

The border community: Language and learning through experience

Even though I have not been born into a Mexican-American family, I was born and have spent my life growing up in the streets and schools of Corpus Christi, Texas. All except two of my elementary, middle, and high school teachers were of Mexican-American heritage. When I started classes at Del Mar College, I noticed that the ethnicity of my teachers changed along with the ethnicity of the student population. This trend continued throughout my undergraduate career at Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi. It is strange in a way that the higher I go in education the more I feel like pulling away from my roots in the community and focus my scholarly interests elsewhere. I do not fully understand why I feel that I need to do this but that feeling to pull away is always there. For the most part, I have stayed active within the community, working and teaching at the Alternative High School Center in the Corpus Christi Independent School District for five years now.

Working at Alternative High School has really helped me to develop a better understanding of the students and their needs. I am not bilingual myself but I have worked with students whose first language is Spanish. From a writing teacher's perspective, I find that the way students whose second language is English interpret their writing assignments and classroom activities differently. But I feel that "differently" is the incorrect word to use here, because when someone's attitude or perspective is "different" in a predominantly English classroom, negative feelings from other students and teachers can develop. Labels like "ESL," English Second Language, or "LEP," Limited English Proficient, start to be thrown around the teacher workroom and appear on students' academic placement documents. All that these labels do is identify the student as "different" so that is the way they act; these labels do not help them learn English or how to express themselves through their writing, it usually only makes it worse.

Due to the changing curriculum and other additional changes to the Alternative High School Center, I will be leaving after this summer. This coming fall I intend on teaching in the first-year writing program at Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi while continuing working on my Masters in English in the graduate program. Cultural diversity has changed the academic landscape of both Del Mar College and Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi since I first entered into these institutions. I notice that there are more multicultural texts being offered in many of the English courses now, and there are also multicultural courses being taught at the university as well. Chicano literature, African-American literature, and community literacy are some of the areas of focus now being examined within the English curriculum. While this seems like a good thing, it also sets it in its own place and labels it as something "different," something that is outside of the norm and not fully accepted by the English department.

While conducting research in this area, Dr. Christina Kirklighter, my rhetoric and Composition instructor this semester, told me about Isabel Baca's work and interests in the El Paso/New Mexico region: basically, a borderland community. I was fortunate enough to obtain an unpublished piece of Baca's writing through Dr. Kirklighter to help me prepare to interview her.

Dr. Isabel Baca grew up and was educated in the El Paso/New Mexico region where she went on to earn her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Professional Communication at New Mexico State University. Dr. Baca's dissertation, "English, Spanish, or Los Dos? Examining Language Behavior among Four English/Spanish Bilingual Families Residing on the El Paso, Texas/Juarez, Mexico Border," explores the differences between languages and how speakers of two languages interact with each other. As a tenured English professor at El Paso Community College, Dr.

Baca has focused her research in areas that include teaching writing and composition, basic writing, technical writing and collaborative learning. Dr. Baca is now teaching in the region as a professor of English at the University of Texas at El Paso. Also working as a technical writing consultant and editor, Dr. Baca has stayed active within her community where she has worked with many local companies and businesses as a technical writer. She has helped to pull together the support of more than twenty non-profit organizations that assist college students in the area of service learning. Dr. Baca has presented at the 4 C's, Conference on College Composition and Communication, the League of Innovations, and the National Council on Student Development. Dr. Baca is also a recognized and renowned teacher where she has earned the El Paso Energy Foundation Excellence in Teaching Award and the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development Award. In 1998, 1999, and 2001, Dr. Baca was honored for her dedication to teaching by being entered into the Who's Who Among American Teachers.

Q: Due to the changing cultural landscape in America, what are your views on bilingual/multilingual education within the United States? In your opinion, should public schools move toward teaching in a bilingual/multilingual setting?

Isabel Baca: I have mixed feelings about bilingual/multilingual education within the United States. The way we have it now needs revision or a closer examination of what constitutes bilingualism and who is qualified to teach bilingual/multilingual courses. In El Paso, I see many students not learning either language and being labeled as illiterate because their literacy skills in both languages are poor. Part of the problem is that some educators are not equipped or qualified to be teaching in Spanish, and many times, parents at home do not work with their children in either language. What I do defend and stand by to the fullest is that we, parents, educators, community members, administrators, etc., need to have positive language attitudes. We cannot say one language is better than the other. We most certainly have an obligation to teach children English language skills, and they must learn how to write, read, understand, and speak in English properly. However, students' home languages must not be undermined; these languages should be seen as an asset not a hindrance.

Q: As a teacher, what is your perspective on the current status of the way English graduate programs are designed? And to further this question, how do you feel about the way rhetoric and composition courses are designed? In their current form, do you feel that they are best serving the students in areas such as multiculturalism? How are they promoting interaction within a diverse community of learners?

Isabel Baca: I cannot speak of all English graduate programs, but I can tell you that at the University of Texas at El Paso, we are making an effort to integrate multiculturalism, diversity, bilingualism, and intercultural rhetoric and communication in both our undergraduate and graduate courses. We are most certainly attempting to address the needs of our multicultural and bilingual community while promoting interaction within a diverse community of learners. For example, in my graduate course "Community Literacy Internship," students complete an internship with a non-profit organization of their choice. Most of El Paso's non-profit organizations need documents and oral presentations in both English and Spanish. Our border community consists of people who may not know English or people who may not understand the Mexican culture. Rhetoricians and communicators who know not only both languages but who

understand the border culture are in great demand. My course helps the agencies meet some of these communication needs because the bilingual students know the languages and the monolingual students learn and practice intercultural communication because they are being exposed to it through their internship.

Q: Growing up and receiving your education and now teaching in the El Paso/New Mexico region, what can a “homegrown” professor offer her graduate students as someone familiar with the area? How might this enhance a graduate program to have professors who grew up in the region?

Isabel Baca: Understanding and a genuine appreciation of all languages and cultures-- I know what it feels to be the “outcast” and I know the damage that devaluing someone’s first language and culture can do. It is crucial to help learners not lose their identity and for them to have the freedom to be who they are without feeling less or insignificant. I promote multiculturalism and multilingualism. And I make an effort to not only teach but show an appreciation for diversity in all my courses; I believe that through example I am enhancing our graduate program. I look for ways and opportunities for our university to do the same—to promote interaction between cultures, communication between cultures, and an appreciation for all learners’ cultures and home languages. My efforts are in my research, presentations, writing, and teaching.

Q: In what ways do you feel language determines a student’s learning ability? In what ways do you feel language discrimination/difficulties affect a student’s writing ability if they are non-native speakers of English?

Isabel Baca: As I said in my previous answer, much damage can be done. I see it all the time in my students, especially when I taught at the community college. I taught “Basic English Composition” what is considered a remedial writing course. Students, whose first language was not English, came in with low self-esteem and already convinced that they were going to fail the course. Many of these students come in to the classroom hating or fearing writing in English. They consider themselves illiterate in many instances, even though they have some English skills and their literacy skills in their first language are strong. Bilingualism should play a greater role in determining one’s literacy level. Why do we label a 10-year old child as illiterate because he scores low in reading comprehension in English when he takes his grandmother to the doctor and translates everything to her in Spanish? How can this be illiteracy? We have yet a long way to go! We need to see the whole picture and value all languages the learner knows.

Q: You have stated your interest in Peter Elbow’s perspective of helping minority students use their native language to explore their thoughts and ideas in their writing. What do you feel are the far-reaching effects of this in a learning community and a community in general?

Isabel Baca: The far-reaching effects can be positive, but we can run the risk of having some negative effects as well. The negative effects come from perhaps having some students not learn English as they should. They may try to get away with just using their first language and getting by with the very basics in English. I will admit, this can happen; this is why the writing instructor plays such an important role and must be committed to truly wanting to help second-language writers learn how to write in English while genuinely appreciating the learners’ home

language/culture. I still believe, as Peter Elbow does, that allowing students to use their first language to facilitate at least the “prewriting/brainstorming” stage of their writing process helps them improve the substance of their writing. They concentrate on their ideas, express them more freely, think more critically, and present stronger arguments. Forcing them to “think in English” stops this cognitive process. They focus so much on writing “correct English” that their ideas get lost or are never presented. The writing instructor may get a couple of paragraphs written in “correct English” but empty in ideas and substance. Is this what we ultimately want from our students—correct English but no critical thinking?

Q: In a largely Anglo and Hispanic community such as Corpus Christi, what advice would you give to a graduate student preparing to teach in a university’s first year writing program?

Isabel Baca: Be easy on yourself and enjoy your teaching. We all make mistakes, but it’s from these mistakes that we become better teachers. Don’t worry so much about being the teacher; think of yourself more of a facilitator of learning. Never devalue or undermine your students—each one of them has at least something to contribute to your class—it may be in writing, speaking, interacting or being an example to others. If students leave your class not fearing or hating writing, but enjoying or at least knowing the value and importance writing has in our lives, you have accomplished a lot. Hold and practice positive language attitudes and help your students do the same.

Q: What are your views on incorporating technology (such as having the students use the Internet to find their sources, collaborate on assignments, and build their own personal websites to display their portfolios) as a learning/teaching tool within a first year writing program? How do you think incorporating technology into a first year writing class could benefit and promote students to explore their language?

Isabel Baca: Technology is here to stay, and we, as educators, have an obligation to our students—we must help them learn to use it to advance in their education and careers. Just like I believe that instructors in other disciplines must include writing in their courses and show students the importance of writing in whatever field they’re pursuing, I believe that writing instructors must do the same with technology. Technology can help students at the different stages of their writing process, in oral presentations, in conducting research, and even in communicating interculturally and in their home languages/other languages—by e-mailing people whose first language is not English, reading internet articles in other languages, etc. Educators must work together in helping learners improve their literacy skills, keeping in mind that literacy involves more than reading and writing.

In the most recent edition of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Donaldo Macedo discusses this labeling of things outside of what is considered to be the norm. Labels like “multiculturalism” reduces it to covering different cultures, different peoples, into one large, accessible niche. Labels are convenient to reduce something that comprises many cultures into one simple ideology. Reading African-American literature and Mexican-American literature only in their specific courses only helps to keep it separate from the mainstream courses. Recently, I have noticed some instructors teaching in the mainstream English courses using texts

that are not part of the traditional canon. It does seem like a valiant effort by the instructors that are doing this but I am not sure if it is enough.