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TEACHING PHILOSOPHY AND ITS CONNECTION TO PRACTICE

My teaching philosophy is grounded in the theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), a framework for teaching and learning that honors students' lived experiences and their unique funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992). Since many of the students with whom I work are multilingual speakers both in the ESL/EAP and "mainstream" classrooms, honoring students includes respecting their home cultures and the languages that they and their families speak. As a language and literacy teacher, one of my objectives is to teach students academic English, though it is also my position that this should never be done at the expense of "erasing" the students' home language(s). Acquiring a new language or register should be an additive process, a process that adds to a student's linguistic repertoire, not a process that replaces one linguistic system for another. Research shows that fostering literacy practices in the learner's home language(s), results in positive linguistic and academic transfer to the target language (Baker & Prys Jones, 1998; Reyes & Halcón, 2001).

Central to a culturally response pedagogy is to care for students, but not in the sense that is usually associated with this word. In this framework, caring refers to holding high academic standards for student learning while providing students with the thinking and academic tools needed to successfully reach these standards. These tools include teaching students to engage in reflective learning so they are able to develop metacognitive awareness of what and how it means to learn, helping students to develop cognitive strategies for interpreting and writing about texts, and providing learners with the necessary scaffolds to support their learning. These scaffolds include: preparing students to cognitively engage with new information through a process of question posing that helps them access background knowledge (schemata) and prior learning so that they can meaningfully connect new information to old information; providing students with appropriate graphic organizers that guide student thinking and teaches them how to autonomously organize their learning; and providing cooperative learning opportunities where students of different talents and strengths can help one another to jointly construct knowledge.

Ultimately, the engine that drives CRP is the ability to tap student interests so that learning becomes personally meaningful and relevant. It is important to provide students with numerous opportunities to self-select project topics and texts so that they are better able to connect academic learning with their own inquiry-driven interests. Intrinsic motivation is heightened when students write from their own curiosity, finding greater relevance in their work. When students are thus engaged, teachers can then push them to delve deeper, make more sophisticated arguments, and substantively revise their work.

Finally, I believe that it is important for teachers to create safe learning environments for students. When students feel safe, they can develop their intellectual identities by taking risks—freely sharing their opinions with classmates, experimenting with language, taking on challenging topics, and trusting their teachers to be supportive and fair. When students are respected for bringing in their own funds of knowledge and not treated as what Freire (2001) calls "empty vessels" waiting to be filled, they become co-constructors of knowledge alongside their teacher. Students are valued and respected for their contributions knowing that their voice matters. Thus the ultimate respect we can give to our students is the expectation of excellence.

EVIDENCE OF PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS

Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) write that the introduction of new pedagogies and learning projects into one's classroom is the fuel for professional development. Throughout my career as a teacher, I have taken risks in my teaching, especially in the area of computer-assisted learning as I am far from being a computer expert. I also take risks by pushing students to work outside of their comfort zones with somewhat "outside the box" projects. These approaches can be risky as the unfamiliar can intimidate students and cause resistance. Nonetheless, I find this risk-taking to pay off because it energizes both my teaching and students. However, despite my history as a risk-taker, I had been playing it safe at John Jay, that is, until recently. It took me some time to make the writing curriculum my own and to know how to access the resources I needed to fully implement my ideas for student projects.

This past fall marked a turning point in my teaching at the college. I embarked on a re-envisioning of my English 101 course in which I was successfully able to incorporate computer and project-based assignments—learning tools that had been the hallmark of my teaching. Since coming to John Jay, I have also been teaching in Learning Communities (LCs)—my English 101 course paired with another disciplinary course—and my pedagogical challenge has been how to best integrate these two courses so that student learning is reinforced yet at the same time, new and engaging for learners. By the introduction of innovative projects through the use of technology, this collaborative puzzle, now pieces together well.

From my experience working with second language learners, I have found that using computer technology as a tool for learning provides students with affordances to use language for authentic purposes, that is, to use the target language to solve problems and complete projects, instead of relying on textbook-driven language drills. The same is true for other learners who can also use computer technology as a tool for meaningful collaboration and a means for applying newly learned concepts and constructing knowledge. Working with both ESL and native English speakers, I have had students create inquiry-based documentaries, web-based electronic portfolios, and contribute to class blogs. This past year at John Jay, I have used these concepts again, but in new ways to not only foster collaboration amongst students, but collaboration with my learning community partner. Before describing these innovations, there is another piece to my pedagogical reboot.

Learning from Ethnographic Research

My current book project is an ethnographic study of a start-up charter high school in the southwest. From the first days of school, chaos reigned. Students could not sit still; personal items soared through the air, things literally caught on fire. Then one day I went to English. I was startled by the silence. Students sat quietly at their tables engrossed in literature that each student had self-selected to read. I saw first hand the power of self-directed learning. The gifted high school English teacher (CUNY trained!), used students' own interests to guide their intellectual development through scaffolded, inquiry-based assignments. Experiencing this transformative power of literature and student autonomy, I too, wanted to explore this method of autonomous, inquiry-driven learning applied to my own teaching. I was able to do this through a literature-driven podcast project I designed for my English 101 paired course described below.

Podcast Project: A Heuristic for Inquiry-based Thinking and Writing in English and Psychology 101

Teaching in the Learning Communities this past fall, I was fortunate to be paired with a teacher open to exploring new pedagogical ideas. The first major assignment in our paired course was the Podcast Project. Using information I gleaned from John Jay’s “Making Objects Speak” podcasting seminar, I decided that having *students* create their own podcasts would be an excellent collaborative writing project. Although the introduction of this technology is innovative in and of itself, what I believe to be the true innovation is using the podcasts’ creative process as a site for helping students to understand the concept of “research question,” and how to analyze texts, incorporate outside library sources, and organize content. In short, creating podcasts helped students to understand the process of writing a research paper, but in a hands-on and more engaged way.

The project began by having students form “literature circles.” My partner teacher and I compiled an annotated bibliography of 40 books—novels and memoirs—that had psychological themes that corresponded to the themed units in their psychology class. Each student picked their top three books and from these choices formed seven reading groups with students who had selected the same books (e.g., *Brave New World*, *Flowers for Algernon*, *Beautiful Boy: A Father’s Journey through His Son’s Addiction*, etc.). Students met with their reading groups both inside and outside of class to discuss their books, each group member bringing discussion questions for the group to answer. As I had not read many of the books that students chose, I read these books and joined reading groups, peer-like. This low-tech aspect of the podcast project was actually one of my favorite parts. As I was reading each book, before class, I would approach one my of “co-readers,” and we would have an energetic chat about our texts. In short, students and I bonded through literature.

When books were finished, students had the assignment to create a podcast based on their chosen texts in which they would embody characters and scenes from their books and also include the “voices” of psychology experts who would comment. As a model for these podcasts, I chose the Peabody Award winning radio show, “This American Life,” as its format most paralleled what I wanted students to accomplish as well as the broadcast having several shows in their archive based on psychology themes. On our class blog, I posted several links to the show for students to listen to at home and in class. Using graphic organizers that I had created, students analyzed the rhetorical structure of the podcasts, paying special attention to transitions and how outside experts provided commentary.

Prior and concurrent to listening to the professionally produced podcasts, I guided literature teams to determine a list of probing/juicy questions that emerged from their texts and whose researched answers would be the foundation or argument of their podcasts and their final research essays (written individually). To prepare students to write and perform their podcast scripts, I had to rely on my academic community as a resource to best support my students. This included inviting Christian Delgado from ITSS to conduct a workshop on how to use GarageBand to create podcasts, Meghan Duffy who gave students an “expressive voice” workshop so their podcasts would have dramatic energy, and librarian Ellen Sexton who gave students a research database workshop. I also contacted writer/producer Eric Molinsky of WNYC’s “Studio 360,” to share one of his radio scripts so that students could model their own scripts after a professional one. During the brainstorming and script writing process, I arranged “working lunches” in the faculty cafeteria where my teaching partner and I met with all podcast groups to discuss topic selection and research strategies. These lunches were generously sponsored by FYE. For some students, these lunches were the highlight of the LC.

When students had produced their podcasts, I placed them on a website I constructed (<http://web.me.com/kim_helmer/Learning_Communities_Student_Podcasts/Welcome.html>)¹. Students then presented their podcasts in a joint English/Psychology 101 class that was followed by a podcast-team led discussion. Audience members then wrote any questions that they might have regarding the topic as another form of feedback to presenters that might help them narrow their research essays. I designed a podcast grading rubric that also included spaces for my partner and I to offer suggestions to guide students for the next phase of the assignment: the research essay.

In sum, this podcast assignment was a writing invention tool. Through the motivating use of technology, and its public performance, students were actively involved in discussing books, forming research questions, and researching answers for a tangible project. After assembling the ingredients for their podcasts, students had also gathered many of the components needed for writing their research essays, which were the “academic” versions of their podcasts. Albeit, the essay required additional research and writing instruction, much of the idea development and research skills were well underway.

BlogProject 101: A Hybrid Writing Space

Another innovation that I launched in my English 101 course was “BlogProject 101.” Part of this project was something that I had done before: creating a class blog for students to comment on assigned readings and film clips. Again with the support of my own academic community, FYE’s writing fellow, Jessica Wells Cantiello, helped me set up the class blog; she also held office hours for students who needed help troubleshooting. The intention behind the class blog was to offer students a virtual space to reflect on readings through guided questions before coming to class so that we could have deeper classroom discussion. Virtual discussion forums also allow for shyer students or students who do not speak English as a native language, time to form their thoughts without the pressure of having to perform “live.” It also serves as a type of dynamic assessment of learning outcomes. By reading student posts, I could see immediately what students were and were not understanding about a reading. This knowledge helped me to plan for more effective lessons when I met up with students in person.

This past semester, I added an additional component to the class blog. Inspired by our Learning Community’s theme of “Thinking, Learning, Doing,” I had students write individual blogs that all students could access from our class blog. Students blogged every week about trying something new for the duration of the semester—a new activity that was outside of their comfort zones or something that they had always wanted to try, but needed the extra push to actually do. The objective was for students to experiment with new things, express themselves in writing, develop audience awareness, and cultivate the habit of writing on a continual bases. The blog served as a hybrid writing space in that it was a forum for personal expression, but unlike a journal, it was public. Students blogged about exercising and eating healthier, learning about student life at John Jay, developing their study habits, exploring the NY culture scene, playing new instruments, doing volunteer work, and visiting different places of worship that fell outside of their own religious traditions. In the spirit of learning with my students, I also became a blogger. My blog was about my teaching experience as I was experimenting with new assignments and new content. Reading student blogs was a great experience—I loved reading

¹ An updated Quick Time player is necessary to view the website.

about the new things students were trying and seeing them grow from the experience. The blogs also helped me to understand and appreciate my students on a deeper and more personal level.

FYE Student Showcase

Though this innovation does not directly take place in my classroom, it is an innovative event that I have introduced to John Jay of which I am immensely proud: The FYE Student Showcase. Though many universities hold such events, ours is innovative as it is one of the few that spotlights the work of first-semester freshmen. The Showcase features research posters and creative works from learning community and first-year seminar students, much like a poster session at a conference or gallery opening. This past fall, we also expanded the event to include student oral presentations—again mimicking the professional atmosphere of an academic conference. For the Showcase, students are encouraged to dress professionally, setting a serious tone for the event. Over the past three years of holding the Showcase, the event has continued to grow. We went from 630T to the Multipurpose Room and now we will hold the event in the college gymnasium. From a sole professor organizing the event, the Showcase has now become institutionalized thanks in large part to the support of administrators. If anyone has doubts about the intellectual potential of our students, they need only to visit the FYE Student Showcase to see students proudly discuss their intellectual and creative work.

REFLECTIONS ON ACHIEVEMENTS, CHALLENGES, AND INTENDED IMPROVEMENTS
Though Bailey et al. (2001) describe teacher innovation as the source of professional development, reflecting on those innovations may be the most important step in the process of growing as a teacher. Reflecting on my practice, I see the value of incorporating technology as means for active and collaborative student learning. As sociocultural theory suggests that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts organize and develop human cognition (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), blogging and podcasting have served as pedagogical organizers that provide students with an authentic means for reflecting on meaning, synthesizing, analyzing, and structuring knowledge. And, at the top of Bloom's revised taxonomy of cognitive development, students become *creators* of knowledge, not only academically, but also artistically.

Despite the positive learning outcomes in my English course, there is always room for improvement. In a collaborative study with my LC partner, we found that our closely integrated courses did not achieve greater learning outcomes for students on their psychology exams compared to similar students in a less integrated, but similarly paired LC. This upcoming fall to address this issue, I plan to redesign the course so that instead of using one psychology unit as the exemplar unit for writing a research essay/podcast, I have decided to select two to three short stories with psychology themes to be paired with its corresponding psychology unit. Each story would illustrate a unit's theme and our story discussions and question posing would scaffold the podcast assignment. Using the "juicy" questions sparked by these stories, students would practice database searches to find answers to student generated research questions. Students would then include some of these articles/book chapters in their annotated bibliography assignment. We could then measure if this more integrated design yields higher psychology learning outcomes as well as compare student writing from each semester's course to find if this additional practice yields stronger researched and argued research essays.

Though I have more to say on how I will refine my course, I will end with perhaps the greatest lesson I have learned: to practice my pedagogy. I stress collaborative learning in my

classes, I have benefited from collaborative learning as a student, and now as a professor and scholar, I have learned that I have an academic community from whom I can also learn and benefit and of course, contribute.

FACULTY BIO

Kimberly Adilia Helmer is an Assistant Professor of English at John Jay College, The City University of New York. Professor Helmer received her B.A. in Communication Studies from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and her M.A. in Educational Linguistics (MA TESOL) from the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Dr. Helmer holds a Ph.D. in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching from the University of Arizona. Her research awards from the University of Arizona include the Centennial Doctoral Student Achievement Award and the President's Award and from Washington State University, she received the Summer Doctoral Fellowship. Also from the University of Arizona, she was awarded the Tilly Warnock Fellowship for outstanding composition teaching and research. Dr. Helmer's interdisciplinary research areas include educational anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and multilingual literacy development. She is currently researching the effect of high stakes assessment on classroom community building and working on a book project that ethnographically chronicles the first year of an innovative charter high school, examining a cohort of Mexican-origin students' engagement with and resistance to academic learning in English and Spanish heritage language classes. Professor Helmer is also collaborating in a study that examines the effect professor collaboration in paired courses has on student learning outcomes.

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