

Multicultural Education and Academic English Writing

“This is the great new problem of mankind: we have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace”

(Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967, *A World House*).

I. Multiculturalism, Literacy, and EAP

In the 21st century, a pro-active member of the world community is highly literate by necessity. Literacy in today’s era is multifaceted and culturally shaped, so that ethnographers, having studied the literacy practices of various societies around the world, now talk about multiple literacies rather than one single literacy (i.e., Street, 1995). In an extended sense of the term, literacy also encompasses a number of academic disciplines, so that we come to speak of *linguistic literacy*, *mathematic literacy*, *computer literacy*, and so on. In an increasingly heterogeneous local community, there is a pressing need for its members to cultivate *cultural literacy* as well, in order to communicate effectively with people of backgrounds different from their own. Cultural literacy is therefore an essential skill for everyone, members of minority and majority communities alike.

Multicultural communities in urban settings offer excellent opportunities for residents to develop cultural literacy in a living laboratory, since people from widely divergent backgrounds come into contact with each other on a regular basis. As a practicing language teacher in an international college in Greece, I try to incorporate in my classroom teaching the range of perspectives of all students who attend my classes. In what follows, I briefly characterize a current

Linda Manney

model of multicultural education as it is envisioned by multiculturalists in North America, and I describe how I have adapted and applied these ideas in curriculum I have developed for EAP writing classes that I teach here in Greece.

II. A brief look at Multicultural Education

As a school reform movement, multicultural education aims for interracial harmony and understanding, an empowering classroom atmosphere, and equal educational opportunities for all students. It is therefore viewed as one part of a wider program of social justice (Banks and Banks, 1993; Nieto, 2002; Oakes and Lipton, 2003). Multiculturalist educators, in their efforts to promote cross-cultural understanding, try to expose their students to a variety of ideas and viewpoints, including the views of people who have traditionally been diminished, silenced, or ignored in the larger society. The emphasis on multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives helps students understand and empathize with a wider range of people, and will hopefully increase their social and intellectual flexibility. Multiculturalist educators believe that through this experience, students will come to view contemporary issues more realistically as complex networks of conflicting interests, rather than simple situations with two sides only, a right one and a wrong one.

Philosophically, multicultural education has much in common with critical pedagogy: both examine unequal power relations and unequal access to resources which reflect the racial, gender, and class inequities institutionalized in many societies (Pennycook, 1999; Nieto, 2002; McLaren, 2003). This type of pedagogy encourages students from all backgrounds to grow and develop as active and engaged **agents**, i.e., those who consciously work hard to develop a

strong intellectual, political and moral understanding of themselves and others. (McLaren 2003, p. 214). In fact, developing students' sense of agency is a key goal among critical educators (Luke, 1996; Pennycook, 1999; McLaren, 2003). As critical agents, then, we always aim for greater awareness, as we confront deeply held prejudices and hidden assumptions that members of one group make, often times unconsciously, about members of another cultural group.

III. Multicultural influences on an EAP Curriculum

In an EAP writing class that I teach here in Greece, I have developed a thematic unit which I call "Moral Responsibility." In this section, I briefly describe a part of this unit which focuses on cross-cultural harmony. In addition to providing the students with quality English language texts and helping them learn to write academic papers in English, I also hope, through my curriculum, to open up a discussion of current sociopolitical issues here in Greece. My point of entry is the recent history of race relations in the North American context, and the organized nonviolent response to racial conflict by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The focus of study is extended to include the students' personal experiences with intergroup conflict locally, and culminates with the students' individually done written research projects which expand on their personal experiences.

Greece, as a member of the European Union, has become a desirable destination for people who immigrate because of economic hardship, and many of these people eventually end up settling in Greece. It is my hope that through the unit on "Moral Responsibility," students will consider some culturally sensitive ways to integrate the influx of people from Eastern Europe and the Balkans into mainstream Greek society. As the ideas we explore are extended to include the

Linda Manney

social problems related to recent immigration patterns, they also lead to discussions of prior issues that have been submerged and kept out of public discussions. For example, themes presented in the texts we read have led to analysis of gender inequities and anti-gay sentiment that hurt Greek and non-Greek people alike. The aim of my curriculum, in addition to providing for EAP instruction, is to raise awareness of diversity in our local community, and to consider how we can include diverse viewpoints in our lives, individually, and institutionally.

Materials and Techniques used

To focus our study of intergroup harmony as an attainable goal, students in my class read two essays by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The World House” (1967) and “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), both of which are reprinted in Washington (1992). They also write and present several personal responses to the content of these texts, leading to a formal research essay which connects their own personal experiences with ideas introduced in one of the informal writing assignments. Since these two essays by King provide the philosophical basis of our discussions, I spend a lot of class time on pre-reading. As a preliminary activity for “A World House” (1967), for example, I bring in music by African American artists, including early rap music by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and soul music by Marvin Gaye. I also play segments of a recording of King delivering his famous speech “I Have a Dream.” As we begin to read and respond to the ideas in “A World House,” we analyze and reflect on King’s skillful use of language as we discuss a key idea developed in his essay,

Linda Manney

i.e., that people of all races, creeds and ethnicities must learn to live together peacefully or face extinction. Students free-write on whether or not King's notion of "world house" is a realistic goal in their own communities nowadays, and their responses form the basis of an extended class discussion on this topic.

The second essay we read together is "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which King wrote while imprisoned in Birmingham, Alabama, USA. As a pre-reading activity, we view and discuss a video from the PBS series *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (1987). After the students see and react to the massive demonstration during which King was arrested, they are better able to appreciate King's commitment to nonviolent resistance as the only way to confront racial injustice, which he explains in great detail in "Letter from Birmingham Jail." As we read and discuss this essay, we explore the relevance of King's ideas to contemporary situations, both world-wide and locally. Students have made many thoughtful observations on prejudiced thinking that they, personally, have encountered, and they have offered suggestions for challenging and transforming such thinking. We end this section with a panel discussion on how to deal with unjust laws in today's world. The culminating activity for the unit is a formal research paper on one of the topics explored during class discussion. Each student must connect the topic s/he chooses to personal experience or local concerns, research the topic thoroughly, and write a properly documented research essay which explores the complexities of the issue.

IV. Some closing thoughts

Linda Manney

I have taught versions of this unit on “Moral Responsibility” several times, and the response by students from all backgrounds has generally been very positive. Furthermore, the intelligent and sensitive papers that students have written prove, to me at least, that discussions of social justice are appropriate content for EAP classrooms, assuming of course that the classroom instructor has taken great care to create a classroom environment in which trust, respect, and goodwill are predominant. My goal as a teacher is to create exactly such a classroom environment, so that students can state their views freely, develop tolerance for viewpoints different from their own, and respond to difference in good faith. As a practicing language teacher, I believe in the goals of multicultural education to promote intergroup harmony and understanding, and I agree with Sonia Nieto (2002) that multicultural education is good for everyone, because “it is *about* all people and *for* all people, regardless of their ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, religion, gender, race, class, or other difference” (p. 38).

Works Cited

Banks, J. A. and Banks, C.M. (1993). *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years (1987). Vol. 2: “Ain’t Scared of Your Jails” (1960 – 1961) and “No Easy Walk” (1961 – 63). Produced, directed, and written by James Devinney and Callie Crossley. Public Broadcasting System Videocassette.

Luke, Allen (1996). “Text and Discourse in Education: An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis.” In Michael A. Apple, Editor, *Review of Research in Education* 21, 1995–96. Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.

Linda Manney

McLaren, Peter (2003). *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education. 4th Edition.* New York / London: Allyn and Bacon.

Nieto, Sonia (2002). *Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives for a New Century.* Mahwah, New Jersey / London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Oakes, Jeannie and Martin Lipton (2003). *Teaching to Change the World. 2nd Edition.* New York / London: McGraw-Hill Higher Education.

Pennycook, Alastair (1999). "Introduction: Critical Approaches to TESOL" *TESOL Quarterly. Special-Topic Issue: Critical Approaches to TESOL*, Vol. 33, No.3, 329-348.

Street, Brian (1995). *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography, and Education.* London / New York: Longman.

Washington, James M. (Editor) (1992). *Martin Luther King, Jr: I Have a Dream. Writings and Speeches that Changed the World.* San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

Linda Manney has a Ph.D. and a M.A. degree in Linguistics (University of California San Diego) and a M.A. degree in TESOL (Arizona State University). She is a member of TESOL Macedonia-Thrace, TESOL Greece, TESOL, Inc., Linguistic Society of America, and American Educational Research Association. At the present time, Linda Manney and Dimitris Primalis are Editors of the *TESOL Greece Newsletter*. Linda teaches at the American College of Thessaloniki as an Adjunct Lecturer in English.