Sethunya Mokoko Gall

Rhetorical Composition

Theories of Literacy

A Comprehensive Analysis of Teaching First Year Composition

"A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special."
—Nelson Mandela

A Farewell to Pretentious, Untruthful, and Ambiguous Writing

Stage One:

Introduction to First Year Composition—English 100 Pedagogy

Shuttering Stereotypical Characterizations with Nomadic Consciousness

The demographics of the educated number of people compared to the uneducated in the world are rather staggering. If the world were a village of one hundred people, eighty-six percent are literate while fourteen are illiterate; additionally, one percent has college education while ninety-nine percent doesn't. I use this comparison of a village of one hundred people to make it easier to grasp and comprehend the privilege discrepancies that exist in a world of seven billion. The article that I initiate my research with in piece opens with a quote from Karl Marx, which prevails how the superstructures of societies have, for a longtime, dominated in the world; in this case, in literacy. Juan C. Guerra, a professor of English from University of Washington, composed an article that examines a moment in the discipline, in 2004, in which he advocates for the working class, underrepresented, and underprivileged students to situate themselves in academic discourse and have a nomadic consciousness by evoking a metacognitive development, avoid internalizing the ideas of the ruling elite, and break free from the stereotypical characterizations that limit their progression in literacy.

In his text, "Putting Literacy in Its Place: Nomadic Consciousness and the Practice of Transcultural Repositioning," Guerra strongly argues that our awareness is changing; thus,

students mustn't stay in a stagnant state of mind, which limits their possibilities; rather, they should cognitively liberate themselves, from what I personally deem mental slavery. Guerra opens the piece with a Karl Marx's quote which claims that social existence is the determiner of consciousness. I find this claim to echo W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of Double Consciousness—an awareness of the "two-ness" of being "an American & [an African-American]", and the largely unconscious, almost instinctive movement between the two identities. Du Bois's Double Consciousness relates to Guerra's text in the attest that, "The veil suggests to the literal darker skins of Blacks, which is a physical demarcation of difference from the whiteness. And the veil also suggests white people's lack of clarity to see Blacks as "true" Americans. Additionally, the veil refers to Blacks' lack of clarity to see themselves outside of what America describes and prescribes for them" (Du Bois 2). Du Bois's notion of Double Consciousness and the Veil are comparable to how the population of the underrepresented in college campuses lack clarity of where they belong, or their ability to overcome challenges and be free from the categorical and compartmentalization by the ruling elites.

Guerra's text articulates that from his twenty years as a scholar in the field of literacy studies and thirty years as a writing teacher, he almost gave up trying to put literacy in its place. After enduring many years in public school systems, working with students from marginalized communities and the working class, Guerra established that he would lecture students in his basic writing classes about spelling, grammar, punctuations, mechanics, etc. Naïve as he was at the time, he told them, "literacy belonged on the page" (1644). Guerra's own nomadic consciousness began when he was influenced by Miguel Palacio, a Puerto Rican colleague who was born in labor camps, raised in segregated housing, educated in public schools, and prohibited from using his first language. While working on his Ph.D., along with his other

scholar friends, Palacio argued that the most productive literacy resides from personal experiences of students—their lived experience. After this influence, Guerra would thus ask his students to produce confessional writing. Though he fancied getting into student's psyche, he also questioned invading their private matters. This notion of lived experience and confessional writing echoes to Ken Macrore and his writing freely aspect—students telling truths with active voices. Macrore in "From Telling Writing" states, "A good writer speaks in honest voices and tells the truth" (299). Macrore criticizes the institutions' teaching of what he deems *Engfish*—a language that uses mimetic structure in universities without realizing that it makes their students' writing private, phony, unprecise, and untruthful.

Guerra mentions Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* He talks about Freire's work—consciousness of those who truly transformed, deeming it—"Once I was blind, but now I can see." At this point in his career, along with Freire's work transforming his perspective in education, Guerra also saw literacy to be on the border of between freedom and constraint, between hopelessness and possibility; no longer confined on the page; no longer lurking students psyche—transmogrified into power. Guerra consequently wanted to empower his students, deviate them from the culture of silence, free them from false consciousness that "conditions people to police themselves by internalizing the ideas of the ruling elite" (1644). Guerra anticipated providing students with necessary tools to re-appropriate their history, culture, and language practices. He also read from Sawacki that no discourse is inherently liberating or oppressive; consequently, he aspired to assist students to change the world by first having them change themselves. This progressive movement of literacy relates to my research discovery of Stephen Gilbert Brown. In his article, "New Writers of the Cultural Sage: The Ethnographic-Self Reconfigured," in the subtitle "Nomadic Consciousness," Brown emphasizes on literacy stating,

"While talking back to criticism in its own tongue, it is simultaneously moving beyond the limits and constraints of postmodern theory into new dialectical terrain between the widely dispersed yet inherently related signs of the personal and political, the autonomous and relational privileging a relationship-driven, resistance-oriented research" (223). Brown explores the tensions between lived textuality and lived experience in the writing disciplines, deeming them social actions that triumph to improve the learning process. For a while, Guerra announces that he, however, lacked interest in social justice, decided to find focus in narrative progress and the teaching of writing, and had a new take on literacy with consciousness.

There are differences in cognitive capability between members of different cultures, Guerra mentions, recently known as the "Great Divide Theory," inspired by Goody & Walt—1963. The two argued that differences were not on the results of cognitive capacity but of cognitive development. While in agreement with these two, Guerra attest that the emergence of alphabetic literacy is western, culturally. This involved logic, rationality, objectivity, and rational thinking. Guerra uses the term ideological to describe the approach in less contentious terms such as cultural or sociological. Through this undertaking, social literacies view literacy as united rather than the singular monolithic concept of literacy, which only makes sense when studied in the context of social and cultural practices. This approach relates to Brown's text, for it extends Freirean theory, along with Robert Brooke and Charlotte Hogg, stating, "As Brooke and Hogg observe, critical ethnography emerges from an extensive body of work in critical pedagogy in which the goal of teaching is to engage the students (or other groups of learners) in the dialogic work of understanding their social location and developing cultural action appropriate to that location" (212). We can comprehend here that in order to develop critical

action, we ought to use dialogue that is contextually cultural, and maintain the politics and ethics of the represented groups.

Furthermore, we get an advocate voice from Guerra when he criticizes the dominant power in literacy. He mentions Street, affirming that he talks about New Literacy studies arguing that, as a society, once we begin to slip into multiple literacies we then begin to move towards culture. While Street, similarly to Guerra, voiced concerns about critical literacy, he voiced an authoritarian practice that conceptualized power as quality rather than process. What both Guerra and Street want us to be aware of is that, "Critical literacy tends to situate the teacher as hero, as the only individual in the classroom who has achieved critical consciousness and whose job it is now to enlighten his or her students so that they can be transformed and emancipated" (1646). The authors' emphasis here is to establish how power is problematic when it is possessed by those who always already possess critical consciousness—teachers, activists, and community organizers, and when it presupposes that others do not possess power because they lack critical consciousness, are unable to self-acquire it, and thus must go through an extremely regimented program developed and administered by those who already possess both—the ruling elite. Victoria Boynton and Kathryn Russell, in their piece "Nomadic Travels: An Interdisciplinary Transformation of Composition and Philosophy," in their subtitle "Nomadic Identity: Wearing the Mask of the Other," they examine how power can be problematic by sharing an excerpt from one of their students' writing which articulated that, "Individuals do not recognize problems with the system as a cause of poverty" (76). Boynton and Russell argue that a way forward is to assign students philosophical and rhetorical essays, which will encourage them to grapple with issues of diversity, and through that grappling, their viewpoints will change and their attitudes will also be modified. The authors attest that, "students continue to hold individualistic ideas that

will deny that they are prejudiced" (76). To battle this, the authors announce that they offer an approach they employ, which is shifting to accept nomadic identity to relish literacy contradictions.

Guerra mentions Freire's Naïve Consciousness Stages*:* Intransitive thought, Semi-transitive thought, and Critical transitivity. Additionally, he mentions Stanley Fish's Critical Consciousness which notes: Can we know what we are doing. This approach attempts to establish that there is no qualitative difference between different states of self-awareness. Guerra disagrees and announces, "Epiphanies are moments when we think we understand something that we did not think before—undeniable reality—the engine that drives our pursuit of knowledge" (1648). He announces Critical Consciousness, firmly arguing that the change from an unreflective state of mind to a state of self-awareness is neither linear nor progressive. Guerra ardently introduces the idea of Nomadic Consciousness, to highlight the fact that no one among us ever achieves such a heightened state of consciousness that we no longer have any place to go. His determination is to have us comprehend that at most, we engage in social practices and experience social conditions that lead to various forms of consciousness—naïve, nostalgic, contradictory, and critical. This is how Guerra strongly argues for cognitive development. When I configure this, I recall Clarence Darrow's words, "To think is to differ"—words that I find to be stimulating mankind to free ourselves from the enslavement of our egos, using the power of imagination, thinking, and understanding.

On his final conquest, Guerra finally attest that there is a changing awareness of social existence. He uses an example of Maria Isabel—a girl born in rural Mexico, who only attained six-grade education. He declares how she belonged to a social network, worked for fourteen years, and was depicted of possessing a false consciousness. At age eighteen, in 1992, arriving in

Chicago, she was married with four children; and then, she triumphed with effort to study English and obtained an equivalency of a high school diploma. Guerra articulates that Isabel, by experiencing a changing awareness; and as a consequence prevailing, she disrupts these easy-stereotypical characterizations, and illustrates the fundamental nature of a nomadic consciousness. Profoundly, I find Guerra's piece to be insightful and a progressive route for literacy in rhetoric and composition departments, along with other disciplines. Thus, I have dived deeper into the phenomena and wreck that is teaching composition and practicing writing center pedagogy. Progressing my own nomadic consciousness as a teacher of First Year Composition, I reflected back to my syllabus rational for English 100, which I proposed during English 535—Theories and Practices of Composition Instruction. I will now progress this paper in the next pages talking about my syllabus and its pedagogical contents.

Stage Two:

Progression of First Year Composition and Writing Center Pedagogy

Arming Students with Advantageous Tools for Success

Tutoring at Long Beach City College's Writing and Reading Success Center and teaching in the Beach Learning Community at Cal State Long Beach's Writers Resource Lab have brought to my attention that though most students place in composition 100 and below because of low testing scores, the greatest adversity they encounter is situating themselves in academic discourse, feeling ill prepared and intimidated.

Throughout the first year of my master's program, while taking English 535, I read many engaging and informative pedagogical approaches that I found helpful and beneficial. Out of many theories, *Expressivism* stood out as the most intriguing and promising approach to help assist the silent and intimidated students gain stronger command of the English language and succeed in college.

I put in conversation four theorists that I wanted to teach composition 100 with, through their perspectives and methods. When I read Jacqueline Jones Roster's piece, "When the First Voice You Hear is not Your Own," she talked about "cross-boundary discourse" and "subject" position being everything. Roster composed her piece not only to establish the importance of identity as a concept, but also to focus attention on the misrepresentation of identities, whether deliberate or unintentional, especially for those who are not automatically privileged and entitled in academic circles. This aspect presented by Roster lead me to Susan C. Jarratt, who in her article, "Besides Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation of Postcolonial Feminist Writing," attends to the notion of speaking and listening. She articulates: "Who speaks? On behalf of whom? Who is listening? And how?" Jarratt's purpose is to address the problem of speaking for

others by looking at how “others” speak. I found it beneficial to connect this to Giyatri Spivak, a theorist I first discovered during my English 696—Theory and Criticism. Spivak in her piece, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" warns first-world intellectuals about the danger of obscuring their own acts of discursive imperialism into the process of facilely “representing” the interest of apparently silent subjects of oppression. Through current research, I discovered J. Maggio, who responded to Spivak with a publication, "Can the Subaltern Be Heard?" Maggio established that “Speaking” is linked to “being heard”. The cannot speak in “the subaltern cannot speak” is gesturing to the impossibility of speech to an audience that refuses to hear and respond to the crying out. At this time, I concluded that Ken Macrore has a pragmatic approach that connects and resolves the issues brought forth by Royster, Jarratt, Spivak, and Maggio. In "Telling Writing," Macrore advocates that institutions ought to deviate from *Engfish*—phony, pretentious language in schools. Subsequently, I recalled that Macrore wants students to write about what they know and care about; speak for and about themselves using narrative voices. He establishes that through expressivist approach students will produce honest writing that is not phony or private, which will result positively—good writing that is clear, vigorous, alive, sensuous, appropriate, strong, etc.

While I was taking English 535—Theories and Practices of Composition Studies and worked at the writing labs both at Long Beach City College and Cal State Long Beach, I modeled an expressivist method to assist students improve their writing and help them place themselves in academia and furnished a syllabus that I hoped would alleviate students' stress levels. My goal was to make the English language and grammar approachable in a less intimidating manner, equip students with skills to write concise summaries that demonstrated their comprehension and articulation, exemplify narration skills for them, and teach them critical

analysis skills, as well as show them how to evaluate texts and make strong arguments. The course calendar on my syllabus was composed of teaching theories and readings that attend to these concepts.

My ultimate objective was to teach English 100 using two texts—*Rules for Writers* and *Ways of Reading*. I wanted to also post additional readings on BeachBaord. On the syllabus, I addressed the course's purpose: to improve students' critical reading and writing skills and to widen their experiences of academia, through thought-provoking composition. I attested that at the end of the semester the students would feel confident to analyze, demonstrate adequate grammar, and use MLA and APA citations consistently and properly to respond to scholarly arguments. I clearly identified the course requirements along with the grading principles. Reading responses, formal essays, late papers, rough drafts, attendance, plagiarism, accommodations, midterm and the final exam were all concisely addressed, too.

In the first week of the semester I anticipated introduce the course, and give a brief in-class writing assignment to assess the students' writing. Using Malcom X and Sherman Alexi's pieces, I wanted to teach *comprehension and articulation* by asking students to compose summaries of the readings. During this period, I was prepared to additionally assign *Rules for Writers* as a source to familiarize students with annotation, outlines, summaries, drafting, and building effective and coherent paragraphs. I also envisioned that we would have rough draft workshops, followed by some peer review days. The exigence of this assignment was to set a clear differentiation between Macrore's idea of using individual voices to write versus summarizing texts without making up ideas and conclusions.

To demonstrate *narration and expressivism* I intended to assign Richard Rodriquez's piece, "The Achievement of Desire," in which students would be required to take an episode

from their lives, one that seemed in some way similar to the reading, and cast it into their own version of Rodriguez's essay. My aim was teaching them to interpret details in a similar fashion of the piece. Since that would have been the time they practiced narration, I added readings from *Rules for Writers,* in the grammar section, to familiarize them with sentence fragments, run-on sentences, subject verb agreements, pronoun references, who vs. whom, adjectives and adverbs, and verb form and tenses. I included in the course calendar, a short quiz, which enforced them to demonstrate control of English grammar. With each formal essay, I also scheduled rough draft workshops and planned for students to have at least twelve to fifteen days to edit their final drafts.

Prior to assigning the third essay—The Researched Argument—I anticipated to have an MLA format and documentation workshop. Subsequently, I wanted to introduce a reading of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." A thesis workshop was going to be on the same week they read Plato, to teach them how to sufficiently read and analyze texts. I was determined to use "The Allegory of the Cave" to have students practice their *critical analysis and argumentation skills*. With a creative and fun approach to Plato, students would use Plato's notion of darkness versus light and shadows in the cave. They were to take Plato's claim that "people take journeys from dark to light, where their souls escape the real of sensory perceptions to freedom of "true reality," which exists beyond the realm of senses," and apply this to our media-saturated culture, in which we are confronted with images of how we should look, act, and even feel. Students would be required to view a media selection of their own, and write about what Plato would have had to say about it; pretend Plato was in their living rooms with them, hanging out in front of their televisions. Their requirement would be to analyze the realities that their media selections represent. Along with a rough draft workshop, I was also going to assign readings from *Rules for*

writers to help students clean up their writing and avoid wordy sentences, and use appropriate language and exact words.

Towards the end of the semester, I planned on having individual conferences to address student's worries and concerns, and additionally suggest that they visit the Writer's Resource Lab as another helpful resource. During the week of this assignment, we would have a workshop on creating arguments and assign readings from *Rules for Writers* on writing arguments.

The midterm and final exam was going to model the *GPE*—Graduation (Writing Assessment Requirement) Placement Exam, as a preparation ahead. This way, students would be familiar and comfortable with timed, prepared writing. In conclusion, I was confident that with my teaching philosophy, along with the syllabus I had created, I would help my English 100 students achieve a stronger command of the English language. While I assented with my mentioned theorist: Roster's objective to benefit students by allowing them to use and hear their own voices, J. Maggio advocating for the Subaltern to be heard, and Macrore's proposal to deviate from *Engfish*, and ground students with strong language skills of their own, I felt confident that my approach to the instruction of my English100 class would arm students with necessary tools for success and provide a productive learning environment that is student-centered. The following pages attend to the instruction of my English 100 course.

Stage Three:

Practice of First Year Composition, English 100—Instruction in the Classroom

Auto-ethnography Writing

"Auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially just and socially conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write auto-ethnography. Thus, as a method, auto-ethnography is both a process and a product"— Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, & Arthur P. Bocher.

In "ESL Composition as a Literate Art of the Contact Zone," Suresh Canagarajah asserts that while teaching ESL students, the process of transforming personal experiences into an auto-ethnography develops the language awareness and rhetorical sensitivity needed to engage with the hybrid and layered genres one encounters in the contact zones inside and outside the academy (Cranagarajah 30).

Canagarajah's writing activity is also designed to generate a reflexive awareness of students' own literacy backgrounds. Canagarajah uses examples of authors who employ personal reflections in their writing as well. She references Chinua Achebe, Gloria Anzaldua, and Amy Tan to characterize essayists and novelists who write about tensions that English generates as they struggle to represent their community experiences.

During the instruction of my English 100 course, I employed Canagarajah's writing activity and noticed that students indeed do value their experiences and learn from them. During the first weeks of the semester, I had my class read several literacy narrative essays, mostly written by authors who began their own literacy developments speaking little to no English at all.

I assigned Sherman Alexie, Malcolm X, Amy Tan, and Richard Rodriguez. While we discussed these authors' texts weekly, I encouraged my two ESL students to write their weekly responses modeling those authors, but using their own experiences.

This approach functioned satisfactorily enough that both of my ESL students improved in engagement and participation. My shy Cambodian student began visiting my office hours regularly and discussing his struggles and breakthroughs with English. He particularly enjoyed Sherman Alexi's piece. He found a strong connection to Alexi's experience of learning how to read and write using a comic book with his own experience of a high school teacher who encouraged him to use a DVD/Film to pay attention to the conventions and functions of the English language. This student improved his writing ability from a D+ to a B+ within the first month of instruction.

My other ESL, Japanese, student relished making appointments with me at the Writer's Resource Lab, where she met with me to work on her art history papers. For she is an art major, she understood art and had passion for it; however, she struggled with conveying a clear message or descriptions of her visited art exhibits. While working with her closely at the Writer's Resource Lab, I realized that she was, in fact, a strong writer, but did not use articles properly. With several sessions in the writing lab and regular attendance in class, my Japanese student began speaking in class, self-explaining some language concepts that she realized she was beginning to comprehend during our tutoring sessions, and began composing concise summaries and well-articulated descriptive essays. She actually inspired me to look at the art pieces and sculptures around our own California State University, Long Beach campus and taught me a thing or two about the three-dimensional sculpture— *"U" as a Set, Claire Falkenstein, 1965*—in the waterfall, right behind the English department's McIntosh building.

After closely attending to the development of my two ESL students and the rest of my composition class, I better appreciate and recognize that gradually modeling Canagarajah's theory has molded me into a perceptive and discerning composition instructor. I especially valued the auto-ethnographic writing form during the latter of my lecturing, when the same ESL, Japanese, student gave an oral presentation of her final researched argument paper. With my guidance, Using Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and his shadows and fake reality metaphor, the young lady is currently taking a profounder glance and bringing to light the duplicity of the Japanese government for lying to its people, telling them that nuclear power plants were safe, while they actually presented health threats and harm to innocent lives. My other Cambodian ESL student also deviated from Macrore's *Engfish* and found his own place in academic discourse. He also proposed to work on an interesting topic, while also using Plato's metaphor of shadows, to bring to light the false perception held by diamond companies that make people gullible to spending hundreds of dollars in belief that diamonds are rare, a precious gemstone, and should be highly priced. Though I principally focused on the two ESL students in my class for this section of my paper, I wholeheartedly find all my student's research topics interesting and engaging. On the following pages, I demonstrate my approach to teaching the researched argument essay.

A Guiding Approach for the Researched Argument Essay

In “Occasions, Sources, and Strategies,” Douglas Hesse proclaims that, for a research topic, composition instructors might instruct the students to do the following: “Decide on their topic for the [past and next] few weeks of [instruction], and write one page that explains why they want to pursue that topic” (Hesse 60).

Hesse provides a sample of five questions to help guide the students: “Why do you see that topic more important than others? What is your personal connection to it? Why does it matter to you? What do you expect to learn from writing about that topic?

*Please find attached on the following page, My **Researched Argument Essay Prompt**.*

The Researched Argument Essay

Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave"

Writers English 100: I appreciate you all, and have had a wonderful semester being your instructor. You are all exceptional individuals. We have the *Final Exam* and *Researched Argument Essay* left. With my guidance, please approach this research with intent to learn another thing of value, on a topic that you abundantly care about.

Prompt:

We live in a media-saturated culture. Everywhere we are confronted with images of how we should look, act, and even feel. Depending on our age, social status, race, gender, etc., we are in fact told to feel different things—there are norms we are expected to live up to.

Plato talks about a line of people chained in a dark cave, trapped by shadows, compared to those who are released to the outside, into the sunlight. He argues that we all take this journey from darkness to light, where our souls escape the realm of sensory perceptions to the freedom of "true reality," which exists beyond the realm of senses. What we see in our eyes is suspect, a shadow. Only what we see with our souls is "real."

Look at Plato's use of metaphors and analogies to make his point across. Describe what is valued as real in our society versus what is considered real by Plato. What are typical images—metaphors if you will—that the media floods us with in order to make us believe their version of reality? Think about commercials, products advertisements, TV shows, billboards, vacations ads, etc. How do these conform to our society's obsession with certain norms? Do they, in fact, differ or try to enter a higher level of "reality"?

Form your own argument discussing how Plato would have viewed your media selection and what he would have had to say about it; pretend he is in your living room with you, hanging out in front of the television. Essentially, construct an argument about the "shadow" reality that is being represented by your media selection. What is it doing to society and what do you suggest should happen?

Exigence:

> Your final essay, the *Researched Argument*, requires you to persuade a particular group of people to potentially change their opinions and to even alter their behavior in some way. This requires you to identify and partially refute opinions alternative and/or opposed to your own.

Guidelines:

- Use Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" as your primary text.
- Develop logical, ethical, and emotional appeals to convince your readers.
- Cite four sources— (two of which support your argument and two of which must include ideas opposed and/or alternative to your own).

Requirements: *7 Pages (Not including the Works Cited)* **Final Due Date:** 14 May *2018*

I assign this essay each semester, fall and spring; thus, usually the week prior to Thanksgiving or spring break, I ask my students to compose a one-page paper, along with their research proposal. Though I do not collect the one pagers that day, I ask each student present an oral presentation, seven to nine minutes, answering Hesse's questions in class. I instruct the entire class to ask the presenter questions, give him/her constructive feedback, and assist one another to further explore their research topic. In attempt to avoid a "banking concept", much like Freire asserts, I sit in the audience to remove my body as the authoritative figure in front. Doing thus allows me to observe and carefully guide my students towards appropriate and scholarly research. I blended in with the rest, creating a calm and relaxed atmosphere during the discussion of an intimidating research paper. The oral presentations are usually informative and exciting for both the students and me. When we return from the break, I meet with students individually to discuss their rough drafts. I then work with them on their research for the remaining few weeks of the semester, and collect the papers on the last day of instruction. Our last undertaking is the final exam.

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