

Write from the Heart (*Escribe desde el corazón*): Connect Lived Experiences to First-Year Writing Curriculum

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This Instructional Note, grounded in Latin American cultural values, offers “wise practices” for instructors to connect lived experiences to course curriculum, encourage authentic voice and “home language practices,” and treat students as extended family to reduce academic isolation.

The purpose of this Instructional Note is to provide instructors with “wise practices” (Wesley-Esquimaux and Calliou 31) that connect lived experiences to course content and encourages students to use their voice and home language practices in an essay that can blend genres of narrative and realistic fiction to “count experience as knowledge in writing classrooms” (Gallagher and Messer 152). The importance of the family unit, brought to life with the popular saying “Family first” (*la familia primero*), provides a motivational context for a wise practice approach, and instructors can regard students as extended families to reduce academic isolation. This Instructional Note is grounded in contemporary conversation regarding justice-centered pedagogies and decolonial rhetorics and presents an important message for two-year writing instructors, given our commitment to democratic education and current institutional agendas, to increase student persistence and completion.

Teaching Problem

Latin American cultural values can conflict with the dominant lens of academia, because home language practices are usually unwelcomed at school by curriculum standards. Typically, the academy enforces the code of Standard English. Other codes of English exist, but these are deemed only appropriate in home or social contexts or as fit for private uses (Haydee par. 1). A bilingual student in my English class noted, “It’s only a problem to speak more than one language in an English course.” I replied, “Concentrate on your assets and aspirations.” Students should be approached in a caring way that allows time to develop a literacy connecting lived experiences to curriculum. This Instructional Note weaves theory and praxis together to offer a clear, concise message on creating an inclusive writing space for all students, specifically

Latine students, who may feel isolated in the college classroom when their rhetorics do not align with the hegemonic rhetoric of academia.

Literature Review

The literature review is grounded in interdisciplinary areas including composition studies, cultural studies, intercultural rhetoric, higher education, and literature to ground the Instructional Note as a whole. “Many institutional spaces were not designed for students of color” (Enríquez-Loya and Leon 212). Specifically, addressing the impression of the Latinx population as “Other”¹ within English departments is a complex challenge. It often involves fostering a more inclusive curriculum that incorporates diverse perspectives, authors, and voices from literature and culture.

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for open dialogue, understanding, and representation can encourage a more inclusive environment within these institutions. Additionally, advocating for diverse faculty representation and support for cultural initiatives can further contribute to inclusivity.

To lessen academic isolation, students need a reliable and familiar support system and a “community of support (in other words, a family)” (Browdy et al. 14). Many underlying structures and practices of higher education institutions overlook

the “cultural values of low-income, first-generation Latinx students,” including the prioritization of familial connections and obligations (Covarrubias 3). Instructors should be aware of the importance of (*familia*) (Guerra 186) in the lives of students. Familism impacts daily classroom practices.² Instructors can accordingly craft a composition pedagogy with Latinos in mind (Barajas 216). Instructors should consider utilizing a pedagogical intervention described in “*Familismo Teaching*”;³ this approach forms class families (teams of four or five students) “to develop content knowledge and skills while simultaneously enhancing their most precious sociocultural value, the family” (Sánchez et al. 111–12). Including Latine authors in English course curriculum can build inclusivity: “My embrace of it is thrilling especially because we will be the first to use ‘Latine’ on a book’s cover” (Guzmán 13). In class discussions, Guzmán’s explanation of Latine is highlighted since it sheds light on course materials. Instructors should be aware of cultural values and establish pedagogical interventions that support and welcome home language practices in FYW courses to establish a real connection with students.

Writing teachers should consider “how to teach writing in ways that do not privilege a monolingual, Standard or Edited American English measure of writing” (Baca et al. 1–2). Instructors can contemporize curriculum. Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young asserts, “code-meshing may be the best new way to do English” (Young et al. 9). Instructors can utilize code-meshing as part of their instructional framework.⁴

Specifically, “with respect to ELLs there is undeniable and growing evidence that the home language of ELLs is of considerable benefit to their overall academic success” (Genesee), and “maintaining children’s cultural and linguistic heritages leads to stronger identity development and long-term academic success (Ramírez par. 2). Instructors should welcome home language practices and cultures while student choice about what to write should also be paramount. Abundant writing choices, topics, and strategies should be sprinkled throughout the course. Sommers recognized, “when we asked students about their wise freshman writing experiences, they described opportunities to write about something that matters to them, whether in Chicano literature or Italian” (141). Students can decide what, when, why, where, and how they want to write instead of trying to write only the way their instructor wants them to write. When students feel supported and comfortable, they tell the story they want.

Personal Narratives and Culturally Relevant Storytelling

Storytelling occurs in all cultures and exists to entertain, to inform, and to keep cultural values and traditions alive. Storytelling within composition classrooms “dismantles intra-disciplinary hierarchies and stale genre prescriptions” (Enríquez-Loya qtd. in Barajas 218). Narratives “need to be privileged for Latinos, and personal narratives in particular must not be displaced by the conventions of academic discourse if writing instruction is to mitigate the alienation that thwarts Latino academic success” (Enríquez-Loya qtd. in Barajas 218). To encourage this academic success, instructors can introduce personal narratives that utilize culturally relevant storytelling to connect lived experiences to curriculum. The story provides a glimpse into the storyteller’s life. “Storytelling is an epistemic practice, and . . . storytelling and narration serve similar, if not the same, purpose as academic writing, drawing on the lived experiences of the writer” (Medina 96). In class, shared power dynamics can encourage students to positively want to share their cultural knowledge through storytelling.

“Developing a thorough understanding of culturally responsive/relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010) is indispensable to the work that each of us do in the service of our students” (Sims 91), and students can fully participate when they know and feel that their cultures and personal narratives will be welcomed, appreciated, and valued. “Our narratives contribute to the ‘everyday praxes’ by foregrounding lived experiences of individuals who are complex assemblages of difference” (Chairez et al. 55). Some students may feel more comfortable discussing their stories whereas others may feel more comfortable writing their stories. Writing instructors should consider how “these writing and pedagogical differences originate from different rhetorical traditions especially concerning the styles and rhetorical purposes of writing, as opposed to orality (Valdés, 1996; Leon-Portillo, 1996; Thatcher, 2006)” (Thatcher et al. 63), and how this may conflict with writing curriculum.

Instructors can prioritize and/or highlight the cultural value of orality in course curriculum by encouraging students to orally share and then write their stories. Recognizing the cultural importance of sharing authentic stories among families and people whom they trust may encourage academic success with a sentiment of care.

An Innovative Pedagogical Intervention: Students as Extended Family (*La familia extendida*)

In our caring classroom, student writing is continually supported by instructor presence, peer collaboration, co-construction/modification of assignments, instructor-student conferencing / weekly check-ins, and confidence that as soon as students enter the classroom, they are extended family (*La familia extendida*). Treating students as extended families can lessen the isolation they may feel from academia by manifesting the importance of a caring classroom family that bridges personal and academic lives. Language such as “our family” and “we” are used in course documents to reflect this supportive extended family in the course. The complete person is welcome, and students can use language as they do in their homes. Students are encouraged to do their best, be true to themselves, and feel comfortable creating authentic writing. Including students as extended family impacts all course activities and shows care. Our class’s mantra is “we are extended family—jump right in and add a layer to the conversation.” Layering, an enhanced cultural view of interruptions, can encourage participation.

Students can begin their transformative educational journey with the support and encouragement of this group configuration: extended families. They begin to feel more comfortable and share their unique stories because they feel supported and thus can begin to build trust. Some deeply personal experiences may be disclosed. For example, in the course’s final evaluative letter, a biracial student described isolation and how she learned to connect lived experiences to writing:

I also arrived at another sad realization that writing had become a selfless work chore. In the pursuit of managing corporate chaos, emails, and presentations were so professionally polished and reminiscent that my individual voice was lost along the way. I was dumbfounded and must have stared blankly at the first assignments to simply write about ourselves. It was uncomfortable to start writing or sharing about myself at any level. My own advice to my sons, “To be authentic is to be boldly vulnerable” reminded me to apply the same advice for my own writing.

Students should “know and feel” that their voice matters in the classroom and to use that voice. We are who we are with no artificial separations between our personal/school lives. Our classroom is our shared space where all voices are welcomed and appreciated—no apology for who I was in the past, who I am now, and who I will be in the future. Students can advocate for themselves and read what they choose according to their academic needs.

Our Course Materials

Students should have options to choose meaningful course materials, so they begin to overcome artificial classroom boundaries. In Canvas, links to “sources” are provided by the instructor and former/current students, and they are continually added during the quarter. “Students are actively looking for readings to bring in to help each other think, challenge their preconceived notion, and develop their writing” (Gallagher and

Messer 157). When students see themselves in course materials, academic isolation can be lessened. Students are asked to explore identity and grapple with materials through course discussion. As one Latine student posted, “A just classroom incorporates diverse perspectives and inclusive curriculum, ensuring that all students see themselves represented in the material they study. It also provides opportunities for students to explore various cultures, histories, and experiences, broadening their understanding of the world around them.” Students can explore and work through the process of describing who they are and who they hope to become. Sharing your story can also highlight fairy tales, folklore, or biographies that can be added to course materials.

Cultural Narrative Essay Instructions

To reach Latine students and to ensure awareness of cultural values, instructors can share stories of their own childhoods. For instance, my dad never gave me a direct answer to a question. He told me a story about an aunt or a cousin and relied on folklore such as *El Cucuy* (Higuera) and *La Llorona* as a warning. Some might consider this type of storytelling fabrication, but I understood life from my family’s stories. Authentic storytelling shows students who you are, which can build trust and start amazing course discussions.

Essay #1: Write a narrative (an essay that tells a personal story) in 700 to 1,000 words. Use **one** source from our course materials collection as a basis or rationale for telling your story. This story should encompass cultural elements from your background, such as details about your childhood, home, discourse community, space, rhetorical practices, and family members. Use narrative details such as the five senses to bring life to the story. If warranted, tell the story in chronological order. In the last paragraph, explain to the audience if the narrative is “absolute truth” or if some embellishment is used, and if your distinction between “absolute truth” and “small lies” makes a significant impact. Please attempt to follow APA/MLA guidelines. All languages, language use, and multi-modes are accepted. **Note:** include footnotes/translations (when possible) to encourage audience comprehension.

We have discussed the following passage to illustrate storytelling techniques that students may choose to creatively use in their essays:

Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira.

Tell me a story, even if it’s a lie.

The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled upon the truth, *perdónenme*.

To write is to ask questions. It doesn’t matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern: *Eres Mi Vida, Sueño Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Ti, Sólo Tú*. (Cisneros)

After reviewing instructions together, students commented that they understood how and why storytelling could be integrated into an essay. Many students had never read Spanish and liked its lyrical nature. Some students chose this quote to start/end their essay, and others chose sources such as a poem, a song, or a photograph (e.g., family, favorite places, quilts, and so forth). At the end of their essays, students revealed what and why they chose from various rhetorical moves: absolute truth, complete embellishment, sprinkled embellishments, or various points of view. I couldn't wait to read their conclusions to understand their rhetorical moves. To continually encourage student participation and completion, instructors can also offer alternative assignments and hold student choice paramount in their courses.

Alternative Assignments

Flexibility and alternative assignments are ways to encourage students to participate in and complete the course. In that case, “why do teachers insist on one way of writing?” (Gallagher and Messer 146)—after all, one assignment/expectation may not work for everyone. In our classes, students can choose from two to four alternatives to the

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above-mentioned essay and never have to write an unmeaningful essay. Students and I have co-constructed various alternative assignments, and one of these alternative assignments is described below.

Our course materials come from diverse writers and artists and ground the importance of connecting lived experiences to academia. To reduce academic isolation, students should be connected to both place and time. One alternative assignment provided in our classes asks students to make connections between the past, the present, and the future and provides a “sense of place” for students in

the Salish Sea region. This alternative is framed by indigenous ways of knowing. One of our course materials, the book *Berry Song* (Goade), illustrates the importance of the “seasons of change.” Students have read this book to their children and enjoyed seeing their smiles while connecting lived experiences to academia. Most students do choose to write cultural narratives, and some students have chosen alternative assignments to reach their own academic goals.

Redefine Terms

In our classes, students are also free to redefine commonplace terms to reduce academic isolation. Some students did not want to write about culture. To highlight student choice, our class redefined culture to include *everything* (including subcultures such as sports, food, and gaming), based on Toni Morrison's writing, “Definitions belong

to the definers, not the defined” (Morrison 225). The next two student essay excerpts (Mariah and Student B) are included because both used home language practices, culturally relevant storytelling techniques, and blended narrative with realistic fiction.

Student Essay Excerpts from Cultural Narrative Essay

These two student essays were peer-reviewed in groups of three or four and are included because both connect lived experiences to the curriculum. Mariah wrote about her family making tamales, included Spanish, and chose to embellish. Student B, who was bilingual and bicultural, authentically used English and French to illustrate home language practices, provided a translation in footnotes, discussed family members, and took “liberties” in their writing.

Mariah

My Mom’s Tamales

Introduction

Nothing is better than a meal cooked by mom. I took it for granted at times. When I was really young my mom did not have the heaviest pockets. We lived in a run-down little spot in town.

Two Body Paragraphs

One time my mom and I decided we were going to give everyone tamales. We have made tamales with my *tias* before. They usually did all the work. The cooking, the seasonings, things we should have probably paid more attention to. We were in the assembly line. Rolling tamales and stealing little bits to snack. This time was going to be different. We were already down 4 or 5 people. There were only 2 of us. So we started cooking at 2pm. “We could probably have this done by 5” we thought. The chicken easily took 2 hours. We severely underestimated how much time this takes with 2 people. Now that we had the biggest bowl of shredded chicken ever seen. We had to tackle the *masa*. We kept adding our chicken broth and oil little at a time. We realized this was not our strongest skill. *Masa* is supposed to float and smoothly coast though your fingers when you squeeze it. Ours never floated and it was smoothe-ish. After 90 minutes of hand mixing *masa*, we had to call it good. We were about 4 hours into cooking and we could have stopped. We should have stopped. Save the assembling and cooking for the next day. “It won’t take too much time to just bust through these.” We thought. Again we were wrong. After another couple hours passed we got it done. 8 hours had passed since we got out the ingredients. Our tamales were subpar, mediocre at best, 7/10. All that work and my *tia’s* tamales come on top. It wasn’t about how they turned out, though. It was the time spent with my mom. Telling stories and sharing an experience together.

Now, being older, cooking has been a big part of my young adult life. My roommates and I love to cook. We always have dinner nights throughout the month. Where we pick something to cook that takes a bit of effort and tackle it together. Food brought people together growing up. I’m glad it continues as I get older.

Conclusion

This story is mostly true. I was inspired by Sandra Cisneros “hot *tamales* and sweet *tamales* hissing in my mother’s pressure cooker”. My mom and I made tama-

les a few times. The first time is what the story is about. Now I'd say my mom and I make decent tamales, 7/10. Unlike what I wrote in the story, the first time we made tamales they were not good. 3/10, edible but not enjoyable. The blandest thing I've ever had. It took hours because our ratios were off. So, cooking took forever. Telling the better side of the story was better than explaining our failure.

Student B

The rest of the workday was a blur. I got into my car and connected my iPhone to the Apple CarPlay. I opened Spotify and scrolled down to one of my playlists, “*Français*,”¹ and the song “*Où aller*”² started playing throughout my car. The bass was so strong that I could feel the car shake with every bass drop. When I arrived home and opened the kitchen door, I was simultaneously hit by the aroma of my mom’s *tourtière*³ and the French-Canadian commentators of *la Ligue Nationale de Hockey*⁴ arguing about which Canadian team has a chance to win the Stanley Cup. My parents would greet me, and that was our unspoken cue to gather around the dinner table a few minutes later. The hockey game acted as background noise as we all cut a slice of the *tourtière*. My dad would always initiate the conversation with a basic “*Comment était ta journée*?”⁵

1. Translates to “French” in English.
2. French song that translates to “Where to go?” in English.
3. French Canadian meat pies, which are typically eaten with ketchup.
4. French name for the “National Hockey League (NHL).”
5. Translates to “How was your day?” in English.

(Conclusion)

I took some liberties in writing this story, so the above text is not the “absolute truth.” The general idea of the plot is factually sound, but some aspects and details were inserted for dramatic effect. Other details were put in to effectively set the stage for the reader to embellish certain sections and to create parallels. I wouldn’t say the overall story was significantly altered, so in summation, “small lies,” did not impact the story.

These two students exhibit creativity, incorporate authentic/authoritative voice, and explore who they are. The next section will answer how student work met course outcomes such as reading in several genres, developing critical thinking skills, using multiple composing processes, and attempting MLA/APA documentation.

Student Learning Outcomes for Cultural Narrative Essay

I teach first-year composition at Whatcom Community College, and the English department’s English 101 Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) are numbered below. After the outcome, I describe how the cultural narrative essay meets those outcomes. “Composition classes at Whatcom Community College introduce you to ‘college writing’ in all its richness and complexity. You become more aware of yourself as a student-writer and student-scholar. You use writing as a process of inquiry and communication and learn about writing for an academic audience” (“English 101 Learning Outcomes”). After completing this essay, students will be able to:

1. Use rhetorical knowledge to analyze contexts and audiences to compose texts such as using rhetorical concepts (such as audience, purpose, genre, etc.) and reading in several genres:
Essay: Students envision/write to their target audience. This essay purposefully encourages students to tell a story in both genres such as narrative blended with realistic fiction and utilize rhetorical moves as they choose to bridge their academic and personal lives to reduce academic isolation.
2. Think critically about texts (print, media, data, etc.) and read across multiple texts critically.
Essay: Students read and choose which text they incorporate in an essay.
3. Use multiple composing processes to conceptualize, develop, and finalize writing projects such as developing a writing project through multiple drafts and giving and acting on productive feedback to works in-progress during peer reviews.
Essay: Students work in base groups and consider constructive feedback from peers, tutors, and instructor. Students are encouraged to write multiple drafts, although never required to follow one writing process.
4. Analyze the formal rules and informal guidelines that define genres such as applying appropriate citations systems in the writer's own work (Whatcom Community College English Department Training website).
Essay: Students choose MLA/APA documentation style (depending on major) and attempt to incorporate.

Conclusion

This Instructional Note discusses various pedagogical interventions that encourage students to utilize agency in creating their own positive, educational outcomes. In student-centered classrooms, writing instructors will appreciate the combination of concrete praxes and student examples offered that have disrupted the isolation students may feel in college. “College success then becomes students’ collection of obstacles defeated and benefits gained throughout the college experience” (Ramos and Sifuentez 95). Let’s bring together who we are with what we write in college courses. Sharing stories and authentically recounting stories of joy and pain can be, as one student said, “the metaphorical pair of scissors that can set students loose from the systematic constraints of the traditional writing workshop.” ◀

Notes

1. “One challenge within HSIs (Hispanic-Serving Institutions) and their English departments has to do with the general impression that the growing Chicanx/Latinx population is Other and that demographic changes are just now coming into fruition. As such, the imperative to make drastic changes in our classrooms and programs is perceived as sudden. Yet Chicanx/Latinx students have been on our university campuses for a long time” (Enríquez-Loya and Leon 212).

2. “Familism has been identified as a cultural value which emphasizes family obligation, unity, and respect toward family members” (Kuperminc et al., qtd. in Martinez and Polo 2441).

3. “We propose Familismo Teaching as a pedagogy for helping Latinx students cross the cultural borders of their home environments into the spaces of higher education. We anticipate this pedagogy will allow more equitable and meaningful FYW experiences where students feel empowered and motivated to thrive in a context which feels more familial and less threatening” (Sánchez et al. 106).

4. “Instructional framework that incorporates multiple languages into classrooms, interrogates notions of which language are ‘correct’ or ‘appropriate’ within those spaces, and broadens how to approach writing instruction for linguistically diverse students” (Lee and Handsfield 159).

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