

Chapter 14

Using Email as a Cultural Bridge in the Learning Process for Transnational Students

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ABSTRACT

Today many American composition and rhetoric courses are theme-based and have an embedded focus on social, political, and/or popular cultural issues. This kind of course can be especially challenging for transnational students who are less conversant with this cultural information than many of their native-born peers. In these classes, writing assignments that incorporate interviewing as a part of the information gathering process often allow transnational students to build a kind of cultural bridge between their native country and the U.S. Email can be used to help facilitate this process. What the author focuses on in this case is how email discussion can be incorporated organically into a learning/writing task, and how this discussion can be student-framed. The fact that the students initiate the email communication of their own volition taps into the positive qualities that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has. The students are empowered to act autonomously and construct their own learning activity.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

This case involves a satellite campus of a large public university in the northeastern part of the United States. The main campus serves approximately 10,000 students while the satellite campus serves about 500 students. The satellite campus is located in an economically disadvantaged urban community of roughly 80,000 residents. Although

this community had once been a thriving city that offered secure employment for its residents with jobs at manufacturers such as RCA Victor and Campbell Soup, in the late 1960s it began to experience a significant decline in manufacturing, as did many urban centers in the United States. The city eventually experienced major urban decay and currently suffers from a high crime rate and a troubled public school system. Data from the United States Census Bureau indicates that in 2005 approximately 44% of the city's residents lived in

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poverty. The 2000 Census reports that the city has a very high minority population, with 53.3% of the residents identifying as African-American and 38.8% as Hispanic.

The satellite campus offers a variety of courses that meet the general education requirements for most majors, and it provides complete four-year programs for a limited number of majors, such as early childhood education, sociology and criminal justice. Most of the students eventually move on to the main campus to complete their degree requirements. A high percentage of the students at the satellite campus are enrolled in the university through the Educational Opportunity Fund Program, which is designed to support financially and educationally disadvantaged students. In addition, a high percentage of the students are English as Second Language (ESL) students, and many complete our ESL program before matriculating to the university.

SETTING THE STAGE

As the primary instructor of the required first-year composition and rhetoric courses at the satellite campus, I have had to seek out effective ways of enhancing the language learning experiences of the ESL students in my classes. Complicating matters, the ESL students themselves fall into several categories. The first group could be labeled “transnational students.” On rare occasions these transnational students are international students, who come to the United States to complete their college degree and then return to their home country; more often, though, these are students who have recently immigrated to the United States, having lived here for one to six years. These students completed their high school education, or even some college, in their home country. They tend to still have significant ties to their country of origin and remain in close contact with family members and friends there. The second group of ESL students immigrated to the U.S. with their

families when they were children or teens and attended some elementary and/or high school in this country, often in ESL or bi-lingual programs. The last group of ESL students immigrated to the U.S. as very young children or were born here, and thus, grew up speaking both English and their family’s native language. These students generally speak the family’s native language at home. While the students themselves tend to be quite Americanized and speak idiomatic English, their writing still demonstrates many of the grammatical errors that characterize the writing of ESL students, such as problems with verbs (tense and agreement), prepositions, and articles. I am primarily focused on the transnational population in this case.

As matriculated students at the university, all these ESL students are enrolled in the regular, required composition classes with native speakers. In recent years, my composition classes have had an enrollment of between 50 to 90% ESL students. In the last few years, the largest ESL populations have come from Vietnam, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Students at the satellite campus often begin their writing course work with a Basic Writing class, a non-credit pre-college level writing course, before moving on to the required College Composition I and II courses. In this case, I focus on a College Composition I class.

The transnational student population that I am examining in this case tends to be fairly technologically savvy. They often have their own email account as well as the one provided by the university. They frequently use cell phones, webcams, and instant messaging services like Yahoo! Messenger to stay connected with friends and family. They regularly use the Internet to find information.

However, the satellite campus does not provide much in the way of computer technology or training to support instruction. It does provide two computer labs for the students to use and good access to electronic databases through the library’s web page, but no computer technology

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