Pedagogy, Ideology, & Composition: Is There a Better Way to Teach?

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ABSTRACT

While academia tends to focus on differentiating various groups of students, prioritizing similar learning practices can have surprising and potentially transforming outcomes. In classrooms that are often filled with students who do not quite comprehend the significance of critical thinking processes or practices, the role they will play as global citizens, or why studying abstract topics is necessary, interchanging effective pedagogy from one classroom or student type to another may result in more engaged and productive learning. Additionally, students may mature and create their personas more clearly when classes interject 'basic' classroom practices such as modeling respect while discussing politics or more 'advanced' techniques like scaffold writing and hands-on activities. If instructors are more reflective as they interact with students as adult learners, their lessons may provide chances to explore identities, ideologies, and a deeper comprehension of the impacts of their actions within and on society.

This article will discuss a combination of personal experience and research-based pedagogy with the aim of illustrating useful ways to stimulate students' critical thinking abilities. While many educators and recent assessments have focused on significant learning experiences and valuable course outcomes, this research focuses on creating practices to serve students better within writing courses, general education, and in their future careers. Interchanging conversational practices, writing activities, and research processes across classrooms with specific student demographics (such as developmental learners, international students, non-traditional students, and traditional college learners) may be key in helping students understand how their academic education could serve them more usefully in their post-graduation communities.

Keywords: pedagogy, reflective practices, diverse learners, student-centered learning, general education

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in different institutions, programs, and with different students requires varied techniques, topics, and evaluative materials. I have taught age groups from preschoolers to non-traditional students and in programs in and outside of academia. And at the end of the day, teaching is teaching. It requires patience, courage, and a desire to foster someone else's growth in a manner that works for them (not always for you or me). As such, some of the practices in one area can be usefully transferred to another, but sometimes our training or understanding of "groups" of students inhibits that.

My college students work with playdough in English 101, my Introduction to Literature students participate in scavenger hunts, and my Intensive English students play jeopardy. For the most part students have a positive reaction with these activities, as well as some of the other 'wonky' lessons they participate in. All of these are relatively standard creative classroom practices- so what is it that needs to be done more, better, or differently to encourage meaningful outcomes for careers, not just for college or writing, but for the diverse student body higher education services?

When I first began teaching, I looked to my other adjunct colleagues to get a sense of what I was about to encounter. In my early trainings, many instructors bemoaned the level of apathy they encountered in their classrooms. As I have formed my own pedagogical approach and continued on my academic journey, I had to begin questioning whether the apathy was on the part of the learners or the instructors. Was the 'apathy' symptomatic of instructors who insisted that their students should be ravenous for knowledge, should love learning for learning's sake, or should prioritize education disregarding the life changes many first-year students undergo? Is this just another railing against the industry killing millennials?

Perhaps the solution to the critical thinking crisis lies in a better blending of rigorous expectations, practical life instruction, and career skills preparation and practice. These elements are often addressed in all classrooms, but in differing proportions. In order to attain higher-level critical thinking skill sets, all college classrooms need to model civil conversation, idea exploration, and professionalization. For me, this often involves engaging political or current event topics, transparency in lesson purposes, and clear connections of lesson outcomes with students' future circumstances. Such practices have developed by teaching different types of learners in varying classroom settings.

VIGNETTE

Here is why: The morning of the 2016 election, I woke up early, stared at the ceiling after looking up the final results on my Facebook before deleting the app off my tiny blue lighted phone, and rolled over among the mound of blankets and pillows next to my fiancé asking him, "How do I do this?" It is not so much that I was desperate for Hillary to win, and it is not exactly that I was so opposed to Donald Trump. But it was that I was going to have to go into a classroom in Western Pennsylvania at a private Catholic University filled with a diverse group of students ranging from gay and out to people of color to straight, white, and conservative, and I was going to have to tell them all that it was going to be ok. That despite the fearful rhetoric used to win the election, that no one's rights would be under fire, that no one's identity would make their lives more difficult, and that we could all still get along. And I did not know how to do that.

Fortunately, our theme for that semester was analyzing American identity through literature. So, after some chatting with my fiancé, but mostly to myself, while he was literally a soundboard (it was 5:30 in the morning), I decided my class would start by looking at past political speeches and newspaper reports of such. We then listened to clips of speeches by both 2016 political candidates. We ended by discussing ways to critically read resources, look for political agendas and how to be conscientious about our own belief systems in conversations with others.

Now, I am not by any means proposing that this little hour and a half lesson solved the world's problems or even the ones those students were having in that particular class. But it opened my eyes to how effective, constructive conversations can be developed. Student's reflections from that semester demonstrated how rarely this dialogic had been modeled for them and that was when the significance of discussing politics and ideologies in an open-minded manner in all my courses became key to my personal pedagogy.

BACKGROUND

Although this crucially changed my personal pedagogy, many instructors are already doing this. They have already embraced this thought process (See Bruce McComiskey's *Teaching Composition as a Social Process* and/or Seider et. al.'s "The Impact of Community Service Learning Upon the Expected Political Voice of Participating College Students"). But in many cases, there remains a question- have they truly? Some instructors have been engaging political discussions within their classrooms; some for decades, while others are beginning to flirt with the topics of discussion. Others, however, use this approach to promote their own ideological agenda, and as such, there has been a push in some fields to resist incorporating politics into classroom discussions (See Maxine Hariston's "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing;" H. Richard Milner IV's "Yes, Race and Politics Belong in the Classroom" is useful for discussions approaching politics, race, class, and ideology in freshman liberal arts classes).

To best balance this, while approaching politically loaded topics, instructors should be reflective regarding personal biases, students' agency development (and where offensive concepts begin), and allow interrogation of their own, as well as their students' ideals. This process, for me, has developed from encounters with Intensive English Program students expressing vastly different ideologies based upon unexpected reasonings. Regardless of personal preferences, the reason for the lack of political engagement in the classroom may be deeper than individual agendas.

Institutions may be creating a resistance to this type of instruction. Bill Readings' *University in Ruins* provides a study of the university system and makes many observations that, unfortunately, still hold true about a continued problematically globalized and corporatized intellectual system. However, if instructors can alter thinking in their classrooms, they may be able to challenge institutional agendas and thought processes concerning the goals of academia. For example, Readings' comment that holds the most hope for me and has the potential to aid in the ailing university structure is his assertion that "the aim of pedagogy should not be to produce autonomous subjects who are supposedly made free by the information they learn, which is the Enlightenment narrative… teaching is a question of justice not a search for truth… pedagogy can hold open the temporality of questioning so as to resist being characterized as a transaction that can be concluded, either with the giving of grades or the granting of degrees" (Readings 19).

So, as Readings instructs here, my first mission in developing a more useful pedagogy across courses was to engage, engage politically, and engage with questions. I would not teach politics; I was going to teach processes for productive thinking and communication. Perhaps more importantly, I was going to be transparent about what we were doing, why, and how our practices could be used by students in their futures.

IS THE ISSUE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES OR CLASSROOM APPROACHES- OR BOTH?!

While teaching a few sections of English 101, I was fortunate enough to be placed in an Intensive English Program. The international students here typically completed between one to three years of coursework to introduce and develop academic writing, listening, reading, and speaking skills. By the close of the final course, students were required to construct a ten-page research paper, using scholarly sources, and write at a level approximately equivalent to freshman native speakers. Not only was the skill level students acquired through

these courses astounding, but they were engaging with highly political topics, ranging from air pollution to global warming to the problem of money laundering and global water shortages.

These students were researching and writing about politically geared topics in a social and cultural climate vastly different, in many cases, from their homelands. While these students were busying themselves with in-depth explorations of these topics, many native English-speaking composition and research writing students were explaining how there was nothing they cared about, writing about sports, or discussing a hobby. While both groups were engaged, one was clearly gaining a deeper understanding of topics that are unarguably important when taking one's place in the world as a responsible global citizen.

I had to ask why. Why would students who lived under strict regimes and non-democratic societies be so curious about political issues? And, perhaps more importantly, why were students living in a country founded upon the principles of active civil engagement so willfully ignorant of these conflicts and their decisive role in them? Part of the answer was that students had different life experiences. Many of the students in the Intensive English Program discussed having to wear masks when going out on the streets of their cities, their being restricted from having recess due to air quality, and incentives for planting trees or plants on balconies of high rises. One particular student cited, in her paper discussing global warming, a field trip in high school where she went out of the city to plant trees. She emphasized the impact this experience had on her understanding of environmental issues and her role in them as a young adult. These students were experiencing the effects of 'hot topic' issues while the native speaking students were enjoying (largely) middle to upper-class lifestyle with backyards and state parks. They had consistent access to technology and most were being insulated by the very institution that should have been explaining and showing just how much their world was expanding in these few years at the university and in the next couple as students become professionals.

Additionally, problem-posing education was not modeled in the majority of these native English speaker's writings. And, again, I had to ask why? Why when we performed a reading or analysis of a webpage or video did students simply want to respond to questions on a worksheet and close the proverbial "book?" Why was there so much resistance to open-ended questions or discussions? Why did students avoid asking their own questions and finding answers? It was not because they were avoiding hard work. In fact, remaining silent on their part was probably more stressful- as they sat in their creaking chairs, keeping their phones in their laps and attempting to avoid checking social media while waiting for me to instruct or impose some sort of mind-blowing intellectualism into their beings through visual osmosis. So, eventually, we talked.

Students reiterated an oft-experienced reality in American education: students are told they are learning to critically think, but they are not. According to Jani and Mellinger in "Beyond 'Writing to Learn': Factors Influencing Students' Writing Outcomes," their study revealed that "students wanted to be trained to provide a certain service rather than to be educated to reflect critically on the context of the service being provided. They viewed themselves largely in a passive role as receivers of information" (148). These students, like my own, were struggling to re-conceive their duties as learners. Students' past experiences were framing their present ones- and not in a useful manner. They told me that most of their English classes had often been reading and answering questions about themes, symbolism, character development, or had consisted of sleeping….I could have told them that this was going to be a different kind of English study, but I wanted to engage my students, not tell them.

When I started teaching at community colleges, these types of activities became even more important. Many of these students were more likely to be invested in the community they were learning in, therefore, discussing local politics, policies, and elections held more weight than at some other institutions where I had been instructing. Furthermore, these courses had to evolve to be much more practical in application, particularly regarding the construction of Developmental English courses. Students asked aloud, 'Why do I have to take English if I am going to be a welder, a dental hygienist, a preschool teacher?' Again, I have

learned to justify this in a multitude of ways and to hone instruction so students (hopefully) find value in the education they participate in.

However, to me, the true response arises from McComiskey's argument that "Preparing students for participation in postmodern communal democracies entails providing students with critical cultural knowledge as well as practical rhetorical skills with which to apply that knowledge. For if critical knowledge never enters the flow of public discourse, then it perishes in the silence of its knower" (121). These courses need to teach students how to think, communicate, and usefully critique social processes, figures, and systems in which they are participants as well as the significance of *why*. However, this process must be devoted to allowing students to develop their own critiques and support. If it is reduced to an espousal of beliefs by the instructor or a recitation of those beliefs by the student, the process becomes disingenuous and provides the groundwork for a potential backlash against those ideologies promoted. Instead, honest exploration of issues is crucial for these students, their families, and their communities as they encounter power struggles, policy changes, and enter adulthood.

Teaching in practical avenues has helped inform my pedagogical practices heavily, and I would urge everyone in academia to find a way to practically teach for at least a few years. Working in Developmental and Intensive English programs has helped immensely in this regard, although both are still in academic environments with academic goals informing the curriculum. Both programs require a much more practical approach to the use of English and writing skills. Working with students in these environments reinforced some conclusions in Moss et. al. in "Does Classroom Composition Matter? College Classrooms as Moderators of Developmental Education Effectiveness." According to these scholars, the environment, interaction with fellow students and outside resources, and engagement with the instructor determine the success or failure of Developmental pedagogy practices. My time in these two types of courses has reinforced these conclusions *and* spurred me to incorporate these concerns more reflectively in other classrooms. How could I help students understand that until coming to America one of my international students had only seen forests during field trips to plant trees? How could I interest them in the funding of local before and after school programs within their communities that my community college student was researching? These teaching experiences were two of the most stimulating factors in revising my pedagogical approach to academic writing as a way to develop responsible global citizens.

I began reexamining my instructional practices-sticking staunchly to the syllabus, practicing rhetorical approaches, developing composition skills within the classroom for the classroom- and reflecting more on how to communicate with students as well as how to teach them to communicate. As Mina P. Shaughnessy explains in "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing," I had to "DIV[E] IN… decid[e] that teaching them [to write well] is not only suitable but challenging work for those who would be teachers and scholars in a democracy" (317). I had to revise the way classrooms were constructed for these students, changing them from centers of power and authority to places of questioning and exploring.

The "Why?" and "How come?" questions of childhood had to be encouraged again as they experienced the childhood of their adulthood- and the taboo of questioning in education needed to be broken. Students needed to develop a desire to learn for reasons other than having the right answer or getting a piece of paper at the end of a few years in exchange for a couple of thousand dollars- and I was responsible for aiding in their learning as well as in researching how their learning could or should be useful.

So I continued being a learner, in order to become a better instructor. I had been a teacher long before I had graduated with my credentials, and in realizing this, it struck me that most of my students would (and will) have this experience (of teaching) as well. They might not recognize their roles as teachers- they may be called Coach, a colleague, or a parent- but if they do not learn to be reflective and curious now, then I (and the academy) have failed in teaching them significant life outcomes. As such, students in all of these types

of classrooms deserved to have an education that provides them with career applicable skills, the ability to interact responsibly, and skills to develop an interest in topics that may be new, controversial, or of opposing ideologies to their own.

IMPLEMENTATION

So I started small. I began rethinking prewriting activities. Traditional pedagogical practices urge instructors to use topics and activities with which students can relate and see the significance of. Many educational practitioners recognize the value of incorporating topics students are familiar with as well as referencing contexts where students will apply their classroom practices to create significant learning experiences. A great deal of composition and peer-tutoring pedagogy also stress the importance of allowing students to find their voices. Both of these were going to be highly important in constructing these new activities. Since learning management systems have become such an ingrained part of the majority of college coursework, this seemed to be a good place to allow students to construct their thoughts initially.

As most of the teaching I do is composition or research writing, one of the first activities I developed was asking students to research a political party's platform (of their choice) using the internet. They had to outline the party's most important goals and examine whether there was any explanation provided as to how those aims would be achieved. Students were also required to pose a comment or question to another student's post. The aims of this activity are obvious to most instructors- it is geared to honing critical reading, thinking, and articulating one's thoughts clearly before engaging them with others. Furthermore, using webpages distanced the student from the politics if s/he either identified with or rejected that particular platform. As McComiskey discusses, this asked students to use "writing and culture as dialectical social processes through which they can derive a degree of agency" (25). Students encountered belief systems, agreed or questioned them, and explained why. Furthermore, they were required to begin a dialogue with others in this activity. This asked students to maintain objectivity and respect while discussing sensitive topics- undoubtedly a vastly important skill during professionalization, and for family gatherings.

My classrooms tend to be characterized as a democratic and conversational space. Recently, my concepts of classroom conversation have been reshaped as I have reflected on ways that conversations occur in my IEP (Intensive English Program) classrooms in comparison with my native English-speaking classrooms. Although I have only taught writing courses in the IEP program, these classes are never mutually exclusive and due to my teaching style in particular, my classes incorporate reading, listening, and speaking skills. We have classroom debates, peer review works collectively with a projector, and incorporate listening and speaking skills when learning and reviewing grammar. Occasionally, when a student is having difficulty grasping a concept, I allow another student who speaks his/her native language (if available) to explain the activity or assignment in their first language. The student who was having trouble comprehending the directions must then explain, in English, what the other student clarified for him/her. Activities like these allow students to grow through confusion, interact with one another and in ways where I am not guiding their learning process.

Each of these is important keys to learning that I have honed in peer tutoring sessions with both native English speakers and second (or third) English language users. These practices have transferred into my native English-speaking classrooms as I have worked to accommodate differing learning styles, paces, and agency. In doing so, I have begun using peer 'explainers' to clarify information, review sample essays on a projector, and have students prepare presentations or grammar information sheets within my native English-speaking classes. Motivating students to engage in various ways with complex topics can sometimes be the work of their peers, rather than that of their instructor, or even developed by themselves as they find the niche that makes their work interesting to them. These practices have already been recognized and explicated by Hanson et. al.

However, the implementation of techniques to meet Effective Teaching Principles are worthy of examination and construction as disciplines, fields, and the university system remains in flux in an increasingly globalized academia (Hanson et. al.).

Clarifying the complexities and tangible examples of "hot topic" or "restricted list" ideas often encourages students to significantly learn and critique them. I encourage my writers to engage in what they are passionate or curious about. As they research and write on these topics, like abortion, I encourage them to become more global in their thinking. When we discuss abortion, we research it and analyze countries that have enforced abortion policies or lacked access to abortion. Introducing students to some of the complexities involved in Ireland's repeal of the 8th Amendment began to raise questions of socio-economic status, healthcare availability, and life-or-death situations for pregnant and/or miscarrying women. Using Twitter's #repealthe8th handle to explore some of the personal stories complicated the issue in ways that would not have been attainable in other ways. The personal stories here developed respectful discussions and a face to some abstract concepts that are too often seen in black and white or righteous terms; students found one thread discussing a mother who almost died of sepsis due to a denied abortion that would have left her other two children motherless especially complex (I have since tried to relocate this particular thread unsuccessfully). These discussions are aimed at analyzing issues, becoming educated about what impact they have on individuals, and being able to have civil conversations. Therefore, students of varying skill levels learn to regard the impact of culture (and its codes) as well as how to interact with others respectfully.

Practical aims of our classes work have been especially prioritized, based on what students across varying classrooms have explained in midterm and end of the semester evaluations. Instead of discussing equal opportunity employment specifically, we read stories of interviewers and interviewees and connected them to these policies as justified or problematic. In one unit students responded positively to the examination of an article ("I Won't Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar. Here's Why" by Kyle Wiens) and employee evaluations/observations I have culled from professionals in various fields over the past years. Students see bureaucracy in action (which balances political discussions). This activity and its discussion help emphasize the value of the course and its practical aims. Students begin to see the value of critical thinking, reflection, and professionalism early on in their academic work as they examine professionals being praised for independence, self-motivation, and creative thinking. At other times, students focus on how observations or evaluations are developed- what skills are important and why? How do these skills connect to job performance and policies? We then return to related topics such as equal opportunity, affirmative action policies, and wage rates. The connections between tangible 'real world' activities and university practices have considerable impact on student comprehension and engagement.

Rather than problematizing issues, as some pedagogies require instructors to do, these topics are already controversial. All that is required then is an interest in the topics, the development of an informed opinion on them, and a comprehension of the significance of these issues in action. These key components to more effective classroom practices are present in the blending of cultural studies, transparency in purpose, and clear explanation of goals within lessons outlined in the preceding paragraphs. Students in higher education, in all types of classrooms and classified as various types of learners, deserve the equal advantage these critical thinking, cultural studies based, and professionalization focused activities offer. Furthermore, these discussions create more in-depth discussions regarding cultural values and cultural norm construction than some types of popular cultural analyses or mass media discussions. And, perhaps most importantly, these activities are geared towards connecting students and individuals with abstract topics.

Using or referencing "adulting" activities, as my students like to call them, draws a line between critical thinking, cultural studies, and professionalization amongst a variety of my students. Students are encouraged to express their opinions, engage with one another, and use rhetorical devices in honing and articulating their

thoughts on these topics. Going back to the political party research and discussions, the second step students take is to research particular candidates in order to consider how the knowledge they have acquired may help them usefully in electing officials, participate in performing support roles for a candidate, or in recognizing ways that a particular candidate might help or harm their social status if elected (if students are too young to vote- as in dual enrollment- or are international, they are asked to do the same work in preparation for future participation here or abroad, respectively). I introduce students to the process of registering to vote. If it is election season, or if there is a special election, I offer resources to do research on candidates and their platforms. Additionally, if students show me a picture of themselves at their polling place on the day of the election, I give them extra credit. Students love this activity. It combines selfie-taking, activism, being part of their community, and someone acknowledging their taking steps to become a responsible participating adult- which leads back into one of my priorities (teaching students how to be aware citizens).

The reason I introduce the discussion of extra credit here is twofold. Students are not forced to participate but are encouraged in a 'choose your own adventure' style of classroom design. These extras relate to a desire that Jani and Mellinger detected in their research on college writing practices. Students value assignments that connect "personal experience to course concepts" (150). They also indicated that outside resource use was beneficial and carried over into the likelihood of collaborative work practices in the students' careers. For example, if students have registered to vote on campus, they have often taken their roommates with them or friends from a club they are in. Additionally, while these are not required assignments, they are encouraged and occasionally these types of activities have resulted in students running for student government offices and feeling confident within academia and in their larger socio-political circle.

During the revision of my pedagogy, I have noticed some students resist politics. They have been raised to believe that it is not polite conversation, is a private matter, or is simply something that they have learned and have no desire to explore further or question. So sometimes, being creative and transparent in discussing political topics is required. For example, rather than discussing the student loan debt issue or free college programs, we discuss the advantages and flaws of Rhianna's offer to pay for some students' college semesters with proof of high performance. Approaching topics this way gives students a tangible concept of the political ideal discussed- a practice often used with developmental and second language learners. Additionally, students typically engage more enthusiastically with cultural references they are familiar with, or at least have some background in. Framing political topics within social or cultural circumstances disarm these conversations and often makes students feel less trepidatious. "Edutainment" conducted in this way- with transparency of skill development and justification of chosen cultural referents- achieves two goals that strengthen coursework utilizing political discussions or current events regardless of the classroom or learner type.

There have been some challenges in reenvisioning my classrooms as places for civil, political, global, and social conversations. Perhaps one of the most difficult parts of instruction in this manner arises in determining when to interject in conversations, when to allow students to dialogue, and when to shut down a line of thinking that is on its way to becoming offensive or hurtful. In the world of 'snowflakes,' true conservatives, capitalists, socialists, varying sexualities, and diverse religious adherents, the potential for disagreement is high and the possibility of offense grander when having these types of conversations. Getting to know my students has helped tremendously, as well as fostering a respect for my classroom on their part and an admiration for them on my part. There have been times where I have asked students questions to develop a line of thinking in a way that displays its offense, or potential offense, through metaphor.

Occasionally, I have asked students to hit the 'pause' button, do some research, and report back on their conclusions. For example, in one course we were discussing gun control after a mass shooting and a white, American, conservative, male student insisted that if every female was armed with a gun rape would never occur. We paused his assumptions, and he reexamined them in his research project. He found that

attempting this argument was flawed, logically and according to research. So instead, we developed his argument by examining authoritative resources and constitutional law. This student was still permitted to express his opinion and explore the topic in a passionate manner. However, he was now better informed, more capable of articulating his stance, and aware of some concessions or conflicts with his position. Allowing myself to recognize cultural assumptions that may take place within my classrooms of international students has helped me better comprehend and discuss oppositional viewpoints to my own within other classrooms (for example, avoiding a "What the…?" knee jerk reaction to the previous student's initial position on gun control). Working with students learning a language and cultural code has helped me understand how to develop a 'cultural code' within my classroom to foster more respectful and open engagements.

Even as some students struggle with college adjustments and real-world situations, others excel at college and have simplified homelives. In other words, they are at college to focus on college and are looking to complete the required work to leave with their degree, which is beneficial, goal-oriented learning. However, reaching these students in meaningful ways can sometimes be challenging. Mindsets must be shifted from teaching to a test (or an evaluation) to learning for professional setting use. In this case, using writing to learn can be especially useful. These types of activities invite critical thinking, hypothetical prompts, and are good avenues to allow students to accumulate the work they have done in one area.

Writing to learn also provides space for students to create and explore how their lives connect with their chosen topics or research (Fry and Villagomez). In other words, when exploring topics of global significance, implementing write to learn assignments has allowed students to connect their experience with a family member who has autism with an examination of therapies offered and funded, or a close friend's struggle with cancer that concluded with the challenge of paying her medical bills with a discussion of laws regulating insurance coverage.

For example, a friend of mine wrote "Treating Cancer Patients Like Criminals Won't Solve the Opioid Crisis." This article connects with students on many levels- cancer survivors, opioid crisis experiences, interest in medical careers- and it is a well-written piece easily lending itself to critical thinking and debate about policies, medical treatment, and stereotyping. Students read this article at home and write for a few minutes before we begin a discussion in class regarding what issues are raised, why, and what should/can be done. They are encouraged to incorporate personal experiences in their writings and discussion *if* they concretely connect it with a point from the article. In this case, students write to learn regarding content and practice. In short, students use personal experiences and connections to see the significance of the political topics explored rather than me telling them these ideas and their opinions matter.

Again- this is nothing new. What is new, however, is allowing students to explore those narratives in professionalized and researched writing as a balanced approach, not as a narrative focused assignment. Additionally, encouraging students to express whatever opinion they formed in a well-developed piece to be objectively evaluated, even if it was an unpopular position or one that did not align with the instructor's, could be key in creating professionals who can engage usefully with controversial topics and handle conflicts in the workplace with grace.

PURPOSE OF PEDAGOGY CHANGES

James M. Lang writes that "we see only the tiniest slices of our students' lives, and those tiny slices rarely reveal to us what matters to them most, or what major events or people are shaping their lives right now" (181). He provides much insight and practical advice for teachers early in their careers and for others looking for a refresher. His point here is significant. He also provides an introduction for the extension of this idea: that instructors should be (or are) one of those shapers of students' lives. While Lang is explaining

why school, and perhaps one's course, in particular, may not be the high priority that an instructor desires, he also lays the ground for instructors to reflect on exactly how impactful s/he might be on a specific student or students. Often images of students escaping to schools as the 'greatest hello and the hardest goodbye' are located in identifying ways to be supportive to students who have difficult home lives, most often in grade schools.

However, once a student arrives at college this mindset might become prevalent or arise where it had not been before. Fry and Villagomez, as well as Hanson et. al. and Moss et. al., have found in their research that instructor feedback/engagement is one of the most valued aspects of a college course. It often aids in determining whether a student has a useful or off-putting experience. As such, coming to understand (not judge) students' opinions and aiding them in exploring those stances should be part of our job descriptions (as opposed to indoctrination). Helping students become engaged, political, and responsible citizens can offer them a sense of worth, aid in creating their agency, and empower them during their struggles.

Some will argue that political writing in a composition classroom is a vehicle for the instructor's ideologies or negates student's beliefs. However, when conducted appropriately, students can and should explore ideas that they feel have merit, especially if they differ from those of the instructor. The writer's job in these cases is NOT to convince the reader to agree with him or her, as is so often, unfortunately, espoused as the purpose of college writings. The writer's goal is to explain his/her reasoning well enough that the reader can agree to disagree or at the very least see the merit in the writer's position.

Often, academics may find themselves forgetting that colleges are not designed to produce students who think alike, either with one another or with their instructors. Additionally, faculty may sometimes fail to consider how useful illustrative reasoning may be in fields where disagreement is common, or where growth comes from diverse viewpoints. As such, students who have positions differing from that of the instructor should be encouraged to explore their viewpoints. Perhaps more importantly, in answering this concern, the students who agree with the instructor's ideologies ought to be encouraged to reexamine the issue or topic from a different standpoint or to take up a fresh view for the position's advocacy. This will prevent a student from simply repeating what an instructor may have consciously or subconsciously discussed concerning a particular topic. Both of these strategies allow students to feel validated and encourage intellectual growth as well as composition and rhetorical skill development.

In addition to avoiding the potential indoctrination of students, some concerns arise in whether students are equipped to interrogate such complex topics as politics, religion, and social norms. Some instructors avoid these topics, explaining that students do not yet have the cognitive tools or intellectual backing to discuss them. To these instructors, I would simply ask, if they have not acquired these tools yet, and we will not be introducing them now, when will these students learn? What opportunities will arise for these students to enhance their thought processes? Perhaps this lack of cognitive development is why we have come to be a society that screams at one another in echo chambers of politically reifying social media bubbles, rather than one that can civilly discuss differing political views and develop solutions to complex disagreements. Perhaps our Ivory Tower ought to be servicing students who are not gaining these skills or models in their secondary education classrooms rather than turning tail and saying that the process is too arduous.

CONCLUSION

The recent past of the university system has been characterized by multicultural, inclusive discussions; Writing Across the Curriculum programs; team teaching; interdisciplinary practices; and de- and reconstructionist studies. While the expansion of academia in terms of topics and pedagogical techniques is beneficial to students and faculty alike, considering the connections between these different topics and types of teaching may prove more useful, particularly regarding the potential to hone citizenship, human

relations, and switch-coding skills in graduates. More significantly, if instructors can manage to use their teaching strategies and curriculum across various demographics and courses, perhaps they can stimulate the growth of skills students may well use after graduation, such as critical thinking, communication, and reflective practices regarding interpersonal relationships and in professional settings. Rather than limiting or differentiating students and topics, distributing and adopting classroom techniques, styles, and topics of study may prove more beneficial to a greater number of students. Academia's strength comes from its sponsorship of exploration and connection rather than its differentiation and limitations.

In this learning model, students are exactly that, students. As Clawson and Page explain at the close of their work, "Students should not be 'customers' or 'clients' who are offered a 'product' (an education or, at the very least, a diploma)" (52). They should not be taught politics at all. Instead, what they should learn is self-value, self-confidence, critical thinking, and the ability to hold conversations across battle lines regardless of the setting. Recently, one student who finished a semester of English Composition wrote in her reflection that "Before coming to this class, I didn't care about anything. Now I have topics to care about, and I have reasons why I care about them." If the goal of a college education is to encourage students to be responsible citizens, productive employees, and effective communicators, then arguably, a model such as this used early in a college student's education, sets the stage for a continued communal participation while in residence at the university and hopefully as a more engaged citizen upon graduation.

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