BMCC WAC Newsletter

Appendages to writing: Decolonizing reception using multimedia forms

BY JARED DANIEL FAGEN

Have you ever included a text on your syllabus that was met by student resistance? Have you ever wanted to teach a text but refrained due to its perceived difficulty? As educators, we carefully curate an array of works with simultaneous aims, including subject comprehension and optimizing student potential, which are primarily gauged by both responsive and critical writing exercises. When we revise our readings and assignments, when we alter expectations: not only is this disappointing to us as facilitators of information (let alone experts in the field) but robs students of the reward of accomplishing what John Bean calls the "deep reading" of a difficult text. Sometimes, the difficulty of a text stems from a student's conditioned relationship to the uses of speech types.

For example, a poem that utilizes non-utilitarian language will renounce the type of language at which one would arrive through the narrative of a work of fiction. One pedagogical response to the problem of omission or reluctance might be attending to alternate, non-traditional entrances. Multimedia forms, such as video lectures, can act as an appendage that aids students in inhabiting the problematic text. By shifting the way in which information is distributed, we can disrupt the very hegemony of reception. Deconstruction is one way to repair: the first step to building intimate responses.

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Decolonizing Writing

APPENDAGES TO WRITING: DECOLONIZING RECEPTION USING MULTIMEDIA FORMS

DECOLONIZING WRITING: AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANCISCO D. DELGADO (P. 2-4)

M.A.P. AND DECOLONIAL PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE (P. 5)

APERTURA A LA DISCUSIÓN: ¿CÓMO DEMOCRATIZAR LA PARTICIPACIÓN EN LAS CLASES? (P. 6)

DIVERSIFYING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS (P. 7-8)

BRINGING YOURSELF INTO THE CLASSROOM (P. 9)

Decolonizing Writing: An Interview with Francisco D. Delgado

BY MARIA LITVAN AND PATRYK TOMASZEWSKI

Francisco D. Delgado (He/Him/His) is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Borough of Manhattan Community College (CUNY). His areas of expertise are: Native American/Indigenous Literatures, Asian American Literatures, and Literatures of the Pacific. https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/faculty/fdelgado/

1. How do you envision decolonizing writing in academia?

Decolonizing writing means, among other things, making room for our identities in our scholarship. This is something I constantly emphasize with my students: of course I want them to examine passages from our class readings as their evidence, but I also want to know how these readings connect to their lives outside of class in meaningful ways. A decolonized writing practice avoids jargon for jargon's sake and constantly prompts us to reflect on how exactly our writing can help the communities we claim (and who claim us back). Decolonial writing makes room for this reflection, and this reflection can even make its way onto the page. Decolonized writing also entails mindful citation practices: quoting Indigenous scholars when writing about issues, and artistic work, by and about members of Indigenous communities.

2. As a person who identifies as CHamoru, how does the process of decolonizing writing differ from other non-indigenous scholars?

In many Indigenous cultures, you will find an idea about the importance of living in good relations – or living relationally. CHamoru culture (the CHamoru are the Indigenous people of the Mariana Islands in the Pacific) is no different. My thinking of decolonizing writing – and decolonizing writing instruction – has roots in the CHamoru idea of chenchule', which emphasizes the ways in which we make ourselves responsible to one another. Writing should not be an ends to itself. I want more for my writing, and I want my students to want something more for the work they do in our class. Writing to me should be an act of chenchule', as well as to the larger principle of inafa'maolek, which is about restoring balance and order. There are so many distractions in our lives. Writing should give us time to pause and reflect and even get our ideas down "wrong" so that we can eventually articulate them correctly. So by extension, decolonial writing means extending grace to one another, and to ourselves, when we first fall short in our goals.

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3. What are some of the specific teaching strategies that you apply in your classes?

Great question! I can mention a few strategies I use here. First, I make sure to make space for my students' cultures and identities in our classwork. I do not want them to leave their backgrounds and the knowledge that comes from them outside of the classroom. I openly tell them that our classwork is as much about themselves and their own growing senses of identity and social responsibility as it is about literary analysis and critical writing. A second strategy I use is I make sure to give my students plenty of time to write and revise their work. Students appreciate the opportunity to improve their grades, but to me, students revising their work illustrates a greater commitment to the purpose of their college studies. One final strategy I use in my teaching is, whenever possible, I give students choice with their assignments. English classes are all writing-intensive, but what that writing looks like can go beyond the scope of the traditional research essay. In most of my classes, I give students the opportunity to work with a partner and create their own podcasts, which I believe taps into many of the same academic skills as a research essay while also developing the additional skills of critical listening and collaboration.

4. Can you share where you encounter the legacy of colonization impacting your students in obvious ways? And in more subtle ways?

A number of students have been taught to view Native/Indigenous peoples as strictly historical – meaning, that they belong almost exclusively to U.S. history and that there are no Native people around anymore. This is something I actively push against in my selection of class readings, which are more contemporary in scope to show that Native/Indigenous people are still here and producing art and involved in various forms of activism. I also often assign a visit to the National Museum of the American Indian or an event sponsored by American Indian Community House. A subtler legacy of colonization that some students bring into class relates to the purpose of education. Some students come into class with a competitive mindset, that the point of college is to extract all that they can (good grades, namely) so that they can beat their peers for internships or jobs later on. I try to counteract that by emphasizing the importance of collaboration: of working together and learning from each other. A college education should be less about individual gain and more about better understanding the ways we are responsible for one another and can help.

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"Decolonizing the academy means actively forging relationships with nearby Indigenous communities, making space for them on our curriculum but also making space for them in our classroom and campus spaces."

5. What are the paradoxes and contradictions that you see in current attempts to decolonize academia? And, can you think possible solutions to these problems?

I suppose a pretty common shortcoming with some efforts to decolonize academia involves some people's belief that doing a part of the work is doing all of the work. For instance, decolonizing academia means more than group assignments – although those can certainly be a part of it. I believe it also means more than adding a land acknowledgement on the syllabus or including an Indigenous author or two in the class readings – although these practices are also a part of the larger process. Decolonizing the academy means actively forging relationships with nearby Indigenous communities, making space for them on our curriculum but also making space for them in our classroom and campus spaces. I was very fortunate this past summer when my former MA advisor at Brooklyn College, Joseph Entin, asked me to join a BRESI project about promoting Native American Studies across CUNY. The project brings together CUNY faculty (Beth Cooper, Joseph Entin, Diana Pan, and Jocelyn Wills from Brooklyn College, Eve Eure from Lehman, and me from BMCC) working in Native/Indigenous Studies and alongside educators and scholars like Ben Geboe at the American Indian Community House. I hope the momentum generated from this project helps us decolonize CUNY curricula in meaningful, concrete ways that make space for, and listen to, Indigenous communities and organizations throughout the five boroughs.

M.A.P. and Decolonial Pedagogy in Practice

BY ALEX MENDEZ

From my undergraduate career at Brooklyn College, to the first three years of my PhD at The Graduate Center, CUNY, I have always had a strong interest in M.A.P. The organization stands for “Minorities and Philosophy,” and their mission is simple but powerful: to address the structural injustices found in the academic accessibility and practice of philosophy. MAP, through autonomously run chapters, strives to reconcile marginalized groups and their identity, with a practice that has been historically hegemonic. I’ve more recently been reflecting about my participation in MAP, since it parallels my experiences as a WAC (writing across the curriculum) fellow at BMCC. For the past two semesters as a WAC fellow, I have been thinking about the integration of decolonial pedagogy into the classroom, its deep relation to writing, and my role as an educator generally. When considering what is meant by decolonial pedagogy, consider when Nora K. Rivera writes, “Whereas postcolonial theory suggests that the social and political control that afflicted colonized lands are part of the past, decolonial theory insists that we still have to contest to coexist with colonial histories, languages, and societies” (p. 124). MAP embodies this sentiment boldly; chapters found across multiple universities play their part in actively transforming our understanding of philosophy by providing students with resources on inclusivity, locating reading materials by philosophers who are members of underrepresented groups, and by answering the question ‘who gets to study philosophy’ in one simple word: everyone. As a first generation American, who is the first in their family to attend and graduate college, the sentiments expressed here resonate with me deeply. Through the help of organizations such as MAP, I am excited to see how I can actively improve the philosophical community, both at a local and global level.

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Apertura a la discusión: ¿cómo democratizar la participación en las clases?

POR CESAR AUGUSTO COCA

Una de las preocupaciones más relevantes observadas tanto por profesores como por estudiantes es el desarrollo de una participación activa durante las discusiones en clase. La tecnología solo ha aumentado esta brecha y no ha permitido una conexión confiable entre el tema propuesto por el profesor y el razonamiento crítico del estudiante. En la mayoría de los casos, las llamadas “clases magistrales” siguen presentes. En estas, los estudiantes se encuentran más bien sometidos a un rol de escucha pasiva. Una de las primeras consideraciones a tener en cuenta es que tanto los estudiantes como los profesores deben construir juntos el desarrollo de la discusión, a través de preguntas de participación más que la gran exposición de un tema, como si lo presentado fuera una posición irrefutable del profesor. Este tipo de preguntas permitiría a los estudiantes, individualmente y en grupos, acercarse al tema por sí mismos. Esta consideración, que rompería con la omnipresencia de los profesores, ayudaría, al mismo tiempo, a la integración del estudiante en la clase. Es a través de una aproximación crítica, que el estudiante podría desarrollar una postura individual y particular.

Previamente para ello, el profesor debe haber proporcionado el o los temas para la discusión, cuya finalidad primera debe ser el de centrar la clase. Esto, por supuesto, facilitaría la democratización (en términos de apertura de la discusión) para estar enfocada y centrada en los objetivos que los profesores tienen en sus cursos. La participación, en este sentido, debería darse desde distintos enfoques: oral o escrito. A partir de aquí, los estudiantes podrían contar con la habilidad de exponer sus propias ideas en el debate público. No obstante, y es imperativo mencionarlo, todo este desarrollo tiene que darse dentro de un ambiente amistoso y espacio de confianza, con absoluto respeto por los estudiantes y su desempeño académico. En este sentido, la "democratización" debe entenderse pensando en la subversión de algunos esquemas rígidos de comportamiento académico.

Diversifying Writing Assignments

BY DANIELA CASTILLO

We are all wired differently. Students' experiences as cognitive beings are shaped by a complex amalgamation of biological, psychological, societal, and cultural factors. Some students thrive when given analytical tasks, some are risk-takers and like to experiment with their writing, while others navigate multiple languages and, on occasion, may need to resort to their entire linguistic toolkit (Garcia and Lin, 2017) when expressing their ideas on paper. Despite such a heterogeneous learning landscape, the collegiate system insists on imposing a one-size-fits-all academic writing assignment. In his book, Engaging Ideas, John Bean lists the benefits of academic prose in teaching structure, clarity, and argument development, but its rigid, formulaic nature, according to Bean, comes at a cost: it may hinder meaningful connections by disregarding students' learning styles and limiting their voices. How can we then embrace student diversity within the classroom and acknowledge their unique identities? Low-stakes exploratory writing assignments, such as reflections, journal entries, and free-writings allow students to pour their ideas on paper without having to worry about fitting a certain structure.

The essence of exploratory writing brings students' experiences to the foreground, helping them think deeply about complex or foreign topics while establishing meaningful connections between the new and the familiar. Alternative genres to closed-form writing can similarly cater to the various learning styles in a classroom. Alternative genres allow students to manipulate content for different audiences, thus letting them approach ideas from diverse angles. Multimedia blogs, posters, podcasts, poems, dialogues, and informational pamphlets are just a few alternative assignments that can diversify a syllabus, while at the same time fostering student collaboration and acknowledging the range of learning styles in the class. As an Introduction to Linguistics instructor, I have experimented with alternative genres myself and found much success when implementing these less conventional assignments. For instance, my students have created informational pamphlets on topics of their choice related to language acquisition or bilingualism with a specific audience in mind: laypeople.

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"Students' experiences as cognitive beings are shaped by a complex amalgamation of biological, psychological, societal, and cultural factors."

Poster presentations emulating a conference have equally proved successful with my classes. Rather than simply asking students to write a final paper describing the phonetics/phonology, morphology, or syntax of a linguistic variety of their choice, I thought it would be much more enriching and realistic if they were to also present their research as a poster. We ran two poster sessions (half of the students were presenters and the other half were audience members in each session) while the non-presenters circulated the classroom and asked questions. Students then turned in a mini report on some of the presentations they found interesting and why. Unlike traditional stand-in-the-front-of-the-class presentations, the conference-style took the edge off public-speaking anxiety and allowed students to interconnect around the common theme of language. While academic writing should be a fundamentally integral part of every student's skill set, we must recognize that students are diverse in their learning styles and build knowledge in varied ways.

By incorporating non-academic writing and alternative genres we can better cater the student body needs and help them find what works for them.

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Bringing Yourself into the Classroom

We asked some faculty how they model bringing themselves into the classrooms so that their students feel comfortable being fully present in the classroom.

"Feel your feet, I often ask my students at the start of the semester, as a way of bringing the body into the room, where I teach freshman composition. My hope is that my students will come to see the body--their bodies-- as a site of feeling, and feeling-- what are the sensations accompanying a thought, an emotion-- as a door into meta awareness, a kind of cognition I believe is crucial for learning and essaying (a vehicle of seeing and knowing)."

Noel Sikorski, Clinical Associate Professor, NYU

"I craft my lectures like personal essays. They are usually grounded in some firsthand and experience. My students, like my readers, know me and all my family members as characters struggling to understand the world."

Gregory Pardlo, Associate Professor, Rutgers Camden, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry

"I've been lucky to teach writing at NYU Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates for the last ten years, where students speak multiple languages and arrive from all around the world. This experience has changed the way I teach. For instance, now when I ask students to free write in their journals, I invite them to use any language they want to, or to use the language in which they feel at home, even if the language of instruction at the school is English. Being multi-lingual is a super power."

Marion Wrenn, Director of the Writing Program, NYU Abu Dhabi

"For the past several years, since I've been doing the "Writing and the Brain" course, I give every class a 60-second elevator pitch on gratitude journaling, focusing on its benefits, of course. Plus, I curse like a sailor."

Kathleen Volk Miller, Teaching Professor of English, Drexel University

"I sometimes bring candy to my students following a Jewish tradition that encourages children to associate learning with sweetness."

Jason Schneiderman, Professor, BMCC

2022-2023 Writing Across the Curriculum Fellows

Borough of Manhattan Community College
City University of New York

Daniela Castillo, Ph.D. Candidate, Linguistics, CUNY Graduate Center

Cesar Augusto Coca, Ph.D. Candidate, Latin American, Iberian and Latino Cultures, CUNY Graduate Center

Jared Daniel Fagen, Ph.D. Candidate, Comparative Literature, CUNY Graduate Center

Maria Litvan, Ph.D. Candidate, Theatre and Performance, CUNY Graduate Center

Alex Mendez, Ph.D. Candidate, Philosophy, CUNY Graduate Center

Patryk Tomaszewski, Ph.D. Candidate, Art History, CUNY Graduate Center