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Book Review

"We Are Not All the Same": Latino Students, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and the Need to Reform Rhetoric and Composition

Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students: Lessons Learned at Hispanic-Serving Institutions
Cristina Kirklighter, Diana Cárdenas, and Susan Wolff Murphy, editors
Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Edited by three writing teachers/scholars from Texas A&M–Corpus Christi (TAMU–CC), this helpful and inspiring collection fills two gaping holes in the composition literature. The first is the embarrassing paucity of research on Latino students, despite the fact that they are "the largest and fastest growing minority group in the nation" (viii). The majority of these Latino students attend 236 Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), defined as colleges with 25 percent or more Latinos. Few, if any, books on the teaching and writing of Latino students have been published since *Latino(a) Discourses* in 2004. The second gaping hole is the scarcity of publications by composition teachers at these HSIs, most of which are regional and community colleges that serve the 83 percent of U.S. college students who are nontraditional (45). The lack of audible Latino and HSI voices harms our profession, our students, and our teachers, as HSI regional and community college teachers together with their Latino students have a wealth of strategies, theories, curricula, and educational action programs to offer.

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These two gaps help to explain why some of the authors in the collection reveal that their graduate programs did not prepare them to teach Latino students (39, 47). How can this be? One obvious reason for their unpreparedness is the failure of many rhetoric and composition programs to include courses in bilingualism, linguistics (ESL and sociolinguistics), and education, as well as Spanish, sociology, and law. These disciplines are gateways to knowledge about Latino political, linguistic, and social issues. As Michelle Hall Kells argues in her powerful and articulate foreword to the collection, we need "a nation-wide MA and PhD reform that pushes the boundaries of Rhetoric and Composition and builds partnerships with related disciplines" (x).

Editors Kirklighter, Cárdenas, and Murphy state in their excellent introduction to the volume that they were motivated to compile these narratives, statistics, qualitative studies, excerpts from student writing, and teachers' conversations by the following question: "Who are our HSI compositionists who work day in and day out with these populations of students, and what do they do to promote student success?" (6). The book's three sections composed of eleven chapters provide numerous well-developed responses to both these questions, as well as comprehensive, insightful answers to the question "Who are these diverse Latino populations with whom the HSI compositionists work?"

The title of part 2, "We Are Not All the Same," sums up one of the book's most important lessons. Approaching Latino students with stereotypes and assumptions (e.g., that they are all ESL, that they all speak Spanish, or that they are all high risk) can result in inappropriate teaching strategies and consequently in miscommunication and misunderstanding. "Know your audience" has become a cliché in rhetoric and composition, but many teachers do not learn enough about the linguistic, cultural, and family backgrounds of their students—what Yagelski calls their "local situations" (93). Some Latino groups—for example, the majority of students in Isabel Baca's classes at University of Texas–El Paso (UT–EP)—located close to the Mexico–U.S. border, are Spanish-dominant and qualify as speakers of English as a second language. These students are bilingual according to Grosjean's definition, which Baca prefers—that is, they regularly use two languages. They would not, however, qualify as bilingual according to the monolingual's faulty definition of a bilingual as a combination of two monolinguals, that is, fully fluent and literate in two languages (151). Other populations, for example, the TAMU–CC Latino students whom the editors teach in the Coastal Bend area of Texas, are English dominant; in fact, a language survey they distributed revealed that 56 percent of their 180 first-year Latino

students speak only English and 27 percent of that group uses Spanish only 10 percent of the time (90). Some English-dominant Latinos might personally feel the "linguistic shame" of not knowing Spanish (66), recognizing that it has been, as one student said, "taught out" of them. A third group of students, the Mexican Americans and Chicanos at the University of Texas–Pan American in the Rio Grande Valley, alma mater of the late Gloria Anzaldúa, is not as English dominant as the majority of TAMU–CC Latinos, but they may still speak and write in English with more fluency than they do in Spanish. After all, frequent use of Spanish, contributing author Beatrice Mendez Newman reminds us, is not a necessary condition for *Latinidad* (24).

Complicating sociolinguistic diversity, some Latino students of Mexican ancestry identify as Chicano/a, others as Mexican American or Mexican. Likewise, in some areas of Texas and of the rest of the United States, Spanish may be stigmatized, in part because of racism and ethnocentrism, but also because Anglos as well as some Latinos feel that unlike English, Spanish will not help Latino students get ahead or fit into mainstream society. However, among the Cuban populations of Miami, Spanish has no stigma, according to the contributing authors who teach there. Some Latino groups are indeed underprepared and at risk, for example, those served by programs at Santa Barbara City College, while others are not, such as those at TAMU–CC and the University of Miami. Some groups are committed to living permanently in the United States, for example, Mexican Americans in Corpus Christi, while others, such as the Dominicans of New York, are transnational, traveling back and forth between the United States and the Dominican Republic, maintaining residence and citizenship in both places. Not only are sociological and sociolinguistic analyses of different Latino groups necessary for composition teachers to perform, but so are what contributor Sandra Starkey calls "individualized, detailed, linguistic profiles" of each student at each institution (48).

The authors emphasize that Latino students are just as intelligent and capable of success as any other student group, but because many are older students with their own homes and their own children, or commuting students who live with their parents, they often experience conflict between family and academic responsibilities. That is, if they do not succeed in college, it is often for reasons that are not academic (170), as contributor Barbara Jaffe points out. Parents and spouses may pressure students to work more and study less to gain much needed economic stability, or they may try to convince female students to marry or to stay home to care for their own children or for their siblings. Dora Ramirez-Dhoore and Rebecca Jones quote one of their students

at the University of Texas–Pan American who faced such a conflict: "I am still living at home, but I had to literally run away from home for a year to show my parents that my younger siblings were not my children" (65). Because of financial strain, Mendez Newman explains, some Latino parents and spouses see college as delaying entrance into the work force, so there might be "little family buy-in" (19). For this reason, a number of the authors note, class attendance and completing assignments on time can be persistent problems. Latino students often have a reverence for authority that may manifest itself either in a strong teacher-student bond (xiii), or in a kind of silent rebellion in which students might refuse to participate in class discussions or come to teachers' office hours to get help with a paper (19), behaviors that could seem academically self-destructive if teachers do not understand literally where their students are coming from.

As impressive as the "dynamic hetereogeneity" (x) the authors establish for U.S. Latino groups is the array of teaching strategies, theories, curricula, and educational action programs that address the needs of Latino students, HSIs, and the communities they serve. However, as the authors also point out, Latino students desperately need more Latino teachers as role models and mentors. To resolve family/college conflicts, Starkey uses techniques to bring home and school together, assigning her students to get help with their studies from their own children, spouses, siblings, or parents, who can prompt their students with flash cards and other memory aids to prepare for a test. This way, study time is family time rather than taking away from or threatening family time, and older students can model study skills for their children and siblings. Integrating academic skills with the personal skills of accountability and independence, Jaffe´s *Familia* approach forces students to accept responsibility for their actions, or more often, their inactions. Students are accountable to their *familias* or writing workshop groups. If they miss a class or an assignment, the teacher refuses to allow them to make the "blame something or someone else" excuses characteristic of "Sleepers" rather than "Achievers." The teacher responds to "Sleeper" student behaviors in terms of the student having consciously chosen them. That is, "You chose to miss the bus and come late to class. You chose not to read the assignment. You chose not to revise your essay" (183–86). Jaffe trains teachers with the same *Familia* approach that they later implement in their classrooms with excellent results in achievement and retention. Other more familiar strategies are making academic codes explicit and distinguishing clearly between oral and written discourses, a technique also used in Spanish courses for heritage speakers of Spanish (114). To respond to student silence,

Mendez Newman recommends not giving mixed messages about student input, that is, inviting it and then communicating to students that their responses are inadequate or incorrect (29).

The collection also proposes theoretical change. To implement Juan Guerra's "multilingual, transcultural pedagogy," in which teachers mediate between students and the academy (4), it is becoming increasingly clear to many teachers of linguistically diverse students that operating with or teaching rigid dichotomies such as home versus school languages and Students' Right to Their Own Language versus the Student's Need to Invent the University can be "disabling fictions" (69)—traps that polarize students against the institution without offering enough feasible resolutions to the conflicts posed. Basing their argument on Malea Powell's work, Ramirez-Dhoore and Jones propose a third, liminal space of possibility and tolerance of ambiguity—a new language for discussing the relationships between Latinos and the academy and between English and Spanish oralities and literacies (79). According to Powell,

> we need a new language, one that doesn't convince us of our inutterable and ongoing differences, one that doesn't force us to see one another as competitors. We need a language that allows us to imagine respectful and reciprocal relationships that acknowledge the degree to which we need one another (have needed one another) in order to survive and flourish. (84)

In the book's most theoretical chapter, Robert Afflelt employs theories of embodiment to examine how two of his summer program students at the University of New Mexico, a Chicana and a Native American, read Barbara Ehrenreich. He shows that instead of reading Dani's and Mary's narratives as resisting or misinterpreting Ehrenreich's ideas, by demonstrating their reliance on their respective communities' values, they complicate "common cultural narratives about the self as solitary traveler or capitalist manager" (207).

Bilingual students also need engaging and thoughtfully constructed bilingual curricula. In "Más Allá del Inglés: A Bilingual Approach to College Composition," Isis Artze-Vega, Elizabeth I. Doud, and Belkys Torres describe a promising bilingual composition course taught at the University of Miami, where 27 percent of the student population is Hispanic. Modeled after K–12 bilingual and dual immersion programs (an obvious reason rhetoric and composition programs should require or at least encourage students to take courses on bilingualism and bilingual education programs), this course involves students reading and writing in English, Spanish, or a combination of the two. For example, students study texts by two Cuban American authors,

Pablo Medina and Gustavo Perez Firmat, written in English but with culturally significant, possibly untranslatable, words in Spanish. Students discuss the fact that Medina explains those words in English, but Firmat does not, implying that each author is writing for a different audience. The authors recommend that students perform literary translations from English to Spanish and vice versa; I can also suggest that students examine the connotative and denotative differences between English and Spanish versions of the same Latino/a texts—for example, some of the works of Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, and Cristina Garcia originally written and published in English and subsequently translated into and published in Spanish. Because of the diversity of linguistic backgrounds and academic interests, Latino students should be free to choose placement in bilingual composition rather than being assigned to it, the authors emphasize. As a two-way bilingual program, Anglo students who have studied Spanish should also have the option to take such a course. Likewise, in another helpful chapter on curriculum development, Sharon Utakis and Marianne Pita recommend Dominican documentaries, poetry, and short stories for their Dominican students at Bronx Community College, part of the large New York community of a half-million Dominicans.

The educational action programs developed and described by the authors provide blueprints for us to adapt to our own student populations, institutions, and communities, especially the California Programs Multicultural English Transfer (MET), the College Achievement Program (CAP), the Puente Project, and TAMU–CC's service learning program and their University Author's Day. These successful programs show how closely related these two-year and regional institutions are to the communities they serve, a town–gown connection that is sadly missing in many larger, research-oriented universities. According to service learning developers Diana Cárdenas and Susan Loudermilk Garza, who teach technical and professional writing as a social intervention "to change the lives of underserved populations" (137), this partnership is essential to achieve their university's mission as an HSI—"a mutuality that is crucial to achieve the economic and social advancement in the Coastal Bend area" (148).

Helpful, inspiring, and groundbreaking as this collection is, it is not without its flaws and contradictions. For example, some of what could be considered the chapters' most important information, such as the full Malea Powell quote and the description of the *Familia* program, is relegated to the notes that follow the chapters rather than integrated into or featured in them. More importantly, the editors admit that they would have liked to receive contributions from teachers in the Midwest and from those who teach Puerto Rican populations (8).

Thus, the book is demographically and geographically skewed and imbalanced. Latino populations are concentrated in California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois, but of the eleven chapters, none are from Illinois teachers, one is from Florida, one is from New York, two are from California, and seven are from Texas, resulting in a collection that is decidedly Texas heavy, as well as Coastal Bend heavy, as three of those seven chapters are from TAMU–CC. Huge U.S. metropolitan areas with sizable Latino populations are unrepresented: Chicago, Phoenix, Tampa, as well as the entire states of New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Puerto Ricans, with their unique history, politics, and relationship to the U.S. mainland, are sorely missing, but so are other nationalities of Latinos who have immigrated to the United States—Central and South Americans from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Venezuela who attend, for example, Miami-Dade and Broward Community Colleges in Florida or Northeastern Illinois State University and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Another problem with the book's focus is that none of the articles discuss the role of Latino student organizations such as MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlán) in promoting Latino student success. As the authors point out, the way teachers teach either enhances or detracts from Latino student success, but students empower each other, not only inside but also outside the classroom. A related issue is that the collection could have featured, instead of only short excerpts from their work, more sustained writing by Latino undergraduate students—full essays, research papers, or editorials in which the students explain their own arguments about and experiences with issues of language and power. Many of the students whom these authors teach, especially the older students with family and workplace experience, can eloquently advocate for themselves—without having to rely on their teachers. Or undergraduate Latino students and their teachers could have collaborated on a chapter, like the one co-written by Kirklighter and her graduate students about University Author's Day.

One might have also wished for a stronger hand of the editors in resolving contradictions. For example, are there 236 HSIs, as it says on page 2, or 242 HSIs, as it says on page 18? A more significant contradiction is that after strongly arguing that not knowing one's students results in poor teaching, the authors of chapter 4 report their focus group results that teachers' misconceptions about their students *did not carry over into their teaching* (94), results that seriously undermine, even undo, their initial argument. The most disturbing anomaly, though, is that the two chapters from Texas–Pan American are diametrically opposed on the issue of whether the field of ESL is of any use to UT–PA teachers

and students. Mendez Newman states that UT–PA students do not fit the ESL label and that "[t]herefore, I believe we can safely and authoritatively assert that the pedagogical practices associated with ESL Writing are inappropriate for the HSI classroom" (24). Yet, one chapter later, her colleagues from the very same institution, Ramirez-Doore and Jones, suggest that first language composition and communication need the insights from second language composition and communication: "What do linguists or teachers of ESL have to tell us about writing and speaking practices that affect the writing practices of our students? American rhetoric and composition scholars, though usually interested in interdisciplinary work, have not thoroughly examined what these experts have to offer in theoretical terms and practices that could aid the students of South Texas" (87). How are we to account for these differences in perspective? It is possible that Mendez Newman conceives of the ESL field as only teaching and researching international students, rather than students who are immigrants, residents, naturalized citizens, or born in the United States, as are most of the students discussed in the book, except for Mexican nationals in Baca's classes who commute to UT–EP from Reynosa, Mexico. But in *TESOL Quarterly* and *Journal of Second Language Writing*, one can find articles on resident bilingual populations, and the renowned 1999 ESL collection *College Composition Meets Generation 1.5* includes not only case studies of Latino students but also studies of the psychological, social, and linguistic backgrounds of other students who identify culturally, say, as Chinese or Korean rather than American, but who are more fluent in English than in their family languages. Could the UT–PA population or at least some of it be considered part of Generation 1.5?

Narrow notions of an academic field such as ESL or second language writing are certainly not as damaging as narrow notions of student populations, but perhaps the editors could have either resolved the conflict between these two chapters or questioned the dismissal of a profession that is becoming increasingly relevant to diverse U.S. student populations, both at the K–12 and college levels. ESL/second language writing has reached out to composition in a number of articles in composition's own journals (see Matsuda; Silva, Leki, and Carson). In order to prepare its teachers to teach Latino and other linguistically diverse populations of students, composition must likewise reach out to ESL/second language writing, as well as learn from K–12 bilingual education. Recent rhetoric and composition PhDs should never feel when they start their first postgraduate jobs as one of the contributors felt—as if they are teaching in a "foreign country " (79), especially when Latinos will constitute 25 percent of the U.S. population by 2050 (3).

Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students will go a long way to help prepare future teachers of Latinos and to improve the teaching of present faculty. However, it is imperative that we restructure and reform rhetoric and composition programs by making alliances with related disciplines to enable MA and PhD candidates to learn in depth the linguistics, sociolinguistics, pedagogies, and politics of diversity. Only then will they be ready to teach U.S. college students of the twenty-first century.

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