Why We Need Cross-Cultural Differences in the Writing Class

Sarah Coprich Johnson

How did Billy pass EH 101?

This question was scrawled on a short note that I found in my mailbox one afternoon as I rushed to class. I looked at the note for some time. I was surprised and troubled by it.

Although Billy's 102 teacher stated that she only asked a question about Billy's performance in 101 because she was concerned about how she should instruct him in her class, I found the whole matter upsetting. Did this teacher consider a passing 101 grade for Billy inappropriate, inaccurate or unfair?

Comments that followed when she poked her head into my office one afternoon after she submitted the note were even more disturbing. "People like Billy usually know not to enroll in my class. They know that I have very high standards," she said. "Billy is sort of like a foreigner without a passport. He won't pass my course."

Billy was just an ordinary student in terms of the students that I teach each term. He was the son of working class parents, a member of the university soccer team, and a friendly young man who seemed committed to succeeding at the university on and off the soccer field.

Writing, however, did not come very naturally or very easily for Billy. He seemed happy, however, to be at the university and he evidenced a great motivation in my class to overcome his writing problems.

Determined to succeed in EH 101, Billy revised several drafts and regularly received assistance at the departmental Writing Center. After much personal effort and much instruction Billy's writing improved and he earned the grade of "C."

To me there was nothing particularly significant about Billy or the grade that he earned. I had taught several such students.

Billy's 102 teacher, however, was determined to make a point to me as well as to Billy about how she felt about his inability to function within her class. She met with Billy early in the term and let him know that she did not feel that he would pass the course. She also made it clear that she had very high standards and he simply did not fit.

Discouraged and confused, Billy dropped by my office one afternoon to let me know that he was not doing very well in 102 and that he had withdrawn and enrolled in another 102 class. At the end of the term he returned to report that he had passed the course.

The dilemma was over for Billy, but not for me. I was still puzzled. Why did I see so much potential in Billy in the

101 class when his 102 teacher saw absolutely no hope for him in "her" class? Why did this happen? What did it all mean?

Kurt Spellmeyer defines this sort of dilemma as a cultural rather than an individual one. He argues that some freshman writing teachers are committed to a kind of radical cultural politics that too often serves to transform them into "therapeutic critics" who serve rather "harsh medicine" (qtd. in Trimbur 115). Rather than inviting students to enter the conversation of professional and academic discourse as recommended by some composition researchers, Spellmeyer suggests that writing teachers should "reimagine" the conversation in the classroom as an encounter between the two cultures and "life-worlds" that populate writing classes, those of specialized practitioners ("us" the teachers) and ordinary people ("them" the students).

Spellmeyer helps me see more clearly what happened between Billy and his first 102 teacher. Two unlike life-worlds and cultures collided in the writing class when Billy and the 102 teacher encountered each other. The teacher immediately recognized the division and "unlikeness" of the worlds as indicative of the fact that Billy would not be able to easily "enter the conversation." This situation created tension. How would such a student be taught? Who placed her in this uncomfortable position? What strategy could she use to move Billy from what Spellmeyer calls "general citizenship" to the commmunity of the "academically" competent? (qtd. in Trimbur 113).

Recognizing that the writing class is often a site where two cultures collide and where seemingly incommensurable discourses encounter each other, Spellmeyer says that the task of teaching writing is often difficult and painful. He likens the process to that of childbirth, but boldly asserts that as a teacher he wants to "assist at delivery," and that he is "not afraid of hard labor" (Trimbur 115).

David Bartolomae describes the cross-cultural conflict that often occurs between teachers and students in writing classes as "inventing the university." Explaining the struggle that students experience, he says:

> Every time a students 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 . . . 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. . . . They must learn to speak our language. Or they must dare to speak it, or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is "learned." And this, understandably, causes problems. (273)

Patricia Bizzel says that there is a need for the academic discourse community to broaden its boundaries so that more people will be able to benefit from becoming participants in its conversations. To reinforce her idea she criticizes E. D. Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy by suggesting that any "unitary national discourse" will limit the group of people who will have access to it in terms of race, sex, and social class (663).

I strongly believe that we must give all of our students an opportunity to learn from us, and we must also give ourselves an opportunity to learn from all of our students. When we spend time deploring the great number of students who come to writing classes with social experiences and linguistic habits that are unlike our own, and engage in wringing our hands in self-righteous anguish about how little students know and fit into our modes of understanding with regard to language and writing, we deny ourselves the opportunity to experiment and to learn more about how to teach writing to such students, and we deny ourselves the opportunity to learn more about students, ourselves and the world around us.

I am encouraged as a teacher by such writers as Shirley Brice Heath, Donald Murray, and Paulo Freire who challenge me to learn from students who represent social and cultural worlds unknown to me and to work toward empowering such students to reach beyond the boundaries of their discourse communities to join a larger one. Heath, writing about the value of cultural and linguistic experiences, for example, encourages me to explore and create conditions within the classroom that help students use their experiences as springboards for writing. Murray, in sharing his writing stories, challenges me to think of ways to use student stories and lived experiences as vehicles for building on what Mikhail Bakhtin and others recognize as the social nature of learning. And Freire, in emphasizing the power of the oppressed and marginalized, causes me to think of how I can move students--who in many ways represent the margins in terms of their familiarity and use of academic discourse--closer to the center, using student voices and student ways of seeing and knowing as useful tools for learning.

As a teacher and as a writer I recognize that sometimes writing does not come naturally or very easily. I want all of my students--weak and strong, different and familiar--to recognize, however, that it is really possible to make it through the swamps of pain and struggle as beginning writers to the clearing--the place and the time when writing becomes meaningful and more joy than pain, so I grapple constantly for ways to avoid negative devices which cripple student interest and initiative.

What does all of this mean in terms of the conflict that occurred between Billy and his 102 teacher? How does this conflict inform our teaching and thinking concerning cross-cultural differences and the teaching of writing?

Based upon my own experiences as a writing teacher in confronting a wide variety of students, and based upon the information that we now have from composition researchers and theorists regarding the value of cross cultural differences in helping teachers learn more about students and about ways to develop accommodating pedagogical practices, I am more convinced than ever before that we need cross cultural differences in our classes. Contrary to the belief of some, differences do not have to serve as barriers within our classes or as signals that foreigners are about to invade our classroom settings. Cross-cultural differences can serve to broaden teacher and student knowledge, as both teachers and students learn more about each other. They can provide a wide experience base from which class discussions can grow and develop. And they can serve to assist students in developing interesting topics for papers based upon social and cultural experiences, and provide a wealth of information regarding which pedagogical strategies will best help us achieve our goal of producing a rich harvest of clear

and meaningful student writing.

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