



# Be Not Deceived: Looking at Historians' and Compositionists' Views of Multiculturalism in Freshman Composition Courses

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## Introduction

Situated between disciplines, multiculturalism is a topic spoken about by historians, compositionists, literary critics, social scientists, anthropologists, and those in other fields. While consistent with postmodern principles that break down disciplinary boundaries, multiculturalism as a curricular phenomenon<sup>1</sup> depends on but also suffers from its interdisciplinary nature. In fact, a number of debates on both the right and left point to problems resulting from the pedagogical pursuit of multiculturalism. Louise Phelps, for example, argues that the teaching of multiculturalism too often serves as an agenda for instigating social and cultural change. This type of pedagogy elevates the political agenda of the faculty over their students' own agendas. Others point out that multiculturalism as a topic elicits student writing that is oversimplified, stereotypical, or superficial (see, for example, Stockton).

While many have cited reasons to help promote or discourage the use of this theme for pedagogical pursuits, little, if any, work has documented the ways students' writing about multiculturalism is filtered through their different disciplinary backgrounds. Since multiculturalism as the theme for compositions is used, quite often, in freshman core courses and/or in freshman composition courses taught by faculty from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, it is important to understand how faculty make their expectations explicit within their various disciplinary viewpoints. We know that different disciplines express arguments differently, raise different questions, and utilize different rhetorical styles. Thus, if we knew more about how faculty of different disciplines teach a core course's common texts, we would be better able to help students address in their writing complex sets of stylistic and rhetorical expectations from different disciplines.

## Context

During the 1992-1993 academic year, I studied the pedagogical views and expectations of social science and history faculty in conjunction with compositionists and literature faculty who taught a freshman Core Writing

Seminar I course, entitled “Commonality and Diversity in American Lives.” While I do not mean to imply that social scientists or compositionists uniformly endorse one position respectively, or oppose each other in all arenas, differing views of this multicultural theme-based course seemed to fall quite often along disciplinary lines.

The course itself evolved as a result of ongoing curriculum planning and guidance by the director of the core curriculum, a historian, and the director of writing, a composition-trained individual. Originally a two-semester, mostly traditional English curriculum, its current form is a one-semester seminar, divided into thirteen sections all using one common multicultural anthology, one common non-fiction multicultural work, and one individually selected multicultural theme-based text among them. The stated goals of the course were to improve reading, writing and studying skills, to learn the skills and processes of academic writing, and to understand more about America as a multicultural society.

Although many colleges design their freshman composition program around a similar set of themes and goals (the 1995 CCCC’s convention had over 73 sessions on this topic alone), I worked with data from only this one particular school. It is not possible to generalize from this small sample and set of data across all disciplines, all departments and all schools. Nonetheless, I look to this small, preliminary set of data to call for more research as well as to raise questions about how disciplinary differences affect a multicultural theme-based composition course. I believe that if faculty made more explicit what has been implicitly expected of students vis-a-vis discipline-based knowledge, they would more effectively communicate with one another across disciplines and integrate multicultural issues into teaching the how-to’s of written texts.

## Methodology

For this study, I examined fourteen faculty responses, out of a total of fourteen white faculty (the racial references will become clear later), to a course questionnaire, which was only part of an ongoing critical review and assessment of the course. In that questionnaire, I asked faculty to identify strengths and weaknesses of the course, its important goals, and apportionment of class time. Faculty also identified their consciously held conceptions of and frustrations with the course. Designed to elicit candor, the survey provided an additional anonymous source from faculty who may have felt less open in articulating their thoughts in our face-to-face faculty meetings, held at least twice each month.

In addition to looking for patterns of answers to the questionnaire and to commentary at meetings, I analyzed patterns of faculty responses to student essays published in *Textures*, the school’s literary magazine. The feedback from *Textures* came in many formal and informal ways. In some cases, feelings were aired at whole department meetings. Other times, they were aired in College Studies (core curriculum) meetings, department meetings, Writing I meet-

ings, in hallways, in private conversations, as well as weekly planning meetings that occurred with the director of writing, director of core courses (historian), chair of the humanities and social science department (historian), and a full professor of English. Looking for patterns of answers, I found that the kinds of accolades and reprisals in faculty responses to student writing revealed strong underlying attitudes and quite particular expectations centered within disciplines. These expectations (though strongly expressed) were not articulated in assignments distributed to students and submitted to the Director of Writing. The discrepancy between the faculty's reactions to, and instructions for, written work helped me to identify a number of key rhetorical and stylistic features expected by professors of different disciplines.

### **Discussion of the Findings: Faculty Responses to the Questionnaire**

All fourteen white faculty teaching sections of the course responded to their feelings about the course, Writing Seminar I, Commonalities and Differences in American Lives in oral discussions as well as in writing. From the written reports, I found that social scientists and historians viewed this freshman course on multiculturalism differently from literature and composition faculty. Almost without exception, social scientists and historians saw the course as "a precursor to Social Science I" and saw the common readings in the course as "an opportunity to use texts as evidence about wider social issues." More specifically, they noted that the material encourages students "to put evidence in the text *in context*" and helps them in "seeing evidence of racism and understanding the impact of white racism as it shapes a community, [for that is what] is essential." In effect, what was important to these faculty was highlighting a *particular* context of the stories or essays so that what the students discovered would be in accord with what "most historians (and all good historians of the South and civil rights) would see—evidence of racism and its impact."

Although all faculty listed "understanding racism" and "denouncing imbalances in power or racist tendencies" as a strength of the freshman composition course, the English or composition-trained faculty asserted that the course had "too much content, and too little time to focus on writing needs." Some stated that the course "had *so many objectives*" as to be "schizophrenic." The metaphor of "schizophrenia" underscores an awareness of the disciplinary split, particularly between content and coverage of material [on one hand] and writing skills [on the other hand]. Rather than maintaining that racism should be a course focus in and of itself, compositionists valued "teaching students to read and write in college ...read and annotate texts, read for meaning and interpretation, write original ideas about the readings" more highly. English faculty also praised writing as an opportunity to elicit facets of student identity: "I would love for students to be able to locate themselves more in the course readings and writing assignments. They need to bring *their* context to the classroom." It was reading and writing and student reactions that English

faculty felt were crucial to the course. In fact, they were disturbed by the amount of time devoted to discussions of racism for they felt it tended to subtract time from reading and writing. This lack of writing time led to the statement that, “[We need to] clarify more our goals for a *Writing Seminar* and to thus allow it to *be* a writing seminar.” In effect, then, even as the compositionists positively regard the theme of multiculturalism, they seemed to view it more as a means to help students see patterns, create arguments, and support ideas from the readings rather than as a way to learn the content in and of itself (as historians were more wont to do).

That each discipline views a multicultural theme-based composition course differently would not be surprising to Judith Langer who explores in *Writing, Teaching and Learning in the Disciplines* broad-based distinctions between the “literature teacher [who] talks about the study of human values, ethics, knowledge of self and the world around us” (76) and the history teacher who focuses on “the collective cultural heritage of . . . a people . . . [who privilege] shared knowledge [and] . . . a sense of collectiveness” (76). Stark and Lattuca also note broad disparities in course planning among faculty from various disciplines. For example, they find that 60% of history instructors begin their course planning with course content, yet only 30% of composition instructors do (283). Given these interdisciplinary dissimilarities, it is not surprising that differences would also emerge in other pedagogical and curricular decisions, including assessments of written work. Below I describe how those differences affected faculty evaluations of student essays.

### Discussion of the Findings: Responses to Students’ Essays

Disciplinary orientation affects not only the views faculty hold toward their courses, but also their judgments of which essays qualify as “exemplary” or “weak” in *Textures*. Multicultural essays from the freshman composition course comprised the journal’s sole content. As a result, the magazine became an arena for some debate about multiculturalism and a source for some disciplinary jousts. At issue, in the words of one historian, was the feeling that too many of the essays published in *Textures* (and therefore, she assumed, in all of the freshman seminars) were “weak”; in effect, they were “racist” and “blamed the victim.” Of the thirteen published pieces, two received no commentary from the historians (due to lack of familiarity with the elective works these essays covered); of the others, all but three essays received strongly negative criticism from the historian/social scientist group. Most vehement were the responses to essays responding to Faye Greene’s *Praying for Sheetrock*, a narrative, non-fiction work about a small Southern community — McIntosh County, Georgia — before and during the 1970’s, as it confronts itself and a changing social world.

History faculty particularly objected to student essays about Faye Greene’s *Praying for Sheetrock*, that noted that: 1) “racism was unchallenged by the masses of the oppressed” (Tyson); 2) “the black society in America [w]as a

society of quiet acquiescence” (Tyson); 3 “the countryside [was] untouched and unchanged” (Mapes); 4 “the Blacks continued simply to wish for change instead of creating some of the tangible social changes needed” (Mapes). In objection to the implication of passivity in the black community, historians commented, “Oh dear blame the victim” or “What would you have them do?” Historians focused more on particular ideas or attitudes as reflected in the remarks, “The larger context, not the text, should have been noted here,” and, “These student remarks only reinforce the myths and stereotypes [about race] this course is hoping to dispel.”

In another round of objections, social scientists and historians dismissed as “racist” a set of essays, accepted by compositionists, which claimed that one of the powerful white characters (the sheriff) “hoodwinked the black community.” *Praying for Sheetrock* directly states, “the sheriff had them hoodwinked” (Greene, 7). Yet, historians called “weak” and “quite racist” essays that repeated this hoodwinking theme.

While objecting to *Textures*’ publication of and compositionists’ implied praise for three “weak” essays which “perpetuated racist stereotypes and myths,” historians praised three other essays (“Much better”; “Much better understanding of the issues. This I like”; “Much better paper overall”; “Yes! At last, some [evidence] of power of people to survive.”). Yet, each of those essays (hereafter referred to as the “praiseworthy essays”) referred to the same themes as those in the “weaker” group — “passivity” (“The passive beliefs were rooted deep in the black community”) and “hoodwinking.” Given the similarity in subject matter, what made one group of essays susceptible to claims of “weakness” and “racism” while the others not? Clearly, the content alone does not distinguish them since both sets of essays about *Praying for Sheetrock* include ideas of “passivity” and of being “hoodwinked.” If not in the content domain, might the answer lie in the rhetorical domain as Geisler argued in a 1994 essay (44-5)? Are there differences in how the students interpret and present themselves and their academic arguments? What differences existed between historians’ and compositionists’ expectations of student writing? What specific instructions do each set of faculty articulate that might reflect subtle disciplinary perspectives? What clues are students given about how to write a “praiseworthy” essay and avoid the labels “weak” or “racist”? What would help the historians and compositionists to successfully communicate their expectations with their students?

### **History: Rhetorical Styles**

These questions drove me to explore even the small samples of questionnaires and commentary available to me. I continued by looking carefully at the rhetorical style of each essay as well as its content. I found several characteristics that might assist or aid a composition teacher in helping students write more like historians, if that were desired, or help historians better understand a

student who writes from more of a compositionist's view. I describe these characteristics below.

### *Distinguishing Characteristic #1: Passive Voice*

Among the "praiseworthy" essays, I found that each potentially "racist" comment avoided the label of "weakness" by hedging a position with the help of passive voice. That is, while the "weaker" set of authors found evidence of passivity and reported it in the active voice, the "praiseworthy" set used passive voice to make its claims less bold ("advancement was kept in check"; "the image was shattered"; "the passive beliefs were rooted deep inside the black community from slavery and religion).") Compare these "praiseworthy" phrases to the "weak" group's use of active voice: "The blacks continued to simply wish for change instead of creating it" or "the black society in [1970's rural Georgia] was a society of quiet acquiescence." The historians and social scientists accept references to "passivity" when it is presented in passive voice. With passive voice, little agency is ascribed to the black community so they cannot be "blamed" in any way for "creating" this, or any, condition (of social injustice).

### *Distinguishing Characteristic #2: Community*

A second distinguishing characteristic of the praiseworthy papers is that even when a black community is named as an agent, it is named in concert with others: ". . . fear . . . controlled Macintosh because it was a time when *both* (emphasis mine) communities feared what the other one was going to do" (Goodman). As long as one community is named alongside the other, the author seems to be spared the "weak" or "racist" claim.

### *Distinguishing Characteristic #3: Context/Explanation*

Third, the papers more readily upheld by the historian group provide external reasons for negative events. For example, the "praiseworthy essay" identifies slavery as the cause of passivity: "the passive beliefs were rooted deep inside the black community, drilled into the lives of small black children, such as Fanny Palmer in her childhood. It started in slavery . . ." (Brown). External explanations account for whites succeeding more than the blacks in the following quote as well: "Because the whites got to Macintosh first in relation to the McIntosh blacks, history itself was laid to claim, as if it were of good bottom land. This is one of the reasons why McIntosh had strained racial relations" (Goodman). Not only is the "victim" not responsible, but someone or something outside of either group is abstractly blamed.

In effect, then, in the praiseworthy essays the "passivity" and "deception" named in *Sheetrock* are not merely named as they are in the "weaker" set. They are named and *explained*. In that sense, the "praiseworthy" students

have fulfilled what Bruner refers to in *Acts of Meaning* as one of the “principal forms of peacekeeping — presenting, dramatizing and explicating the mitigating circumstances surrounding conflict...the objective is not to excuse but to explicate” (95). The praiseworthy essays share attention to voice, agency and explanation which are important to these historians and perhaps history as a discipline as well.

### **Composition: Rhetorical Styles**

#### *Distinguishing Characteristic #1: Narrative/Persuasion*

Although the set of student papers identified as “weaker” by the historians does not offer explication, they offer, I believe, what Jerome Bruner refers to as narrative experiences. Specifically, according to Bruner, with narrative, the author’s version of a story conflicts with a “canonical” version, so that:

rhetorical aims or illocutionary intentions that are . . . rather partisan, [are] designed to put the case if not adversarially, then at least convincingly in behalf of a particular interpretation. . . . Getting what you want... connects your version through mitigation with the *canonical* [emphasis mine] version. . . . So, . . . narrative [is] not only as a form of recounting but also as a form of rhetoric (85) .

Defined in this way, the historians prefer the explicating or “canonical” versions of stories, and the compositionists prefer the narrative or “anti-canonical” versions. If we look at Tyson’s essay in terms of Bruner’s definitions, we see Tyson’s efforts not merely to report and explain — as those in the “praiseworthy essays” did — but to alter what occurred in the past, or what might occur in the future. That is, Tyson is in a way arguing that the blacks of McIntosh County in the seventies should have been less passive, or as he writes in another essay, to “Be Not Deceived.” In other words, while the “praiseworthy” essays explained how the phenomenon of passivity came into existence, the “weak” essays took a rhetorical stand on racism and descried it. While the “praiseworthy” essays attributed little agency to the blacks, the “weak” essays offer agency at two levels: both for the initial passivity and for the possibility of imagining change or a time without passivity. The “weak” essays experiment beyond what was to what could be. Alternatively, the “praiseworthy” essays accepted the “canon,” at least as Bruner defined it, and molded current theory to work toward explaining it. Like the children described by Bruner, the “weaker” writers are captivated by the unusual and produce ten times as many elaborations with what is anti-canonical as canonical (82).

Using Bruner’s concepts, the historian tends to accept what happened as what happened (past tense) but looks for reasonable explanations that account for it. This view could be portrayed, according to Bruner, as “canonical,” in that it upholds the past and its traditions. The compositionist or rhetorical

approach, on the other hand, focuses not on what happened, but on what might have been different (conditional past). It can therefore be viewed as “anti-canonical” in its departures from the past.

Another way to view the two groups of writers is in terms of Gates’ notions about identity and liberation politics. The “praiseworthy essays” might be similar to “identity politics,” in that they find pride in the old identity. The “weak” essays are able to be more “liberatory” in their effort to deny an old identity and synthesize a new one.

### *Composition: Characteristic #2: Context of Author*

If we contextualize Tyson’s “weak” and “racist” essays differently, using, this time, more personal information about Tyson, would that change our point of view? Would it matter, for example, if we know that Tyson is African-American? Would it be helpful to know that he responded angrily in class to any African-Americans who lacked a contemporary, urban consciousness, one more like the consciousness that might be found in Los Angeles in 1993, or like the one held by the brother in *Brothers and Keepers* (also read during the same term) who is aware of his blackness, and fights to hold on to it at any cost? How different, in effect, is Tyson’s claim—that the blacks in Sheetrock were passive and deceived—from Toni Morrison’s claim that “During the past quarter century ... we who have been othered have awakened” (quoted in Baker, 5)? Clearly if one “has awakened,” then what precedes “the last quarter century” includes not only being “othered” but being “un”awakened—or asleep, passive, maybe even deceived. Should we still read Tyson as a “weak writer,” or a “racist?”

### **New Perspectives**

Clearly hidden beneath each set of reactions are concrete and discipline-specific ways of knowing and making history-like or composition-like arguments. Thus, if writers had used passive voice, taken responsibility jointly, accepted past or canonical events and explicated them, the “weaker” essays might have been “praiseworthy” from a historian’s point of view. Conversely, the disuse of these stylistic features might have cast the “praiseworthy” essays into a “weaker” set from the compositionist’s point of view. The goal of this paper is not necessarily to have all students write like either historians or compositionists, but rather to better understand what lies behind individuals’ reactions and discipline-based beliefs. Put differently, if the efforts of Tyson to be “anti-canonical” had been understood, might there have been no “weak writer” or “racist” calls? Or, if I had understood then what I now believe historians expect to see, might I have been more sensitive to a historian’s point of view and reacted differently myself to the debut of the *Textures* essays? I believe that with greater cross-disciplinary knowledge, all faculty



would have better understood one another, or at least expressed themselves in more constructive ways.

In an effort to learn even more about different disciplinary assumptions, I also looked to opening paragraphs. I found that “weaker, racist” papers all began with a thesis about imagery even though that imagery also reflected larger issues: “razzle dazzle” imagery to reflect Macintosh County (Tyson); Macintosh community paralleling images of the ocean (Mapes); images of the law reflecting the community (Erazo); images of color (Malloy) reflecting the community. On the other hand, the three “praiseworthy” essays focused directly on “corruption and inequality” (Stawnuczyi); “the strong influence of the church” (Brown); “Black[s] and whites liv[ing] in the same county, . . . but . . . never communicat[ing].” The “praiseworthy” essays directly faced the issues that interest historians and social scientist (explanations for how imbalances of power occur, for example); the “weaker” essays identify images that reflect the imbalances of power in those times, but do not necessarily focus on them directly. Given the distinctions between the two sets of papers, it is not altogether surprising, then, that the essay whose thesis was “Pharoah dreams of winning spelling bees, of finding hideouts, and of leaving Horner in order to escape the harsh reality of violence, poverty and racism in America” was viewed by a historian with disdain: “This is exactly the kind of thesis I find reflects literary modes and I consider a weak thesis — it focuses on character, and individual character development, not on connections, issues and context,” she stated. Suppose the thesis were reversed, would the historian object as vehemently? If the author had begun: “The harsh reality of violence, poverty and racism in America [calls for] a sense of escape for many within its grasp: for Pharoah dreaming of spelling bees, hideouts, and leaving Horner helps provide such relief.” Would the “content”-centeredness of the reversed sentence suffice? Would it help moderate the negative evaluative call?

## **Conclusion**

In pointing out the differences between the sets of essays, I am not concerned with their status as either “weak” or “praiseworthy.” What concerns me, and what I hoped to show, was that faculty accusations, judgments, and beliefs about curriculum, pedagogy, and student writing reflect deeply hidden values that are in part disciplinary and/or personal in origin. Yet, we read, judge, evaluate, and teach from these undercurrents, seldom bringing them forward for closer inspection. Others have identified our “failure to articulate ways of thinking or rules of argument and evidence specific to each discipline” (Herrington and Moran, 83) and have called for greater clarity of disciplinary expectations in rhetorical, personal and content domains (see Geisler; Bazerman, among others). Their call is vital when our teaching crosses disciplinary and political lines, as it does with multiculturalism. I see, in other words, a need to problematize multicultural issues in or for composition, to see the complexities and burdens as well as benefits of teaching such a course. I

see a need, described well by Tyson's essay, that faculty and administrators of multicultural theme-based courses "be not deceived."

Teaching multicultural issues is much more complicated than we are sometimes willing to admit. But, unless we do so, and face the complex web of expectations and perspectives, teachers will be uncomfortable crossing disciplinary boundaries and hurt students with racist calls. Closer readings of texts, not only of professional authors but of students', is important. Unless instructors, regardless of their training, read students' essays both critically and analytically — for the disciplinary perspectives on content and rhetoric as well as the personal contexts that helped produce these texts — the rules that govern teaching, grading, selection of essays for publication or other rewards are compromised. So too is our purpose and function as either history/social science or composition instructors; at least as we broach increasingly complex social and political fields. Unless faculty can understand precise expectations for different kinds of texts, we risk applying to students (or to other faculty) broad labels (e.g., racist, poor writer) without concrete direction in how to write more effectively from any discipline's base. Equally important, perhaps, is the need for faculty to articulate disciplinary expectations with a level of precision that is all too rarely enacted. By researching further — from a multiplicity of data sources and perspectives on our personal, disciplinary and rhetorical domains and beliefs — we can clarify our expectations and underlying intentions, and improve not only our teaching but our students' writing and the conversations that cross departmental lines.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A mere glance at publishers' catalogues reveals that every major publishing house has at least one multicultural reader if not two for freshman composition courses.

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## Appendix

### Faculty Survey: Writing I

1. How many sections of Writing I do you teach?
2. What is your disciplinary background and training for this course?
3. What do you perceive to be the strengths of the course?
4. What do you perceive to be the weaknesses of the course?
5. Even though the course has many overall goals, which three are most important to you? Why?
6. What goals are least important to you? Why?
7. If you could change anything in this course, what would it be and why?
8. Of the 120 minutes you spend in class each week, how do you apportion the time? Name the activities you do each week and say about how much time you spend in class on each of them. (answer on back)