



The Counterpublic Writing Experience of Houston Latino University Students

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The Houston Situation

Because most students at the University of Houston come from Harris County, Texas, and the Houston Independent School District is the largest (by far) district in the county, an understanding of the demographics of our community and our university will help us begin our discussion. Illustration 1 shows that Hispanics or Latinos¹ constitute the majority of residents in the county, with Caucasians as the second group. Compare this with Illustration 2, however, showing the demographics of Houston ISD, where nearly two thirds of Houston's students are Latino, another quarter are African-American, and fewer than ten percent are white.

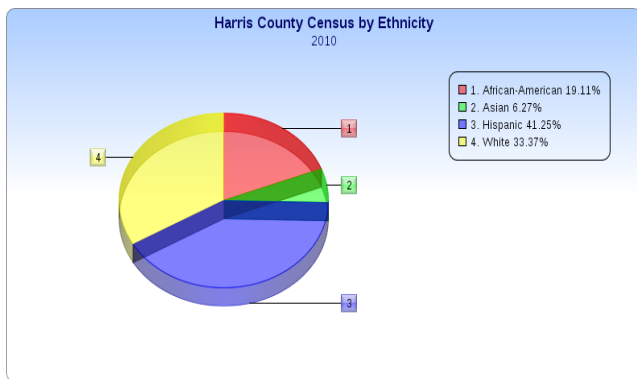


Illustration 1: Harris County Census by Ethnicity. Source: US Census Bureau

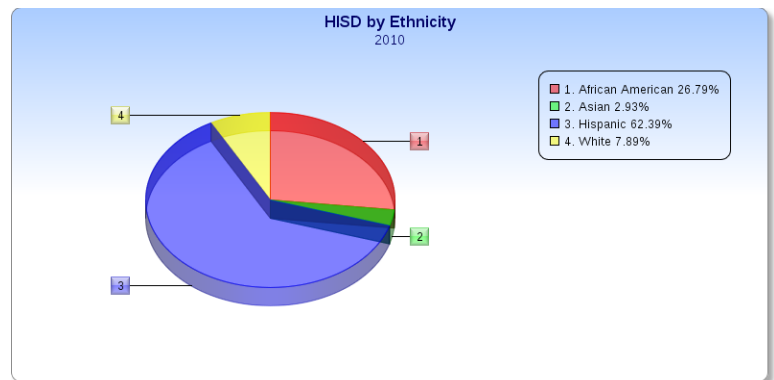


Illustration 2: Houston ISD Student Demographics. Source: Houston ISD

This is the largest source of students coming into the University of Houston. However, Illustration 3 is more specific to the UH experience; it shows first time in college (FTIC). We see that, though UH was founded to be the city's university and to serve a working class student population, the university does not represent, ethnically, at least, the demographics of the city. In fact, only a quarter of UH students are Latino, compared to that 62% of Houston public school students. Note that this chart shows FTIC and not total enrollment. When the enrollment of transfer students is added to the FTIC number, the percentage of Latino students drops to 23%. This last percentage does not qualify UH to be a Hispanic Serving Institution

(HSI), which requires Hispanic student populations of at least 25%. While neither The University of Texas, A&M, Texas Tech, nor Rice University are designated HSI, Texas State in San Marcos is also recognized, as are *all* community colleges in the southeast Texas region (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities).

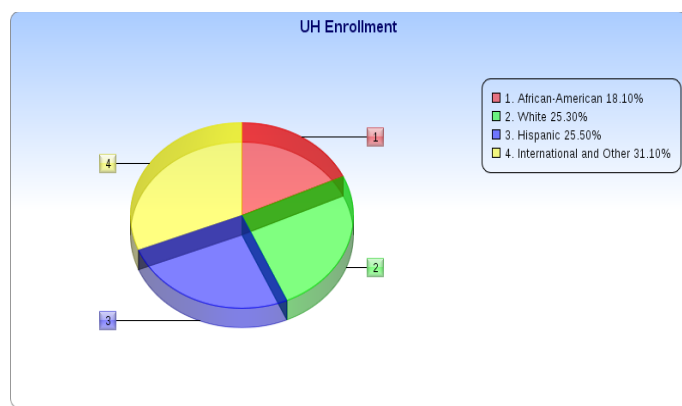


Illustration 3: First Time in College (FTIC) at the University of Houston. Source: Institutional Research

Still, Latino students make up nearly a quarter of our first year students, most of whom will enroll in First Year Writing (ENGL 1303, 1304) with several having to take the basic writing course, ENGL 1300, before they can enroll in the core required courses of 1303-04.

	1300	1303	1303 Retakes
African-American	12.9%	24.1%	25.0%
Asian American	28.6%	20.8%	27.6%
Hispanic	19.3%	25.4%	22.40%
International	21.4%	22.9%	21.1%
Native American	0.7%	0.3%	1.3%
White/Other	16.4%	5.7%	1.3%

Table 1: Student Demographics of ENGL 1300 and 1303, showing 1303 Retakes, 2010-2011. Source: Institutional Research.

The reasons that any student, not just minority students and not solely Latino students, repeat ENGL 1303 are complicated, and students may

opt to repeat a course for completion or a better grade. Regardless, that a quarter Latino students retake the course while only one percent of white students do necessitates an inquiry into the experience of the course at all levels (See Table 1). First, Latino students may retake the course for one or concurrent reasons, including:

1. UH Latino students are more concerned than whites about their GPA and are more willing to repeat;
2. UH Latino students fail to complete ENGL 1303 for other reasons in their first year, such as social or academic preparedness;
3. These urban Latino students come into the university compositional experience without the secondary preparation that white students at UH have; or
4. The instructors, curriculum, and texts do not reflect, represent, or validate the rhetorical and writing background and needs of these UH Latino students.

It is this final possibility that this paper addresses, as it is the one dynamic that teachers of writing can have the most efficacy in changing in the classroom.

Notably, though each of these statistics is important, much work has been done on African Americans in the FYW course and the complicated subject of ESL, but here I will address the importance of recognizing, validating, and building on multilingual cultures as well as the heritage culture we call, variously, Hispanic, Latino, and Chicano. I will note how our textbooks and our curriculum often do not reflect the rich cultures of Latinos and in fact may function as an academic colonization of Houston's Latino community. This is a local concern with national implications.

The question of Latinos in the FYW course affects institutional concerns such as retention, but also larger institutional concerns such as ethnic diversity in graduate school, faculty, and administration. As an institution, we want all students to graduate and return to the community to strengthen it. But as a compositionist, I am most immediately concerned with the perception and validation of writing courses such as FYW by Latinos; and ultimately, to validate such a personal and intimate thing as writing, the course and field must validate the students' own values and goals. Specifically, I will show how the First Year course actually excludes the rhetorical interests of Houston Latino students and maintains their counterpublic place in the public university.

Problems that may affect both research into Latinos in the FYW course, as well as praxis, include the identification and identifying of Latino students. It's not just an issue of national heritage, or various dialects, or even how many generations a family has been in Texas. It's also the identifying choice of what the Census Bureau would call Hispanic or Latino, but which the student may reject – not because of heritage, language, or skin color, but of cultural assimilation. In other words, some students whom I may identify as Latino because of heritage or family origin will reject that label because they see themselves as white – they speak English as their first language, perhaps went to a largely white high school, and identify with mainstream white students in dress, music, and mass culture. Still, their home culture may maintain both dominant and recessive traits of Latino culture, as rich and complicated as they are. Others will reject the label of “minority” because in their home neighborhood and school, especially in Houston, Latinos are the *majority*, and to switch from one arithmetic to another seems unnecessary to them.

This is where it becomes complicated for me, because I have no Latino heritage by any definition. I can step out of the M.D. Anderson library and see a sea of black-haired students and not one blond or brown or red like mine. To discuss any problem of another ethnicity, gender, nationality, or mind-set seems more than presumptive, naïve, and supercilious; it also begs that both the counterpublic under discussion *and* the dominate public under criticism to immediately, deftly see through each claim, uncovering bias and pseudo-academic jargon that disguises the insecurities of speaking from the outside. We have, then, a question of public and counterpublic. This is the kind of society that Jürgen Habermas discusses in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, where he argues that a kind of publicity originated in eighteenth century Europe that represented a new relationship between the regime and the private individuals – “publicity” (2) here meaning the interests of the state or regime in all its forms, but newly discussed, argued over, and influenced by the conversations, writings, and meetings of private individuals outside the family dwelling. What we call “public” today is the norm and often even assumed (at least, assumed by those of us who are normally considered part of the dominant public – middle class, white, educated), especially at the university; but in early modern Europe, this was an important nascent participatory act, though participation was largely limited to the bourgeoisie – white, moneyed, males. I argue here that, *de facto*, the same problems of public and counterpublics are largely reflected in even the public University of Houston in its courses and texts in the First Year Course: There is the unexamined assumption that the rhetoric, writing samples, and discussion topics are applicable to all adults, while the multiple counterpublics such as the city's large Latino population, are – like in Habermas's ideal – bracketed and even ignored.

It's telling that Habermas's argument centers itself around the public sphere created when merchant interests, exploration ventures, and civil liberalism converging to nurture the political phenomena of coffee house discussions and literary-then-political salon meetings (16, 20). These venues and their conversations began with less political and more literary interests, however, and Habermas concedes that the legal permissions were already assumed "in the public sphere of the world of letters, [as they] confirmed each other's subjectivity as it emerged from their spheres of intimacy" (54). In other words, because of the long tradition of sharing literary works with the writer's coterie, it was a natural extension to exchange and discuss works with a larger public once printing on large-scale became feasible and marketable. Likewise, the FYW course functions something like a coffee house for our first year students, though not a voluntary one – we expect them to come in and actually engage with the instructor, with their peers, and with secondary texts on topics that should be of importance to them or to society at large including topics of global, national, and local interests. But, unlike Habermas's ideal, the students at UH are rarely merchants or explorers – they are sometimes literally coming from the barrios of Houston and hardly understand the vocabulary of the merchant, much less have experience in how markets function. And yet our textbooks assume that students have some experience with capital markets and clean energy and globalism.

Our students are, in fact, citizens of counterpublics. Like critical theorist Nancy Fraser's identification of peasants, women, and working class counterpublics, UH's minority students are "competing publics" as they "[contest] the exclusionary norms ... elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (61). This does not necessarily mean that those hundreds of

dark-haired students walking in front of the library are not interested in or do not feel familiar with whatever values and interests the dominant white, middle-class culture espouses at the time. Pop and mass culture have ensured enormous overlap and cross-breeding of materialistic and artistic interests. But neither can we ignore that Latinos (and so many other groups), sometimes have "alternative styles" of behavior and speech. Rocco, for example, argues that American Latinos have been constructed by the dominant public as perpetual "foreigners" and that only a form of citizenship that transcends this type of political world-view can foster a more democratic system that addresses the unique position of Latinos in the United States (9). Various "modes of exclusion" have been established in the American political, educational, bureaucratic, and business arenas so that the majority of Latino groups have been categorized within a preexisting racialized cultural imaginary that is "produced, limited, and modified by the dominant cultural institutional apparatus" (10), even in mixed metropolises such as Houston. The dominant public of our classrooms – using corporate textbooks, taught by Graduate Teaching Assistants who often come from less diversified schools and who are predominantly white in our own program – this dominant public tends to see all people whose ancestors come from Central and South America as some homogeneous race with identical language, cultural tastes, and acceptance of their subaltern status. It's one thing to expect film and television to see Latinos as the object of quick humor or a tattooed gang-banger, but even in politics, the corporate media identify certain politicians as a "Latino mayor" of Los Angeles as if one's ethnicity restricts an elected leader's voice as audible only to those of that same heritage.

Consider the University's mission statement as it portrays itself as an instrument of the dominant public:

The mission of the University of Houston is to discover and disseminate knowledge through the *education of a diverse population of traditional and nontraditional students*, and through research, artistic and scholarly endeavors, as it becomes *the nation's premier public university in an urban setting*. In this role, the University of Houston applies its expertise to the *challenges facing the local, state, national and international communities*, and it establishes and nurtures *relationships with community organizations*, government agencies, public schools and the private sector to enhance the *educational, economic and cultural vitality* of the city of Houston and the state of Texas. (University of Houston, "Mission Statement;" emphasis added)

This statement simultaneously claims the heritage of the institution's founding while seeking some internationally competitive rationale, balancing the local with the global. But what is of interest here is something that I doubt few instructors – those in the trenches with the students, more than the authors of this mission statement would ever be – would be aware of the text's actual implications or be aware how to effectively implement curriculum or pedagogies that would somehow bridge the chasm from the local to global and reflect the diversity of the student body to the needs of the city. Note, too, that the mission statement is all about the university, and mentions nothing of the individual; though it mentions local communities, community organizations, and cultural vitality, these are dually the means to an end and the end itself – the city's enhancement is the mission, but not the enhancement of the local

community's. And, importantly, the "education of a diverse population" is nothing like the "learning from" those diverse populations.

As Warner argues,

Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely. (122)

So, though a university might be considered a counterpublic within the larger non-academic world, instead, it overlooks the alternative rhetorics, experiences, missions, and discourses of counterpublics even from within the shadows of the university campus. The university's educational mission is unilateral and anti-Friearian. Minority communities such as Houston Latinos, then, are expected to come and participate in the university experience, but on the university's terms. This is reflected in their first writing experiences.

This is evident, considering the State General Education Core Requirements, where each undergraduate student must take 42 hours of courses that reflect "basic intellectual competencies – reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, and computer literacy – that are essential to the learning process in any discipline" (University of Houston, "About the Core Curriculum") of which writing is one, defended as "competency in writing [being] the ability to produce clear, correct, and coherent prose adapted to purpose, occasion, and audience" (University of Houston, "Core Curriculum Foundations"). Within the larger argument for the need of a core curriculum – that everyone should be inoculated not only to basic math, but also the public standard model of

American history and (largely white, middle class) cultural history – is the more precise argument that writing is essential to learning across the university and that effective writing will employ all the traditional rhetorical tropes, ultimately so that students will be at least enfranchised in their own learning. Nothing is said, however, anywhere in the curriculum documents about being enfranchised in the community outside the classroom. Fraser argues that it is a “common good” that should be the goal of public discourse, not just private interests (71). In increasingly corporate-friendly universities, even the liberal arts are often defended in terms of how to best serve the corporate think tank. The core curriculum implies that writing is useful on campus, but that's about the extent of it. Specifically, the argument states, “[students] often need further instruction and practice to meet college standards and, later, to succeed in both their major field of academic study and their chosen career or profession” (University of Houston, “Core Curriculum Foundations”). Again, nothing is mentioned about being an engaged member of a liberal society or even refers to that Mission Statement's lofty rhetoric of local, community, and city. Ideally, however, enfranchisement within a public sphere is precisely what a university should be cultivating.

Warner states that, “Without a faith, justified or not, in self-organized publics, organically linked to our activity in their very existence, capable of being addressed, and capable of action, we would be nothing but the peasants of capital – which, of course, we might be, and some of us more than others” (69). And so, enrollment and retention statistics aside, we are forced to admit that Latinos in Texas, along with other ethnicities in Houston, are both marginalized and disenfranchised. These are the issues that counterpublics instinctively are drawn to by the very nature of their subaltern status.

These are also often the issues that writing instruction should consider as its *topoi* in a free society, but especially in a public university. For example, in April 2006, millions of Latinos and fellow sympathizers marched nationally to demand immigration reform; five years later, regardless of which party is in power, little reform has been made. Later that same year, over 5,000 Houston members of the newly unionized Service Employees International Union blocked streets in the Post Oak area and downtown of Houston rejecting a proposed salary increase *up to* \$8.50 an hour, up from the average of \$5.25 an hour (Greenhouse). In Houston, the SEIU is largely Latino, and the “*si se puede*” from the year's earlier national march was the rallying cry in that November. The rhetoric of choice was blocking traffic in both cases, though it was their *actions* that were the subject of debate in the major press – not their cause -- not their voices, not their rhetoric, not their experiences.

These concerns of the subaltern are both national to local. When the State of Alabama passed new legislation to penalize illegal immigration in that state, under the guise of “creating jobs,” we can see that Latinos' voices in that debate were not only stifled, but threatened (Preston). Our own state legislature attempted in the 2011 session to write Arizona-like immigration laws and will now look to Alabama for their exemplar on how to treat people who don't look like us or speak like us or come from the same places². It seems, then, that part of the actual *topoi* of our era include issues such as wages, migration, education, language, and racism. At least these are the issues on the street and in the halls of the legislature, but rarely are these issues part of the educational discourse of our city's university students. They may be discussed in the student chapter of LULAC and very occasionally with enormous posters in Butler Plaza on campus, and *they are* issues discussed in our on-campus Latino-interest

newspaper *The Venture*, but are they valued and systematically part of the formal curriculum of the city's university? Literally, do our courses apply our “expertise to the challenges facing the local, state, national and international communities”? The strength of the counterpublic is that its very act of expression gives it a strength against any oppression or forgetting by the dominant public. Thus Warner argues

Whether faith is justified or partly ideological, a public can only produce a sense of belonging and activity if it is self-organized through discourse rather than through an external framework. This is why any distortion or blockage in access to a public can be so grave, leading people to feel powerless and frustrated. Externally organized frameworks of activity, such as voting, are and are perceived to be poor substitutes. (70)

If Latinos, of any national background or with any legal status, are to have more of a voice in their own status and activity in the national dialog, then the purposes of the First Year Writing course should be considered as even more relevant to this marginalized, often disenfranchised community, even more than we might consider the course to be relevant to any ambiguous community of adolescent scholars. I'm not arguing that the FYW course should be or become an induction into political activism for its own sake; the purpose of the FYW course should be to teach *writing* and *not* political correctness or political strategies. Still, as *writing*, the course should also consider the history of rhetoric which it so often claims as its legendary heritage – men (white men) peripatetically reasoning those things most important for them and their *demos* – the *topoi* of the day, engaged by men (white men) who chose to engage in the rhetoric because it was, in fact, topical for them. The problem, then, comes to

this: Is the rhetoric and writing of the FYW in our public universities suitably engaging for all students to be critically involved, interested, and invested in their own learning so that the required course is not just another core to “get through,” so that the student is inducted into some “academic discourse” community, but that the course in fact does prepare students to be proactive in a liberal society? It's important to remember, too, that this *will not happen* in many other courses. The opportunity for rational critical discourse with *topoi* of values and concerns relevant to Latinos or students of any background and heritage will not happen in a History course of 500 students, or a Biology course of 600 students or in a Hotel Management course or even in Business Ethics seminar.

The Student Experience in First Year Writing at UH

By the time our students arrive at UH, they have already endured twelve years of Texas public education, being told to speak English, write English, and respond to Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)³ writing exam prompts of “Write an essay about a time when you helped another person” (the TAKS high school exit exam writing prompt for 2009) after being trained in test-taking template writing strategies. They sometimes come from failing schools⁴, with increasingly smaller education budgets cut by a Legislature with members, such as my own Legislator, who fear Hispanic “anchor babies” (read: Latino babies) are the most serious threat to our national security (Sanchez). Though the UH is touted as the second-most diverse campus in the United States, the faculty is not – a full 70% of the faces these students will see are white and only six percent are Latino (Office of Institutional Research, “Faculty Headcount by Rank, Diversity and Gender”). If the student wants to know about the ultimate governing body

of their city's university, he will discover that the UH Board of Regents is composed of seven whites, one Latino, one Indian, one African-American and one appointed African-American student, not elected by her student peers. The student Alumni Association is somewhat more diverse with more African-Americans but with no Latinos. So, what would this public sphere look like if a Latino, for instance, were to look around herself and expect to engage in the public discourse around her?

In their first year at college, our students are required, like most American students, to take two semesters of writing, though they had no input in this legislative decision. At UH, most will take their writing courses from Teaching Assistants and Fellows (the vast majority of whom are white) from the graduate program who have minimal training in teaching first year writing, using a textbook that they had no input in choosing, except for the rare TA with enough initiative to propose an alternate text, subject to a faculty committee approval. Most course instructors, anecdotally, do not poll their students for their input on the syllabus or the writing assignments. The students have limited access to out-of-class writing support in the form of a Writing Center, and often need to balance their hectic commuter schedule with those of their busy graduate student instructors to arrange for face-to-face time to consult on writing questions. So far, there is little rational-critical discourse in the course establishment or management for these public university students. All this background frames the question of how the FYW is or is not a public for these freshmen. Unfortunately, it is my argument, that just when these adolescents are expecting and anticipating to be more engaged in deciding their own life choices and legitimately participating in the larger public, the one course that actually offers the chance of becoming a real public sphere often limits the rational, critical discourse that we

expect in a public. This is exactly the kind of bracketing that Nancy Fraser discussed two decades ago:

A discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction. Of course, in and of itself, this irony does not fatally compromise the discourse of publicity [...]. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the relationship between publicity and status is more complex than Habermas intimates, that declaring a deliberative arena to be a space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized is not sufficient to make it so. (60)

Fraser's deconstruction of Habermas's ideal public sphere in his ideal bourgeois world almost sounds immaterial when discussing historical movements two centuries ago, but becomes more uncomfortable when shining the same light on an institution of higher education. The university as a whole, and the FYW course, specifically, should tout these public ideals:

- (a) accessibility – students should be able to access ideas, texts, narratives, and exchanges that are relevant to their learning goals or their community's values and objectives. In an urban university such as UH, this would include non-English texts, local print news, and alternative repositories such as folklore, neighborhood, and texts generated by minority community organizations;
- (b) rationality – students should be able to learn from their peers and their instructors the discourses of reason and compare that with their own community's valued reasoning. This includes validating and focusing on the students' background and values set and contrasting them on their own terms with the dominant corporate model; and
- (c) the suspension of status hierarchies – students should engage their peers and

instructors on a rhetorically equal field, especially considering these students often have more experience in their communities than the (often) white, middle class graduate students have in many of these same issues and, honestly, most graduate students are really only a few years older than these freshman.

And so, even though we claim that the university is a free and public space, and the FYW course often perceives itself to be one without text, so that *any* text is open for discussion, the reality is likely not the case. Often, by design or fiat, the FYW declares itself to “space where extant status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized,” but for Latinos at least often is not.

Consider the official textbooks – *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing* and *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings* – both published by Pearson Publishing. Pearson Education Holdings of New Jersey, with annual sales of \$840 million and with 14,045 employees, is itself a subsidiary of Hochtief Public-Private Partnership Solutions Chile, an investment firm specializing in airport construction (“Pearson Education Holdings Inc.”). Appendix I lists sample published and student texts used by the 1303 text to demonstrate writing process and products. The 1304 text, *Writing Arguments*, does have a section of six readings in the anthology called “Immigration in the Twenty-First Century: Accommodation and Change,” but this is only one of ten sections, others of which concern video games, Walmart, energy, war, media, etc. That section also addresses the issue of immigration from a national perspective, but these concerns are more real and more varied at the local scale, where concerns of students from the East End of Houston are different from those students from the suburbs of Spring, for example. According to these two official, public texts, the

rational, critical discourse expected of first year students should focus on energy, globalism, consumerism, and fashion fads. Sample texts are provided so that our students can model their own writing. Naturally, the instructor has her leeway to supplement readings and research topics, but the public that this corporate text attempts to engage is one where the student-citizen thinks that these global issues are ones of most importance. These issues *are* important, of course. But our university students, who commute to campus, often work and share their income with their families, who often come from families where college is not a shared experience, where English is often not the language of the home, where their own secondary schools struggled even to prepare for high-risk standardized testing instead of critical reasoning, perhaps tattoos and the Alaskan Natural Wildlife Reserve are not the *topoi* that our students should be using as their introduction to a critical discourse community. Still the assumption that these texts' topics are ones that interest our local students or that they should be writing about that demonstrates an imposition of the dominant public on students that, in fact, in no way reflect national or global norms. As Warner notes,

It might be only through its imaginary coupling with the state that a public acts. This is one of the things that happens when alternative publics are said to be social movements: they acquire agency in relation to the state. They enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. For many counter-publics, to do so it so cede the original hope of transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself. (Warner 124)

The text, however, may prohibit this space-transforming effort by not only its omissions but also by its very nature. By introducing a textbook – with all the socio-emotional power that it holds

to any first-year student, but especially to any students who were not raised to have actual texts in their homes – to a marginalized public with the cultural assumption that “this is what is important to write about,” the FYW course brackets the students behind some wall of engagement and validation. When we calmly accept mass culture – even mass curriculum culture – as the universality of our students’ existence, we ignore and devalue their own worlds, perhaps even facilitating the endangerment of local and community culture and civic involvement. When we overlook or refuse to even acknowledge individual cultures in a course where writing can best be used to explore culture, the student-citizen, indeed, becomes even more disenfranchised, and perhaps becomes subtly intellectually disengaged at the same time. This is the dominant public overcoming and rhetorically erasing the counterpublic’s rhetoric and tradition. More importantly, since most TAs at the university are in fact part of the dominant public, the Latino student may not understand that he has the opportunity to discuss his subaltern status because of the unintentional neglect of that status in the classroom. The corporate textbook, the white middle class TA, all dis-empower the Latino student before he even knows he can form a counterpublic in the classroom.

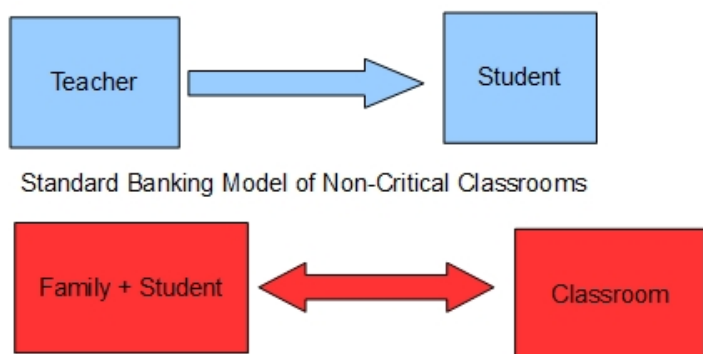
In the matter of the course pedagogy, we permit our classrooms to be tools of the oppressing public, or as Nancy Welch has argued, “When we remove that tension between exposition *and* assertion, inquiry *and* argument, unsettling *and* concluding, we fall short of teaching all that’s needed both to analyze and go up against systems of oppression, to assess a situation and, when needed, take a side” (Welch 70, emphasis in the original). To understand oppression, of course, requires a greater understanding of the people being oppressed; then we may begin to understanding how the

counterpublic is or is not expressing itself in the rational-critical discourse of the city’s university.

A Brief Survey of Latino Rhetorics

So, what is Latino rhetoric, or at least, what can we broadly paint as general trends and characteristics of North American Latino discourse as reflected by culture and heritage? First, as Cristina Kirklighter, professor of composition at Texas A&M Corpus Christi, argues, Latino students often hear a home rhetoric of narrative, repetition, and digression. To emphasize a point, repetition should be used; to digress in an argument may give a clarification or elucidation. These tendencies, however, are often stamped out by FYW instructors, as the standard classical model of rhetorical argument is focused on *focus* – direct exposition and analysis in the Greek form. The FYW classroom often discourages narrative as a form of evidence and insists on *logos*, *ethos*, and grudgingly, *pathos*. Kirklighter explains that in many Central and Southern American rhetorics, the thesis – the central argument – comes at the end of discourse, where our textbooks stress that the thesis should come in the introductory paragraph for “closed” writing. The writing process, too – pre-writing, composition, revision, editing, and publishing – is described in the texts with little or no mention of collaboration. However, Kirklighter stresses that the ethos of *La Familia* is a collaborative one, and that all students can benefit in the FYW course from collaboration at many steps of the process. Then, by extending a recognition of the culture of *La Familia* and encouraging not only inter-student collaboration, but also family-student collaboration with *topoi* which are valued by the student’s home culture, the family itself can become part of the collaboration process, reversing the power flow from a banking model of teacher depositing knowledge to the student,

to one where a collaborative experiential unit of *student and family* share the classroom.



Standard Banking Model of Non-Critical Classrooms

A Shared-knowledge Model of Collaborative Classrooms

Illustration 4

Validating the family and community can offset the competitive and “consumeristic forces” adversely affecting the well-being and stability of these students and families, as forces disrupting Latino culture (Kirklighter 51).

Brown shows that Latinos value collaboration and cooperation as part of their education. Importantly, values themselves are included in the Spanish word *educación*, more than its English counterpart might confer. *Educación* entails both academic and character development, referring “to competence in the social world, wherein one respects the dignity and individuality of others” (Brown 100) but nowhere in the 1303/1304 sample texts is there a discussion of social values other than respect for the environment and an assumed preference of employment over unemployment. Further, there are family values, typical of many Latino communities, where parents find it difficult for their children to leave home, both literally, in the case of living on-campus, and socially, in the case of separating one's self from a family with no university experience and enrolling full-time, away from the household and family employment, in a large university where parents

rarely understand what their adolescent children are studying. Similarly, many Latino families depend on their older children to supplement the family income or care for younger children (101). The promise of a college degree is foreign to many in the working class. On the other hand, some studies point to self-surveys where university Latino students consider their parental support and encouragement, their family's optimistic outlook, the drive to succeed, ethnicity as a source of strength, and academic and mentors as being invaluable to their consistency in college (104). These values are respectable and useful and none should be foreign to any ethnic group. But as a value set, as a world-view, they are ignored in the FYW texts as subjects of discussion and examination.

Further as a pedagogical model, because of their close-knit and extended families, many Latinos are often agreeable to small group discussion and collaborative writing. Mejia describes such organically-based pedagogies and curricula that show how ethnic identities are shaped in/by schools and universities. The collaborative behavioral nature that Mexican-American students are often raised with in their extended families is disrupted by the competitiveness that colleges inevitably inculcate (51). Consider how disruptive this might be, then, when a young Latino is asked to produce a lengthy essay on his own and present it before the class in some peer review as an individual artifact (and this is not asked of him in 500-student courses such as History), where his family experience is one of sharing for validation, not critique and competition. Yet the strategies of small group work and collaborative writing seldom emphasized in the texts and are barely mentioned in TA orientation. Fraser describes subaltern counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional

interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (123) yet the Latino students, though a counterpublic, are rarely given the chance to voice/write themselves as a counterpublic in the course because of instructions on their writing assignments. The texts do not offer space for counter-discourse, and within a department of mostly white, middle-class professors and a TA cohort of the same (with all the burden of overworked, underpaid, full-time graduate students), it is unlikely that the values and concerns of local Latinos are upheld as potential topics of discussion with local writing texts to serve as validated models.

And we must remember where our students come from – a public school system that has as its goal the “processing” of as many students as possible to meet state-mandated, legislative, political goals as part of the neoliberal idea that schools are factories and can be managed as factories to increase output. Most instructors in our public schools are white, not Latino, nor African-American. Most principals are white. Most of the literature that students are exposed to, even in Houston ISD, are written by white authors about white characters. López explains how Houston schools devalue Mexican-American culture through a *subtractive process* (225). This subtractive process can be reversed, however, through dialogue of students to teachers, curriculum change, critical pedagogical praxis, and community involvement, sensitivity to the Spanish language, culture, and the *topoi* of things Latino (226). Several writing pedagogies in the FYW course can address this subtractive process – ethnography, personal narrative, and community research each address these directly. She concludes that “silencing the cultural background of Latino students is a form of academic violence which may lead students to feel their culture is deficit” (229).

Unfortunately, when we accept mass culture as the universality of our students' existence, we ignore and devalue their own worlds, perhaps even facilitating the endangerment of local and community culture. When we overlook individual cultures in a course where writing can best be used to explore culture, the student-citizen, indeed, becomes even more disenfranchise, and subtly disengaged at the same time. This is the dominant public overcoming and rhetorically erasing the counterpublic's rhetoric and tradition. In the matter of the course pedagogy, we permit our classrooms to be tools mirrors of the dominant public, or as writing professor Nancy Welch has argued,

When we remove that tension between exposition *and* assertion, inquiry *and* argument, unsettling *and* concluding, we fall short of teaching all that's needed both to analyze and go up against systems of oppression, to assess a situation and, when needed, take a side.

It's important to remember that a localized approach to education; using a student's own background knowledge, such as that in ethnographic community writing, personal histories, etc., are some of the most effective means of bridging the gap from secondary school to the larger world-views of the academy. The concerns and principles I address here are appropriate for all groups of first year students.



Notes

1. The term “Hispanic” is troublesome and generally considered a relic of colonial and linguistic domination. Most conversations will use the less troublesome though equally nationally and even ethnically ambiguous term “Latino.” This paper will use “Latino” though many secondary resources (including the University of Houston and the US Census Bureau) still tenuously use the term “Hispanic,” a term first codified by the Nixon administration in its classification of major ethnic groups in the US. Contrast this, however, with a recent survey by the Pew Research Center which indicates that Latinos would prefer to be identified by their nation of origin or heritage. This would be more accurate, but for the sake of simplicity in this paper, the term “Latino” will be used except where primary sources still use the term “Hispanic.”

2. A press release from my own Texas legislator, defending her authorship of several bills: “HB 17 would have allowed a peace officer to arrest, without a warrant, a person who the officer had probable cause to believe was in the country illegally while arresting them for another offense. HB 21 would have required state agencies to report the cost of services they render to people in the country illegally. HB 1202 would have had penalties for businesses who knowingly employ illegal immigrants.” None of Riddle's bills made it out of their respective committees for a vote because of partisan opposition.

“We are a country of laws and I believe we must respect those laws especially having to do with illegal aliens. While economic impact is extremely important, it should not be the end that justifies the means for breaking the law. No country in the world has an open border policy for all who want to come in without any restrictions at all. In fact, no country in the world could survive a policy like that. I am all for revisiting our nation's immigration laws and policies to make it more efficient for law-abiding, hard working individuals to come to this country legally to earn an honest living and support for their families. However, the emphasis must be on doing so 'legally'” Riddle said.

3. Currently being replaced with STAAR – State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness

4. In Texas, the TEA “Acceptable” rating is in fact failing, as most students coming from these “Acceptable” schools will not be prepared for college work.

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