

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Teaching Note Writing, History, and Power in the Classroom

by Lance C. Thurner



"TOGETHER WE GROW A NEW PATH" BY ANDREA NARNO, DE-MIL-I-TA-RISE DISSIDENTS PORTFOLIO VIA JUST SEEDS

**I**t was the pandemic and we were on Zoom, but otherwise it was a common situation. Following up a student's self-critique, I asked: "How many of you think of yourselves as good at writing?" Two or three thumbs-ups appeared on the screen. "And how many of you would think of yourselves as bad at writing?" Thirty-some thumbs-ups and a few thumbs-down. I was unsurprised: that's the typical breakdown in History of Colonial Latin America.

My students write better than they give themselves credit for (see *From Obstacles to Resources*). Nonetheless, their low self-estimation is understandable: many, perhaps most, of them speak a language other than English in their home, come to college with a vernacular tongue quite distinct from standard hegemonic English, and/or were poorly served by their underfunded K-thru-12 school districts. They are at a disadvantage in the world of letters and they know it. It is significant part of their struggle in college. As a gen-ed course, my (virtual) classroom was filled to capacity with a representative cross-section of the student population. After Supply Chain Management, the most popular majors are pre-med and Criminal Justice. The students mostly hail from within an hour of our Rutgers Newark campus and are overwhelmingly the first in their families to attend college. They tend to live at home, work more than 25 hours a week, and help their families. They are thrilled to be in college, but there is a lot else going on in their lives at the same time.

For years I've worked against their internalized disadvantages regarding writing. I've opened my standards to different modes of expression. I champion their efforts. I let my dauntless faith in them shine. But, admittedly, for small gains.

Then last fall I tried something new. The course focuses on the development of racial ideas and structures in the Spanish and Portuguese empires -- fertile territory for critiquing the entanglements of language and power. Therefore, in week three, I began, "For the next few weeks, we are going to examine the role of language in the governing structures of the Spanish empire. While this may seem esoteric and remote, the challenges you face in mastering the writing standards of college and professional life directly derive from this imperial history."

Interest at first was mild, suspicion high. I pressed on: "Writing and literacy was an essential technology of imperialism, without which it is likely Spain and Portugal would have never conquered the Americas." We spent the day examining numerous examples of how standardized writing was imperative to imperial statecraft. The nerve centers of empire, the Council of the Indies and the House of Trade, knew the colonies through the letters, reports, manifests, surveys, inquiries, and registers arriving through the port of Seville. In the other direction, the monarchs' orders reached their subjects through printed decrees, which were collected into voluminous tomes called "Laws of the Indies" for functionaries to reference. Literacy supported the imagined possibility of a global, connected, uniform empire. "Language was always the companion of empire... language and empire began, increased, and flourished together." So quipped (apocryphally) the

preeminent grammarian Antonio de Nebrija to Queen Isabella of Castile and Aragon in 1492, just as she was defeating Muslim Europe, exiling the Jews from Spain, and commissioning Columbus's first voyage westward.

That part was all rather academic and abstract, but I had a plan and interest was growing. "Literacy was a technology of power," I continued. "It was also a metric and mode of oppression." We then read about how early missionaries burned precolonial codices (books) with puritanical zeal, painstakingly learned indigenous languages to facilitate evangelism, codified living languages into grammars and dictionaries, and used these to render native tongues to alphabetic script to enable the printing of confessional manuals. In class, we discussed how early colonists did not recognize indigenous forms of recorded knowledge as literacy, and how the perceived deficit of indigenous language became a foundation of racial ideation. I passed around (metaphorically, virtually) a few pages by José de Acosta, a sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary and natural historian who succinctly captured the colonial common sense: "Because [the Indians'] figures and characters were not as adequate as those of our writing and letters, this meant that they could not make the words conform exactly but could only express the essential parts of ideas."

The students were on fire as they picked Acosta apart. They had no trouble identifying many parallels in their own lives of linguistic discrimination. Several spoke of high-school teachers denigrating their familiar dialects, some mentioned being berated to "speak English in America," and many reflected on the disjuncture between the way they most effectively communicate and the way they are expected to. Together, we dissected the ways their experience with language and writing was deeply inflected by class status, race, migration, and other social factors. One student summed it up: "This shit's been going on for 500 years."

He was right: the history of English is, of course, not that different than that of Spanish. Among other abuses, standardized English served as a weapon against enslaved Africans, a tool for forcefully assimilating Native American children, and a bludgeon against immigrants. As bell hooks writes, "it is difficult not to hear in standardized English always the sound of slaughter and conquest."

The next week it was time for the lesson's riskier consummation: the violence of language education and where that leaves us. Again, we started with colonial history. We read and discussed how higher ed served the empire by grooming Spanish functionaries. We examined how mission schools suppressed native tongues and inculcated Spanish and Latin in an effort to root out pagan religions, diffuse and dissolve native customs and culture, and implant a supposedly Hispanic way of living, thinking, and believing. A student in the back row remarked, "It's like it wasn't really about education at all. It was all about power."

"Well, yes. Sort of. Maybe education is always about power," I replied. "Certainly, language education was a tool of cultural violence and functioned to enforce and reproduce

imperial social hierarchies. Many critics say something similar about higher education in the United States today." Drawing on Ibrim X. Kendi, bell hooks, and others, I outlined some of the critiques that colleges reproduce the hegemonic cultural norms of white, middle-class, heterosexual America, including, among other things, by judging and enforcing standardized English. I briefly covered how the institutions and standards of elite education functioned historically to reproduce white supremacy and class hegemony and opened the question of whether they still do today. "What about in your experience? Based on what we covered, in this regard, how is higher education today different or the same as it was 300 years ago?"

The ensuing conversation was stimulating, impassioned, and much more than can be summarized here. Most importantly, the students took it away and made it their own, more so than any other class discussion. With impressive sophistication, they earnestly debated the nature and state of the university and its social functions. Even the shier students spoke up. I, the teacher, stood alone before their energetic multitude. Their power was manifest.

"And what about us, here, in this course? After all, here I am, the white male judge of your writing skills. People in my job have been responsible for reproducing the social hierarchies of American society for generations. With that in mind, what should writing instruction mean to us over the next ten or eleven weeks? What do we want it to be?" The ideas were many, and there was no consensus. There didn't need to be any: what was important is that we opened the conversation. Some students wanted more opportunities to express their ideas in ways that felt fluent and supported intellectual creativity. Others stressed the importance of the skills they would someday need to land a job. Most weighed these poles and considered other possibilities. And they heard from me, and my hopes and concerns as their teacher. It was a moment of mutual recognition and solidarity – a shared acknowledgement that college is not a refuge, but a predicament.

Though we talked about it, we did not reinvent the classroom that day – that would be more than we could accomplish before the bell. But we did bring to the surface some of the pressures, unspoken tensions, and educational

baggage weighing upon our classroom dynamics. And we developed a sociological understanding of the writing challenges the students face. Asao Inoue writes that this self-awareness about students' "existential writing assessment situation" is critical to anti-racist pedagogy, for only with this knowledge can students decide how and what they want to learn. Or, in Paulo Freire's words, this awareness is necessary for "learners to live a critically conscious presence in the pedagogical and historical process." In other words, it is about empowering students to take charge of their own education. Without a doubt, many students, especially those of disadvantaged backgrounds, had already considered the fraught discrepancy between, for instance, their home vernacular and standardized English. I didn't introduce them to the analysis of language and power. But I brought it to surface and by acknowledging the situatedness of our pedagogical predicament before them, to them, with them, I could be an ally and mentor in their empowered decisions.

We returned to these conversations many times over the remainder of the semester. Several students mentioned it as the most important lesson of the course. It marked a permanent change in our relations. It wasn't just that I was a likable, chummy professor. It was that I allowed them (and helped them) to blow away much of the haze and mirrors surrounding higher education and in so doing joined them on a more even plain. They still struggled with diction, grammar, and the like, but they understood I was there to work with them all the way. They cared more, tried more, and did great.

## References

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