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The Classroom Mosaic: A Medley of Cultures Bonded By a Common Dream

Elaine Parker

When I look about my basic writing classroom at York College in the borough of Queens, New York City, I see a mosaic of cultures. Daljeet is recently arrived from India with her family. Nicolau, who has been in America two years, migrated with his mother from Russia. Sung Gin O and Sunny are both from South Korea. Soo Lim is from China. Jean is from Haiti and Ingrid from the Dominican Republic. Maralima comes from Morocco, and Dramane is Arabic from Northern Africa. Equador, Guiana, Egypt, Turkey, Portugal, Italy, and Mexico are represented in this medley of cultures—these are the students York attracts; these are the students we serve.

What my students have most in common with one another is their desire for English literacy and the social, political, and educational direction which will facilitate their assimilation into their newly adopted country and give them access to the opportunities about which they dream. In a reflection of his progress in writing English since the beginning of the semester, one young man in my basic writing class poignantly points to his efforts to “improve my reading and my writing...because since i [sic] live in America English will be my key for anything....I don't want to be making mistakes any time i [sic] talk to someone [sic], or when i [sic] write to a friend.”

That passion to learn English was dramatically demonstrated when we recently read ex-

cerpts from Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*. In the chapter entitled “No Speak English,” Mamacita, whose English is limited to eight words, sits isolated in her apartment. She refuses to speak English and reprimands her son when he sings in English. Her husband is exasperated with her resistance. “Ay, Caray!” he cries, “We are home....Speak English. Speak English. Christ!”

In the class discussion which followed the reading, not a single person in either of my basic writing sections sympathized with Mamacita. Instead, they sided with her husband. When I challenged them, inviting them to express some empathy for Mamacita, they responded by reminding me of the husband's sacrifice, and the necessity to learn English so that they might achieve the dreams which brought them to the United States. America is her home, they told me. “This reminds me my father,” explained Sunny. Sunny is often absent because she must act as interpreter for her father, who has not learned to speak English in his fifteen years of residency in New York. “He gets me upset when he ask [sic] me to speak at his place [sic] for him.” After class, Daljeet, whose family speaks Punjabi at home, complained to me, “My parents get angry when I speak English, but how else will I learn? I want to become a doctor—English is important in my studies.”

Growing up in a bilingual French Canadian family in a WASPish New England town, I experienced Daljeet's frustration. It was my speech which marked me as different and crippled my younger five-year-old brother's attempts to learn to speak either French or English coherently. I remember the embarrassment of listening to an audio tape of a class discussion in which my accented voice clearly marked me as separate from the other panel participants. My classmates chuckled when I pronounced the word "three." I asked a classmate, "Did I say something wrong?" "You said "ter-ree" instead of "three." When I returned home that day I told my mother I would never speak French again. "I live in America," I informed her, as if she didn't know. "I want to be an American. I don't like being laughed at and called the 'frog' by my classmates."

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Although I doubt that my declaration would have been enough to convince my parents they should not speak their beloved French, my problem was partially solved when doctors told my parents that for my brother's sake, they must stop speaking French at home. My brother's speech problem, being "tongue-tied," was caused by the confusion of trying to learn two languages at once. During the day at school he spoke English; at home he heard and spoke only French. Norman's tongue, which seemed to have a mind of its own, often became tangled and distorted his speech. His French was sprinkled with English and vice versa.

In his essays, Richard Rodriguez recounts similar experiences to mine and my brother's. He welcomed his Americanization because without it, he experienced a separateness which was a distinct disadvantage. Rodriguez suggests bilingualists "oversimplify when they scorn the

value and necessity of assimilation." They "romanticize public separateness," when in essence it is a "dilemma" (335). It is divisive, not promoting individuality, but separate cultural groups, and perpetuating the primacy of those groups over the nation. Rodriguez asserts, "full individuality is achieved; paradoxically, by those who are able to consider themselves members of the crowd" (335).

Like Rodriguez, Mike Rose writes about his "otherness, difference and deficiency" in *Lives on the Boundary* and articulates his childhood wish to be "average." Charles Krauthammer cautions his readers in a recent *TIME* essay, "Quebec and the Death of Diversity" (124), that the "insistence on group rights over individual rights" is leading us down a precipitous path, not only as individuals, but as sub-cultures who may evolve "into a kind of folk curiosity."

My students, like Rodriguez, Rose, my brother, and me, want to be "Americanized" or "average." Their objective is my rallying cry; and my means of achieving it, the reading and writing we do, revolves around the issues and knowledge which will help them get a better sense of this new environment in which they are becoming immersed. Last semester when their education was being jeopardized by budget cuts and tuition increases forced upon higher education in New York by a new Republican state administration, I had the perfect opportunity to hone my students' English reading and writing skills by focusing on the daily coverage of this crisis in television broadcasts, newspapers, and news magazines. We wrote to our state representatives, and while our letters offered us the opportunity to practice invention, revision, and editing, components of the writing process, composing these letters also allowed us to experience how Americans can practice responsible citizenship and participate in the shaping of their destiny.

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Paulo Freire refers to this kind of exercise with words like "praxis" or "conscientization" founded upon the philosophy that people must be made aware of their power to change history and/or nature. In our experience, the public outcry in which we participated forced the legislature to modify both the budget cuts and the tuition increases. For some of my students, this was an incredible feat. "This could not happen in my first country," many of them assured me.

Earlier this semester when my students were bemoaning the cost of their textbooks and verbally attacking the college bookstore for taking advantage of them, we searched for articles addressing the cost of textbooks. Charts accompanying the articles we found offered the opportunity for a lesson on reading charts and graphs, and the article itself helped them to understand, for better or worse, the process of pricing textbooks in our free enterprise system. They took exception with the author's charge that students contribute to the high cost of texts by participating in used textbook sales. Much like Peter Elbow's "believing game," my students may now anticipate the argument of the opposition and prepare to refute the author's charges. Their challenges are more informed, reflecting more substance than their earlier unstructured emotional outbursts.

The determination of my students is exemplified in the person of Wanda, the young Hispanic mother of two-year-old twin girls, who yearns to become a self-supporting, successful businesswoman. In her freewriting for my basic writing class she likes to quote Sally Kempton who protests the role of women as what she calls the "maintenance class" of society. Society, Kempton writes, "is built upon their acquiescence." Anxious to make the most of each moment of her time in her quest to learn "perfect" English, Wanda goes to sleep each night listening to an English-

speaking radio station playing close by because, she tells me, she has learned in the work place how crucial good English is to success. Through her daily practice of time-pressured freewriting, Wanda has found that she has begun to think in English when she is writing so that she avoids many of the transferal errors from Spanish which previously plagued her work.

Listening to the disappointment of students failing time-pressured written English placement and employment tests has given me a new perspective of teaching in a multi-cultural classroom. Certainly, pride in one's cultural heritage is commendable, and I do not hesitate to tap my student's experience and knowledge, whether it be cultural, business, or political, but my first responsibility in the language arts classroom is to ensure that my students know English well enough to have access to the opportunities they seek in their adopted land. In earlier eras of American history, assimilation by learning English was expected of immigrants. Those who didn't learn the language could still depend upon factory jobs. Today, even the most menial jobs require speaking and reading English.

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