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Teaching Cultural Awareness in a Composition Classroom through Global Collaborative
Projects

Cultural and self-awareness matter. Regardless whether it's students in class or in a workplace, in today's world, people who work with or expect to work with other cultures must not only possess the ability to both acknowledge and understand other cultures and the complexities within those cultures but also have a grasp of their own cultural biases and thought patterns. In order to accomplish this increased awareness, people must interact with foreign cultures on an intimate level as well as with other individuals.

While there are many ways to accomplish this goal, I propose that one of the best ways to not only to increase student cultural fluency but also their self-awareness is to have them participate in collaborative, problem-based projects with groups not only in their own home universities but also in groups from their foreign partner universities.

An Introduction into Existing Theories

Freire believed that students must be made self-aware in order to empower them (Freire 73). As Freire wrote, "A deepened consciousness of their situation leads men to apprehend that situation as a historical reality susceptible of transformation" (Freire 73). In other words, through self-awareness, when people become aware of their cultural biases and personality nuances, they are given the tools to gain more control over their lives, regardless of whether or not they choose to use them. Separating his theory from his politics, I am using Freire's critical consciousness

theory as part of the base of this study. Freire states that “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (Freire 70-71). The primary goals of the global writing project are to stimulate students’ critical thinking ability through challenging them to work through complex writing projects on an international scale and to help them experience the exchange of ideas occurring world-wide via their experiences working with international students, individuals who likely possess very different ideas about things domestic students take for granted in their daily lives.

Community in Writing

In challenging students to work with international students, however, instructors would encourage their students to attempt to break out of their comfort zone into unfamiliar academic territory. Bartholomae says,

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.” (Bartholomae 134)

By needing to write with and for an international audience, students must “invent the university” of this new discourse. It probably will not be a smooth transition. Even for the instructor, who will most likely also need to get used to the new discourse, the reality of needing to alter the way they approach discourse for the purpose of the international writing project will likely take a while for the class to grasp.

Harris says, “We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong” (Harris 12). In other words, our actions and intentions and those of our students are influenced by the communities we are a part of. In the international classroom community I suggest in this proposal, students will acquire new beliefs, concerns, and practices (or, at least, either modify or reaffirm old ones) through exposure to a new community.

Contact Zone

It is on this note of communities I will also be applying the concept of the contact zone. Coined by Mary Louise Pratt in 1991, she explains that it refers to “...social spaces where cultures, meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power...” (Pratt 34). Bizzell elaborates upon this, saying, “A ‘contact zone’ is defined primarily in terms of historical circumstances. It is circumscribed in time and space, but with elastic boundaries” (Bizzell 166).

Pratt generally considers the contact zone to contain positive interactions, but she acknowledges that such interactions did not always go smoothly. She says, “In the absence of community values and the hope of synthesis, it was easy to forget the positives; the fact, for instance, that kinds of marginalization once taken for granted were gone” and that “No one was excluded and no one was safe” (Pratt 39). When there are enough differences between the participants in a contact zone, unavoidable issues are likely to crop up. For example, if half the students are from an immensely conservative evangelical religious culture and the other half are atheists, if religion were to be brought up in a class conversation, things could get unpleasant. If

people from different enough backgrounds and personalities come together into one contact zone, the contrasts and people's inability to accept the contrasts could lead to negative interactions in the face of a lack of common ground.

On this note, in Miller's 1994 study, Miller discusses the academic reaction to an inflammatory student paper, "Queers, Bums and Magic," submitted in a "pre-college-level community college composition course" (Miller 392). This paper and the widespread academic reaction to it is an example of the kind of conflict that can occur in a contact zone. Miller continues to say that the response to this incident "...dramatize how little professional training in English Studies prepares teachers to read and respond to the kinds of parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, and regressive writing that gets produced by students writing in the contact zone of the classroom" (Miller 394). In other words, while contact in the contact zone can often be beneficial, negative interactions could occur and, when they do, teachers are often unprepared to deal with them. However, Miller goes on to say, building from the concept of no one being entirely "safe" in a contact zone, that "the point of having such discussions...is neither to establish a community where a simple pluralism rules and hate speech is just one of its many voices, nor is it to create an environment that is relentlessly threatening, where not feeling safe comes to mean the same thing as feeling terrified" (Miller 395-396). After describing a series of posters on the topic of rape and feminism he found on his campus, Miller discusses another example of inflammatory writing-based class conversation, stating that, "the value of pursuing such issues in a writing course is that it helps illustrate the fact that no writing situation is without its conventions, nor is any writer ever fully able to control these conventions" (Miller 403).

In the context of my study, I will focus in particular on the contact zone of a freshman composition course classroom, where students will not only interact with their fellow peers and the instructor but also create a new contact zone of a foreign classroom. In the case of the international writing project, participants will bring to bear their previous misconceptions, biases, personalities, etc. on the project. This could lead to some learnable complications in the process.

The Benefits of Intercultural Collaborative Writing Projects

Freire advocates encouraging students to become more self-aware and prone to critical thinking in order to empower them (Freire 73). Self-awareness often results from students being encouraged—often by teachers—to evaluate other people and, by extension, themselves. As a part of group intercultural writing projects, this awareness takes place in two waves. First, students are instructed to work with a group of other people for longer periods of time, thereby exposing themselves to different viewpoints and ideally encouraging them to reevaluate their own viewpoints for the sake of cohesion. Second, students are further forced to work with people from other cultures, whose very differences in terms of mannerisms and expectations also prompts self-evaluations.

In other words, students enter into three overlapping contact zones, one within their domestic classroom, one within the foreign classroom, and one which connects the two classrooms. The domestic contact zone contains the American students and their teacher. Within this contact zone, the students interact with their domestic group members as well as their teacher. In the foreign classroom contact zone, the international students likewise interact with their own domestic group members and teacher. However, in the third contact zone, the students from both classes interact with their foreign group members as well as with the foreign teacher.

Within these contact zones, student expectations, personalities, and backgrounds interact with each other. While these interactions may not always be good, they are certainly learning experiences which will encourage students to evaluate themselves more closely than perhaps what they are used to doing. Also, through interacting with students and teachers from different backgrounds, students gain new ideas and perspectives to which they had not previously been exposed.

Characteristics of a Good Intercultural Collaborative Project

Regardless of the specific flavor of intercultural collaborative project used, there are some specific qualities that make up a successful project. These qualities include a willing set of universities, teachers already well-versed with or comfortably learning about international nuances and issues, and project designs which encourage students to actively collaborate rather than simply parcel out responsibilities.

A Willing Set of Universities

Before an international collaborative project can even begin, there must be two universities with administrations willing not only to allow the project but also support it. Without both schools cooperating, organizing a project which would require real-time interactions with students across the ocean from each other would be difficult, if not likely impossible due to the technical and political intricacies of setting it up and maintaining it. Therefore, the extended campus coordinators of both participating schools or whoever has final authority over whether such a project could take place should be willing to support it all the way through.

A Teacher Well-Versed in Intercultural Nuances and Issues

On a smaller level, not all teachers are well-suited to overseeing this kind of project. If the teacher him or herself is not comfortable or familiar with dealing with other cultures on a

personal level, they might not be able to properly instruct their students about how to navigate through the often murky waters of intercultural relations and issues. In an intercultural collaborative project, teachers would have to not only work around more technical issues like varying levels of access to technology between the schools and different school schedules but also more subtle complications like differences in cultural values and perceptions (Boehm and Aniola-Jedrzejek 7-9).

In fact, a lack of understanding of this variety will not only prevent students from properly engaging and learning from the project but also perhaps even prompt them to become more reluctant to deal with other cultures at any level. If a teacher projects his or her own values onto their students, especially without taking into consideration value and perception differences, they could risk alienating the international students and teachers and reducing the effectiveness of the collaboration. For example, if an American teacher assigns a project and uses a timeline based exclusively on the American school schedule even though the international participants follow a schedule which has the semester starting earlier, the international students would be forced to rush through the project or have it interfere with their remaining school work, something that could be especially challenging if the international class is using English as their second language.

In order for this sort of project to work, the teacher needs to have a solid foundation in intercultural relations. By “a solid foundation in intercultural relations,” I mean experience in dealing with international cultures. Ideally, a teacher managing this sort of international collaborative project should have some experience interacting with people from other cultures, thereby gaining an awareness of not only the differences in values, habits, etc. in the people they interacted with but also of their own. Furthermore, these teachers also should feel comfortable

encouraging students to reevaluate their own self-identities in terms of what they take for granted in their lives such as their personal values, perception of events, etc.

However, as many people do not have access to people from other countries and cannot afford to travel to other countries, either due to financial limitations or due to having family or financial obligations, this ideal is not likely to occur. In lieu of the ideal, however, teachers should be able to adapt to dealing with cultural differences (ranging from value differences to variations in perception of various things like deadline expectations and collaboration techniques) and be at least somewhat aware of their own biases and tendencies. Lacking this self-awareness and ability to adapt would make dealing with students from other cultures as well as foreign educational institutions difficult as the cultural nuances of both could be radically different from what the teacher is used to. For example, international students could come from a value system which places a higher emphasis on collective behavior over individual or perhaps finds more value in nonverbal communication over verbal. Or, in the case of foreign educational institutions, perhaps the teaching methods are more memorization based rather than analytical or the school year is set up differently.

A teacher can acquire these competencies by reading up on other international cultures, particularly on the education systems, cultural expectations, and value systems of the culture they expect to interact with through their project. They can also seek out those who hold differing perspectives than those they themselves hold and analyze their reactions to those interactions. This will allow them to see what kinds of biases they hold as well as make them more aware of where they come from culturally. As Edward T. Hall says about his own intercultural experiences in *Beyond Culture*, he would never have become aware of the more

subtle nuances of his own culture (such as our perception of time, for example) if he had not had the opportunity to interact with members of other cultures (44).

However, unless a teacher is already inclined towards these behaviors, they would be less likely to take them up in order to do this sort of project. Furthermore, teachers who are unwilling to deal with other cultures or have too strong a bias against people from other cultures—conscious or subconscious—are unlikely to accept such a position and should not be pressured into doing it. This strong bias would manifest in a strong aversion to having to interact with those too different from themselves.

Active Collaborative Project Designs

Finally, in order for an international collaborative project to have the most benefit for students, the project should be designed so that students must actively collaborate with each other in order to achieve project goals. If students are able to parcel out individual responsibilities and then put them together piecemeal without any real interaction, the benefits of the project diminish. Therefore, there needs to be some sort of mechanism which requires students to actively discuss things with their classmates in order for the project to properly conclude.

Suggestions for Theoretical Intercultural Collaborative Projects

Diane Boehm and Lilianna Aniola-Jedrzejek describe four different variations of intercultural collaborative projects they have used previously in their classes. These include a collaborative research project, “[i]ntercultural [i]nterviews and peer [r]eview,” “[c]ontrast/comparison of the job market for targeted jobs in both countries,” and “[i]ntercultural [i]nteractions [u]sing Critical Incidents, based on the Cushner and Brilin model of Critical Incidents” (15). In the last kind, students were told to develop an international issue scenario, for

which students were to come up with through research and collaboration several response scenarios. Finally, they had to justify each response scenario and present the results of their research to their international class. My particular collaborative writing project suggestion adheres most closely to the collaborative research project, though it shares some aspects of the second and last varieties.

Project 1: A Collaborative Writing Project with a Sister University

My first suggestion for a theoretical project assumes that the university in question has a strong relationship with a university abroad that either has English as their first language or has a strong English as a Second Language program. Such a university would already have an established relationship with the sister university through exchange programs and therefore would be able to more easily set up a collaborative writing project through existing contacts within the sister university. If a university or college did not have a sister university, they could seek out other universities who would be willing to participate in the project. Another alternative is using classes of international students through private educational institutions that serve business people and other non-traditional students. The most important things would be that, first, the students have a high enough language proficiency to undertake the project and, second, that whatever institution the class originates from is willing to go through with the assignment as specified by the instructor.

Assuming a more traditional sister university situation, this first project type would take place in two primary parts, the work the domestic students would accomplish within their home university collaborative groups and the work accomplished in cooperation with groups in the sister university. Having two separate parts to the project allows for a multi-layered collaborative experience. In essence, the separate parts allows for students to interact within the three contact

zones previously described (both their domestic and international zones), as opposed to just one (the domestic zone).

Domestic Collaborative Work

The domestic side of the international collaborative writing project could have multiple parts to it. In order to properly prepare to work with students from other cultures as well as to encourage self-analysis and reflection, several components must be included in the project outside of just the main writing project.

Collaborative Research on Culture

First, in preparation for the main writing project, small groups of domestic students should be assigned to research a relevant aspect of their own country's culture. This could include nonverbal communication, writing style differences, history, religion, politics, current events, etc. The idea is to allow students to gain a familiarity with the culture they are to interact with for a sizable amount of time so as to make the collaborative process hopefully more smoothly. How in-depth and varied this research could be greatly depends on the number of students in the class as well as the amount of time devoted to this project. Obviously, if there is only a period of a couple weeks to prepare for and execute the project, this step will be relatively brief.

During this step, small groups of student will be assigned a topic and be required to collaboratively write a short essay and then present it to both the domestic class and the international class. This will give students additional collaborative writing, research, and public speaking experience. To optimize participation and student effort, I would recommend giving it a significant grade value.

Self-Reflection

Throughout the entirety of the writing project, students should be required to write daily self-reflections. The contents of these will most likely vary, but they should include some sort of analysis of their own behavior in the collaborative projects, some issues they are experiencing, things they are learning (or, perhaps, not learning), etc. The challenge of requiring student self-reflection, if done in a first-year composition class, will be to get students to write honestly but also to write thoroughly and completely. In order to prepare them for this, self-reflection should be required throughout the semester with this project being scheduled after midterms so as to give students enough time to get used to doing self-reflection.

Peer Review

Similarly, students should also learn to analyze other students' performance and behavior. Either throughout the project or at strategic points during and after the project, students should be required to analyze each other's performance through peer review. This helps them further acquire useful critical thinking skills as well as encourages them to reflect on their own behavior further.

These peer reviews would take the form of standardized worksheets allowing them to assign some sort of numerical value on a 1-10 scale to specific categories of their group members' behaviors, including cooperativeness, timeliness, adherence to the assignment, etc. In addition, there should be spaces for further comment, which students should be encouraged to use. Through using these peer review sheets, students not only hold themselves accountable to the teacher but also to their group members.

Collaborative Work with Sister University

There is no one exclusive way to coordinate this part. The actual nature of the collaborative work with the sister university would vary depending on which sister university the class would be interacting with as well as where that university is located. For the purposes of this particular project design, as any future research will take place at Missouri State University, I will assume that the sister university is located in China and that the participant class will be from one of the advanced English language courses in its English department.

One of the things to keep in mind with arranging this sort of project is that in order for it to succeed, both the American students and the foreign students must mutually benefit from whatever the project is. On this note, for the particular project design I will describe, both the Chinese students and the American students gain self-reflection and collaborative skills. The Chinese students have the added benefit of improved oral and written English

Collaborative Writing Project

The variety and complexity of the collaborative writing project will probably vary depending on what level writing class this project takes place in as well as the duration. However, for the purpose of this proposal, we will assume that the class in question is first-year composition. This part of the project would take place in conjunction with the Chinese English class.

The premise for this writing project is a research project on a topic both the American and Chinese group members agree upon at the start of the project. This topic would focus on a current event or issue relevant to both the American and Chinese students. After the groups decide upon their topics, they will research and compose a paper, which they will then present to their respective classes as an international group. Throughout the entire process, all small groups

will be expected to keep in contact with each other through Skype, instant message, emails, etc. Small group presentations would take place in the form of Skype conferencing at prearranged times and be presented to both classes simultaneously.

Project Sequence

This project would take at least four weeks. Anything shorter than that and the projects would most likely have to be reduced in scope. Shortly before the first week, students would be assigned the domestic collaborative writing project. In this time, the groups would also be introduced to their foreign counterparts.

During the first week, students would present their papers on their assigned domestic culture topics to both classes. This will allow both the American students and the Chinese students to not only learn more about each other's culture but also to give them additional time to get to know each other a little better. The students would choose their main paper topics after the presentations.

For the rest of the second week and up through the first part of the fourth week, the international groups would work on their paper. The project would wrap up with the global presentations. Throughout the project, students should reflect on their experiences and fill out peer reviews on their group members.

Goals and Benefits

The goal of international intercultural collaborative projects is two-pronged. First, students will produce through collaboration a final longer written project. Second, they will write self-reflection journals throughout the project in order to analyze their experience. These goals should benefit them in multiple ways, both academically and professionally.

Students could learn a lot from international collaboration. First, by interacting with students from different cultures as well as those within their own groups within intertwined contact zones, students might be more inclined to evaluate their own behaviors and biases after they become aware of how the other group members and international students behave in relation to their own behavior. By having students research current topics and issues relating to both countries, differences in opinion could arise that would lead to greater awareness. This awareness of the difference in viewpoints and behavior triggers an almost involuntary tendency towards self-evaluation and analysis, achieving the sort of self-awareness Friere promoted. Even if the students graduate and then go on to never interact with another international person again, they will benefit from the increased self-awareness as it will ideally permit them to make better decisions about their career and hopefully react more maturely about difficult conflicts in agreement.

The second prong of the goal of this kind of exercise is to give students more collaborative experience. Regardless of what career students end up in, they will have to work in collaborative settings at some point in their life. When they get to these situations, they need to be able to handle the fact that not everyone will agree with their opinions or come from the same background. Therefore, by having students work both in groups in their own university and then work within that group with another group in a foreign university, they will get an in-depth experience working with all sorts of backgrounds and personalities.

Project 2: A Collaborative Writing Project with Domestically Located Students

A variation on my first project suggestion, instead of using international students currently located in a foreign country, is to involve a class from the local version of the English Language Institute (ELI). In this version, instead of collaborating via the internet, students would

be able to collaborate in person. This would eliminate many of the technology based issues as well as any issues concerning different time zones and academic schedules. Additionally, as the ELI students would have already been exposed to American culture and educational practices, they would have an easier time adjusting to working with American students.

The basic requirements of this project version would remain the same as for the first, including the two essays, the peer reviews, and the self-reflection. Less time, however, would be spent on setting up the technology and rigid Skype times, thereby allowing students more time to work on their projects. Also, the very process of setting up the project would be more streamlined as instead of having to work with multiple people in multiple countries, the teacher would only have to work with the ELI Institute. Either project should accomplish the aforementioned academic goals.

Discussion

Some Limitations of This Proposal

Theory always works in theory. However, when it is applied to real life situations, theories can sometimes fall apart. As the suggestions I gave are backed up solely by secondary sources and theory, the results may not be the same as expected. Without personally doing case studies and longer term observation, I cannot say for sure if any of these suggestions would work. However, all of my practice theories are solidly based in psychological, educational, and professional resources, most of which are based off of primary research of the kind I have mentioned.

Some Potential Limitations of Intercultural Writing Collaborative Projects

The specific environmental differences between schools and the personality differences between students can have a significant impact on the inherent success of any intercultural

writing collaboration. For example, a university with access to foreign student populations and the will and financial wherewithal to proceed with such a project will be more successful than a project taking place at a university with few foreign students, little money, and even less will to carry out the kinds of things necessary to implementing intercultural education.

Student Resistance

Humans generally see the world through their own cultural lens. Without prior exposure to other cultures and other ways of life, humans typically have a lot of difficulty adjusting their viewpoints if asked to do so suddenly and therefore might resent the process. Additionally, humans generally dislike uncertainty and doubt and sometimes absolutely despise change. As self-awareness is often cultivated by evaluating oneself in context with others and, by extension, questioning and then changing one's own beliefs and habits as a result of that evaluation, humans in general naturally resist being forced into situations in which critical thinking is mandatory. Additionally, as writing courses, especially lower level writing courses, are often mandatory, students do not see anything they do in writing courses to be useful or the least bit pleasant.

Institutional Resistance

In addition to student resistance, there also might be institutional resistance. Especially in freshman composition courses, there are a set of objectives that must be accomplished within the course. As these objectives take precedence over anything else, institutions might not be entirely willing to change entire courses or programs to have an intercultural emphasis. Also, instructors themselves might not be entirely willing to change their curriculum for a multitude of reasons including, perhaps, their own sense of discomfort toward international collaboration.

Future Areas for Study

Due to the limited and highly theoretical nature of this study, my suggestions may work better in theory than in practice. Classroom implementation of these ideas would be able to determine which parts work best as well as which ones need to be adjusted in accordance with particular school policies and personalities. Some of these ideas would work better than others in certain settings. For example, if a school did not have a strong exchange program and therefore had no relationship with a foreign university through which to organize global collaborative projects, alternatives would have to be found.

More broadly, international collaboration's effect on student self-awareness needs to be researched further. Ideally, this research would take place in the form of a case study in which students in an actual freshman composition course would complete a project similar to that described in this essay. Through additional research, projects and perhaps entire courses could be developed to help students become more self-aware through both global and local collaboration.

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