
| Moniza Alvi | “Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan” (2004) |
| Walt Whitman | “America” (1855) |
| Truong Tran | “Scars” (1999) |

Table 1. Poem Options

Once students made their selections, they read and analyzed their poems in groups. If a student chose a poem that was not selected by a student in their class period, they joined a group so that they

were not working in isolation. In their groups, students used visual annotations to read and annotate their text. During the annotation process, students annotated to highlight vocabulary, figurative language, conflict, theme, and imagery.

After, students employed the TPCAST literary analysis strategy. This strategy was adapted from the original College Entrance Examination Board (2002) TP-CASTT version by omitting the second reference to the title, to better align with the TEKS and objectives for the lesson. Students used the technique (see Figure 1)

to analyze the symbolic meaning of the title, paraphrase a section of the text, analyze the tone of the author, analyze the shifts in the author’s tone or message, and analyze the theme of the text.

Next, students were provided a scaffolded writing template based on Lyon’s (1993) poem “Where I’m From” (see Figure 2) that they could use as a writing model for their poem. Another option was provided for students who wished to develop their own formats. Many of the students explained that the mentor poem served as an example for strong poetry and served as inspiration for their original work.

Culturally Relevant Poetry: Option #3

INSTRUCTIONS: Read the poem below and use visual annotations to guide your comprehension of the text. **Use the following visual annotations as you read the text:** (2) Vocabulary, (1) Theme, (1) Conflict, (2) Figurative Language, (1) Imagery. **After you finish annotating the text, complete the TP-CAST analysis on the back.**

Immigrants by Pat Mora

- (1) **wrap** their babies in the American flag.
- (2) feed them mashed hot dogs and apple pie.
- (3) name them Bill and Daisy.
- (4) buy them blonde dolls that blink blue eyes or a football and tiny cleats
- (5) before the baby can even walk.
- (6) speak to them in thick English.
- (7) hallo, babee, hallo.
- (8) **whisper** in Spanish or Polish
- (9) when the babies sleep, whisper in a dark parent bed, that dark parent fear.
- (10) will they like our boy, our girl, our fine American boy, our fine American girl?

Adapted from the TP-CASTT literary analysis strategy

Poetry Analysis Using TP-CAST

INSTRUCTIONS: Once you have finished reading the text, use this graphic organizer to analyze the poem. All questions should be answered in complete sentences. Refer to your annotations of the poem, to guide your analysis of the text.

| | |
|---|---|
| T | In your own words, explain the meaning of the title before you read the text. Why do you think the author choose this title? |
| P | What is the best paraphrase of the sentence below? <i>“wrap their babies in the American flag”</i> |
| C | What is the meaning of the rhetorical question in line 10 ? <i>“Will they like our boy, our girl, our fine American boy, our fine American girl?”</i> What impact does this phrase have on the reader? |
| A | What can you infer about the speaker’s tone ? I can infer _____. _____. When the speaker states, _____, this reveals _____. |
| S | While reading the text, do you notice any shifts in the text? In the text, I noticed a shift when the author states, _____. _____ _____ This change influences the theme because _____. |
| T | The primary theme the author is conveying _____. The author wants the reader to learn _____. This message is important because _____. |

Adapted from the TP-CASTT literary analysis strategy

Figure 1. TPCAST literary analysis template

I am from _____
(specific ordinary item)

From _____ and _____
(product name) (product name)

I am from the _____
(home description)

_____, _____, _____
(adjective) (adjective) (sensory detail)

I am from _____
(plant, flower, natural item)

(description of above item)

I’m from _____ and _____
(family tradition) (family trait)

From _____ and _____
(name of family member) (another family name)

I’m from the _____ and _____
(description of family tendency) (another one)

From _____ and _____
(something you were told as a child) (another)

I’m from _____
(representation of religion or lack of) (further description)

I’m from _____
(place of birth and family ancestry)

_____, _____
(a food item that represents your family) (another one)

From the _____
(specific family story about a specific person and detail)

The _____
(another detail of another family member)

(location of family pictures, mementos, archives)

(line explaining the importance of family items)

Figure 2. Poem Template

Jorge, another student in the class, captured the sentiments that most students shared when they discussed the importance of analyzing mentor poems. He wrote,

Being able to analyze other poems made it easier for me to be able to write one. Learning how some poems are formatted and how people manage to implement their culture and feelings into their writing helped me not just think about my culture and feelings more in depth but also [to be] able to see other cultures and learn about their beliefs and perspective.

Here, Jorge explained how the mentor poem he analyzed made it easier for him to create a poem and how it challenged him to reflect about his culture and feelings more in depth. Many of the students talked about how writing the poem challenged them to learn about their culture and understand what it means to them.

Mary captures this claim in her writing reflection. She expressed, “The writing unit made me think about my culture and what it means to me. Thanks to this unit, my [vision and insight into] the realm of writing have greatly expanded.” Likewise, Cynthia recognized that the poetry assignment challenged her to dig deep into her culture to learn about her ancestors and to learn about diverse cultures. She stated,

I think the past writing unit was very informational. I say this because it has gotten me to dig deep into my culture and the past of my ancestors’ way of life. Digging into my culture has made things a little more clear to me as to why certain cultures do certain things.

Syncing

The third and most crucial step in facilitating culturally relevant writing pedagogy is “syncing.” Winn and Johnson (2011) described this as connecting teachers’ ideas with students’ ideas to fuel their writing. During the lesson, students received both teacher and peer feedback. In pairs, students used a writing feedback form (Winn & Johnson, 2011) to give feedback to their assigned partner. Students gave feedback on the ideas of the text, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, and voice. Similarly, Ruegg (2018) explained both teacher and peer feedback are beneficial to increasing student

writing capacity and self-efficacy. At the beginning and end of the study, participants ranked their writing self-efficacy for poetic writing on a scale from 1 to 10. The students’ mean score for writing self-efficacy prior to instruction was 5.17 and after instruction the mean score for writing self-efficacy increased to 6.51.

Many of the students discussed the importance and benefit of writing feedback. For example, Tonya explained the benefit of the feedback process. She wrote, “The peer evaluation also helped to show [the] weak points in [the] poem. It showed me where certain words could be changed to enhance the overall effect of the poem.” After students received feedback from their peers, the students were provided three reflective questions to consider before they completed their final draft:

1. How will you address your cultural, social, and personal experiences in your text?
2. How will you leverage your cultural lens and language to craft your text?
3. How will you address the historical and contemporary norms of your culture to craft your text?

It was not required for students to answer or address all of these questions. Instead, these questions served as a reminder to ensure that students used either their experiences or cultural background to create their poetry product. Once students completed the writing feedback form and considered the reflective questions, students created the final draft of their poem (see Figures 3 & 4).

Share Your Music

Continuing with this metaphor that writing is a form of music, the final step involves students sharing original poetry in the classroom. Thus, Winn and Johnson (2011) coined this process “sharing your music” and maintained that it is necessary because “performing writing, for example, creates community and instills ownership and pride in one’s work” (p. 46). Similarly, Williamson (2019) agreed that sharing student writing has the potential to build community as each student can serve as a “reciprocal collaborator” (p. 259).

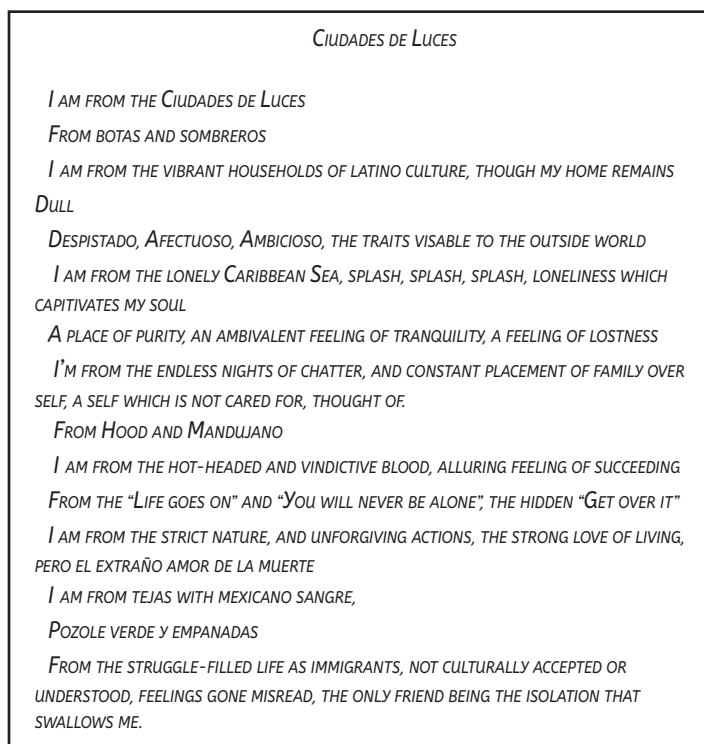


Figure 3. Student Poem #1

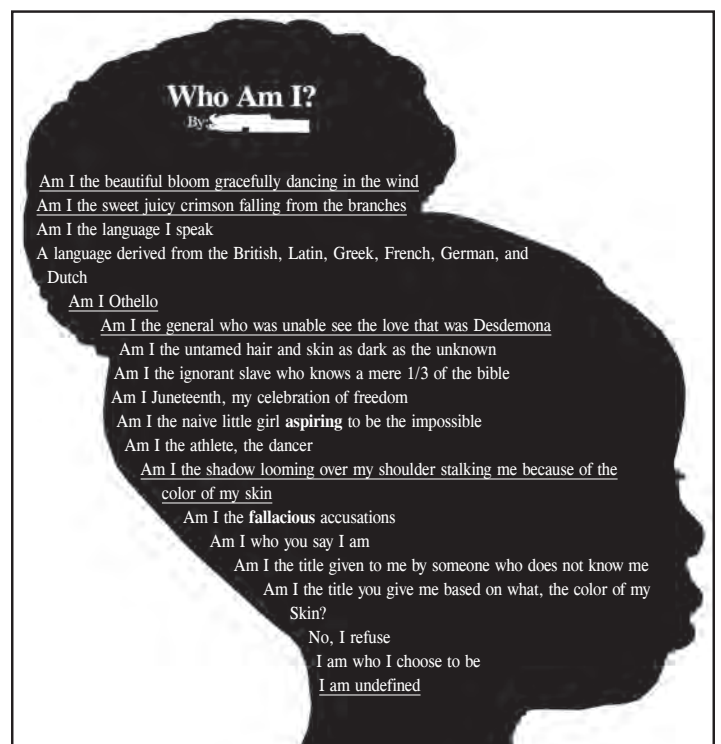


Figure 4. Student Poem #2

Williamson further explained that these collaborations provide students opportunities to assess their writing and leverage feedback to improve their texts. Regina agreed with the claim that reciprocal collaboration was beneficial for her. She explained, "Hearing the other people read their poems and giving them advice opened up my eyes on all the possible things I could incorporate into my poem." Here, Regina acknowledges that listening and providing advice to her peers opened her mind to the possible improvements needed in her poem. At the end of the lesson, students presented their final products to their feedback partners, their writing table groups, and the entire class. Classroom time limits did not allow every student to share their writing product. As a result, students nominated three to four students to share their products with the entire class.

Conclusion

All things considered, from my experience, most students do not see themselves as writers. Students do not believe that they have perspectives that should be valued and respected. Students do not believe that their social, cultural, and personal experiences can serve as content and inspiration for writing. This assignment provided both a foundation to help students believe these sentiments and a beginning framework to integrate more culturally relevant poetry instruction in the English classroom. This relevant approach to writing instruction has the potential to amplify students' voices and perspectives and empower students, so that they see themselves as writers and use their voice to give life to meaningful texts.

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