Chapter 16

Reengaging Texts, French, and Cultural Narratives: A Teaching Model for Crosscultural Communication in the Experiential Humanities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines a course model through which first-year college students engage in advanced reflective communication (i.e. discussion, writing, field trip investigations) in order to embrace diverse voices, perspectives, and populations. To determine how freshmen can achieve a high level of multiculturalism and insightful expression at the same time, the author investigates the effectiveness of his freshman-only Reflective Tutorial, “Global Travel through Cultural Studies.” Drawing jointly from the Humanities and experiential learning, this course invites students to embrace conversations and research on global cultural narratives and to interact with spaces outside of the college classroom that both demonstrate and question these narratives. And by synthesizing reflective writing with experiential observation and analysis, the proposed course model promotes effective communication and awareness of diversity that will prepare students for the kind of crosscultural critical thinking that future experiences at the college level, but also the future itself will require.

INTRODUCTION

Most literature on high-impact educational practices emphasizes—and rightly so—the vital role that experiential engagement with diverse perspectives and groups plays in helping students evolve as cross-cultural learners and participants. Yet, few specific case studies focus on how reflective writing can enhance students’ experiential learning by helping them untangle complex cultural narratives and experiences through the development of a critical voice. This chapter expands, therefore, existing literature on experiential learning and high-impact practices by demonstrating how the evolution of the reflective writing process is inseparable from the evolution of students’ multicultural awareness and engagement.
The author of this chapter proposes a course model (an “RFT”) that seeks to link two traditional Humanities models (language and literature) through reflection and writing on in-class and out-of-class experiences with global as well as local culture. This model emphasizes critical thinking and writing through intensive reflection and engagement with New York City itself through a series of field trips and in-class activities that highlight global cultural narratives. By encouraging students to experience, reflect upon, and enter into dialogue with the cultures that surround them, this course model pushes students to critically examine and take ownership of their role in a larger, multicultural narrative that extends beyond the college walls.

Every fall semester, the author of this chapter teaches a freshman Learning Community (LC) at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York City. As part of Wagner’s First Year Program, the author runs his LC with a professor in the English department. Like all freshmen LC instructors at Wagner, the author and his co-professor lead a group of first-year students in a three-part course model. In the case of the author and his co-professor’s LC, the author instructs freshmen in an intermediate French I course. His co-professor offers a course on world literature to the same group of freshmen. Together, both author and co-professor team-teach a Reflective Tutorial (RFT) entitled “Global Travel through Cultural Studies.” This RFT, like all freshmen RFTs at Wagner College, also takes the place of the standard freshmen-level writing course, which Wagner does not offer. Instead, all freshmen at the college participate in an experience-based interdisciplinary course that focuses on reflection as a gateway to developing a critical mind and voice.

Both the French language course and the literature course invite students to explore cultural, as well as individual identity through the examination of culture’s predominant mode of expression: language. In the literature class, students analyze cultural identity narratives that originate in non-Western societies, many of which grew out of—and also rebelled against—French colonialism. Textual examples from the World Literature class include Marguerite Duras’ The Lover (1984/1985), Marice Condé’s Crossing the Mangrove (1989/1995), Edwidge Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory (1998), and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis (2000/2003). In the intermediate French course, on the other hand, students explore metropolitan, and therefore Western, French culture by fine-tuning their French language skills through a semester-long series of activities that conjoin grammar and vocabulary with more tangible cultural institutions like the arts, cuisine, and politics.

While the author and his co-professor attempt to engage students in their respective, individually taught courses through up-to-date, invigorating, and analytical teaching practices, neither the literature class nor the language class break out of the physical space of the classroom in any real terms. Rather, students explore other communities through literature and language and the ideas that they generate. However, students in both courses do not physically encounter other communities or cultures. The author therefore characterizes his intermediate French course and his co-professor’s World Literature class as traditional courses in the Humanities.

The same cannot be said, however, of the Reflective Tutorial. Synthesizing the themes of the language and literature courses, the RFT invites students to further examine cultural and individual identity by bringing the very notions of identity, the individual, and culture into question. Over the course of the semester, the author and his co-professor challenge students to investigate the shifting faces of culture and identity through in-class discussion, reading assignments, and three in-depth writing assignments, two of which relate to a series of field trips and one of which relates to the entire course. To further link the RFT with the two other courses, students also read Persepolis in the original French towards the end of the
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