

Review

Enacting Transcultural Citizenship by Writing Across Communities

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Guerra, Juan C., *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*. NCTE-Routledge, 2016. 179 pages.

During his 2015 Chair's address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Adam Banks challenged scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies to fly beyond traditional practices and beliefs of writing instruction and instead actively imagine a new and more equitable field of play—one where students and scholars alike are free to transcend dominant structures that often serve merely to reinforce standardized conceptions of language, identity, and social space. The speech struck a crescendo when he demanded we “free ourselves from [. . .] the set of handcuffs the same old theory and the same old theorists and the same old scholarship *place* on us” (276; emphasis added). Extending this point, Banks declared we will only obtain true intellectual freedom as scholars when not just “the demographics of our conferences and our faculties look like the demographics of our society, but when our citation practices and works cited lists do too” (277).

Juan Guerra's 2016 publication *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities* in many ways resonates with the charges put forth by Banks. It extends many of the ideas Guerra had previously brought forward in his 2013 article, on “Cultivating Transcultural Citizenship in a Discursive Democracy,” from the collection *Texts of Consequences: Composing Social Activism for the Classroom and Community* (Wilkey and Mauriello). In addition to making the case that the lives, languages, and communities students inhabit ought to be validated and made central to any writing course's objectives, he also presents a model

for how to extend a WAC/WID-type of program that is more flexible, fluid, and engaged with the community. Part theory, part play, *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship* spans a variety of genres—from critical essay to teaching reflection to case study—each incorporating a range of voices from top scholars to undergraduate writers. Situated within such contexts as writing across communities (Kells “Leveling,” “Out of WAC,” and “Writing Across”), activist writing program administration (Adler-Kassner), and a range of linguistic and literacy studies (Canagarajah; Lu and Horner), Guerra’s research probes the possible means by which teachers and programs writ large might more effectively engage students’ unique backgrounds and experiences and help cultivate a broader culture of literacy based upon active citizenship. In addition to the scope of its theoretical research, what makes this book stand out among other texts that address similar issues of literacy, citizenship, and civic engagement is its practical application.

The book is split into two parts. Part one, “Building Theory through Lived Experience,” lays the theoretical groundwork for a broader, more inclusive WAC program by looking at a range of linguistic and educational concepts such as code-meshing, critical cultural awareness, cultural modalities of memory, and cultures in transition, to name a few. Part two, “Putting Theory into Play,” examines what it looks like when those ideas become implemented at both the classroom and community levels.

In chapter one, “Fixity and Fluidity,” Guerra situates his discussion within tensions surrounding language standardization (fixity) and difference (fluidity) and the extent to which writing teachers and/or administrators ought to weigh one camp more heavily over the other. For Guerra, the traditional emphases on standardization (beyond just prescriptivist grammar policing, but also of pedagogies, program structures, best practices, etc.) not only reinforces inequities in the classroom, it also limits opportunities to expand how we come to understand what it means to be literate in an increasingly diverse world. Guerra discusses translanguaging and translingualism and reflects on his “Deleuzian dreamscape of desire” as metaphors to illustrate how language, like every other space we inhabit, “is in continuous motion” (3). For him, this perpetual fluidity is itself justification for why writing classrooms must be more malleable, accessible, and inclusive. Lu and Horner reflect on some of Guerra’s teaching philosophies in their introduction to the 2016 *College English* issue on “Translingual Work in Composition.” They note how Guerra suggests “teachers might pursue a similar reorientation to language difference among their students” (209). Guerra brings to light the rationale for this “reorientation to language” in part by acknowledging how the interactions students are already

having with others in their communities and that they, in turn, bring to the classroom,

signals a significant turn toward developing curricular and pedagogical practices . . . that will equip students with the tactical and strategic tools they need to thrive in the fluid *and* fixed social spaces they inhabit over the course of their daily lives. (11; emphasis original)

Guerra's emphasis on pedagogical accountability permeates throughout the book, demonstrating his passion for teaching as well as his commitment to change. The following four chapters tease out both the theoretical rationale and analytical backing that supports the kind of flexible pedagogical practices Guerra is advocating.

The next two chapters focus primarily on language and culture. Chapter two, "Language Difference and Inequality," begins with a personal story of how Guerra and his siblings learned to understand the inequalities inherent in language use as their use of Spanish was often met with contempt from teachers and students at their school. The paragraph begins in Spanish, then evolves into Spanglish, and ultimately switches entirely to English. In this and the third chapter, "Navigating Cultures in Flux," Guerra offers code-meshing as a pedagogical alternative to code-switching and code-segregation, preferring it for its emphasis on malleability. He then visits the concepts of critical language awareness and critical cultural awareness (27, 31), citing the need to be reflective of the liminal spaces that students occupy. While his emphasis on critical may sound fundamentally resistant to standardization, he is quick to note he believes appropriateness (discursive, situational, behavioral, etc.) can, and often should, have a place in the choices writers and communicators make.

Chapter four extends the critical discussions on language and culture and applies them more specifically to identity. In arguably the most salient section of this chapter, Guerra offers a personal deconstruction of his own "Mexicanness" (82). He does this to demonstrate how and why he has his students deconstruct their own identities, particularly in relation to the communities in which they inhabit. Guerra firmly believes the difficult, often-messy conversations of identity (at all of their intersections) must be allowed in the writing classroom. As he makes clear,

Just as we need to give students the opportunity to decide how they wish to invoke their language and cultural differences in the course of representing themselves rhetorically and discursively, we need to provide them with opportunities to perform as limited or broad a range of identities as they so choose. (90)

The issue of student-agency is of central concern for Guerra, one he sees as pivotal in enacting transcultural citizenship.

Chapter five is aptly titled “Cultivating Citizens in the Making.” As its name suggests, Guerra sees the rhetorical act of citizenship as a process in constant motion—always in the making. He invokes the phrase *cultural citizenship* as an alternative way of thinking about citizenship as a shared, constantly evolving status informed by “translingual and transcultural forces” (97). Because Guerra sees cultural citizenship as an essential literacy/identity-marker, he reflects deeply on the relationships between pedagogy, democracy, and citizenship. Drawing on the language of the New London Group, Guerra argues that one of the ways teachers can cultivate citizenship is in giving students “actionable opportunities” that can in turn be put to work in other spaces (110).

In order to put his theories to play in chapter six, Guerra first reflects on his own experience teaching an advanced writing course on “Language Variation and Language Policy in North America” at the University of Washington in 2012 (118). Included in this chapter are the perspectives of several students who were enrolled in his course, both graduate and undergraduate. From personal interviews and their own writing, Guerra’s students’ reflections reveal the complex rhetorical acumen citizens in the making can display when encouraged to “[call] on their prior knowledge in ways that acknowledge shifts in context, purpose, and audience” (119). Writing teachers looking for ways to incorporate engaging meta-discussions on language, culture, and politics into their courses will find this chapter particularly useful. Not only does it offer poignant insights from the students themselves, it also provides sample essay-prompts that aim to generate dialogue on many of the issues presented in the first five chapters.

In his final chapter, Guerra presents readers with a case study of UNM’s writing across communities (WAC²) initiative. Calling it the “best response currently available to address our [FYW and WAC programs] collective concerns,” Guerra details the histories and exigencies that prompted the inception of WAC² (146). Charged with the task of creating a WAC program at UNM, Guerra explains how Michelle Hall Kells drew upon her experiences working with underserved, underrepresented writers in south Texas to inform how she would lay the groundwork for what would become a grassroots-styled, community-based WAC. Kells explains that in practice, her original role as WAC²’s program chair was less an “administrator and more of an agitator and intellectual architect” (qtd. in Guerra 149). Guerra sees in WAC²’s vision a blueprint for how those in positions of influence might be able to implement a more community-responsive WAC program at their own institutions.

To illustrate why he feels WAC² represents a model WAC program, Guerra turns to its successes as a coalition-builder driven primarily by graduate students. He describes how in the beginning, Kells and a few graduate students hosted a variety of colloquia around campus focusing on local needs and concerns. As the guest speaker at WAC²'s first colloquium in 2005, Guerra himself facilitated discussions on creating pathways to student success in and beyond college. Following this success, WAC² organizers continued to host colloquia, bringing in such accomplished guests as Susan McLeod, Barbara Johnstone, Michael Palmquist, and John Bean to discuss a wide array of issues concerning the "personal, academic, civic and professional needs of all, but especially historically underserved students, by building on the language and cultural practices that inform their varied communities of belonging" (156–57). Eventually, in 2007, a handful of graduate students took over the reins and chartered WAC² as a student organization called the Writing Across Communities Alliance, thus cementing a structural model that by nature was fluid and decentered. Since then, WAC² has hosted numerous symposia focusing on social justice and literacy; organized small- and large-scaled events targeting first-year writers; and has worked with and alongside community and campus partners on numerous projects.

Guerra cautions, however, not to mistake his profile of WAC² as a utopian vision. Through his interviews with WAC² graduate students, UNM's dean of the college of arts and sciences, and Kells, Guerra notes some of the difficulties in not being an institutionalized entity on campus. For example, because it is a graduate student organization, WAC² has no office, no (paid) full-time director, and no official budget. It also lacks some of the agency, *ethos*, and resources that a more firmly established, institutionally protected program might possess. Yet despite some of these constraints, Guerra sees the counter-discourse position of WAC² as one of its strengths.

Certainly my description of UNM's writing across communities is not in itself sufficient in affirming Guerra's claim that it's the best WAC program out there. The care and attention he brings to telling WAC²'s story while linking it so seamlessly to his linguistic, pedagogical, and administrative beliefs is much more thorough and convincing. As a PhD student and emerging scholar in the field of Rhetoric and Writing, I appreciated the way in which Guerra incorporates student perspectives, clearly giving their insights significant weight. It sends a powerful message that throughout the final two chapters on putting theory into play, we predominantly hear from students in his interviews. While his description of WAC² is indeed applicable and actionable, it would have been helpful to have compared WAC² to other programs with a similar level of thoroughness to their descriptions.

Guerra's book offers a well-grounded, reflective, and ultimately actionable set of resources for anyone willing and able to play with the conventional structures of WAC/WID programs. WPAs, teachers, and scholars in such fields as writing studies, communication studies, and education will no doubt appreciate Guerra's detailed explanation of WAC's organizational structure, his heavy emphasis on pedagogy, and the substantive theoretical rationale he provides throughout. What his book provides to the WPA community, in particular, is a demonstration of how a creative and empathetic administrative approach—one that places students' diverse lives and experiences front and center—can effectively promote literacy, citizenship, and community, while consequently teaching students to become more rhetorically sophisticated.

As our field continues to expand its disciplinary and scholarly foci while our work is still largely perceived as skills- and/or service-based, it is perhaps more important than ever that we wrestle with these tensions Guerra brings to light. Who does our scholarship and our teaching serve? Who is being left out or overlooked? How can we more ethically and efficaciously cultivate students' own language, culture, identity, and citizenship? At what point must we remove the rigid handcuffs of standardization—in theory, in practice, and in our scholarly identities—and instead embrace uncertainty, flexibility, and imagination in our methods? Guerra's book addresses issues that reflect the unstable, precarious reality of American higher education at this time, and yet he remains an optimistic advocate for the positive work institutional involvement can do—particularly for the historically underserved and underrepresented—when committed to enacting transcultural citizenship at the community-campus-classroom level. We can only hope such optimism encourages other WPAs to embrace similar work at their institutions.

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