

Mainstreaming Diversity Writing

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According to The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), Kansas State University (K-State) has a “diversity problem.” In its 2001-2002 accreditation visit, NCA not only identifies the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among students and faculty as a weakness but also critiques the meager “qualitative diversity experience” possible for all students at K-State (Higher Learning Commission 6). Though acknowledging the constraints the university faces because of the relatively ethnic and racial homogenous makeup of its regional constituency, the NCA site visit report argues that these constraints make it even more imperative for K-State to enhance the diversity awareness of students (6). Yet, despite a flurry of multicultural workshops and presentations, problems continue to offset the university’s attempts to transform its homogenous image. In the spring of 2004, K-State received unwelcomed national attention when the faculty advisor for the student newspaper, *The Collegian*, was reassigned because of the newspaper’s failure to publicize diversity and multicultural events on campus (Hoover). K-State’s minority student enrollment has also been flat. From 1997 to 2003, though the numbers of African American and Hispanic students have slightly risen, the percentage of these students in terms of overall undergraduates has decreased, from 3.2% to 2.9% for African Americans and from 2.3% to 2.2% for Hispanic Americans.¹ The numbers of Native American and Asian American students have also decreased (Office of Planning). Additionally, some 45 minutes away, Topeka can possibly “lay claim to being the homophobia capital of the U.S.” (Roston), largely in part because of the efforts of extreme right-wing evangelist Fred Phelps, who condemns homosexuals and much of the rest of world to death on his www.godhatesfags.com website. In response to the constitutional ban on same-sex marriage passed in the spring of 2005, more liberally-minded Kansans began sporting bumper stickers that read, “Kansas: As Bigoted as You Think,” mocking the state slogan (Weslander).

For readers outside of Kansas, Thomas Franks’s popular *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* warns that Kansas—the most average, “anti-exotic,”

and forgettable of places in the United States (29)—serves as the country's common denominator: if it happens in Kansas, it most certainly will happen in your own community. Though a great deal of scholarship connecting diversity education and composition studies assumes a positive and deeper commitment towards difference, Franks's polemic uncovers a powerful and angry anti-intellectual backlash that mocks "liberalism" with a force similar to anti-Semitic discourse and that hungers for a nostalgia of American authenticity, common sense, meritocracy, and individualism. It is a backlash mentality that could applaud diversity, but only a diversity narrowly defined as the equity of ideas, as opinions that all receive equal treatment in a free marketplace of ideas. This is the diversity logic followed by anti-abortionist extremists, who compare themselves to African American Civil Rights leaders (Franks 184); this is the diversity logic practiced by "intelligent design" proponents in Topeka; in this case, it is the elitist scientists who appear not to embrace the diversity of open inquiry, remaining instead close-minded and overly dogmatic about their evolutionary "theory" (Franks 211).

Though Franks's main claim is not addressed here, that religious neo-conservative Kansans have been tragically duped by their false consciousness, this present research shows how the writing program at K-State has confronted this backlash mentality and developed, implemented, and evaluated an introductory diversity-based writing course that, by the Fall 2007 semester, will replace the existing curriculum and represent the "mainstream" writing course for first-year students. This study presents data from 14 pilot sections of the diversity writing course, in which 244 students participated. It is the hope of this author that this study will contribute a more systematic description of first-year students' preconceptions and attitudes about diversity and writing, providing a quantitative and qualitative background that may assist teachers and administrators attempting to develop and mainstream their own diversity writing courses, an especially controversial endeavor in predominantly white, conservative, and rural institutions. Finally, this study suggests that it is difficult, if not impossible, to make generalizations about students who resist the diversity-based curriculum and, in particular, to account for the motivations behind their resistance. Instead of labeling these students as conservative, hopelessly parochial, or worse, this study suggests it is more profitable to listen to these students and strategize ways to further engage them.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A great deal of the research of how composition intersects with diversity education has focused on a set of important inquiries. To name a few, schol-

arship has examined how the majority of white students resist inquiries of race, gender, and class; how notions of “standardized” academic English and academic discourse communities contradict our desires for inclusive classrooms; how computer-mediated classrooms can both promote opportunities for women and historically marginalized social groups, yet at the same time exacerbate the differences in literacy among these groups and problematically erase all notions of difference; and, how instructors can productively invite both majority and minority students to engage issues of human difference. David Holmes, for instance, asks students to unpack the racial and rhetorical constructions in Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels to be Colored Me” (8-10); Margaret Thomas employs Spike Lee’s *School Daze*, allowing her students to identify the social contexts and meanings of African American code switching; Jennifer Beech, moreover, asks students to disrupt whiteness by examining the raced and classed constructions of the “redneck” (177-78). All these examples represent excellent learning models, which enable students to take on active identities as diversity researchers in comfortable, low-risk communicative situations. Yet, as Shirley Wilson Logan, Jennifer Trainor, Amy Winans, and Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas demonstrate, these attempts to make the writing class a site of social justice and to recruit students as allies are often fraught with angry rejections, passive resistance, and the reliance upon clichés, platitudes, and the powerful narratives of individualism, meritocracy, and colorblindness.

For composition practitioners and administrators, however, who hope to build diversity-based writing classes for their local institutions, the research has several limitations. First, action research in isolated classes has been privileged, largely consisting of exploratory discourse analyses, observations, and student case studies. Though it is a paradigm excellent for identifying patterns and issues, it is not as useful for program-wide evaluations or for the development of student and teacher-training curricula. Second, the research has largely investigated writing classes that respond to literary texts—especially memoirs and personal transformation narratives from popular writers of color (e.g., Curtis and Herrington; see Vandenberg for a critique of diversity-based readers used in writing classes); there have been few attempts to investigate writing classes that focus on non-fiction diversity texts in the popular media. Finally, despite the excellent attempts to problematize how students respond to inquiries of diversity, much of the research repeats a similar narrative: teachers, as protagonists of diversity, encourage students to become protagonists themselves—allies for social justice—or, failing this, justify why their students refuse to take on this new identity. These well-intentioned, oftentimes heroically-plotted narratives, though, do not help teachers and administrators begin to envision

how a diversity-based writing curriculum will work in their own institutions and how students may negotiate the materials, texts, and issues of diversity. In other words, diversity writing research needs to examine the intersections of writing and diversity more closely and begin to find data for tentative questions such as

- How do first-year writers characterize themselves as novice researchers of diversity?
- How do students navigate the composition and diversity goals of the course? (That is, how does the content affect their writing, or vice versa?)
- What are the expectations, concerns, attitudes, and strategies of students in the course?
- In what ways is composition problematic for teaching diversity awareness?
- How does a diversity-based curriculum impact training of novice instructors?
- How does the demographic makeup of the class and the university itself influence curricular decisions?

METHODOLOGY

During the 2004-2005 fall and spring semesters, 244 students in 14 sections agreed to participate in a pilot study of a diversity-based writing course (ENGL 100 "Diversity Writing"). This experimental class replaces the first of two required composition courses, the second of which focuses upon argumentation. Participants were selected on the basis of their enrollment in the specified sections of diversity writing.² Though they may not necessarily represent a random sample of students at K-State, they share, as a group, comparable GPAs and ACT scores. Four experienced instructors taught the course, including one graduate teaching assistant.

Early on in both semesters, students were asked to write and analyze a personal narrative that arose from readings and discussions of important constructs of human difference as class, gender, and race/ethnicity (cf. Berlin 116; McKinney 128). From two alternative perspectives, students also responded to editorials questioning the attention being paid to diversity training on U.S. college campuses. Additionally, students wrote an informed research report to a local stakeholder regarding a diversity issue and, finally, analyzed advertisements for how they represented difference, exploited stereotypes, and reproduced constructions of class, gender, race,

and other factors. The course objectives asked for students to become “novice experts” of diversity, capable of

- Identifying how culture and society influenced the ways human beings are represented.
- Making connections between themselves as individuals and as members of particular cultural groups.
- Researching diversity issues that impact them as college students and citizens (e.g., “hate speech,” “white privilege,” “racism”).
- Analyzing non-literary “texts” (e.g., images, movies, speeches, websites, informative essays, diaries, and business memos) and evaluating how authors and designers represent difference and reproduce stereotypes.
- Conducting research, evaluating appropriate resources, and properly integrating and citing sources.
- Demonstrating competence in academic literacy activities (e.g., active note-taking, summarizing, identifying and producing theses, supporting main points, and editing).

These course objectives preserve the majority of the composition and research goals of the mainstream expository writing course and reflect the student multicultural competencies devised earlier by a university-sponsored diversity research group (Tilford).

Several qualitative and quantitative empirical methods were conducted to evaluate the experimental diversity writing course. First, students completed four questionnaires for each major unit. The questionnaires consisted of both Likert-scale and short response items and asked students to

- rank specific readings and writing assignments
- evaluate how well they accomplished unit objectives
- describe aspects of the class they liked/disliked
- make recommendations for future revisions of the course and student materials
- describe what they learned from a specific unit
- respond to a diversity scenario
- predict their grade for each unit and comment about the fairness of the grade
- rank themselves upon their perceptions of their political orientation, the political orientation of their class, and their comfort level (these questions were added in the spring semester)

These responses, which were correlated with course grade, student GPA, ACT score, gender, and ethnicity, served several pedagogical, administrative, and research purposes. They allowed instructors and curriculum developers to make significant revisions from the fall to the spring semester, based upon students' reactions to specific units and readings; they showed administrators how students self-reported their ability to fulfill unit objectives; and, they provided valuable glimpses of students' attitudes towards the course.

The short responses were read by the principal investigator and two trained independent readers in order to identify patterns of student attitudes. The independent readers then categorized students on the basis of the short responses, according to whether they demonstrated a dramatic positive change in attitude towards the course, endorsed the class in some way, divulged little about their attitude, did not endorse the class, or significantly resisted the class. Unfortunately, the inter-rater reliability between the two independent raters, though statistically significant, was weak ($r=.48$). These categories are only helpful, therefore, to make tentative claims about the differences between the two semesters and to identify specific students with highly marked positive or negative attitudes.

As a way to expand upon the evaluation of the course, two students were interviewed three times over the course of the spring semester. Both students identified themselves as an "other" in the classroom: Aaron, because he was "not just an 'average Caucasian person'" and because he grew up in an ethnically diverse family in a rural central Kansas community that did not easily accept those outside of the dominant Germanic Mennonite culture; Laurie, because she was a non-traditional student and because she already filled the roles of a healthcare professional and a mother. In the interviews, Aaron and Laurie were asked how they perceived themselves in the diversity writing class, how they dealt with the assignments, and how they connected the course to their academic and personal lives.

RESULTS: THREE CORE STUDENT ATTITUDES

Three general patterns of student attitudes emerged from the data: students' perceptions of how the diversity and the writing objectives connected (or did not connect) together; students' attitudes towards diversity in general and, for a small number of students, their various ways of expressing their resistance; and, students' concerns about offending their classmates or about the course suppressing their own beliefs and values. The following three subsections detail these attitudes.

Attitude #1: Diversity Versus Writing.

In the evaluation at the end of the spring semester, although a majority of students (68%) claimed that the diversity and writing components of the course were appropriately balanced, 21% of students indicated that they felt that the class included “Not Enough Writing” or “Too Much Diversity.” Interestingly enough, the results appeared to depend on how students identified themselves politically. Of the students who classified themselves as “conservative” or “somewhat conservative,” 42% responded that the class included too much of a diversity focus; for students who classified themselves as “liberal” or “somewhat liberal,” 14% judged that the class focused too much on diversity whereas another 14% thought the class did not deliver enough diversity content.

The students’ comments about these diversity and writing imbalances are interesting, and they divulge a great deal about attitudes towards diversity as well as expectations about what occurs in a composition class. The following quotation is representative and clearly demarcates the disciplinary terrain of the “English class”:

I realize that the class is “diversity writing,” but I don’t feel like I am getting adequate writing/English skills learned. Maybe it’s too soon to tell, though. I just wish we talked more about writing rather than having class discussions (interesting though they may be) on diversity issues ... it’s English class, not cultural studies.³

In the next two quotations, students take on a teacherly and an administrative perspective, respectively:

This course, to me, does not seem like it could be used universally in Expos. There are some people that are struggling greatly writing a complete unfragmented sentence, let alone analyzing, describing, or narrating a story about their own culture.

[W]e’re not getting enough instruction in the actual writing because we’re taking time out to explore diversity; on the other hand, without adding another required class to the required curriculum, this is probably one of the better classes to tack on diversity.

In the first quotation above, the student sounds similar to many novice graduate teaching assistants in our program, who wonder why we urge them to focus upon “higher order concerns” such as analysis or narration

when “lower order concerns”—especially run-on sentences and punctuation—continue to present their students so many difficulties. The second quotation suggests a remarkably cynical savvy: the student obviously understands the institutional context of the class—that it is a requirement—and even suspects that “diversity” might become an undergraduate curricular requirement as well. This student has simply substituted “tacking on diversity” for our cynical “doing diversity.”

There are many possible explanations for these attitudes, several of which have to do with students’ current-traditional expectations of what should happen in a writing course. For example, a student recommends that the instructor “concentrate more on writing than interpreting,” as if interpretation and analysis were practices anterior to a writing class, which, presumably, should consist of more attention to editing. Articulating what should be taught, another student directly diagnoses the problem of the diversity content:

The teacher doesn’t teach us how to write. We discuss the stories fine. But when it comes to writing, all we know is what we learned in high school. We are learning styles of writing, but not how to write (grammar, punctuation, etc.).

Although it may be tempting to hypothesize that this yearning for current-traditional classrooms is a symptom of students’ discomfort with the diversity curriculum, it is dangerous to quickly dismiss these complaints. These students suggest that more explicit instruction is necessary and hint that the discussions of diversity issues need to be linked more directly to audience, tone, the use of different types of evidence, drafting, and usage. In this regard, Lisa Delpit’s warning is important to remember: students may grow suspicious of composition classes in which factors of writing are not directly talked about, not because they are wary of critical pedagogy and controversial content, but because they feel that instructors are hiding something from them, the explicit “codes or rules for participating in power” (25). Alternatively, students may simply be expressing their suspicions of how diversity relates to their academic development.

On the other hand, the interview data do indicate students’ satisfaction with attempts to connect the diversity content to real-world issues. Laurie and Aaron were able to apply the content of their course to their personal and academic lives: as a nursing administrator, Laurie analyzed issues of non-native English speakers and access to health care; she was also adept at articulating the gender and ethnic barriers that prevented effective communication between patients and health-care workers. Aaron, additionally,

was able to identify the diversity elements of his major classes, especially Urban Forestry Management.

Attitude #2: Resisting Diversity Writing.

Similar to previous case study research (e.g., Boler and Zembylas), the open form short response sections of the unit evaluations expressed various forms of resistance. However, although various correlations were performed, comparing overall course satisfaction with variables such as grades, ACT scores, and demographic data, no reliable or significant statistic emerged from the Likert-scale items to identify what types of students may resist the diversity objectives.

This evaluation response, written at the end of the fall semester, serves as a good example:

I don't think this course is worth taking. Part of the reason that there is racism and prejudice is because there is so much focus on diversity. Also, the majority is always left out of the discussion. I realize that people are different and have different beliefs and values but I don't need a course that tells me to be tolerant of others; that is common sense.

This honest statement, written by a white, female student who performed excellently in the class and who had a 30+ ACT score and a 4.0 GPA, is remarkable, not only because it comes from a high-achieving student but also because it illustrates so succinctly the main tropes against diversity. First, she claims that the “focus on diversity” is what leads to “racism and prejudice,” sounding much like Arthur Schlesinger who, fifteen years earlier, warned American readers that “[t]he cult of ethnicity exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities” (102). Second, she speaks from the transparent position of whiteness, stating that “the majority,” white students much like herself, have nothing at stake in discussions of diversity. Finally, this student's ephemeral resistance appears in another guise: it is obvious that this type of resistance, unlike several of the teacher narratives of confrontational students (e.g., see Lindquist 194), will not erupt in class; she will not demonstrate her dissatisfaction or attempt to challenge the instructor's authority; however, she will also not perform the important work of the committed student, ally, and anti-racist. Articulating an anti-diversity trope well documented in the literature, she suggests that the entire issue of diversity is a thing of the past and that awareness and tolerance of differences are obvious commonplaces. Similarly, another student writes: “We all know diversity is important, we all know we need

to be tolerant, and we all know that no two people are the same: but we couldn't seem to stop having the same conversations.”

Yet, again, it is difficult to generalize why students resist the diversity content. Many readers, especially those who have attended various diversity days and diversity training sessions, may understand these frustrations. Although these two students are possibly overly optimistic about how they depict the tolerance and awareness of their classmates, they are clearly exhibiting symptoms of “diversity fatigue”: diversity, to them, becomes a discourse without any definite ends or purposes; it appears to exclude them or to pass judgments on them, repeating a mantra of tolerance that it pretends these students refuse to hear. Indeed, as their class performance indicates, these students hear the messages, codes, and positions of diversity all too well.

However, despite the many research narratives of emotional student outbursts, prompted perhaps by readings hinting that students' academic and professional successes were illusions of privilege, the data indicate few such highly-charged reactions. The majority of students (65%) were categorized in the middle neutral category, indicating that the two independent readers did not have enough information to make a positive or negative determination. For the two semesters, the readers determined that 18% of students endorsed the class or demonstrated a dramatic attitudinal change and that, conversely, 17% did not endorse the class or demonstrated significant resistance (the latter category included seven students, all from the first semester of the study). From these, the two following quotes are most marked by their combative and sarcastic tone (both are responses from male students):

My ankle be broken from the fall or sometimes my ears be itching? There is no way that Ebonics speech pattern should be included in an English text. Do you know which one follows the correct speech pattern Phillip? Absolutely ridiculous.

To top it off, it's about petty stuff like a guy from Ghana bitching about America. Why are these questions about me and not the unit?

These quotations are especially interesting, in that they have selected the principal investigator of the study as their audience. In the second quotation, the frustrated student moves his criticism of the course and a reading by Anthony Appiah to that of the evaluation questionnaire itself. These moments of significant resistance have a life outside the classroom as well. Aaron, one of the interview participants, revealed that one of his room-

mates, who had taken the class in the previous semester, warned him to drop it because it was focused too much on gender and racial issues. Aaron, who identified himself by a wide array of ethnicities—German, Dutch, Hispanic, and Native American—fortunately did not heed his advice.

Attitude #3: Comfort and Bias.

The final set of attitudes that the responses revealed were students' concerns about feeling comfortable in the class and whether the instructor, class materials, and classmates were biased towards a preconceived viewpoint towards the various issues of diversity. In the spring semester, students were asked to respond to Likert-scale items on how they identify themselves politically, how they perceive the politics of the class, and how comfortable they felt discussing issues of difference without offending classmates or feeling that their own beliefs and values were being suppressed or discounted. The majority of students reported that they considered themselves to be "moderate," the classroom politics to be "moderate," and, finally, that they felt "somewhat comfortable." Below, the table summarizes the responses for students overall, for the 29% of students who classified themselves as "conservative" or "somewhat conservative," and the 27% of students who classified themselves as "somewhat liberal" or "liberal."

Overall Student Political Self-Description

Conservative	13%
Somewhat Conservative	16%
Moderate	31%
Somewhat Liberal	9%
Liberal	18%
Don't Know	13%

Overall Student Perceptions of Class Politics

Conservative	1%
Somewhat Conservative	13%
Moderate	50%
Somewhat Liberal	21%
Liberal	4%
Don't Know	1%

Overall Student Perceptions of Class Comfort

Very Comfortable	30%
Somewhat Comfortable	46%
Somewhat Uncomfortable	16%
Very Uncomfortable	7%
Don't Know	1%

**Conservative/Somewhat Conservative Student Perceptions
of Class Politics & Comfort**

Politically Moderate Class	44%
Somewhat or Too Liberal	35%
Somewhat Conservative	9%
Felt Very or Somewhat Comfortable	83%
Somewhat Uncomfortable	13%

**Liberal/Somewhat Liberal Student Perceptions
of Class Politics & Comfort**

Politically Moderate Class	48%
Somewhat Liberal	24%
Somewhat or Too Conservative	19%
Felt Very or Somewhat Comfortable	59%
Very or Somewhat Uncomfortable	41%

Interestingly enough, although more conservative-minded students claimed that the class did not match their political orientation, 83% still indicated they felt somewhat or very comfortable in the class; liberal students, on the other hand, who felt that the class was more aligned with their political beliefs, indicated they felt less comfortable in the classroom. Although we must be careful making conclusions from these data, especially given the low number of respondents (24 conservative students and 22 liberal students) and the uncertain nature of what students mean by categories such as “liberal” and “conservative,” it is interesting that out of a group of students who feel the class is generally not politically aligned with their own beliefs, not a single one of them indicated they felt “very uncomfortable” (unlike six liberal students who indicated this).

Complicated variables such as “comfort” and “perceptions of bias” are formed over the course of the semester and have a great deal to do with the persona of the instructor and the gradual development of classroom community and trust. In their interviews, Laurie and Aaron suggested that student comfort is not instantaneous. Laurie consistently emphasized the “community” aspects of the class and attributed reasons for its development: the ability of the instructor to keep students focused, students’ willingness to talk openly, the small class size and its racial and ethnic diversity, and students’ willingness to talk openly. For Aaron, discussions at first were “scary,” especially when issues of male privilege came up. During one such discussion, Aaron “went ahead and spoke up”: “[M]y father didn’t have to compete; my fear is that I’m competing against people; there’s another

group [i.e., women]—if I can't get a job ... it's what I'm supposed to do." Aaron remains an ally of the course, even though he voices an agrarian conservative viewpoint of the traditional role of men and women. In this case, Aaron powerfully articulates an anxiety of men who feel that their identity as family breadwinners is being challenged and that they have few roles left.

One final note on perceptions of bias: as various other researchers have noted, a significant problem is the fact that students perceive of the content of diversity as a set of "opinions" (e.g., McKinney 127), and that, in this case, instructors have been authorized to defend and privilege certain opinions at the expense of others. This perception not only challenges one of the more cherished tropes of American rhetoric, that everyone is entitled to their opinion, but disrupts the neutrality of the classroom—that the instructor is not allowed to cast judgments upon the validity of these opinions. One consequence of this is that students do not necessarily mind if the diversity content appears biased, as long as opposing and alternative views are offered. At the end of the semester, one student writes: "Give the students a sense that, although white and male privilege are there and everybody should understand, that every opinion is welcome as long as it isn't [un]necessary. Also perhaps show examples of those who opposed some of the ideas written in essays that you cover." Another student, likewise, comments on the differences between fact and opinion: "Teach the class with the fact in mind that most of what you are teaching is opinion, not fact. It is very frustrating to me for opinions to be correct or incorrect." Again, quite possibly, the force of these comments places composition back in its disciplinary box; these students contend that, in a writing course, instructors should value their opinions—after all, these opinions are personal expressions. On the other hand, these students may be voicing positions similar to Catherine Fox in her critique of critical pedagogy. Fox is suspicious of teachers whose authority comes from a belief that they have "already arrived at the position of being a critical thinker" and, henceforth, only need to wait for students to reject their false assumptions and adopt the correct answers and political stances (203). As the many discussions among the diversity writing instructors attest, there was a tremendous amount of concern during the study about how to configure the space for inquiring about diversity, which allows students to reflect upon their conceptions of gender, race, and class, yet without leading them only towards a set of pre-approved responses.

CONCLUSION: MAINSTREAMING DIVERSITY WRITING

Introductory writing classes serve as one of the key disciplinary sites in which to mainstream diversity, especially at large, public, and predominantly white institutions such as K-State. Additionally, even though “doing diversity” represents yet a double or triple service for composition programs, the intersection of diversity awareness and writing promises tremendous benefits for both areas. Moreover, for composition studies, its role in mainstreaming diversity demonstrates the field’s most prevalent inquiry, that of human difference, identity, language, and power. At K-State, diversity writing reaches a great number of students early on in their academic careers; it allows students to confront these important issues in safe and relatively small classes; it focuses upon the powerful technology of writing; and, in turn, it provides students with a rich source of audiences, keywords, texts, and local, national, and global issues to write about.

That being said, mainstreaming the diversity writing course necessitates yet another role for instructors and writing program administrators—to actively market the course to possibly skeptical students, parents, administrators, and others outside the writing program. As we have implemented and expanded the number of courses, we have reached out to important diversity stakeholders on campus and promoted the course to advisors and other department heads. The justification rests first on the assumption that a focus on content enhances writing because, as George Hillocks argues, it allows for students to pursue discipline-specific inquiry strategies that are oftentimes “responsible for the impulse to write and for the kind of writing” (92). Indeed, we argue that the content of diversity is especially effective content for writing classes, in that it involves issues that are relevant to students and highlights a vast array of social issues that dominate political debate (e.g., the Hurricane Katrina investigation), popular discourse (e.g., the fascination with Danica Patrick, Tiger Woods, and Natalie Holloway), and educational institutions (e.g., affirmative action, in-state tuition for undocumented workers, and biased standardized testing). Moreover, as the class emphasizes audience and, especially, writing for possibly resistant audiences, the diversity curriculum allows excellent opportunities to discuss differences in the values and beliefs of readers and in how they privilege different genres and types of evidence (see also Winans 254).

Instructors and administrators need to make reasonable attempts to address resistance and discomfort yet without mainstreaming diversity to the point in which it becomes a safe narrative of clichés and platitudes.⁴ Writing program administrators, in particular, need to avoid overreacting to students who call for more balance in the curriculum or who complain that

their grade has suffered because of their opposing belief or value systems.⁵ In the various revisions to the diversity writing curriculum, we have confronted such concerns by disclosing our own concerns. In a letter addressed to all students, I quite frankly tell them that they may feel uncomfortable, especially at first, for many different reasons: white students, because they have little experience with talking about issues of difference; students of color, because they are wary of becoming spokespersons or cultural guides for particular ethnic or racial groups. Also, we provide students the same materials and strategies we present in teacher training contexts, such as scenarios about possible teacher-student conflicts, in which students have to identify the basis of the problem and formulate possible solutions.

At the same time, we need to be cautious of dismissing students' resistance to the course and making judgments about their parochial natures, such as the belief that their homogenous backgrounds have made them impossibly close minded. We need to consider alternative explanations to why some students express frustration with the curriculum, an endeavor that asks for a great deal of reflection about the assumptions of social justice pedagogy and diversity education, the authority of novice graduate teaching assistants, and the disciplinary status of both diversity and composition studies. Particularly important is the training of inexperienced instructors and asking them to listen for these moments of resistance and then strategizing ways to negotiate their students' frustrations. This study suggests that some initial ways to confront student resistance is to focus on a set of important keywords, procedures, and lines of inquiries which impact students' professional, personal, and civic lives and which additionally touch upon the sports, film, music, and videogame cultures they consume. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that sophisticated and engaged writing is always involved with diversity, meaning that issues of difference inform genre, tone, dialect, and register; the identity of writers; the understanding of the values and concerns of audiences; and the use of evidence and support.

Finally, instructors need to be cautious of attempting to overly transform students. A single semester is far too short of a time to expect that students can silence the powerful ideologies of whiteness, color blindness, individuality, and meritocracy and become committed and anti-racist, anti-sexist allies, who have internalized such attributes as flexibility, respect, and empathy (see Tilford). As I have written elsewhere, these overly transformative agendas for instructors may result in exoticizing the writing of students of color and creating dangerous linguistic metaphors of distance, of African-American students, for example, who remain close to their language and life experiences, and white students, on the other hand, who remain

distant and uncommitted. Indeed, we most likely have failed when white students argue that they are distant from inquiries of human difference, even if they code these feelings in terms of racial self-deprecation, such as contending that whites are “generic” and “boring.” We have failed, then, when a white student first reports: “It is hard to write about diversity when you yourself are the average majority. I am worried that my ideas are not diverse because I am white.” This student, who otherwise received an “A” in the course, writes at the end of the semester, reflecting upon the personal ethnography paper, that “[t]his does not have much to do with diversity because most people in the class are white.” We have likely succeeded, though, in cases in which students have begun to realize that whiteness does not excuse them from these conversations. One student, who does represent a “transformation” of sorts, states at the beginning of the course that the racial and ethnic homogeneity of her class (i.e., white and middle class) will prevent her from receiving the “‘totally correct’ view of diversity.” In the final evaluation, however, she comments:

Before taking this course, my attitude was very much like this student’s [a scenario of a white, middle-class student who claimed that diversity was interesting yet unimportant for whites]. I didn’t feel that I could relate to any issues of diversity based on my ethnicity and background. After taking this class, I have learned that my views on diversity were very wrong. This class has taught me about all the different forms of diversity and how broad the actual word diversity is. Diversity is in everything and plays a vital role in one’s own development.

This statement represents a small, yet important vindication of the course.

NOTES

¹ K-State’s creation of a multi-racial category in 1997 may impact how some students of color identify themselves.

² Students were informed two weeks before the start of the semester about the pilot study and the experimental nature of the new curriculum for ENGL 100. Also, at the beginning of the semester, they were asked to sign an informed consent form to allow us to include their responses and demographic data in the study. If students did not wish to participate, their responses were destroyed at the end of the semester. All student responses were anonymous. For the two interview subjects, I chose pseudonyms.

³ For the sake of clarity, I have edited the student responses for minor usage and typographical mistakes.

⁴ Sue Hum is more blunt. Investigating the relationship of multiculturalism and composition studies, she claims the discipline has co-opted diversity and has embraced a superficial, aesthetic appreciation of cultural difference, yet not one that pursues the radical possibilities of diversity, which would, for example, challenge notions of Standard Edited Academic English (572-73).

⁵ In the fall semester, 12% of students indicated that they felt they were graded unfairly. In the spring semester, this number fell dramatically, to only 2% of students.

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