

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

On Fostering a Pedagogy of Transparency for Immigrant Students in an Urban Community College Developmental Writing Classroom

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Since Mina Shaughnessy published her landmark study *Errors and Expectations* (1977) over thirty years ago, high-stakes testing has become endemic while the pedagogical dilemmas basic writing teachers face have remained consistent. The politicization of basic writing pedagogy has especially impacted the many immigrant students who populate the developmental writing classes in urban community colleges. In many institutions, in fact, standardized assessment has become the sole means of measuring the academic achievement of immigrant students, who arrive in class with educationally, culturally, nationally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds and life experiences. How can teachers improve access to higher education (retention) for immigrant students? In particular, how can we help our immigrant students negotiate an academy that subjects them to constant testing? By constructing a space that engenders a pedagogy of transparency and acknowledges the need for students to hear and recognize their own voices and experiences within an academic context, teachers can create a learning context that both values the local knowledge of diverse students and prepares them for the inevitable “normalization” processes of educational standardization. Teachers, particularly those who have many immigrant students, should not assume that their students are familiar with the reasons for assessments and their significance. Most immigrant students who have been educated in very different systems must cope with a tremendous amount of new material at once. Fostering a pedagogy of transparency is especially effective in facilitating their transition into American classrooms

because it draws students into a community of learners, acknowledges and celebrates the gifts they bring to class, encourages them to develop the skills they need, and provides them with a fundamental working knowledge of the American higher education system.

The climate of high stakes testing affects the full sequence of basic writing and college composition classes, composed largely of immigrant students, who I teach at Bronx Community College, an urban, predominantly Hispanic-serving institution. Throughout the semester, developmental writing teachers must constantly negotiate the mandate to prepare students for the assessments that will provide the ticket to a college education. To this end, I attempt to incorporate liberal classroom practices as a means of “talking back” to the test-driven basic writing curricula while simultaneously, on a local classroom level, ensuring that my immigrant students have the tools they need to successfully pass the tests required to pass through the gateway of the institution and into credit-bearing freshman composition classes.

By virtue of having been educated under many different systems, immigrant students bring many academic and social strengths—as well as challenges—to their developmental writing classes. Teaching composition at any level—remedial writing, composition, and rhetoric and literature—ideally positions teachers to bring out their students’ strengths and to develop their communication skills while ensuring curricular transparency. Indeed, a pedagogy of transparency is effective in helping to address the needs of immigrant students to help them successfully navigate a system that subjects

them to relentless assessment: tests to matriculate, tests throughout the course, tests to exit, and more tests to enter higher level courses. Though the definition of “success” may range from gaining a better understanding of the assessment to actually passing, the implications for engendering a pedagogy of transparency in the urban composition classroom allow students to more effectively respond to the assessment demands of the course, as well as the institution.

Immigrant students who enroll in developmental writing classes at Bronx Community College reflect the ethnic and national diversity of the institution. While the majority of immigrant students are from the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean Islands (such as Jamaica, Haiti, St. Kitts, and Dominica), classes are often also populated with students from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Albania, Belize, and Guyana. Regardless of where immigrant students have originally come from, whether they are matriculating into remedial or credit-bearing courses, most of them are experiencing some sort of transition: from their homeland to the United States, from high school to college, from work to college, from home to college, or from another college to Bronx Community College.

In my experience, immigrant students bring tremendous academic and social strengths to their developmental writing classes: they are intellectually curious and hard-working; they don’t take much for granted; and they are effective multi-taskers, often balancing their academic course load with grueling work schedules and family responsibilities that often extended family

both in the United States and in their home countries. The life challenges with which immigrant students must contend on a daily basis are often enormous: from caring for young families and aging relatives, to working full-time jobs, to balancing their academic work and financial responsibilities, to adjusting to a very new culture in a fast-paced city. When students arrive in my classes, many have the burden of multiple responsibilities on their shoulders: some are burned out from working the night shift at their jobs (often in hospitals or nursing homes or as security guards) and haven't slept when they arrive in class, while others may feel apathetic or anxious about learning. Regardless of their context, I find immigrant students very much want to get something out of the class; they want to learn, to think, to evolve, and to move on to the next level, ever closer to their profession and personal goals.

The majority of immigrant students at Bronx Community College are "non-traditional" in addition to being immigrants: they are often first-generation college students, older than the average high school graduate, working full-time or part-time jobs, caring for families, and sending money home to support family in their home countries. To account for the bumps and hurdles along the semester's path, I have developed what I call a 'pedagogy of transparency' for my classes of immigrant students. To this end, two main constructs inform my teaching: first, the *Course Guide* (a document that maps out the course assignments, requirements, and materials) and second, a *Class Anthology* (a compilation of students' best writing which is published towards the end of the semester into a booklet). While the *Course Guide* introduces students to the course, gives them a sense of expectations and explains what they need to do in order to be successful in the course, the *Class Anthology* "talks back" to the *Course Guide* and celebrates students' accomplishments over the course of the semester by including the voices of all students in the form of essays, poems, personal narratives, and commentaries. Between the *Course Guide* and the *Class Anthology* fall a semester's worth of classes, assignments, readings, con-

versations, and interactions—the usual ups and downs of a teaching-learning life. What can teachers do in their classrooms to respond to and acknowledge the needs of immigrant students? And how, exactly, can teachers foster a pedagogy of transparency in the developmental writing classroom? The following are proven strategies I use to approach teaching immigrant students at Bronx Community College:

COMPOSE AN INTRODUCTORY "LETTER TO STUDENTS"

In the *Course Guide*, I include at the very beginning a letter I've written to my students. This letter is intended to give them a sense of what the class will be about but, more important, it sets the tone for the course. I want my students to know that we will be working hard to achieve our goals but that I am with them, I will answer their questions, I will respond in a humane manner to their papers, and they will have multiple opportunities to succeed—indeed, that I want them to do well. On the first day of class I also ask my students to fill out a Student Information Sheet to get a sense of who they are and what their goals are for the course and for themselves; this provides them with an initial opportunity to respond to my letter.

MAKE THE DAILY CLASS AGENDA EXPLICIT

In each class, I provide students with a clearly written agenda on the blackboard that lists the sequence of activities in the class; this gives students not only a sense of what to expect and but also a sense of mission. Because our attention spans last between fifteen and twenty minutes, I usually time activities throughout each session to reflect this human reality. For example, I will often start with a quiz (always based upon a homework assignment, but also designed to motivate students to arrive on time) and then I review the agenda and calendar to clarify any "housekeeping" issues, give a mini-lesson on a particular writing topic, or review a reading and then engage students in a discussion or question/answer session. I also attempt to involve all students in

the class through a variety of means; for example: responding to a question on an index card, reading aloud directions or a text, having them do three-minute brainstorming exercises, or working in small groups to respond to a particular assignment. This fast-paced sequence of events moves us briskly along and keeps students task-oriented.

OFFER A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES

Providing students with a variety of assignments gives them multiple opportunities to do well and to experience different types of learning. For example, assignments such as vocabulary quizzes that allow students to study different ways of defining words (denotation, connotation, etymological, synonym, antonym) allow students who aren't strong writers to get some encouraging good grades, which can elevate their confidence. Journals help students to practice difficult assignments; responding to quotations, for example, allows students to think on paper without worrying so much about formalities—yet they are getting their initial ideas down and beginning to learn how to incorporate in-text citations to support their own claims. In addition, I try very hard to return assignments within a week or sooner, if possible. And I explain to students why they get the grade they do by always writing a focused comment and by balancing positive and negative observations.

Creative writing, especially, provides a wonderfully effective means for immigrant students to bring their culture and identity into the classroom to share with others and to commemorate their respective homelands. In the following poem, composed as part of a larger assignment that asked students to perform a close reading of Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," one student, Vachelle Byron, vividly imagines her homeland, the island of St. Kitts, and she recreates the sounds, images, rhythms, and language on the page so that we, too, feel the sun hot on our skin; we, too, hear the lively, lilting conversation with its Caribbean cadences. In her poem we, too, can almost taste the "sweetest food":

St. Kitts*Vachelle Byron*

St. Kitts is me land I say,
 Lots of enjoyment when de bands a play,
 Carnival, Mas we jumping up all day,
 Jump-Up to the sweet sounds of Nu-Vybes & Small Axe Band.
 We like to “bang we mout” and make aloud,
 Chat bout we small days running up and down in we panty,
 The sweetest food you could eat,
 Goatwater, black pudding, the list goes on.
 Laying on de beach wit de sun ablaze,
 Hot like fire with a coconut in me hand,
 Can field can’t dun
 Sweet Sugar City.

INCORPORATE ORGANIZATION STRATEGIES

In order not only to help students stay organized and on task, but also to take pride in their work, I provide each with a manila folder within which to maintain and document all their assignments. This is especially effective for immigrant students who are facing a new teaching and learning environment, though it does require some micro-managing and modeling of organization skills on the teacher’s part. It also reminds my students that their work in progress is both valuable and a useful benchmark for measuring their progress over the course of the semester. In addition, I create individual Student Grade Sheets that include a weighted breakdown of the grades, which I tape into the individual folders. These Student Grade Sheets provide an ongoing and up-to-date record of assignments students have completed and are missing, and it documents how they are doing in the class.

PROVIDE MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERACTION AND RESPONSE

I interact with students in myriad ways to update them on their progress: through office visits, in-class student-teacher conferences, notes and comments on their papers, and e-mail correspondence. By understanding a student’s personal situation, it is less likely that I will take it personally if they fall asleep in class or fail to turn in an assignment on time or miss a week of classes or seem unusually addicted to their Sidekicks. Knowing who is traveling two hours from Brooklyn to attend an eight o’clock A.M. class, who has worked all night without sleep, who has a sister in the hospital with a burst appendix, who is living with her daughters in a shelter, who has just come out of jail, who is in an abusive domestic relationship, and who is just plain desperately aching for her/his family thousands of miles and an ocean away helps create a sense of empathy with our students so we can make their difficult lives a little easier through compassion as simple as listening to them and hearing where they are.

UTILIZE COLLEGE RESOURCES

Many immigrant students, especially those who are new to the country, are not aware of the numerous academic, social, and psychological resources available to them as students at the college. Consequently, I attempt to familiarize my students with these resources by employing them in my classes: we use the computer labs, the Writing Center, our library’s databases, the expert librarians in the Learning Center, the Hall of Fame for Great Americans, and the Center for Teaching Excellence’s faculty development workshops. We use a computer lab at least once a week, and this gives my students opportunities to write in class (and have me on hand to respond immediately to their questions along the way) as well as providing useful time in class to meet individually with students.

Although my goals for the students and their goals for themselves may, ultimately, be very different, we both want to experience a successful course. One

key to this success is to pass the assessment so students meet the prerequisite for Freshman Composition. As an English teacher, I want my students to develop their writing and thinking skills, to have at least one paper of which they are proud (hence the *Class Anthology*), and to learn something content-wise. And, of course, I want my students to develop the skills they need in order to pass whatever test they have that looms on the horizon. Most of my students are not planning to become English majors, but what we do in the classroom is nevertheless relevant to other fields. Towards the end of the semester—and often earlier—I know my students quite well: who is gifted in writing; who was a lawyer in the Dominican Republic but must start all over in a basic writing class; who is sending money home to family in Ghana; who has aspirations to be a nurse, a pediatrician, a police officer, an engineer, a teacher; who is taking care of a bed-ridden relative; who is responsible for feeding and clothing four children; whose sister was violently attacked in the street last week; and who is planning to apply to Columbia and NYU when she/he graduates. For now, though, these immigrant students are here, in New York City, and many have made it their new home, in search of opportunity and, perhaps, the American Dream, despite the many social, economic, and educational challenges the city poses. In this poem, Emmanuel Blanco, a trans-national Dominican student, responds to Carl Sandburg’s “Chicago” with his own take on New York, the city he has come to claim as his own:

New York City*Emmanuel Blanco*

Welcome to the city of bright lights
 The city where young kids get
 thrown out of school for having too
 many fights
 Welcome to the home of hip hop
 The city where nobodies make it to
 the top
 Welcome to the city of broken down
 dreams
 The city that told me everything

isn't what it seems

Welcome to the city where being
prejudice is banal

The city where everyone seems to be
in denial

Welcome to the city where the
strong are really the weak

The city where bodies get laid in
creeks then found in two weeks

Welcome to the city of four seasons
Where hot summers lead to cold
blooded killings for no reason

Welcome to the city of hard working
people

The city where everyone appears to
be evil

Welcome to the city of unsanitary
hospitals and clinics

The city where whoever does some-
thing bad, someone else tends to
mimic

Welcome to my home sweet home

Where the Bronx is my kingdom
and I sit on the throne

The city where men thing they're
untouchable until they stop breath-
ing

And the city where everyone and ev-
erything around you is deceiving

Welcome to My City

New York City

Regardless of my students' personal circumstances, we meet in the classroom for four hours a week to do the work of English and composition: reading, writing, listening, discussing, and some deep critical thinking. Constructing a rich classroom space offers myriad possibilities for immigrant students to make new friends, meet people from different places, and discuss issues relevant to them. But immigrant students also need to discover their own personal relevance in our joint mission, regardless of whether we are preparing for the entrance exam, meeting the challenges of a difficult reading, or participating in a tour of the Hall of Fame for Great Americans and connecting with those bronze busts of so many

of the canonized Americans—all children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren of immigrants. Learning is a recursive process, and, the more opportunities students have to learn, the more they will be able to adapt and progress. While I encourage and push my students towards better writing and harder thinking, I also want to celebrate their accomplishments along the way, and I want them to have a positive experience in my classroom. While I expect my students to take responsibility for their learning, I also believe it is my responsibility, as their teacher, to show them *how* to take responsibility. The *Course Guide* helps to make transparent the rules of the institution and contributes to creating a pedagogy of transparency so immigrant students can more successfully navigate the many assessments they will have to experience. I also attempt to make my directions clear and my expectations explicit; I want my mission—the why and wherefore of every assignment—to have purpose. All first-semester immigrant students—from those who have traveled from tiny islands in the Caribbean to the trans-national Dominican students who have made New York City their second home to the brave young West African students who have left behind their closely-knit families to the Central American students who seek a better life for their children North of the border—bring their cultures, their languages, their passions, and their fierce energies to contribute to the developmental writing classes. In turn, I hope to make the requirements of the mandated tests, the department and the institution as visible as possible. I seek to do this in a compassionate manner in order to better help immigrant students succeed by gaining entry into credit-bearing college courses so they may continue their educational journeys.

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