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Composing Our Identities:

An Intercultural Approach to Teaching Composition at an American Community College

A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Durham University, School of Education

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Rae Strickland

January 2007

Dr. Michael Fleming, supervisor

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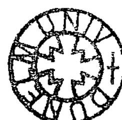

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Composing Our Identitites:
An Intercultural Approach to Teaching Composition at an American Community College

Abstract

This thesis describes an action research project undertaken at Manchester Community College, Manchester, Connecticut, USA. The project was designed to gather evidence to address the research question: *Can an intercultural approach to composition provide community college students with the cultural awareness and skills to succeed in the culture of the academy without devaluing the home cultures from which the students come to the college?* The project involved asking English 101 (freshmen composition) students to read James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and then to apply intercultural skills to their analysis and interpretation of the text. About 80 students participated in the project over a two-year period.

The thesis includes an overview of composition theory, with emphasis on current trends in postmodern/postcolonial approaches that emphasize a binary (self/Other) world view. It also provides an overview of intercultural theory and an examination of the ways in which it reflects or differs from bicultural theory and from current trends in composition. It also contains descriptions of intercultural activities undertaken in my classroom.

Most of the data was gathered by the use of online discussion boards. The student/subjects responded to five writing prompts which asked them to reflect on their intercultural experience with academic culture. In addition, students were able to access the researcher's research diary via a discussion board, and many posted comments to the diary that became a rich source of evidence. Students also completed a paper-and-pencil exit survey, and five students participated in follow-up interviews.

The analysis of the data reveals that most of the students experienced a dawning recognition, rather than an immediate recognition, of academic culture as a distinct culture. While most students experienced a mild degree of culture shock because of this recognition, they went on to develop coping mechanisms that facilitated their competency and confidence in the target culture. The analysis chapters (Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9) examine the many ways in which students experienced academic culture, their responses to it, and their development and use of intercultural skills to facilitate their interactions with the culture. In particular, students did not demonstrate a binary world view, but instead revealed the ability to use academic writing to create a third space, in which they brought academic culture, their own cultures, and the cultures represented by the text into relation.

Composing Our Identities: An Intercultural Approach to Teaching Composition at an American Community College

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Chapter One:
Defining Composition: A Personal Journey

Introduction

It is ironic—and some might say deplorable—that I am a teacher of composition, but I have never taken a course entitled "Composition," much less a course in how or why to teach it. Under normal circumstances, I would have taken composition when I entered Manchester Community College, where I am now a member of the English faculty, as a freshman in 1975. In fact, since virtually every US college and university student is required to take a composition course, usually in the freshman year and regardless of his or her intended area of study, my own evasion of the course is quite unusual. Requiring students to take composition is one of the characteristics that has made American university education *American* for over 100 years. American universities abroad and foreign universities that call themselves "American-style" offer composition courses as a way to distinguish themselves as being "American" (Schaub 2003:89).

I only missed out on this American experience through a fluke in the transfer of credits. I had been selected by my high school to take a so-called "advanced" English course that earned three credits from the University of Connecticut. We spent the year reading some of what was then called the great works of Western literature. We also wrote about them, but I received no formal training in how to write or rhetorical methods; we just did it. Later, when I entered Manchester Community College, my three credits from the University of Connecticut were accepted as the first level of English and I was allowed to progress immediately to Introduction to Literature without spending a semester in Composition first.

So I entered my first composition classroom not as a student but as a teacher, albeit a part-time, non-tenure track lecturer, in 1987. At that time, composition as an academic discipline distinct from English studies was beginning to become well established since its first emergence in the 1960s. By 1987 there was already a great deal of academic literature available from dedicated compositionists, and today there are over 70 programs offering doctoral degrees in composition across the nation (Spear 1997: 322), all of which are producing research and scholarship in the field. However, many practitioners, I among them, continue to see composition as a vital part of English studies rather than a discipline unto itself. Nevertheless, the impact and value of research and writing in composition is undeniable.

When I began to teach composition, a rhetorical approach to the subject, often referred to as "the modes," was in favor. Under this method of instruction, students were asked to write a series of short essays, generally no longer than 500 to 750 words in length, and usually following a five-paragraph model: one paragraph of introduction, three paragraphs of discussion or content, and a final paragraph that concluded the essay. Students progressed from descriptive or narrative essays at the beginning of the semester to slightly more complex essays, which were most often assignments involving a comparison/contrast analysis. The semester generally concluded with the assignment of an essay requiring the development of a persuasive argument. Students were encouraged to be creative and expressive. Generally speaking, the content of the essay was irrelevant—what mattered was attention to the format of the essay and a development of the student's own voice. Students mostly wrote about their personal experiences except for the argumentative essays, when often they were asked to select a topic that interested them and perhaps to include some easily accessible source material, such as a

newspaper article, though arguments based solely on personal experience were generally acceptable, as well.

Although I loved the kind of interaction and personal connection with students that this curriculum encouraged, from the beginning I felt unclear about the real purpose of the course. The curriculum seemed to me entirely artificial: what "real" writing follows a five paragraph format? And under what circumstances would my students ever again be told, in effect, *what* you write is of no importance; what matters is *how* you write it? Most perplexing to me was the near-complete reliance on personal experience for source material. While some of my students enjoyed writing about themselves, and most could do it with fluency, I was unclear of the overall academic goal of the course since virtually all academic discourse requires the analysis of texts. I considered that perhaps I was simply introducing students to writing as an avenue for self-expression and self-reflection. Certainly these are worthy endeavors, but I am an English teacher, not a counselor or pastor.

Consequently I was doubly pleased when I at last achieved my career goal of landing a full-time, tenure-track position in an English department (as noted above, at the community college where I earned my first higher education degree) that had recently abandoned the rhetorical modes as a method of teaching composition in favor of what is called the reading-writing connection. In this methodology, the analysis of text provides the content for student writing. Students are required to develop their own interpretations of texts from a variety of genres and then to support their interpretations with text-based evidence. This approach seems to me to better prepare students for academic discourse and to acquaint them with the types of reading and writing the academy demands.

However, current theories of composition, which I will address in more depth in the next chapter, find much to question in precisely which texts should be examined and how students should examine them. Indeed, my underlying assumption that I am teaching academic writing, rather than "social action" (LeCourt 2004: 38), is antithetical to much postmodern composition theory. On the other hand, as an interculturalist, I subscribe to the theories of socially-constructed identity and language that underpin postmodern theories of composition.

A Brief Overview of the Development of Composition Theory

Composition is often said to have been born in 1963 because that year marks the publication of a landmark study by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schooner (Faigley 1986: 527). The teaching of writing before this date is often ignored, as Robin Varnum points out, "as if nothing before that were worth talking about" (Varnum 1992: 39); however, composition has been part of the American university curriculum for over one hundred years after being first introduced as a required course—and for many years, the *only* required course in the entire curriculum—at Harvard University in 1900 (Spear 1997: 319). Although Harvard continued to serve the most privileged and educated young men in America, those young men were coming from more diverse geographical locations and educational backgrounds than in previous decades (Spear 1997: 321). From the beginning, then, composition was about creating "sameness" among diverse students (LeCourt 2004: 26). Spear notes, "When new students came together with new forms of academic knowledge—each with its own perspective about what constitutes literate practice, the old agreements about what literacy meant—and who got to participate in making those agreements—began to unravel. Interestingly,

each successive literacy crisis in American higher education parallels the infusion of large numbers of new kinds of students into colleges and universities" (Spear 1997: 321). Spear further contends that freshman writing courses from the very beginning have been seen as attempts to "'fix' students whose language practices signaled that they did not belong in the discourse communities they aspired to join," and so, while a required part of the curriculum, writing courses and the instructors who teach them have been historically marginalized in academic institutions (ibid).

Before the professionalization of composition in 1963 and the accompanying growth in research in composition, composition was largely taught by a pedagogical method known as current-traditional rhetoric (Faigley, Spear, Varnum). Current-traditional rhetoric, which held sway for over a hundred years, is rooted in positivism and objectivity (Varnum, 1992: 41). In current-traditional rhetoric, "Language is viewed, ideally, as a transparent medium for bridging the distance between the material world and written descriptions about it. Set patterns of organization [...] are heavily featured [and] writing instruction [...] is oriented toward the production of proper written products" (Spear, 1997: 324). Current-traditional rhetoric has largely fallen out of favor since the 1960s, but some of its tenets are still practiced, despite Lester Faigley's facetious-but-apt pronouncement that "nearly everyone seems to agree that writing as a process is good and 'current traditional rhetoric' is bad" (Faigley, 1986: 527). However, it is important to bear in mind that the assumptions about pedagogical methods prior to 1963 are based largely on surveys of textbooks and may not paint a full picture of what actually occurred in composition classrooms (Spear 1997: 324).

The view that writing is a process, rather than a product, became the preferred pedagogy and philosophy for teaching composition after 1963 (Faigley, Spear).

Faigley has identified three perspectives within the process movement which are useful for tracing the development of current theory: the expressive view and the cognitive view, which were the first perspectives to emerge, and what he calls the social view, which began to emerge in the 1980s (Faigley 1986: 527-528).

The expressive view of composition borrows much of its philosophy from the Romantics. Like the Romantics, expressive composition values "integrity" and "spontaneity." (Faigley 1986: 529). Practitioners may define these qualities differently, of course, but there is a general consensus that these qualities grow out of the writer's personal commitment and emotional attachment to the writing itself (ibid). The third Romantic quality, originality, is slightly different in the expressive view from the idea of "born genius" espoused by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Instead, practitioners of the expressive view stress the "innate potential of the unconscious mind" (Faigley 1986: 531).

On the other hand, the cognitive view of composition links composition theory to cognitive developmental psychology and brings a "science consciousness in composition research," stressing perceived parallels in the language development in children with the development of writing proficiency (Faigley 1986: 532). Practitioners of cognitive theory break the task of writing into a series of steps and present models for accomplishing each step, with an emphasis on the process of writing being similar to the development of problem-solving skills (Spear 1992: 325).

The expressive and cognitive views have both come under attack. The expressive view is faulted for its celebration of self and the tendency to turn writing into something resembling a therapeutic, rather than academic, exercise. As Spear notes, "expressionistic rhetoric is open to criticism for its tendency to reduce

writing to privatized, indeed solipsistic, experience, for isolating writers from political, social, and economic matters, and for its relatively minor concern with writing for an audience" (ibid). On the other hand, the cognitive view is criticized as being too mechanistic and for "the isolation of part from whole" (Faigley 1986: 534).

Despite criticism, elements of both the expressive and cognitive views of the process movement in composition are still widely practiced, although current theory now favors what Faigley termed the social view. This view draws upon several disciplines and is based on the supposition that writing is "social in nature and cannot be removed from culture" (ibid).

In 1986, Faigley could already see the social view developing into four separate—but often tangential or overlapping—areas of research, growing out of concepts drawn from Marxism, ethnography, the sociology of science, and poststructuralist language theory (Faigley 1986: 535-536). While these areas differ in emphasis, they share a view of writing as being a social and cultural activity, and of the writing classroom as a microcosm of external political and social structures. Because the particular area of emphasis is often a crucial distinguishing feature, compositionists often prefer to label their particular strain of composition theory for the school of thought in which it is based: postmodern, postcolonial, Marxist or feminist, for example. However, these many strands of theory are sometimes categorized together as transactional or social-epistemic rhetoric (Spear: 1997: 326). Spear offers this very helpful summation:

> Many scholars today find social-epistemic rhetoric a more satisfying and persuasive theory [than the expressive or cognitive views], particularly in the ways it supports the goals of liberal arts education. Social-epistemic rhetoric

> incorporates definitions of the self as the creation of a particular historical and cultural moment (thus reflecting a more fluid understanding of the self) and of knowledge as dialectical, historically bound, and socially fabricated rather than eternal, material, and invariable. Writing is viewed as part of the negotiation of knowledge [...] Collaborative learning theory is deeply implicated in this view of rhetoric. Also out of this conception of rhetoric come current understandings of discourse communities and formulations of writing instruction as a means of helping students enter those communities. The goal here is not to socialize students uncritically into these communities of knowledge but to help them attain the critical distance on discourse conventions necessary for making informed choices (Ibid).

My Path through Composition to Interculturalism and Back Again

It is interesting to me that there are several parallels between my own experience of teaching composition and the evolution of composition theory. I entered the field as the current-traditional method was losing favor to the process movement, which views writing as a process and stresses the importance of self-expression. The presence of both schools of thought were represented in my first experience with composition curriculum in the adherence to rhetorical models (current-traditional) and the emphasis on writing as a process, particularly as a process of self-discovery and self-expression (process movement). I also practiced some of the cognitive view of writing, as my colleagues and I struggled to codify the steps or phases student writers progress through on their journey to self-discovery. Later, with the reading-writing connection, we moved into what has been called the social view of composition as we integrated more postmodern notions of

language, culture and meaning into the curriculum. However, much of the recent writing in composition studies pushes postmodern concepts to an extreme that is uncomfortable and largely unhelpful to the rank-and-file of practitioners, and it is here that I find myself parting ways with composition ideology.

When I joined the English Department at MCC and was assigned to teach composition, I turned first to the college catalog to read the description of the course:

> This course is designed to introduce students to "the language of the academy" that is, to the complex literacies of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking required of college students regardless of their area of specialization. ENG* 101 also introduces students to the specific requirements and standards of academic writing, including essay format, voice, and organizational strategies. (MCC Catalog, 2005: 128).

Taking this as my starting point, I reasoned that "the language of the academy" implied introducing students to academic discourse, and I began to puzzle out for myself what all academic discourses, regardless of discipline, have in common. Eventually I decided upon the following: Academic writing presents conclusions or findings that are well supported by evidence; that evidence must be fully documented according to the conventions of the intended audience; and the relevance of the evidence to the conclusions or findings must be explicitly explained. In other words, academics consciously reveal their thinking and reasoning processes throughout their writing.

My first problem was to find texts that might engage and challenge students while introducing and perhaps modeling the various types of academic discourse

they might encounter. Most of my colleagues approach these tasks by choosing a variety of essays, poems and works of fiction for students to read, but I settled on a different route. I selected James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a starting point for all class assignments for several reasons: although a canonized text by a white male author, it grapples with issues of culture, language and oppression that are at the heart of social theory; Joyce's use of language demands students "create" meaning more rigorously than less challenging texts and confronts students with the social and cultural constructions of meaning; there is a great deal of contextual material available, not only about Joyce and *Portrait*, but also about the social, historical and political contexts of the novel that allow students to become familiar with discourse communities outside of literature; and, not least important, it is a novel that moves me personally, allowing me to communicate my own enthusiasm to my students.

So, perhaps a bit naively, I set out to teach composition as "an introduction to the language of the academy." However, as a graduate of a community college myself, I was prepared for the fact that most of my students would have little exposure to academic writing, either as readers or writers, upon entering my classroom. I knew it would be necessary for me to provide a great deal of context for the novel, the additional resource materials, and, in fact, the class itself in order for the experience to make any kind of sense to them, particularly a kind of sense that would still be applicable beyond the walls of a composition classroom. As each semester progressed, I found myself making my own thinking and reasoning more and more explicit to my students, and providing more and more overt explanations of how discourse communities work. It was not until I began my Ed.D. course work at Durham University, however, that I realized what I had intuitively been doing:

along with the *language* of the academy, I was attempting to introduce and make obvious the *culture* of the academy.

Through reading intercultural theory, I began to see ways in which composition theory, my own notions of academic rigor and the purpose of composition, and my experiential knowledge of negotiating identity within academic culture, both as a teacher and a student, converged. As my studies at Durham progressed, I began first to discover and then to strengthen the intercultural infrastructure of my course design and to see the usefulness of intercultural theory as an approach to composition instruction and learning.

The language of intercultural theory is not new to composition; indeed, as early as 1986 compositionists argued," The goal of pedagogy is to make students 'bicultural,' able to move between an academic and a 'home' discourse"; furthermore, "...the conclusion to this 1980s debate now infuses most composition theory. Academic discourse came to be seen as providing an 'addition' to an already complicated identity that was written within multiple experiences and languages..." (LeCourt 2004: 28).

The concepts of biculturalism, complex identities and moving between discourses discussed in composition theories are all ideas familiar to readers of intercultural theory. But much of the current writing in composition goes on to argue that this stance is inadequate because the hegemony of academic discourse is so strong there can be no two-way "border crossings"; instead, they insist, academic culture sinks its grappling hooks into any other culture and seizes command. Students must learn the "code" of academic discourse or they will be forced to walk the plank and take their chances in the shark-infested waters that surround their little bark.

The problem with this view is a lack of understanding of what "intercultural" truly means. Very often, American professors use "intercultural" almost as a synonym for "multicultural"—in other words, to indicate a curriculum or syllabus in which readings are neither white- nor Western-based, though instructors might add a dimension of comparative analysis between cultures to the class activities to explain the preference for the prefix *inter-* rather than *multi-*. The charge lobbed against interculturalism by LeCourt and others is that students do not simply add academic discourse to their cultural identities; they are co-opted into serving the needs of the dominant culture by it. But whether compositionists use intercultural terms approvingly or disapprovingly, they overlook the idea that interculturalism is comprised of a skill set that students must learn. Instead, proponents imply it is a state of being that students will intuitively grasp just by being introduced to different cultures, and opponents contend that it is a state of being that facilitates the existing social hegemony.

I do not use "interculturalism" to denote either the selection of particular course materials nor a state of mind, but as the term is used in intercultural theory: the taking of conscious action to facilitate communication between cultures, or as Byram defines it, as "an activity…to act interculturally is to bring into relationship two cultures"(Byram 2002: 60). For students to be successfully intercultural, they must not only be exposed to other cultures, but taught the intercultural skills that will allow them to enter what Kramsch call "thirdness," the place where cultures can be brought into relation, as Byram further explains:

> In short someone with some degree of intercultural competence is someone who is able to see relationships between different cultures - both internal and external to a society - and is able to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of

the other, either for themselves or for other people. It is also someone who has a critical or analytical understanding of (parts of) their own and other cultures - someone who is conscious of their own perspective, of the way in which their thinking is culturally determined, rather than believing that their understanding and perspective is natural. (Byram 2000)

The table below is a crude representation of some of the concepts associated with intercultural theory and those associated with what I am terming "postmodern/postcolonial theory," those theories of composition that have as their fundamental mission a leveling of the hegemony inherent in universities and in society at all levels, from the local to the global.

Interculturalism encourages...	**Postmodernism/Postcolonialism encourages**
• Social construction of language & meaning—"truth" can be agreed upon • Cultural contexts of language & meaning—"truth" can be negotiated • Self & cultural examination in cultural contexts • Activities that facilitate the creation of "thirdness"—the intercultural "place" • Communication and exchange among cultures	• Social construction of language & meaning—"truth" is relative • Cultural contexts of language & meaning—"truth" is always biased • Self & cultural examination in a context of social justice • Activities that bring about social awareness and facilitate social action • Empowerment of those perceived to be oppressed
Interculturalism discourages...	**Postmodernism/Postcolonialism discourages...**
• Judgments based on culture • Insensitivity to culture	• Perceived elitism or privilege • Political incorrectness

Clearly there is a great deal of common ground here, and at first glance the differences may seem to be only a matter of degree. But although interculturalism and postmodernism/postcolonialism share some common roots, the resulting branches lead in very different directions and, ultimately, to different conclusions, even about such fundamental concepts as the purpose of composition as a discipline, its role within the university, and the role of the university in society.

The following table presents, again, in very rough and general terms, concepts of composition as seen from a more moderate, "additive" perspective of composition and from a transformative post-modern perspective:

Additive (intercultural) Perspective	**Postmodern/Postcolonial Perspective**
• The value of academic rigor in writing can be taught • Texts produced by the dominant culture can be useful • Understanding discourse communities is important • Understanding cultures and societies is important	• Academic rigor is elitist and devalues and disenfranchises the oppressed • Texts produced by the dominant culture are attempts to "colonize" students • Self expression and self empowerment are important • Changing cultures and societies is important

To further illustrate my point, I present the following paragraph from Donna LeCourt's *Identity Matters: Schooling the Student Body in Academic Discourse* (2004). I am presenting LeCourt's words in italics to clearly differentiate where I have interrupted with my annotations:

> *Composition, as a field, has taken seriously the challenges posed by recent theories of discourse and subjectivity. Depending on the pedagogy, we have employed varying theories of the subject to guide our understanding of how identity might explain the writer's agency. What we still know less about, however, is how our students come to understand their own identities within postmodern culture.*

LeCourt's assertion here captures my experience as a classroom teacher and the evolution of my own pedagogical practice as I struggled to find ways to bring academic culture into relation "within postmodern culture," as LeCourt says. This struggle has brought me to the same question LeCourt poses: how do students understand their own identities?

Our students, and all citizens for that matter, are offered multiple positions out of which to construct identity, positions created through the conflicts and convergences in public, media, experiential, and institutional discourses. Such choices include academic discourse.

Again, I find myself nodding in agreement. As a teacher in an open-admissions community college, the cultural "conflicts and convergences" are multiplied by the multilingual, multigenerational, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-economic backgrounds that come together on our campus.

Before we can understand how the teaching writing might support the subject's agency to transform the social, then, we must first ask what kinds of subject positions academic discourse, itself, offers for identity construction. We must begin, that is, to untangle the complicated relations among academic discourse, subjectivity, and identity that take place within the confluence of discursive and material relations.

It is, in fact, these "complicated relations" I wish to describe in this thesis and to examine how students experience academic discourse as a part of their cultural identities. However, LeCourt presumes that my purpose for inquiry is to "support the subject's agency to transform the social"—to bring about a transformative experience in my composition classroom that will empower the oppressed and bring about social justice. Postmodern/postcolonial theories of composition freely draw upon theories of cultural capital and critical pedagogy advanced by Althusser, Beaulieu, Giroux, Friere and their disciples. While I feel attracted to these theories for their notions of language and meaning as social and cultural constructs, I also .

find myself resisting them because they ultimately seem to view students merely as members of a victim culture in the clutches of an uncaring, capitalist-driven hegemony. This is perhaps attributable to the fact that most postmodern educational theory is written with children, rather than adults, in mind, and therefore discounts the possibility that students have any free choice. When applied to adult learners, post modern theories tend to see students' decisions not as evidence of self-empowerment, but merely reactions to class-driven pressures. Following this notion, then, truly free decisions and empowerment of the non-elite are impossible without a complete transformation of the existing social order.

Most of my students would be puzzled by the notion of "transforming the social": they simply want to join it. Many postmodernists would point out my responsibility to enlighten their ignorance of how "the social" works, thereby empowering them to change it. At the risk of sounding falsely modest, I do not presume to know more than my students about social reality, and I have found that they are as likely—perhaps more likely—to enlighten my ignorance as I theirs.

In asking the same questions as LeCourt, I simply want to understand writing better in the hope of becoming both a better teacher of writing and a better writer myself. I believe that writing, particularly academic writing, offers my students entry into privileged discourse circles and the accompanying social and economic benefits that accompany them. As Lilia Bartolome notes, "teachers who work with subordinated populations have the responsibility to assist them in appropriating knowledge bases and discourse styles deemed desirable by the greater society" (Bartolome, 1999: 240). In their efforts to be inclusive of marginalized cultures, postmodern/postcolonial compositionists, while employing those "knowledge bases and discourse styles deemed desirable by the greater society" in their writing for

academic journals, often advocate limiting or omitting those same discourse styles from composition curricula.

LeCourt continues:

> *Only when we come to understand both* <u>*why*</u> *and* <u>*how*</u> *(original emphasis) students interact with academic discourse as an act of identity-formation might we get a better sense of how our pedagogies' presumptions about subjectivity influence our students' abilities to refigure the social scene of identity politics and take the first step to realizing composition's goals of writing as social action and intervention into self* (LeCourt, 2004: 37-38).

Understanding the "why and how" are of keen interest to me as well, but for pedagogical rather than strictly theoretical reasons. I believe that border crossings are still possible; that students can learn academic discourse as an additional culture rather than a prescriptive one, and that their comfort level and ultimate success in the culture of the academy can be enhanced. What is necessary for this to occur, however, is for both teachers and students to understand intercultural concepts, develop intercultural skills and practice intercultural action. While pedagogy perhaps offers little in the transformation of the social, it does offer possibilities for individual transformation and even what LeCourt calls "intervention into self." I speak here not only of students' interventions, but of instructors' as well.

My thesis is original in its application of intercultural theory as a way of teaching writing. Interestingly, much has been written about the role of writing in teaching and learning intercultural skills, but the role of intercultural skills in teaching and learning writing appears to be new ground. In addition to examining composition and intercultural theories to draw out their commonalities, I will turn to

action research undertaken in my own composition classrooms to look at the ways in which students see, construct and use multiple identities in their academic lives, and the role that academic writing can play in creating a third space in which intercultural learning and awareness can take place.

In writing this thesis, I have chosen to use the conventions of American spelling and punctuation because they are my own conventions. Since identity as it is shaped, reflected and conveyed by writing is an issue at the heart of my thesis, I feel uncomfortable "putting on" British conventions. As Stephen Dedalus says, "This race and this country and this life produced me. I shall express myself as I am" (Joyce, 1916/1994: 147).

Chapter Two:

Current Directions in Composition Theory and Implications for the Community College

The Trend Toward Viewing Composition Courses as "Redemption"

In her 2003 article, "Imitations of Battle: Quintilian on the Classroom and the Public Sphere," Christy Friend writes, "The notion that composition courses should engage students in public discourse has become so widely accepted during the past few years that it is now virtually uncontroversial...Clearly the drive to get composition students and their writing out of the classroom and into more public arenas is—at least for the moment—firmly entrenched" (Friend 2003: 1). Friend's comments neatly sum up the direction composition theory has taken over the last 20 years as postmodern/postcolonial theories have gained prominence: the call to make writing classes relevant to "real life" has become very strong. Postmodern and postcolonial theorists tend to see "relevant" assignments as a way to ask—perhaps even force—students to examine their community or society while simultaneously examining their own background and values. This quest for relevancy may take many forms, from assignments that ask students to write letters to the editor about an issue pertinent to their lives, to semester-long service learning assignments that require students to volunteer for work in the community and then write about their experiences (ibid). These assignments are meant, "to achieve the libratory promise" (Friend 2003:2) of composition classes by allowing students to analyze and *change* their behavior, attitudes or thinking.

As we look back on the history of composition, we can see that this goal of somehow transforming the student is not really new: composition began as an effort

to bring about a certain academic "sameness" in student writing (LeCourt 2004: 26) and, in effect, separate students from the outside forces that had shaped them up to the point they entered the composition classroom. While seeking to create "sameness" in our students today would certainly be considered nothing short of blatant racism, sexism and a host of other –isms, we still see in composition theory a desire "to immunize the student" (Newkirk 2004: 264) against "a global media culture in which corporations, government spokesmen, and popular culture outlets…actively seek to construct them [students], to name their pleasures, to define the 'normal'" (Newkirk 2004: 263)—again, expressing the desire to separate students from the forces that have shaped them prior to entering the classroom and bring about a type of sameness, but this time, a sameness that might be called sociological or political in nature, rather than academic.

However, unlike past theories, current composition theories tend to go beyond merely strengthening students' "resistance" (in the anti-viral sense of Newkirk's "immunization" analogy) to asking them to outright condemn or deny these outside forces. In the postmodern/postcolonial view, "The student…enters the class embedded, often happily, in an inimical value system—they operate out of 'false consciousness'—from which critical reading and dialogue will rescue them" (Newkirk 2004: 266). Newkirk's use of the word "rescue" is deliberate. He makes a compelling case for awareness of what he calls the "messianic strain" in current composition theory and convincingly points out how often words like "redemptive," "conversion," "breaking free" and other loaded terms are used to describe the goals of today's writing classes (ibid).

Of course, not all college and university writing programs adhere to postmodern/postcolonial principals or require students to undertake

"transformative" assignments, and it never hurts to remind ourselves that what is promulgated in the literature is not always very similar to what happens in actual practice. However, as Friend notes, there is "a rhetorical trope that permeates many of our field's current conversations...Despite these conversations' diversity and richness, they share a common tendency to represent 'public' writing assignments (projects in which students address real-world issues for an audience outside the classroom) as a distinct and inherently superior pedagogical alternative to 'academic' writing assignments (projects that never leave the confines of the classroom)" (Friend 2003: 2). Whether its influence is ascending or descending, the effect of postmodern/postcolonial theory on the future course of composition's development as a field is undeniable.

Most of the composition theorists writing today are writing about students in baccalaureate or graduate classes in American universities. I suggest that, by-and-large, American college and university students are one of the most privileged groups in the world, so perhaps it's natural for composition professors to feel an urgency to wake up their students to the experiences of those who are not as privileged. At the same time, postmodern/postcolonial literature typically contains success stories of the "liberation" of students through "empowerment," frequently by asking students to write about their own experiences or by asking them to frame those experiences in light of a reading assignment. For example, an assignment in *Ways of Reading*, a text used by some composition instructors at my institution, which asks students to read Freire's "The Banking Concept of Education" and then write a narrative of their own educational experience in which they describe the ways in which they have learned to "break free from limited or limiting ways of thinking" (Bartholomae and Petrosky, 2005: 269). It seems to me that if a student

who receives this assignment hasn't actually "broken free," he or she had better be prepared to make something up, as it probably would not be a good idea to begin "breaking free" by skipping the assignment entirely.

The literature is rife with descriptions of these types of assignments that essentially ask students to write "before and after" stories of their experiences in which they describe what they used to think or believe or perceive before receiving the assignment, and what they think or believe or perceive after completing the assignment. But we must ask ourselves, is this evidence of real change, or just evidence of satisfying an assignment? Surely the teacher's expectation that some change will occur—and even a sense of what direction that change will take—is implicit in the assignment itself. A student who wants to receive a good grade (and what student doesn't?) will quickly realize that changing, or at least providing a convincing appearance of having done so, is what will please the person placing grades upon her or his work.

Similarly, Newkirk, a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, points out that composition students who are required to include letters describing their learning process as part of a portfolio review, "are well-advised to stress not what they have learned but also how they have changed" (Newkirk 2004: 266). Once again, emphasis is not on writing so much as on the student's individual "journey" and what James Berlin calls the "conversion from manipulated objects into active critical subjects" (cited in Newkirk 2004: 265). The underlying concept of "the student," then, seems to contain two simultaneous ideas: composition students are so immersed in the capitalist hegemony that they lack the ability to see "the truth" without the guidance of the composition instructor and enlightened readings; at the same time, composition students are viewed as innocent victims of

the capitalist hegemony. The presumption is that these students would cease to enjoy their privileges, or at least put them to some enlightened use, if they are shown "the truth." In other words, composition students are assumed to be ignorant of the sufferings of others and *themselves.* They are encouraged to begin to find "truth" by examining their past experiences and revealing how the system has robbed them, perhaps through the sexist or racist mechanisms of society, but very often by providing the "limited or limiting" ways of thinking suggested in the *Ways of Reading* writing assignment. Composition class, then, can be seen as the first step toward liberation from the blindness and apathy brought about by immersion in a consumerist culture controlled by corporate concerns.

Of course, to imagine the student this way presents moral issues for the imaginer. Newkirk cites studies in which students were offended by their instructors "expressing profound disapproval for the tastes, values, and experiences the students bring to class" (Newkirk 2004: 269) and therefore resisted being "rescued" or even presenting the appearance of having changed. Interestingly, though, Newkirk sees fit to add that one of these studies included students from the University of Cincinnati, "a vocationally oriented school," who take a "pragmatic" approach to composition (ibid), adding a whiff of classism to the mix. The implication is that upper and upper-middle class students are more adept at "the game," while lower-middle class and working class students are so oppressed within the system that they cannot even see the playing field.

Composition and the Community College

Lower-middle and working class adults are exactly the students community colleges are designed to serve, although, to be sure, quite a few upper-middle class

students can be found at Manchester Community College, due to its proximity to several wealthy suburbs. It is not unusual for the wife of a wealthy executive or professional to take courses or even pursue a degree at MCC. Among younger students, however, attendance at a community college is almost always a pragmatic choice, based on finances and convenience. While it is true that some community college students lack the academic records to gain acceptance to a university and therefore attend the community college in hope of either gaining a vocational degree or improving their grades enough to earn acceptance to a university (or, sometimes, simply to avoid joining the armed forces), the majority of our students enter with the intention of transferring as many credits as possible to a university (MCC Fact Book 2006). No doubt the vast majority of young students would prefer to reside in a dormitory on a university campus and earn their credits at the source, rather than attending commuter classes at the community college and transferring credit, but that is not a financial reality for them.

In my experience, most community college students, do, in fact, share similarities with the students from the University of Cincinnati mentioned in Newkirk's article. They take composition courses not to be rescued or to bring about a change in their lives, but because they have to—the courses are required in order to earn a degree. Those students who strive to do well tend to do so for pragmatic reasons as well—they see being able to write well as important to their future success in higher education and in the workplace. In other words, the search for "relevancy" is a short one for these students—composition class is often a more keenly felt part of their "real" lives than any current event or social issue.

As an example, I invited my students to comment on their views of "fairness" with a writing prompt that reminded them of Stephen Dedalus's struggles with

issues of class, and then asked them to comment on whether they had ever felt "outclassed," as Stephen feels. I expected that many of my students would comment on issues related to socio-economic class, but in fact I received few responses that reflected on socio-economic concerns at all. The majority of the respondents (41 out of 68, or 60 percent) interpreted the question to be about the desire to be popular and the struggle to resist peer pressure, and reported they did not feel these social pressures in college and as a result, were quite comfortable in the environment.

However, even though there was a tendency to interpret the question more personally than socially, there were still some references to socio-economic issues. (I am presenting the sample response below just as written, without grammatical, syntactical or spelling corrections, to reflect not only the student's "raw" response but also to preserve the informality with which students responded to these questions, as compared to the more formal persona they adopted in less personal writing assignments, which will be looked at in Chapter Nine.

I have found that college is a whole different ball park compared to high school. You don't feel the need to impress everyone. Everyone here has their own different life styles to attend to so no one worries or cares about what the other people are doing or wearing. People come and go so there is no time to worry. College is a place where you can be yourself. I don't want to be like everyone else so I don't care if i fit in or not. I'm my own person. The only thing I think about when I encounter people that may "outclass" me is a sense of pride that I am doing for myself and I'm not spoon fed anything. They do have it easier because they don't have to worry about as much. I get upset sometimes having to deal with everything myself and it angers me that they

get everything without working for certain things. I guess I'll be the one appreciating things better in the long run. (#136/p.270)

This recent high school graduate forthrightly expressed feeling "upset" by socio-economic inequalities, but she goes on to find some benefit in the inequality—she feels she will have more appreciation for what she has because she has earned it herself. In fact, a sense of pride in being independent—whether financially, or just in terms of casting off peer pressure—comes through in many of the responses. After examining all of the responses I received (additional discussion of these issues can be found in Chapters Seven and Eight), I would have to concur with the postmodern/postcolonial theorists that a great many community college students, like American university students in general, are not intensely sensitive to class issues, and that even when class issues are raised, they tend to take the attitude that the self-reliance and self-respect gained through struggle are adequate compensation for the unfairness inherent in class. One can see how this attitude of "struggle is good" among the lower-middle and working classes—the majority of community college students—would be quite convenient for those in the upper classes. Therefore, one might assume that postmodern and postcolonial composition scholars would be flocking to community colleges to fight the good fight. After all, community colleges came to exist as a result of a six-volume study published in 1947 by the President's Commission on Higher Education, or the Truman Commission, as it is commonly known, that called for greater access to higher education for all Americans: "For the great majority of our boys and girls, the kind and amount of education they may hope to attain depends, not on their own abilities, but on the family or community into which they happened to be born, or

worse still on the color of their skin or the religion of their parents" (cited in Vaughn 1983: 23).

The study also called for higher education to be opened to those who formerly were judged unworthy on academic grounds, noting that colleges "cannot continue to concentrate on students with one type of intelligence to the neglect of youth with other talents" (cited in Vaughn 1983: 23).

The commission used the term "community college" to emphasize this new mission for higher education, which would "include a variety of institutional forms and educational programs, so that at whatever point any student leaves school, he would be fitted, within the limits of his mental capacity and educational level, for an abundant and productive life as a person, as a worker, and as a citizen" (cited in Vaughn 1983: 23). This learner-centered philosophy places community colleges firmly within the progressive tradition, in which "the process of education is to unlock the potential of the child" (Barber, 1996: 11), or adult learner, in this case.

In addition to supporting a progressive approach, the Truman Commission emphasized that community college curricula should not be merely technical or vocational, but should include a strong general education component to equip graduates for "citizenship in a free nation" (Vaughn, 1983: 23). It is this insistence that general education and technical education are equally necessary to community college curricula that has given rise to such laudatory titles as "democracy's college," and "the people's college" (ibid).

Finally, the Commission charged community colleges with reaching outside of the classroom, noting, "It should be the duty of the English faculty or the physics faculty, for instance, to teach English or physics not just to those who come to the

campus, but to everyone in the community or the State who wants to learn, or can be persuaded to want to learn, English or physics" (cited in Vaughn, 1983: 23).

The inclusion of the phrase "can be persuaded to want to learn" in the Commission's charge is significant, implying that community colleges and their faculty should take a "proselytizing" approach. It is not enough to teach those who seek higher education on their own; community colleges should also attempt to "lure" students to higher education. It is also interesting that the Commission chose English and physics, rather than vocational or technical fields, as the content areas for their example. Surely it would be easier for community colleges to "preach the gospel" of say, respiratory therapy or culinary arts training, with their immediate and tangible benefits to both the individual's personal well-being, in terms of career opportunities, and to society's well-being, in terms of providing a skilled workforce.

The commission's emphasis on the importance of general education as part of higher education, and in particular its emphasis on the role of the community college for developing an educated citizenry and not simply a skilled workforce, points to the progressive impulse at the heart of the community college movement. Community colleges were to provide access to "high status knowledge," i.e., knowledge that is "academic," meaning that it is presented in writing, rather than orally, and is in nature abstract and "impractical" and not directly connected to the "real" life of the learner. Often this knowledge is seen as reserved for the "power elite" of society. (Morrison 1995: 188).

Ideally, community colleges would *not* produce what Paul Piccone sees as "an army of alienated, privatized, and uncultured experts who are knowledgeable only within very narrowly defined areas" (cited in Aronowitz and Giroux 1986: 33), but,

vthrough their emphasis on general education, would develop intellect in the sense of "the critical, creative and contemplative side of the mind...intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines" (ibid). If community colleges achieve this, they approach the Habermasian "ideal speech situation" in which all voices, not only those of the power elite, share "freedom to enter a discourse; freedom to modify a given conceptual framework; freedom to reflect on the nature of knowledge," and where "the consensus result[s] from discussion alone, and not from the positional or political power of the participants" (cited in Morrison 1995: 191-192).

The history and mission of the community college, then, would seem to be a magnet for those postmodernists and postcolonialists who would like to bring about real change in American society. But because community colleges emphasize classroom teaching rather than research, most (but far from all) of the writing about composition that goes on focuses on baccalaureate and graduate students. Furthermore, one of the often-stated goals of research in composition is a drive to legitimize the field, to gain respect for composition scholars and funding from university budgets, which again tends to push community colleges from the spotlight. Ironically, many of the part-time instructors in my English department and English departments across the US are candidates for or recent recipients of the Ph.D. in composition. Much has been written about the plight of composition Ph.D.s who are often unable to find full-time, tenure track positions, as universities tend to use their dollars to hire in other disciplines while relying on graduate student labor to teach composition courses. No doubt much more will be added to composition literature about community colleges as part-time instructors begin to

publish research about their experiences in hope of improving their chances for a full-time appointment at a university.

Still another reason exists for the focus on universities, rather than community colleges, in composition literature. Community colleges have been criticized by some pedagogical and sociological theorists, who see the community college as a barrier, rather than a means of access, to power. The remedial reading and writing classes almost universally offered by community colleges are particularly pilloried for their role in helping to "cool out" students, particularly women, minorities, non-native English speakers and students from the working class (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002). The term "cooling out" refers to the process by which a con man convinces his "mark" to see his lost cash as serving a greater purpose. Community colleges, critics argue, use a variety of tactics including placement tests and mandatory remedial work (based on placement scores) to persuade students to lower their expectations from earning baccalaureate degrees to something more "appropriate" to their social status, perhaps an associate's degree or a certificate from a vocational training program. As Regina Deil-Amen and James E. Rosenbaum write, "Just as the confidence man convinces victims to accept their loss as being in their own best interests, colleges convince students that lowered plans are in their own best interests" (ibid).

Unfortunately, the cooling out argument cannot be easily dismissed. It is true that many community college students become mired in a long sequence of developmental courses that earn only institutional credit (credit which entitles them to financial aid and other student benefits, but that does not count toward earning a degree), so after months or even years of "college" education, they are no closer to a college degree. For example, in Fall 2005 I had a student in my English 101

class—a credit bearing class equivalent to Freshman English at a university—who had taken *ten* semesters of work in English as a Second Language and developmental classes ("developmental" is the term preferred at my institution, reflecting our commitment to helping each student progress toward greater literacy, regardless of his or her starting point; "developmental," must, however, still be regarded as a euphemism for "remedial") in order to reach my classroom. This is not a typical story; most students would not have the perseverance and the belief that the work was necessary, let alone the financial and time resources, to devote to fulfilling their English requirements. Many students leave college before they complete the sequence of remedial courses required of them. While they have, we hope, gained competence in reading, writing and math skills at the pre-college level, these students are quite likely to feel that they have not gotten what they've been paying for—access to a baccalaureate institution and a specialized degree program.

Of course, proponents argue that community colleges, by maintaining open admissions policies and offering remediation, are an agency for change, even radical change, in higher education. Proponents see remedial education not as "reproductive" of the existing social hierarchy but as a means of breaching the walls of exclusion. Those of us who champion community colleges reject the notion of community colleges as socially reproductive because, as James R. Valadez argues, "...[this perspective] views the students' own wishes and aspirations as irrelevant. In this structural model the external conditions of society overwhelm the desires of the students, and choices are based on the students' exposure to class-based conditions" (Valadez 1999: 87). Community college students are not passive victims. They are adults who have made a conscious and considered decision to redefine themselves as college students. The self-determining individuals I know in

my classrooms do not fit perfectly into the role of "the oppressed" often ascribed to them, and treating them as such is patronizing.

Discerning Another Pathway for Composition

While I agree with many of the precepts of transformative postmodernism, particularly those that emphasize the social construction of language, I find myself stopping short of full acceptance. My own reluctance has been puzzling to me, as I consider myself politically liberal and socially progressive. Therefore, coming across Newman's phrase, "messianic strain," was a revelation for me. This phrase categorizes for me the parts of postmodern/postcolonial theory that I reject.

My strongest resistance is to the notion that the dominant culture—i.e., Western, white, capitalist culture—is necessarily evil. While it certainly encompasses much that is regrettable, unfair and yes, evil, the dominant culture is not a single entity with a single-minded intent to rule the world like the megalomaniac villain of a James Bond movie. It is, however, dominant, and to reject it wholesale for that reason alone is a type of elitism of which transformative postmodernists tend to be guilty.

I do agree that all citizens need the skills to scrutinize and analyze the dominant culture, but not from the set perspective that the dominant culture is necessarily "wrong," but as a culture among cultures. What makes it dominant? What is of value in the culture? What is harmful, and to whom? These are questions that each citizen should strive to answer for herself or himself, and not accept a prefabricated set of standards, whether those standards come from Hollywood, consumerist society, a right-wing war machine, or a left wing postmodernist agenda.

Fortunately I am in an academic institution that values the citizen, and sees the creation of an informed citizen as its highest mission. I reject the "messianic strain" in composition theory because I can't in good conscience substitute one unexamined viewpoint—even if it is closer to my own—for another. My mission is to teach students to examine for themselves, and, as much as possible, to make that examination from an objective stance.

Intercultural theory provides a way to approach the task of examining cultures, not to label them "good" or "bad," but simply to know them and to understand their workings. Through the use of literature, I ask my composition students to engage in intercultural activities so that they may step out of the dominant culture that embraces all of America and the many subcultures that each student engages. I choose to use a novel set in the past because I can know that the past is the Other to all of my students, so I can avoid unintentionally casting any of my students in the role of the Other. In order to examine this Other culture, I introduce my students to yet another subculture—academic culture—and ask them to "try on" some of its conventions.

In the next chapter I provide an overview of intercultural theory and describe its applications for the community college and teaching composition. In Chapter Four, I describe some of the intercultural activities that I undertake in my classroom. The fifth chapter explains the methodology of the project, and Chapters Six through Nine present data from these activities and an analysis of their effects. Chapter Ten discusses the conclusions that can be drawn from the project.

Chapter 3:

Biculturalism, Interculturalism and the Community College

Introduction

Several years ago, while reading an essay written by a student enrolled in Preparatory College Reading and Writing III (the highest level, non-credit bearing, remedial English class offered at Manchester Community College), I was amused to find the phrase "doggy dog" used to describe a difficult situation. I assumed that the student had merely misspelled, through mishearing, "dog-eat-dog," but when I pointed out the error to the student, she regarded me with skepticism. "Dog-eat-dog" not only sounded incorrect to her, it didn't express to her the same meaning as the phrase that had arisen naturally in her writing. After some discussion, she opted to use "cold-hearted" in place of "doggy dog," but I sensed she was not entirely happy with the choice. Worse, I sensed that I had lost a degree of the rapport I had previously enjoyed with this particular student.

Only later, when I was struck by the name of a rapper, Snoop Doggy-Dog, did I begin to wonder if "doggy dog" might have a cultural meaning that conveyed something entirely different to my student than it did to me. This possibility caused me a strange sense of dislocation: the language being used was my own; I could understand the words on the level of vocabulary, and yet some level of meaning eluded me. In the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein posits, "Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about" (Wittgenstein, 1958: 82). Perhaps I had offered my student the chance to see "the other side" of the phrase, and she had failed to recognize it as familiar territory—just as I also failed to make meaning as she offered me a glimpse from her "side."

Of course, society would not penalize me for my ineptitude in transcending my own culture in order to see another side—I had the comfortable position of being on the societally-endorsed, "right" side of the phrase. And my student appeared to feel that by calling attention to her usage, I had placed her on the "wrong" side of language. Suddenly an issue that I had taken as a mere indication of a mechanical problem had become much more complex. A labyrinth, indeed!

My first reaction was to feel a twinge of shame at my insensitivity. But at the same time, I couldn't see how I could *not* call attention to the use of "doggy-dog" and still fulfill the mission prescribed to me by my institution's catalog, to teach "the language of the academy." This is a mission I take to heart, for if I fail in carrying it out, my students will be denied many things, starting with access to a degree program. But I also realize that I must teach the language of the academy in a way that does not expect students to see their own way of using language as wrong. Thus, like many before me, I began to question whether merely providing a vocabulary and syntactical understanding of academic language was enough. Could I also teach skills that not only allow students to access academic culture and the privileges it encompasses, but also allows them to appreciate and evaluate their existing cultural norms? And, in doing so, might I learn to navigate between cultures myself?

As I pondered these questions, I came back to "doggy-dog" once again. As I considered the possibility that the phrase was not merely an error or an idiosyncratic usage, but was, in fact, an example of socially constructed language, and in particular, an example of an idiom with no exact translation into another language, I began to view the community college classroom from the perspective of intercultural communication. This chapter, then, addresses how theories of

intercultural communication can provide a framework for addressing the unique mission of the community college. It includes a definition of culture that appears workable for the community college, a description of the cultural adaptations necessary for community college students, a discussion of the terms "biculturalism" and "interculturalism," and an argument for the critical need for community college students and professors to become intercultural communicators.

A Definition of Culture for the Community College

What culture, precisely, does the community college represent? This is a complex question. It would be erroneous to suppose that community college professors, as a group, are living examples of a white, middle-class, "majority" culture and that community college students are products of non-white, non-majority culture. By their definition as open-admission institutions, community colleges virtually ensure that no single ethnic, racial, linguistic or, often, generational characteristic will dominate any given classroom, although, by virtue of his or her position of authority, the professor's ethnicity, race and language will have a certain pre-eminence. By way of example, MCC's current student body hails from over 50 nations and speaks over 40 different languages (MCC Fact Book 2006). In Hartford, the capital city of Connecticut located eight miles from the college, up to 50 percent of the children do not speak English (cited in Cushner 1994: 114). This reflects the community college's role as a point of entry into the American economy for recent immigrants. In addition, community colleges serve more minority students than universities serve. At MCC, 31 percent of the student population is non-white (MCC Fact Book 2006). This is reflective of the national trend in community college enrollments, which educate a larger proportion of

America's minority undergraduates than universities. Nationwide, non-white students make up 36 percent of community college enrollments compared to 26 percent of the enrollments at the nation's universities (National Center for Education Statistics 2005).

Added to this linguistic, ethnic and racial diversity is age diversity. Historically, non-traditional students (students older than age 22) have made up the majority of the student body. This was also true at MCC until 2002, when traditional students (ages 18-22) began to outnumber non-traditional students among those enrolled full-time, a result of spiraling university costs and a weakening economy. More students are seeking to complete the first two years of higher education at a community college, where tuition is a fraction of university tuition, and then transfer to a university to complete their baccalaureate degrees. This path saves the average student at least $10,000 and often substantially more, depending on the tuition of the university to which he or she transfers. However, despite the dramatic increase in younger students, the average student age among MCC students is still 26. Among part-time students, who comprise 56 percent of the student body, 73 percent are over 22 years old (MCC Fact Book 2006). So while some universities may approach the linguistic, ethnic and racial diversity of the community college, the predominance of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds on campus would at least provide a type of youth culture. This is not nearly so true at a community college.

As an instructor, it is impossible for me to make determinations about an individual student's culture, or even his or her ethnicity and language background, without asking the individual specific questions. For instance, the students in my class who might appear to me to be "Black" actually make up a fascinating mixture

of newly-arrived immigrants (from the African continent and the Caribbean), first-generation immigrants (from English-speaking and French-speaking Caribbean Islands) and African- and Caribbean-Americans whose roots in the US go back many generations. These students do not share a single culture and do not tend to see themselves as belonging to the same "category," despite the fact that they are counted as being "the same" on institutional reports. The fact that these students do not see themselves as a single group is hardly surprising. As Edwards has noted, "Possession of a given language is well-nigh essential to the maintenance of group identity" (Edwards 1985: 3). Not only may these students speak several different languages as their first language, the English that they speak is very different and reflects not only their country of origin, but also their previous education and socio-economic level.

All of these factors make it difficult to adopt a traditional definition of culture when discussing community colleges. However, Giroux has defined culture as "the representation of lived experiences, material artifacts and practices forged within the unequal and dialectical relations that different groups establish in a given society at a particular point in historical time" (cited in Bartolome, 1999: 243). This definition seems to me to do justice to the reality, and to provide a definition that is workable for community college students. Under this definition, we can see the institution as the "given society," and the "particular point in historical time" as the classroom experience. Despite the enormous diversity among the students, we can point to one cultural similarity—virtually all are outside of the culture to which they seek access, namely, the culture of academia.

However, this gap is often seen not as a cultural divide, but a simple matter of educational preparedness. If the students are "remedied," we believe, they will

belong to the academic culture. If they can read, write and speak "the language of the academy," they will feel at home in college.

Adapting to a New Culture

I know from my own experience as a former community college student that merely "knowing the language" does not create a sense of belonging in the community, and that it in fact takes years of cultural training before a community college student, even the most accomplished, is likely to feel safe from being "exposed" as an outsider. In my own case, I had been sensitized to academic culture more than many community college students, because my high school had placed me in the college-preparatory curriculum and my family viewed university attendance as desirable not only in terms of social status and career opportunity, but as an achievement in itself. In other words, I received encouragement to continue my education beyond high school from both primary and secondary social structures. Yet when traditional baccalaureate institutions recruited me, I was baffled and intimidated by the images and language they presented to me. I distinctly recall studying an academic calendar from an elite institution (which I did, in fact, attend briefly, before giving in to my discomfort with the mismatch in cultures). The schedule referred to "graduate" students and "undergraduate" students. I did not know what these distinctions meant, but it was clear that graduate students enjoyed more privileges than undergraduates. I wondered which label applied to me, and hoped that my excellent high school records might give me access to the more privileged status. My local authority, my father, did not know what the words meant, either, and so the terms remained a mystery until my first

visit to the campus, when I posed the question to an advisor. My ignorance was enlightened, but the advisor had clearly been embarrassed by my question. I came away from the meeting feeling that this was something I should have known without having to ask, and that I had committed a faux pas—the first of many, as it would turn out.

My point here is that not knowing the definitions of "undergraduate" and "graduate" was only the leading edge of my cultural problem. Like many cultural outsiders, I could not always pinpoint exactly why I did not belong, but I was sure the rejection I sensed from others was entirely my own fault. As Paulston points out, sociologists are quick to emphasize that one culture is not better than another, and yet that is not how the experience feels to the person caught between cultures. "When I lived and taught in a small rural town of some 300 families in southern Minnesota," she writes, "I was always odd man out—and eventually came to accept at some subliminal level that there must be something wrong with me" (Paulston 1992: 121). Like Paulston, I believed that, despite my good grades and positive evaluations, there was "something wrong with me" and that I simply wasn't college material.

This type of stress is typical of humans trying to adjust to a new culture and "can be viewed as the internal resistance of the human organism against its own cultural evolution" (Kim, 1988: 55). When a person experiences this type of stress, he or she may be motivated to "[create] a whole new internal structure that is better adapted to the host environment" (ibid 56). However, it is also possible that this stress will result in the person reacting defensively. Some people, then, "as coping mechanisms, [...] yearn for home, become dependent on others, become

excessively concerned with unimportant details, rationalize their inabilities, or simply avoid problematic situations by ignoring them" (ibid 55).

A shared language would seem to be a major cultural link that would avoid or alleviate this type of stress. However, the person who enters a new culture believing he or she is a fluent communicator, only to discover that the "symbolic functions" of the language, that is, language used as "an emblem of groupness, as a symbol, as a rallying-point" (Edwards, 1985: 17), are very different from those used in the home culture, is just as likely to experience stress, and perhaps even greater stress, than someone who is a non-native speaker. After all, a person who enters a new culture aware that he or she does not speak fluently will expect to encounter problems in communication, while the person who believes he or she is a fluent communicator will be blind-sided by problems and may fail to realize the cause of the problems is misunderstanding of cultural clues.

This type of stress describes my experience at the elite college I attended. This deep-seated feeling eventually led me to leave the prestigious institution in order to attend a community college. There my academic ability was spotted by sympathetic professors, who mentored me in the ways of academia. This cultural training facilitated my eventual transfer to a baccalaureate program, graduate work and ultimately, a career within the walls of academia. And yet, despite my apparent success, I retain the sense that I must daily navigate between my home culture, which I suppose might be called working class, and my adopted culture within the academy.

Biculturalism

Paulston describes this ability to choose between two sets of behaviors as biculturalism, or "a 'cultural competence' which is based on two cultural systems" (Paulston, 1992: 124). The term is most often used to refer to an individual whose "two cultural systems" are clearly marked by two different languages, but there is no reason why we must limit the term to linguistically different cultures, and it can be applied equally well to what might appear to us to be subcultures of a single society.

Paulston points out that language can be a key indicator of which culture an individual is operating in, "but with behavior it is not necessarily clear just which cultural system your performance rules belong to " (ibid 125). A person who speaks a language fluently but does not understand underlying cultural norms will appear "deviant" to the monoculturalist whose language he or she uses (ibid 126).

In the community college classroom, where we are all speaking English of some variety, it is indeed difficult to know "which culture an individual is operating in." Furthermore, social identity theory tells us that in order for students to join the academic culture, they must undergo a secondary socialization that involves not only adopting new behaviors, but they must also begin to identify themselves as members of the new culture, that is, college students, and they must be recognized as such by others. This is necessary because "being a member of a group is [...] a consequence of self-ascription, but it is also reinforced by other-ascription, by being categorised by others as a member of a group" (Byram 2002: 51).

This secondary socialization is easiest when there is little or no "friction" between the behaviors, values and norms of the secondary culture and that of the individual's primary socialization (which occurs within the individual's family or

earliest childhood home), so that a sense of "continuity" is created between the secondary socialization within the institution and the primary socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 163). However, when there is extreme disjuncture between reality as defined by the primary socialization and reality as defined by the secondary socialization, the individual will not accept the new reality unless he or she undergoes a re-socialization process very similar to the primary socialization process (ibid 176). Of course, there are many degrees of "being" between a secondary socialization process that builds upon primary socialization and the complete re-socialization that occurs in extreme cases. (ibid 181).

The bicultural individual manages to accept and operate within two cultural "realities," whether by having received primary socialization in both, or by adopting a second culture as an adult. However, it is important to recognize the "either/or" aspect of biculturalism; when presented with "conflicting cultural values," the bicultural individual "picks and chooses" (Paulston 1992: 124). In other words, when the two cultures clash, the bicultural person cannot maintain a "foothold" in both, but must choose one or the other.

One might assume that among adults who consciously choose a new culture, such as community college students, there would be little stress associated with the secondary socialization process and few, if any, extreme cases of culture shock, which has been defined as "the disorientation that comes from being plunged into an unfamiliar setting" (McLaren 1998: 9) and, "a state of frustration" caused by a "immers[ion] in a foreign culture for a prolonged period" (Hofstede et al. 2002: 20) However, many students do, in fact struggle with issues of self- and other-ascription, even after they have successfully adopted new behaviors. This is

particularly true of women, who may see their new roles in direct conflict with, and even a betrayal of, their roles as caregivers and mothers.

When individuals feel that a new culture is being imposed on them, particularly if they perceive the new culture as trivializing or negating their first culture, they will resist "picking and choosing" behaviors from the new culture and will instead engage in oppositional behaviors. For example, there are many accounts in American educational literature of African-American students who see certain behaviors, including academic success, as "white," and so scrupulously avoid engaging in them. Patrick J. Finn describes this phenomenon this way:

> Cultural differences become cultural boundaries. Once a cultural identification is established in opposition to another, a border is established that people cross at their peril. "Border crossers" are likely to be censured by their own as traitors and they are not likely to be fully accepted by the dominant group (Finn 1999:47).

Oppositional behaviors are most likely to be displayed by members of social groups who became part of the larger society "through slavery, conquest, or colonization and who were relegated to an inferior position" (ibid 41), but are also often displayed by working-class whites (ibid 58-59). According to what we know of social identity theory, it would seem extremely difficult for individuals who define themselves as "not *them*" to adopt behaviors identified as "them," such as school success and values like reverence for theoretical, rather than practical knowledge, if those behaviors and values are anathema to their primary socialization, and the adoption of these behaviors and values would not occur without undergoing an entire re-socialization process. As Finn says, "for these

involuntary minorities, school was not and would never be their home turf" (ibid 46).

Interculturalism

How, then, can community college students hope to succeed in academia if the "messages" of academic culture say to them, "This is not meant for you nor for people like you; we do not value 'your kind' here"? And how can community colleges hope to truly serve the populations who are at the heart of their missions? If we "water down" the curriculum to mere technical and/or practical training rather than providing true education, we engage in the "socially reproductive" and "cooling out" strategies our detractors accuse us of. On the other hand, to force re-socialization denies the human heart of the community college and its greatest attribute: the full diversity of contemporary American society.

Fortunately, there is a way out of this bind through the careful tending of an intercultural approach to community college education. Unlike biculturalism, interculturalism does not describe a state of being but rather the adoption of behavior, learned through conscious practice, that develops the "learners' ability to step outside, to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, and to act on that change of perspective" (Byram 2000). Like biculturalism, the term is most often used to refer to instances when the two cultures being brought into relationship speak different languages, but again, the term does not have to be limited to cultures separated by linguistic differences.

When one acts interculturally, one becomes the medium for the expression and critical evaluation of two (or at times more) cultures that have come into contact. Byram calls this act "mediating." It involves:

> ...being able to take an "external" perspective on oneself as one interacts with others and analyse and, where desirable, adapt one's behaviour and the underlying values and beliefs. Thus at any given point in time, the individual is bringing into contact through themself two sets of values, beliefs and behaviours, and in this sense there is almost always a binary relationship, but any individual may have a range of experience and competences which allow them to relate a variety of combinations of cultures (Byram 2002: 60).

Clearly the ability to act interculturally is a key skill for both community college professors and students. The ability "to take an 'external' perspective" and "adapt one's behavior and the underlying values and beliefs" allows the creation of a space in which teachers and students can work out issues that otherwise might emerge as oppositional behaviors or as stress, withdrawal and failure. However, interculturalism is not a tool for imposing academic culture in place of the students' home cultures, nor does it place a higher value on the academic culture. The professor as well as the student must, "where desirable," adapt.

Kramsch refers to the "place" created by intercultural activity as "thirdness," which she defines as "a relational process-oriented disposition, that is built in time through habit, and that allows us to perceive continuity in events, to identify patterns, and make generalizations" (Kramsch, 1999: 44). She contends that this "thirdness" becomes a permanent part an individual's identity through the "habit" of acting interculturally (ibid).

A key difference between being bicultural and intercultural is that the individual consciously chooses to act interculturally, at least until the habit is

established. Being bicultural is something that happens, for better or worse, because of an individual's circumstances (although an adult entering a new culture may certainly choose to adopt the norms of the new culture.) But while bicultural individuals "pick and choose" which cultural norms will govern their behavior, they may not do so consciously, sometimes resulting in psychological stress (Byram 2002).

How does the intercultural individual develop the habit of acting interculturally? Byram describes interculturalism as consisting of five behavioral objectives:

> Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own (*savoir etre*).
>
> Knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction (*savoirs*).
>
> Skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own (*savoir comprendre*).
>
> Skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*).
>
> Critical cultural awareness/political education: an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (*savoir s'engager*) (Byram 2002: 62).

Although being intercultural is described as a set of behaviors, simply adopting certain actions will not bring about interculturalism. "Going through the motions" is not enough as the most important, fundamental activity involves changing attitudes (ibid). On the other hand, all I can do as an instructor is ask students to "go through the motions" by engaging in activities that ask them to use intercultural skills. I can't make my students intercultural—I'm still working on making myself intercultural—but I can provide activities that give students intercultural experience.

Interculturalism and the Community College

In the college classroom, we expect students to automatically operate at the level of "skills of discovery and interaction" and "critical cultural awareness/political education," often without even realizing the intercultural nature of these tasks. If the students cannot, we apply remediation. It is not my intention to imply here that academic intervention is never necessary; however, we must teach academic skills in ways that do not seem to present students with an "either/or" situation: "either you become a member of the 'right' culture or you remain a member of your own ('wrong') culture, but you cannot inhabit both cultures."

By learning to act interculturally, community college teachers can mediate between the culture of academia and the students' culture or cultures, thus avoiding the trap of trying to "fix" culture rather than skills. But in addition to teaching academic reading and writing, community college teachers must also show students how to act interculturally themselves:

> Teachers must be prepared to teach young people from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. At the same time, the knowledge and skills that teachers themselves are learning must become the content that is taught to young people in order for them to gain the skills necessary to live effectively in a global, interdependent world (Cushner 1994: 115).

This intercultural training can begin with educating students about intercultural attitudes. Taking on this challenge does not add significantly to the teaching task at hand because the attitudes necessary for interculturalism are consistent with those required for any learning situation and, indeed, could be said to describe an ideal classroom environment:

> Attitudes which are the pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction need to be not simply positive, but to be attitudes of curiosity and openness, of readiness to suspend disbelief and judgment with respect to others' meanings, beliefs and behaviours. There also needs to be a willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging (Byram 1996: 21).

Of course, even if every student in the class comes in with this attitude, it will do no good if the professor does not share it. Community college professors must be intercultural communicators in order to reach and assist their students. When professors fail in this, they may incorrectly try to ascribe academic "remedies" to cultural issues. Cultural issues cannot be fixed by academic methods, and trying to fix them this way is likely to make the students feel uncomfortable,

alienated and perhaps even "stupid" or "wrong." As Bartolome notes, "The most pedagogically advanced strategies are sure to be ineffective in the hands of educators who implicitly or explicitly subscribe to a belief system that renders ethnic, racial, and linguistic minority students [...] culturally disadvantaged and in need of fixing" (Bartolome 1999: 239).

While I acknowledge that I may have made this error in the instance of "doggy dog," and I regret missing this opportunity to become more interculturally aware, I still believe I was basically correct to advise the student to rethink her wording, although my explanation of why she should change it may have been misguided. The student was engaged in writing an academic paper for an academic audience, and "doggy dog," even if appropriate in some cultural circles, was inappropriate to the diction she was striving to achieve. Many might accuse me of ignoring the cultural capital of the student by imposing my own cultural norms (or at least the norms of my adopted culture) upon her. I disagree. Albeit badly, I was trying to show this student how to gain "capital" in a different culture, a culture that she had voluntarily chosen to enter. If it were possible to redo the incident, I would not simply "correct" the student, but take the opportunity to create a cultural exchange.

The intercultural stance provides teachers with a comfortable position from which to deliver that "additive process." It allows teachers to value the cultural experiences of their students without patronization; it allows students access to the culture of academia without asking them to devalue their own cultures. Most importantly, intercultural education encourages both students and educators to critically evaluate their own values and norms and to put them into a wider, more global context. When I failed to ask my student about the origins of "doggy dog," I

temporarily failed to adopt this additive stance, and missed the opportunity to add to my own cultural base as well as my student's. But I take heart in thinking that I have grown from the experience and that, in time, I will become a competent intercultural communicator.

I believe that a student who adopts intercultural attitudes and who knows how to act interculturally will encounter less stress in adapting to academic culture, and as a result, is likely to have greater success; furthermore, I believe a student is most likely to learn these attitudes from a teacher who models them inside the classroom and out. The following chapters describe my attempts to bring intercultural activities into my English 101 classroom and to model intercultural behavior. In addition to descriptions of activities intended to engage students in the five dimensions of intercultural awareness Byram defines, I will present and discuss my students' responses to the class, which were kept in online journals.

Chapter 4:

Intercultural Activities for the Composition Classroom

Introducing the Concept of Intercultural Experience

At the beginning of each semester, I tell my composition students that my goal is to help them develop and use their writing skills to best advantage, and to do that, I am going to be their guide to a strange land called Academia. A shortened version of my course introduction goes something like this:

> *If you were to go to another country, you would want to prepare yourself so that you could prosper there. You'd want to know the language, of course, but we all know that there's more to fitting in and being comfortable than just speaking the language. For instance, you'd also want to observe how people talk to each other—how close together do they stand? Do they use a lot of gestures? Do they look directly at the person to whom they're speaking? What's "normal" for this society? You would want to know how to behave so that you wouldn't offend anyone, and more important, so that you wouldn't make a fool of yourself. You would probably start to adapt your behavior so that you might appear normal in your new society, even if you still sometimes felt like a stranger. Then when you came home, you'd go back to the behavior you started with because that behavior is normal for here. So you might find yourself thinking something like, when I'm home I look people in the eye and smile when I greet them to show friendliness, but when I'm in X country, I keep my eyes down to show respect. So you've observed the differences between the two cultures, come to understand why we smile—to show friendliness—while the other culture doesn't—to show*

respect, and you've learned how to choose the appropriate behavior for the appropriate situation. We call being able to do all that being intercultural. This semester, I'm going to show you some of the most important customs in the land of Academia and show you how to be an intercultural citizen.

After this introduction, I ask my students to engage in an intercultural activity. For this activity, I divide the class into small groups and ask the students to pretend that they are anthropologists who have just discovered an artifact. We discuss what artifacts are in the anthropological sense, noting especially that they are man-made items, and why anthropologists and others are interested in them. The students quickly come to consensus about the roles of artifacts for providing glimpses of other cultures, and that these glimpses may sometimes lead to incomplete or even false perceptions until more evidence comes to light. At this point I produce an "artifact" for the class to observe and describe. Over the course of several semesters, I've tried presenting a few different objects as the artifact, and have finally found something that tends to encourage students to think in a more intercultural fashion. It is a gadget I unearthed from my basement that has no immediate application that I know of.

The students set to work observing the artifact closely and discussing its possible uses or significance. After several minutes I ask each group to tell me what they think the artifact is. Typical responses include a telegraph key, an old-fashioned lighting control, a thermostat, or some other type of electrical control device. When I reveal that I don't know what the artifact is, the students usually react with disappointment: each group wants to have found the correct answer. But then we talk about the reasons why each group's answer is supportable by looking

at how the observable evidence supports the group's conclusion. The notion that an idea may be "good" even if we can't prove it is "correct" is often new to these students; sometimes students even accuse me of not revealing what the artifact is because I don't want them to feel bad that no one correctly identified it. It usually takes some discussion to satisfy them that I really am happy with the answers the groups supplied and that I see them all as "good."

Next, I hold up a copy of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and explain to the students that this is also an artifact, and that we will spend an entire semester studying it and seeing what it reveals to us. I comment on the fact that we will not only learn about the culture described by the author in the novel, but we will also start to draw conclusions about a culture—academic culture, that is—that would value this book. And finally, I remind the students that the conclusions we draw about this artifact (the novel) will likely differ, just as our conclusions about the gadget differed, and, once again, we will be looking for "good" conclusions that we can support with evidence from the text, rather than one, single "correct" conclusion.

At first glance, my artifact exercise may seem to have little in common with the types of educational activities that are usually labeled intercultural. In those exercises, students undertake tasks that lead them to first imagine the viewpoint of the stranger—a person from another culture—and then perhaps to attempt to observe or act from the stranger's viewpoint. These types of activities can be very successful when cultural boundaries are marked by differences in language, nationality, race, etc., making boundaries easy to perceive. However, the boundary that I wish my students to perceive isn't distinctly marked, particularly for students who have recently graduated from high school. For them, the typical academic

environment of a teacher and students in a classroom may seem so familiar that they may overlook subtle differences, or what I think of as the cultural clues of academia. When they take on the role of the anthropologist in the artifact exercise, they adopt the role of the stranger, but a particular type of stranger, one who seeks to know by observing. The exercise models the behavior I would like students to adopt for class, but it also models the norm for academic discourse—the ability to perceive evidence, to arrive at a conclusion based on the evidence, and finally, to explain explicitly how the evidence leads or connects to a conclusion.

The artifact exercise also causes most students to experience some discomfort as they begin to grasp that an anthropologist—or a reader of *Portrait*—is not quickly rewarded with "right" answers, but must continually strive to find and evaluate "good" answers. Through this exercise, many students will begin to realize that they themselves are the strangers in academic culture and will experience what Geof Alred calls "the common denominator" of all intercultural experience: "a meeting between individuals who are different in important respects and who present one another with the experience of 'otherness'" (Alred, 2003: 16). However, because the students are working in small groups, they also tend to form group identities as "co-seekers." This gives them a comfortable forum in which to explore the strangeness of the absence of a correct answer and to experiment with the concept of "good" answers versus "right" answers. Usually, several students will raise the issue of whether a wrong answer can also be good, first within their small group setting, and then to the class as a whole. I respond by asking, "What if I said this were something to eat? Would you believe me?" The students reply that they would not because the artifact is not made of edible materials. This brings us back

to a discussion of how the evidence must support the conclusion in order for an answer to be classified as "good."

Students generally respond positively to the artifact exercise. I keep my research diary online, and students sometimes post their reactions to my descriptions of the day's activities. Students are not required to read or respond to my diary, so, in general, it is the most engaged students who will post a response. Interestingly, because the teaching platform I used tracks "hits," I was able to see that many students read my diary, even though they usually didn't post responses. Here is what a few students had to say about the artifact exercise:

> *I think today was fun with the thing from your celler. It got me really mad that you didn't know what it was b/c I really wanted to know But the exercise was good and I met some kids ...* (excerpted from longer text) (#527/p. 327)

> *I liked the last class it was very interesting and challenging. We had an opportunity to come up in groups and discuss about "articraft". We learned that there are important steps toward conclusion. Same as in crime scene in order to come up with conclusion what happened we have to observe different things and collect as much as possible information and evidence to conclude what could be.* (#528/p. 367)

> *I can see what we have to do in class, not just look at things for what they are – but for what they mean...* (excerpted from longer text) (#355/p. 333)

In addition to allowing students to experience both roles of an intercultural experience—that of the stranger and that of a group member—the artifact exercise also allows students to try out some of the five behavioral objectives identified by Byram as indicators of an intercultural perspective. In particular, because the correct identity of the artifact is unknown, students do not immediately discard any theories about the artifact as "wrong," but instead listen to all of the groups' rationales. This helps the students to develop *savoir etre*, or "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram, 2003: 62). The observation, analysis and discussion required by the activity also help to develop the students' *savoir comprendre*, "the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own" (ibid). I conclude the exercise by pointing out to the students that they have, in fact, used these behaviors as part of the activity and they are on their way to becoming intercultural citizens of Academia.

Using A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in an Intercultural Classroom

With this introduction to the course, we read the first page and a half of *Portrait* together. I intentionally keep the first reading very short so that students will not feel overwhelmed by the experience of encountering Joyce's prose for the first time. The brief passage we read together is a stream-of-consciousness description of the early childhood environment of the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, before he departs for boarding school. My choice of text may not at first glance seem like fertile ground for intercultural experiences, particularly in the American sense of "intercultural experience" as a subset of multicultural experience, but I have found it a powerful source. It is no exaggeration to say that most students are

shocked by the first few pages of the novel. The shock arises from the prose style, the vocabulary, and the cultural references (such as Davitt and Parnell) that are so unfamiliar to students that the text as a whole is almost meaningless to them. Once again, they are confronted by Otherness.

Working through the text very slowly, pausing to have students use the Internet to find information on unfamiliar references and referring frequently to an online glossary I've developed for the class, I ask the students to pinpoint what they can know from these pages. The initial reaction is usually, "nothing," but as some of the references are decoded, they begin to discern indicators of setting in time and place and qualities that can be ascribed to the characters and the situation. I frequently prompt students with questions like, "How old is Baby Tuckoo?" Then, since no "right" answer is provided by the text, the students find "good" answers based on the evidence the text contains—he wets the bed, he has trouble pronouncing some words, his father tells him stories, etc. We also look at questions for which we lack sufficient evidence and acknowledge that there are things we cannot know in these first few pages, such as Dante's relationship to the family and why Stephen hides under the table after saying he is going to marry Eileen, the girl from "number seven"—although I enjoy one of my student's suggestions: perhaps he's afraid of commitment. Certainly, Stephen's Victorian, Catholic and Irish nationalist world (and that's quite a mix of influences right there) may in itself be an "other" to my students, though some will identify with some parts of his culture. However, it is the act of reading Joyce that truly constitutes the intercultural experience. In reading Joyce, the students are forced to make meaning rather than passively receive it. They are taking their first tentative steps into *savoir apprendre/faire*: "skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new

knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram, 2003: 62). *Savoir apprendre/faire* is developed first in the students' realization that this is a different kind of reading than they are used to performing in academic settings. In addition to "boiling down" the text to retrieve essential facts (which I equate to uncovering the basic plot of the novel), students must also learn to discern what is evidence that can lead to a conclusion and what is simply a plot element, and then to add up the evidence they find to construct a supportable conclusion. For example, most students will start by writing something like, "Stephen gets pushed into the square ditch by Wells. Joyce explains, 'It was Wells who had shouldered him into the square ditch...It was a mean thing to do; all the fellows said it was'" (Joyce, 1916:7). The next step is to move students beyond reporting the plot of the novel to drawing conclusions—how does Stephen feel about being pushed? Students will easily supply an answer to this question, but they are usually nonplussed when I ask, "How do you know?" We can then talk about how the quote from the text implies Stephen's feelings and how to explain, explicitly, how the quote supports the students' conclusions about Stephen's feelings.

This is a very different process than "reading for the main idea," which is the way most students approach academic reading at first. Often the only interpretation of texts that they have been asked to do in their previous English classes is to find similarities between events or characters described in the text and relate them to situations in their own lives. While this is a step toward a reader-response approach to reading, it doesn't call upon the students to probe the text more deeply than the surface meaning, and the writing assignments often place the emphasis on the

students' discussion of his or her own experience, rather than on his or her sense of the text's meaning. Asking students to supply textual evidence for their interpretation of the novel (for example, asking them to explain why they believe Stephen feels bullied, rather than asking them to write about their personal experience with bullies), provides students with an intercultural experience not only by asking them to place themselves in the role of the Other as presented by Stephen Dedalus, but also by creating a "third place" between Stephen Dedalus/Joyce and themselves and becoming the conduit, so to speak, for the exchange between cultures.

In Defense of a "Eurocentric" Text: Postcolonial Concepts vs. Intercultural Concepts

Despite the intercultural experience of language presented by the *Portrait*, compositionists who favor the transformative postmodernist approach might find my choice of text alarming. First, they would argue that a text by a white male implicitly endorses the existing hegemony and does not provide adequate framework for challenging that hegemony. Of course, one can point to many instances within *Portrait* in which Stephen Dedalus questions, rebels against and even threatens the status quo, but his identity as a white male—even though, ironically, the Irish were classified as a black race by English Victorian scientists—make his struggle for identity and freedom just one more incidence of Western literature's "tendency to construct the world through the conceptual baggage of Eurocentric colonial discourse" (Giroux, 1992:125).

This type of thinking reflects the postcolonial view described this way by Bredella: "What we are really after when we pretend to understand [the Other] is

our domination over them. The real motive in understanding is the will to power" (Bredella, 2003: 36). According to this view, what we perceive as "understanding" is really a culturally-wired delusion; we are programmed, as it were, to see things from our own cultural perspective and only from that perspective. So when we think we "understand," what we really have done is to jam another culture into our pre-existing expectation. If we followed this line of thinking to its extreme, we would conclude that it is impossible to understand anything that is not our own cultural experience (ibid).

Bredella goes on to describe a classroom situation in which students complained that they could not understand Toni Morrison's *Beloved* because they were not the descendents of slaves, framing the cultural determinism argument rather succinctly. Bredella points out to his students that, although empathy and imagination are not the same as experience, it is only through the imaginary and empathetic experience provided by the novel that we can know the boundaries between experiencing and empathizing: we know that we are ourselves with our own experiences, and yet we can imagine that we are in the position of the Other. It is not possible for us to *be* the Other, but it is possible for us to "see" from the Other's perspective. Bredella continues:

> "Understanding is a process of negotiation between the context in which something is said and done and the context in which it is perceived. It is also a process of negotiation between the inner perspective—we see things through the Others' eyes—and the outer perspective—we see things through our own eyes. *But such a process of negotiation can only begin if we possess the flexibility of mind to reconstruct the context of production and assume the inner perspective*" (Bredella, 2003: 39).

I have emphasized the last line of the quote because it contains two important ideas for approaching composition from an intercultural standpoint: "flexibility of mind" and "reconstructing the context of production." When I ask students to try to identify my "artifact," I am inviting them to use their flexibility of mind and to reconstruct the context of production—the same skills I ask them to use when they read *Portrait*. Like Bredella, I believe that if these skills are sufficiently developed, understanding—of many types and at differing levels—is possible. (In Chapter Nine I look at some of the ways in which my students develop understanding of the novel.)

To be fair, most proponents of a more transformational, postmodernist approach would not criticize my choice of the Joyce text in itself so much as the fact that *Portrait* forms the thematic core of my course. In their view, this is an exclusionary choice I have made. Henry Giroux warns:

> The student experience has to be first understood and recognized as the accumulation of collective memories and stories that provide students with a sense of familiarity, identity and practical knowledge. Such experience has to be both affirmed and critically interrogated. In addition, the social and historical construction of such experience has to be affirmed and understood as part of wider struggle for voice, but it also has to be remade, reterritorialized in the interest of a social imaginary that dignifies the best traditions and possibilities of those groups learning to speak from a position of enablement, that is from the discourse of dignity and governance (Giroux, 1992: 104).

Giroux argues that students can only be "enabled" by texts that "dignify" their ethnicity, sex and social/political status by making those issues central to the text itself. He recommends texts by Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Adrienne Rich, Zora Neal Hurston, Martin Luther King Jr., and position papers written by labor movements (Giroux, 1992:101)—interestingly, all Western sources—to begin the process of "undoing the uses of power and the relations of domination, and for exploring the dimensions of human potentiality" (Giroux, 1992: 92). Ironically, this statement from Giroux sums up, for me, what is particularly powerful and inspiring in *Portrait*. But according to Giroux, female and minority students would not feel this power and, as a non-Irish, non-Catholic, female reader, I must be "unnatural" in my response to the text. This point of view suggests that I should feel "outside" a novel about a late-nineteenth century lad, and the fact that my own ethnicity and gender plays little or no part in the novel should underscore my feelings of marginalization.

It is not my intention here to suggest that many groups, including ethnic, racial and religious minorities as well as women, are not marginalized in contemporary Western culture. As an aspiring interculturalist, I am very much in favor of students exploring the experiences of as many Others as they can. My argument is with the notion that readers can only empathize with a text that mirrors their own experience. This attitude seems frankly patronizing of the marginalized fgroups it supposedly "enables." So while reading literature by black authors about black experiences "can also help privileged groups listen seriously to the multiple narratives that constitute the complexity of Others historically defined through reifications and stereotypes that smother difference within and between diverse subordinate groups" (Giroux, 1992: 132), a black reader gathers "forms of historical

consciousness that provide the basis for new relations of solidarity, community and self-love" (ibid). The white reader is credited with the ability to empathize with the Other while maintaining her own identity. However, the same reasoning is not applied to a black reader reading a text by a white author about white experience: the black reader is presumed to lack either the ability to empathize with the Other or the ability to retain a sense of self in the face of white culture and experience. Either scenario suggests that the black reader is somehow less than the white reader, a position I find very offensive.

The classroom incident involving *Beloved* that Bredella describes is particularly interesting to me because *Beloved* is precisely the type of book I am encouraged to use in my classroom by writers such as Giroux. It is hard to imagine, though, a scenario in which American students would argue that they don't "get it"—for any non-African American to say such a thing would be considered blatant racism. White students would know that the point of reading such a book is to understand not only how the Other feels, but also the "context of construction" for that feeling. Whether or not the students would approve of or be offended by being asked to understand is another question, but regardless, they would be expected to be capable of understanding. Refusing to try to understand—even based on the argument that the experience is unknowable from their cultural hierarchy—would be socially unacceptable. However, Giroux suggests that it would be perfectly acceptable—even expected—for non-white readers to reject a novel such as *Portrait* as "Eurocentric" and therefore unknowable. But as we have seen, unknowable is not the same as un-understandable, as one of my African American students wrote in my research journal:

I think that I am catching on to the academic culture of this English class a lot easier. The first week of class was very intimidating for me because when I found out that we were going to be learning and reading about Irish folklore I thought that I was done for the whole semester. I am starting to put myself in the shoes of the characters that I am writing about. This technique is helping me to understand the book a lot more easily. I imagine myself to be Stephen Dedalus on the playground with the fear of being crushed by the rough boys. I also try to imagine what it would be like to live in the dormitory at Clongowes college. Proving the how and then why something is important is something that I am constantly working on. (#372/p. 335)

Developing Intercultural Skills as an Instructor

In addition to guiding my students to an intercultural approach to composition, I attempt to model intercultural behavior myself, but as the instructor I have more control over the environment than my students do, and my interactions with the Other often are orchestrated rather than actual real-time events. Fortunately, my students provide many opportunities for intercultural experience. For example, I noticed that despite carefully prepared lessons in how to avoid plagiarism and stern warnings about the consequences of committing plagiarism, many of my students' essays would still contain plagiarized passages. I was pointing out one of these plagiarized passages in an essay to a student when she asked me, "What is the big deal about plagiarism, anyway?" The student understood that she had copied passages from a source without providing proper credit, but she did not see why this behavior was unacceptable to me. It occurred to me that the internet has always

been part of my younger students' lives. They've grown up in a "downloadable" culture, in which it is perfectly legal and acceptable to import all kinds of information and media to their home computers. How different is downloading a few paragraphs from a Joyce website from downloading "shareware" computer games? Of course, to me it is very different, but for my student, the boundary was unclear.

"If I came into your house and drank alcohol and ate pork, you would be offended and you would probably ask me to leave, right?" I asked the student, who is a Muslim. "When you commit plagiarism, you are coming into the academic's house and offending him."

The student thanked me and said, "Now I understand."

Even though the student seemed satisfied, I was not entirely comfortable with this explanation, and after class I described the exchange to one of my colleagues, who expressed horror that I had not described plagiarism as the theft of intellectual property. I knew that this was also what was bothering me, and I felt for a few moments that I had done a disservice to the student by not reviewing the ethical issues involved in plagiarism. But as I thought about the incident more, I realized that the student was familiar with the ethical issues, but they didn't have the same resonance for her as they did for me--just as the drinking of alcohol and eating of pork don't feel wrong to me, and a long discussion of why they are frowned upon in her culture would be unlikely to change my feelings. The important thing is to know that the behavior is shunned and to avoid it in the appropriate cultural situations. No wonder I felt uncomfortable—I had acted interculturally!

Despite having some successes like the one described above, one of the chief difficulties I face in taking an intercultural approach to composition is decentering

myself from academic culture. Because I am interested in making academic cultural clues overt to my students, it is all too easy for me to get caught up in explaining the back story, to borrow a term from Hollywood, for class activities. Although my intention is to make academic culture as transparent as possible, my emphasis on how academics approach topics no doubt begins to sound like "because this is the right way to do it" to my students. I do repeat quite often that academic approaches are just one of many and appropriate to academic culture only because it *is* academic culture. I have even been known to sing, "That's the way we like it, uh-huh, uh-huh" to my students in an attempt to stress that we're talking about cultural preferences. Even so, I suspected that some of my students still saw my approach in terms of "right" and "wrong," rather than academic versus non-academic. To test this, I asked my students to respond to a series of five questions that asked them to reflect on their intercultural experience in my classroom. In chapters six through nine, I will discuss these questions and the students' responses in terms of intercultural theory. The next chapter discusses the development of the research question and the hypothesis for this thesis and explains the methodology used to collect and analyze the responses.

Chapter 5:

The Research Question, the Hypothesis, and the Methodology

Developing the Research Question

As discussed in Chapter Two, a great deal of the current professional literature in composition tends to favor a postmodern/postcolonial approach. However, actual classroom practice is often quite different from what the literature suggests. In his 2001 online survey of 534 syllabi and program guides, John C. Briggs concluded, "Our surveys suggest that a deep-seated antagonism toward anything resembling traditional literary education, though it is occasionally supported in the professional literature, is still far from the norm in most composition programs" (Briggs 2001: 19).

It is my contention that literature is, indeed, an integral component of composition instruction, not only for its artistic merits, but, to an even stronger degree, because it provides "artifacts of intellectual history," as about one-third of Briggs' respondents noted (ibid 15). In fact, one might argue that canonized texts are some of our most complete or intact "artifacts" of Western intellectual history. However, as an instructor in a community college, where enrollment is open to all high-school graduates or holders of general education equivalency degrees (GED), I am sensitive to charges of elitism and wary of barriers that may be thrown in students' paths for unnecessary or even artificial reasons. In my composition classroom, then, I face a daily struggle to balance what I see as a critical responsibility to engage students in the culture of the academy through my discipline, while remaining vigilant that I do not engage in "cooling out" (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum, 2002) students who may be encountering literature for the first time. After all, because composition is required of every student, passing my

class is one of the first hurdles they encounter in their venture into higher education. Also, because Composition is the only English class required in many curricula, my class may be an individual student's only exposure to literature. Therefore, within the context of "introducing the language of the academy," I am also presenting "artifacts of intellectual history" while guarding against creating cultural barriers by taking an intercultural approach. This leads to the **research question:**

Can an intercultural approach to composition provide community college students with the cultural awareness and skills to succeed in the culture of the academy (higher education) without devaluing the home cultures from which the students come to the college?

Hypothesis

I believe that teaching composition as a cultural activity, with attention to revealing the cultural rules and societal norms of the culture of the academy, will enhance student achievement and success in that culture without devaluing the students' estimations of the cultures that produced them. In short, I believe by learning to be intercultural, students can also learn to be more successful writers and students.

To test my hypothesis, I adopted an intercultural stance in my composition classroom in which I had been using a text by a "DWEM" (dead, white, European male) that is a recognized fixture of the Western canon: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as the starting point for all course work. As discussed in Chapter One, I chose *Portrait* for several reasons, but chief among them is the complexity of Joyce's prose and the unfamiliar, even alienating, feeling it creates in

community college student readers. As discussed in the previous chapter, I describe the novel and the contextual materials we use from other disciplines as artifacts from the culture of academia, and ask students to learn more about that culture by the study of these artifacts. In this way I ask students to examine the Other culture and, through their interpretations, bring that culture into relation with their own.

However, my classroom experience has shown me that it is not enough to present the artifacts and expect students to learn or care about them without guidance. Students need intercultural skills to successfully read and interpret the Otherness of Joyce. Therefore, developing students' intercultural skills, both explicitly through planned activities and by modeling intercultural behavior myself, became a centerpiece of my teaching.

As we have seen in previous chapters, contemporary composition theory and intercultural theory share a great deal of common ground. Both are founded on theories of the social construction of language. Composition and intercultural theories agree that the symbolic functions of language create and shape meaning, and that the sharing of these symbolic functions is an important marker of culture. In addition, both schools of thought hold that our use of language and our attitudes toward language help shape our identities. In recent years, though, composition theory has taken a more political stance, often demonizing certain sets of behavior or uses of language that, they insist, equate "correctness" with assimilation into the oppressive dominant culture. On the other hand, intercultural theory tends to be more moderate. Rather than judging culture, it seeks to understand how culture shapes perceptions and to encourage knowledge of self and others in a way that increases the fluidity of interchanges and adds to the understanding and sharing of language's symbolic functions.

Intercultural theory is most often applied to the area of second language acquisition as an alternative to the "native speaker" model of language teaching. When a language instructor takes a native speaker approach, he attempts to mold his students into close imitations of native speakers of the target language. The pursuit of linguistic competence and the "right" accent often masks all the issues of the interdependence of language and culture: what variety of "native speaker" is being imitated? What are the learner's attitudes towards the target language and the culture it represents? In what ways are the learner's identity and sense of self expressed through his or her home language and culture? What does competence in the target language mean for the learner's sense of self? Issues such as these become even more complex when the target language is the language of a world power or a former colonial power, such as English. However, when one takes an intercultural approach to language teaching, these issues are brought to light in the language classroom. The goal of classroom activities is to aid students in developing critical awareness of the target culture and of their own cultures, and to teach them skills that make understanding richer than merely shared vocabulary. Rather than working on perfectly mimicking the accent of a native speaker, the student is working on understanding the cultural context of the native speaker, and on expressing his or her own cultural context in ways that can be understood across language and cultural boundaries.

I am using this intercultural versus native speaker model as the basis for my hypothesis. Current composition theory assumes that teaching academic discourse is analogous to the native speaker model of language teaching, in which the target language is all. Therefore, postmodern/postcolonial theorists reject the notion of teaching academic discourse, seeing it as spreading the language and the culture of

the colonizer or oppressor. But without the communicative skills to understand academic discourse and its culture, students are denied the opportunity to make their own critical decisions about their cultural interactions. They are also denied the chance to learn how to communicate their own identities across the cultural and linguistic divide.

The intercultural model, in contrast to the native speaker model, strives for understanding of cultural context. It does not require or encourage mimicry of or assimilation into the target culture. In a sense, intercultural theory accepts Said's notion that it is impossible for one culture to *know* another culture in the sense of shared history and lived experience (Bredella, 2003: 36). This is just common sense: learning about an experience is not the same as actually having the experience. By the same logic, learning a language, no matter how completely, will never be the same as *knowing* the language. No amount of fluency can make a non-native a "native" speaker since she cannot exchange her physical body and lived experiences for those of the native. But unlike intercultural theory, Said further contends that without knowing, understanding and empathy are illusions (ibid). Interculturalists, on the other hand, believe it is possible to understand and even empathize with another without having been or attempting to become the Other.

I hypothesize that composition class is an effective place for community college students not only to begin to learn how to "speak" academic discourse, but to start to grasp why it is spoken and the cultural subtext of academic discourse. With this foundation they can go on to become competent intercultural communicators, unselfconscious of their "accents" when using academic discourse, and able to understand academic culture—and to make themselves understood within it—without exchanging their identities for "native" ones. Of course, their

sense of self may change a bit through the experience, in the way that all experience has the potential to make us more consciously aware of our identities. But having an experience that makes one say, "I didn't know I had it in me," doesn't mean that it wasn't there all along, only that the individual had never before tapped that part of her or his identity.

Another way in which my hypothesis diverges from current composition theory is in the choice of a single novel as the central text. While works of literature still figure in many composition classrooms, the kind of close reading, extended over an entire semester that I propose is very unusual. Even most 100- and 200-level literature classes, let alone composition classes, do not ask students to read as closely as I ask my students to read *Portrait*. Also, there is a strong bias in composition textbooks towards recent, easily accessible selections (Briggs: 2001 12). As a result, students are very often asked to analyze "artifacts" from cultures with which they are already familiar. Therefore, short essays on sociology issues, items from popular culture, and fiction that reflects a "diversified" experience are the preferred types of texts. As Lynne Bloom notes, textbook publishers look for works that "sound contemporary—in language, syntax, relative briskness and brevity" (cited in Briggs, 2001: 12). To present a so-called great work, especially one written before 1945, that has been canonized by Western Literature is, according to much of the current theory, to attempt to "colonize" the students and further oppress their native cultures. However, I propose that an intercultural approach will allow me to present an artifact from the "dominant" culture as just that, an artifact to be studied for the cultural information it can yield.

Methodology

Because I am interested in recording students' feelings and perceptions about their ability to succeed in the academic culture during and after their experience in my class, I have chosen action research; though, given my level of emotional involvement in teaching my classes, in might be more accurate to say that action research chose me. This project evolved out of my daily practice in my composition classroom. Although I had not formalized or studied my methods before the project, I had been carrying out many of the activities, such as making *Portrait* the theme of the course, incorporating online discussion boards into class assignments, and making use of collaborative assignments and group work, long before I entered the Ed.D. program or considered writing a thesis. My research arose from my curiosity about my students' perceptions of the classroom experience and my desire to make that experience useful and positive for them.

As I began writing my thesis proposal, the course advisor suggested I consider the possibility of running a more traditional (we did not discuss what "traditional" might mean) section of the course at the same time I was running my intercultural section and make use of comparative data. While I was initially attracted to this idea, I decided that an experimental study wouldn't work because of the control issues involved in developing a reliable experiment. As discussed in Chapter Two, the population of my classroom is so diverse as to make any generalizations about outside influences virtually impossible. Even the academic routes by which the students enter the classroom are varied: some will test into the class through the placement exam; others will have taken one or more preparatory classes at Manchester Community College, such as English as a second language classes or one or more remedial classes as indicated by the students' scores on the placement

exam; others will transfer into the class from other colleges; and still others will have had the placement exam requirement waived by virtue of a high score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), a standardized test taken by many high school students.

The lack of controllability is multiplied many times over when one considers the variables at work outside of the classroom. For example, in one class during one semester, I had several younger students living at home who either did not work at all or worked only for disposable income; several single, self-supporting students responsible for all their living expenses (including one person living in a homeless shelter); and a few heads-of-household supporting dependents as well as themselves. The variation in economic pressures outside of the classroom could not be controlled, and certainly might have an impact on student perceptions of academic culture. A host of other variations—age, ethnicity, religion, language, sex, sexual orientation, to name a few—would also be uncontrollable and likely to have an impact on the perceptions I am interested in recording. Rather than trying to control the variables, then, I decided instead to embrace them through the use of qualitative instruments.

However, my selection of action research was not merely a rejection of experimental research. I realized that I had been teaching my class in the way that I do because I believe it is a good way to teach, and I had been reinforced in my belief by my years of successful practice. Suddenly adopting an entirely new method for the sake of research raised ethical issues for me—I doubted my ability to give the same quality of instruction through a methodology in which I had little faith, and I feared my students would feel the consequences. At the same time, I

thought my lack of enthusiasm for the traditional methodology would be communicated to the students and skew the data.

Realizing that I could not be objective about my own teaching practice, I looked for a research method that would not mask my intrusion in the data and found that action research encompasses my concerns as both a teacher and a researcher. Much has been written about the role of the teacher as researcher, and one of the strongest arguments made in defense of teachers performing research in their own classrooms is that teachers are uniquely qualified to observe interactions and to understand the subtexts and contexts of transactions among their students (Hammersley 1993, Kemmis 1993, Pring 2000). At the same time, I was aware of the need to minimize "the researcher effect," the impact of my own presence on the research subjects and ultimately on the data (Wellington: 2000, 42). Knowing that I could not take myself out of the equation, I sought to develop reflective and reflexive practice. I pursued reflectivity by piloting the questions and the online delivery method for one semester before beginning the research project in full. The pilot showed me the need to attach class requirements to the postings rather than making them entirely optional to the students (more discussion follows the description of the instruments).

I also found my research diary (and the comments my students sometimes added to it) a good source of both reflectivity and reflexivity. In my research diary I had the opportunity to "think out loud" about why I had taken a particular tack and to reflect on the outcomes as I perceived them. It also provided an opportunity for me to think about how I am "part and parcel" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 234) of the activity.

Obtaining Informed Consent from Participating Students

As required by Durham University Graduate School, each of the participants was provided with consent form that included a detailed description of the research project in layman's terms. The consent form stated that giving or refusing consent would have no impact upon the student's grade for the class. In addition, I included the description of the project, the students' role, and the fact that participation would not affect the students' grades in the course syllabus, and referred frequently to the fact that I was researching intercultural approaches during course discussions.

Although completing the prompts was a point-earning requirement of the course, the point value assigned to each prompt was very low, constituting only two percent of a student's final grade. In addition, I specified on the syllabus and on the website that introduced the prompts that students received points for having written a response and that the content of the responses did not affect the points awarded. Finally, I provided alternative assignments for any students who preferred not to complete the prompt; however, no student asked me to complete the alternative assignment instead of the prompt, although a few asked to complete the alternative assignment in addition to the prompt.

Overview of the Student Groups Involved in the Research

Each semester, Manchester Community College offers roughly 60 sections of English 101, and I normally teach one of these as part of my normal teaching load. All of the participants in my study were students enrolled in the sections of English 101 I taught in the period beginning with the Fall 2004 semester and ending with Fall 2006 semester. The students enrolled in my sections through normal college channels and were not especially recruited for the class.

The maximum section enrollment in English 101 is 24. During the Fall 2004 semester, I piloted the project and eight students of the 24 elected to take part. (The pilot project is described below). Subsequently, I collected data in one section of English 101 in the Spring 2005, Fall 2005, Spring 2006 and Fall 2006 semesters. In each case, 24 students began each semester. In all, then, data from 104 students is included in the study—eight students from the pilot, and 24 students in each of the four subsequent semesters. However, not every student elected to respond to every prompt; in addition, many students elected not to complete the exit survey. In addition to the students who simply chose not to respond to certain questions, there were some students (a total of eighteen out of the 104) who left the class before completing the semester and therefore may have responded to prompts released early in the semester but not to prompts released later in the semester. Because the number of students responding to each individual prompt fluctuates, in the following chapters that provide analysis of the data, I have indicated the total number of responses received to the particular prompt under discussion.

The Pilot Research Project

During the Fall 2004 semester, I piloted my five writing prompts (described below in the section titled "The Instruments"), in one course section of 24 students. In the pilot, I made the prompts available to the students on the same website where they completed class assignments. I did not assign a required point value for participation, but I did offer extra credit for participation. Under these circumstances, participation was quite low; the same eight students responded to the first and second prompts, no students responded to the third prompt, and three students (who were among the original eight responders) responded to the fourth and fifth prompts. In addition, these eight students were the most engaged students

in the class; they had excellent class attendance and were very active class participants. Therefore, in order to expand participation and gather data from less engaged students, I decided to make responding to the prompts a course requirement.

However, the pilot did allow me to gather some preliminary information about the ways in which my students interpreted the prompts, and I could see that the prompts were yielding the type of reflection I was hoping to elicit from my students. Therefore I did not make any adjustments to the prompts between the pilot stage and the actual research project.

The Instruments

The following table describes the instruments used and their intents:

Instrument	*Intent*	*Comments*
Research Diary	To record daily class activities and solicit student comment; to encourage reflective and reflexive practice.	Kept by the instructor via online discussion board. Students were rewarded with extra credit for responding to the research diary, but were not required to read or respond
Cultural Diary	To record students' perceptions of academic culture as experienced during the course	Kept by the students via an online discussion board. Discussion was initiated by five prompts posted by the instructor. Students were required to respond to the 5 prompts as part of the class requirements. The five prompts appear below this table.
Exit Survey	To gather data on students' reasons for taking Composition and comments on perceived value of Composition and Academic Culture as experienced at the conclusion of the course.	Paper and pencil survey completed by 47 students
Follow-up interviews	To record students' perceptions of academic culture and its impact on their sense of identity as experienced 6 months to one year after completing the course.	5 students were interviewed. Interviews began with a writing prompt that asked students to complete the sentence, "I am a/an…" with as many identifications as they wished. The list then generated the interview discussion.

The five prompts to which students responded for the Cultural Journal instrument are as follows:

1) In the first few pages of the novel, we learn about Stephen's primary socialization and then see how he experiences culture shock when he goes away to school. Please describe your own primary socialization and the "culture shocks" you've experienced in English 101.

2) In both Chapter One and Chapter Two (and in fact, in many places throughout the novel), we see Stephen struggling with the feeling that he's not like his peers--and quite often that has to do with feeling "outclassed"--feeling that his peers come from wealthier or happier circumstances than the ones he comes from. He seems to feel that their "luckier" circumstances make them more likely to succeed. Sometimes he deals with his feelings of being "outclassed" by withdrawing into his own thoughts; sometimes he becomes sullen or angry, and sometimes he overcompensates by trying to be "super kid."

As you think about yourself dealing with going to college and trying to succeed, do you ever worry about not being "like everyone else" and being "outclassed"? When you encounter people you feel may "outclass" you, what "luckier circumstances" do they have that you feel you don't have? How do you respond to situations in college when you feel you might not be "like everyone else"?

3) In Chapter Four, Stephen has a life-changing moment: he sees the girl on the beach, and suddenly he understands that he is on earth for a purpose (okay, so what exactly that purpose is remains a little vague, but he's got all of Chapter 5 to

figure that out!) We call this "moment of discovery" an "epiphany." The thing about epiphanies is you never see them coming; they materialize when you least expect it.

Have you ever experienced an epiphany? If so, I hope you'll describe it--I'm not so much concerned about what you discovered, though you certainly may include that if you like. But I would like to know about the conditions that brought about your epiphany. Which senses did it touch? What did you see, hear, smell, touch or taste? (For example, in Stephen's case, he would describe the "bird-like" girl on the beach and what he saw and experienced that day.)

4) Throughout the novel, Stephen reassesses his values and adjusts his perspectives several times. One thing that Stephen never doubts, however, is that reading and learning are valuable activities. Even when he decides to give up formal education, he never considers giving up reading and learning; in fact, in may ways he decides to leave university so he can read and learn more!

Please tell me about your attitudes toward reading and learning: what are they? Have they always been the same, or have they changed or developed as you've grown up? Who or what has influenced your attitudes about reading and learning? And finally, does English 101 "fit" with your existing attitudes, or have you had to make adjustments? What kinds?

5) I've talked a lot about "the culture of the academy" throughout this semester! Can you tell me now what you think "the culture of the academy" is? Do you think you have a place in that culture? Do you foresee problems for you in taking a place in the culture of the academy (if you want one) and keeping a place in any (or all!) of the cultures to which you already belong?

The five prompts were released throughout the semester to coincide with students' progress in the novel. The fifth question was asked at the very end of the

semester when students had completed the entire course. Students earned points toward their final grade by responding to the prompts, but, as explained above, I did not grade the prompts for content or quality. I simply awarded points for having responded to the prompt. Each response to a prompt was worth 20 points out of 1,000 possible points that could be earned during the course of the semester, so each prompt represented only two percent of the student's final grade. I decided to assign a point value to the prompts to encourage students to respond; in a pilot project in which responding to the prompts was optional and not part of the grading for the course, only a few of the very best students responded. However, I kept the point value of each prompt low so that students who chose not to respond to a particular prompt would not be penalized in their final grade. Also, I made it clear to students, through class discussion and statements in the course syllabus and on the consent form, that they could refuse me permission to use their writing in this thesis with no penalty to their grades. I repeatedly stressed the independence of the contents of the prompts from their grade for the semester in hope of encouraging frankness and openness in the students' responses.

Validity

Validity—the degree to which any given instrument measures what it is intended to measure—is a concern in all research (Wellington, 2000: 30) and my research is certainly no exception. One of my biggest concerns revolves around definitions—I cannot know that my subjects understood terms in the same way that I do. To address this concern, I have drawn on Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" among words, i.e., a word detached from an object will still have meaning because we understand the context in which the word is operative (Hand-

Boniakowski, 2002). To enhance the "family resemblance," I included context from *Portrait* in the writing prompt whenever possible.

I am also aware that the degree of frankness and openness in any particular response must be considered in light of the conditions that produced it. Students were writing for a grade and with the knowledge that their writing would be read by an audience that included me, the grader, and their classmates. To what degree are students presenting their perceptions authentically, and to what degree are they presenting them, either consciously or subconsciously, in ways they think will be pleasing to me or impressive to their classmates? This issue was brought home to me by the postings of a young woman I'll call Bethany. In her initial postings, Bethany described her troubled upbringing in an institution and a succession of foster homes. In a subsequent private conversation she revealed a situation in her current foster home that caused me to fear for her safety, and so I contacted Bethany's advisor to seek advice about how to proceed. The advisor then revealed to me that Bethany was not, in fact, living in a foster home, but with her biological parents in a very supportive home environment that included ongoing treatment for mental illness. Her responses to the first two prompts and what she had told me in confidence were completely fictional.

Bethany is an extreme example of a situation I face with the validity of all my data—do a student's words represent her authentic perceptions of experience, or are they representations of an image she wants to project to me and/or her classmates? In presenting my students' voices, I have tried to provide as much context as possible to avoid misrepresenting the students' intentions. At the same time, I have kept in mind that some students may have misrepresented themselves, but even so, I have tried to guard against reading too much into any student's remarks. As Freud

is famously supposed to have remarked, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. In all cases, I have striven to reveal exactly how I have arrived at my analysis and, in those instances where I have found more to interpret than "just a cigar," I have retained the student's original words and explained how those words have led me to my interpretation.

Because of these issues of authenticity versus presentation, and because this project deals especially with language and the role it plays in facilitating students' engagement in or alienation from academic culture, I was concerned with developing instruments that would preserve the students' own words to the greatest extent possible. The one quantitative instrument I did employ—the exit survey—asked students to rank statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This allowed me to develop raw scores for the statements, but as the statements themselves were my words, not the students', I found them a much less rich source of insight into student perceptions. However, I have included data yielded by the exit surveys to complement the qualitative research I present in the next chapters. I have included a compilation of the data generated by the exit survey in Appendix C.

Data Analysis and Selection of Data

The use of the online platform greatly facilitated my ability to gather student perceptions accurately and completely. It also allowed me to gather a great deal of data—much more than can be evaluated within the scope of a single thesis. In addition to the sheer quantity of data, there are the variables that are inherent in qualitative data that must be accounted for. For example, not every student responded to every question, so the number of responses is not uniform. Also, because students were free to interpret and respond to the questions in their own

ways, I found a great deal of "cross-information," so although I hoped for responses about culture shock in the responses to the first writing prompt, for example, many students also commented on culture shock in their responses to the fifth prompt. I also found student responses to my research diary an unexpectedly rich source of data. Originally, I did not envision including student responses to the research diary in the thesis, but as the project progressed, I realized that these responses contained very useful insights not only for my day-to-day classroom activities, but for the thesis, as well.

In order to deal with the quantity of data effectively for a thesis, I decided to limit my analysis to the data that most directly addresses my research question. Rather than treat each of the five cultural journal prompts separately, then, I categorized responses as to whether or not they dealt with perceptions of the culture of the academy. During this process of reading and sorting student responses, I realized that issues I hadn't anticipated addressing were commanding my attention, while ideas that I had believed would appear were at best only subtly suggested, and often non-existent. While my basic research question and hypothesis still felt right to me, it became apparent that I would need to approach the data in a more organic fashion. As a novice researcher, I had naively assumed that my data would bear out theory, but the more I worked with my data, the more I began to feel that the fair representation of the viewpoints described within it required theory to come after, not before.

The first issue I had to contend with was developing an understanding of my students' notion of "the culture of the academy." I had assumed that this phrase would have approximately the same parameters for them as it does for me, that is, the set of behaviors, values and expectations held by those who interact within and

among the many institutions of higher education. Not only did my students ascribe a much broader scope of interpretation for the term "academic culture," not all students even agreed with me that it exists. I had envisioned creating a generalized conception of the term from the students' perception, but I gave up that notion as my familiarity with the data grew. Instead of "answers" emerging from the data, I saw questions. Three questions in particular emerged as focal points for the data:

Do my students perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture?

Do students who perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture experience culture shock? If so, does an intercultural classroom experience help them to overcome the shock?

What does an intercultural experience in a composition classroom feel like to the student who experiences it?

These three questions became my themes as I to returned to the data and began to categorize student responses according to the themes they addressed. Although I had never asked the students these three questions directly, I found a wealth of data surrounding them that led me back to the first part of my research question: **Can an intercultural approach to composition provide community college students with the cultural awareness and skills to succeed in the culture of the academy (higher education)**? The data addressing the first theme (*Do my students perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture?*) provided insights into student perceptions and definitions of the target culture. The second theme (*Do students who perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture experience culture shock? If so, does an intercultural classroom experience help*

them to overcome the shock?) led me to data which revealed the ways in which students developed cultural awareness and cultural skills. The third theme also yielded data about the development of cultural awareness and skills, as well as providing insights into students attitudes toward their likelihood of success in the target culture.

However, there was a fourth question that intrigued me, and for which I particularly sought answers:

Do students who perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture and who have intercultural classroom experience perceive the culture of the academy as superior to other cultures?

Unlike the first three questions, which seemed to me to grow out of the data itself, the fourth question encapsulated an issue I had carried forward from my reading and is reflected in the last part of my research question: **without devaluing the home cultures from which the students come to the college?** Since my preliminary study of the data didn't yield much information on feelings of cultural superiority, I had to analyze the data even more closely than I had for the issues that emerged out of the content of the students' responses. While content remained my primary interest as I examined issues of cultural superiority, I was more likely to include issues of vocabulary, diction and syntax in the analysis of data surrounding this question than I was in the analysis of data relating to the first three questions.

In presenting student responses for analysis in this thesis, I have, as much as possible, provided the entire response posted by the student so that the context of student statements is clearly visible. However, occasionally it has seemed wise to

take excerpts from long or digressive responses. On these occasions I have indicated that only a portion of the response is presented. Where I have not indicated that the response is an excerpt, it can be assumed that the text presented is the student's entire response to the prompt. In addition, all of the student responses contained in the text of the thesis are referenced to the appendices so that readers the context of all replies can be traced if so desired. After each response presented in the text, the response number and the page number of the appendix on which the full response can be found is listed in parenthesis. For example, (#136/p. 270) refers the reader to response number 136, which will be found on page 270.

I have elected to reproduce student responses exactly as written, without corrections to grammar, spelling or syntax, and without using (sic) to indicate that the errors are original to the text. To correct the originals would damage the credibility of the material, especially for those responses in which language usage is of interest, and to use the (sic) indication would be distracting and would not add anything to the material except, perhaps, a subtle insinuation that my students' choices in informal communication are "wrong," an impression I do not wish to create.

For the sake of efficiency, I eliminated from analysis responses that fell outside of the four questions listed above, including all the responses to the third writing prompt, which asked students to comment on epiphanies they have experienced, as that prompt did not generate much discussion of intercultural experience. However, I purposely sought out and included responses that were contrary to a general trend or that posed contradictions to my hypothesis and included them in the analysis of the data. I have not deliberately omitted any response because it might be problematic to my research question, hypothesis or

methodology. The appendices present all of the student responses to the five prompts and the research diaries, including those that could not be included for discussion within the text of this thesis.

Even after eliminating the less relevant responses from analysis, I was still presented with more data than could be thoughtfully examined within the limitations of a thesis. So once again I returned to the data, this time to make selections of specific responses to be included in the thesis. I selected specific responses with two purposes in mind. First, I wanted to create a picture of the intercultural experience in the composition classroom, so I looked for patterns that emerged that addressed my four key themes. In addition, I was also interested in presenting individual students' stories to show the interplay of intercultural experience and identity awareness that surrounds the four themes.

Reliability

It is obvious that these instruments do not yield results that could be replicated if applied to other subjects or used by other researchers; I could not replicate the results even if I applied the same instruments to the same students. This is a condition inherent in the nature of action research; as LeCompte and Preissle note, reliability "poses and impossible task for any research studying naturalistic behavior or unique phenomena" (1984: 332). However, I still feel that there is much of interest in my study and, despite the specific nature of the data, that the results are generalizable to other composition students, particularly in community colleges. The following observation about the generalization of the results of ethnographic studies can be applied to action research as well:

> The members of the groups under examination share with other human beings certain typical emotions and feelings, aspirations and hopes, needs and wants. In pointing to uniqueness we must not forget what is typical of people in that kind of situation. That is why those who recognize the uniqueness of an ethnographic study do none the less find it 'illuminating'. They recognize what is in common with *similar* situations. And it is surely an aim of research to identify the relevant similarities (Pring, 2000: 109)

While I am also interested in the unique, I have emphasized the "relevant similarities" in my data throughout this thesis. The next four chapters analyze student responses that offer insights into the four themes. I have devoted Chapter Six to an exploration of the first question, Chapter Seven to the second question, Chapter Eight to the third question and Chapter Nine to the fourth question. In each of these chapters, the sources of the responses being analyzed (the specific prompt in the cultural diary, a response to the research diary, interview, etc.) are identified, but they are not necessarily considered separately from each other, especially in cases where an individual student's responses show a change in perception over time. The final chapter, in addition to suggesting some concluding thoughts, brings the four themes back into relation with the research question.

Chapter 6:

The Obstacles to Perceiving the Culture of the Academy as a Distinct Culture and their Impacts in the Composition Classroom

Introduction

As I admitted in the previous chapter, I began this research project with a few preconceptions drawn from my reading in composition theory. Primary among these was a belief that many students experienced academic culture as an unwelcoming environment and furthermore, that their interactions with academic culture caused many students to perceive themselves as the Other.

However, as I studied the responses my students supplied to the five prompts and also to my research diary, I realized that only a few of my students immediately recognized academic culture as a distinct culture in their initial encounters. This led me to my **first key question: Do my students perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture?** This was a very important issue; in essence the answer would determine whether or not it was even possible to ask the research question. If students did not perceive multiple cultures, how could they become intercultural?

While I was wrong in my expectations that students would immediately experience academic culture as a strange and even hostile environment, the data revealed (as will be discussed in detail later in this chapter) that most students experienced what might be called a "dawning recognition" that academic culture was different—though not necessarily less welcoming or more peculiar—from other cultures. However, some students remained insensitive to the subtleties that distinguish academic culture from other cultures even after an entire semester of exposure. This lack of recognition was more common among young students who

had recently graduated from high school. They recognized many of the trappings of academic culture from their high school and elementary school training, and so failed to see anything new in academic culture. As one young student wrote at the end of the semester:

> *To Me "The Culture of the academy" that u talked about had to do with MCC or our roles as students. Since 1st grade we have been tought how to act in school. Low voices, walking in lines, basically just behavior. That's what school has always done. It has rules and guidlines to follow. You should be on time, do your work and show respect to your fellow students as well as the teachers. We all know how to act in the culture, we have learned the rules at a young age and some people cant be apart of it. Because college is a choice you don't see as many cultural norms being broken as you would of in high school. Most of the students who couldn't become apart of our culture decided to skip college and go strait into the work force.* (#270/p.309)

The student makes good points. As Hofstede points out, classroom dynamics between teacher and student are "an archetypal human phenomenon [...] deeply rooted in the culture of a society" (cited in Goodman, 1994: 129), so it's hardly surprising that what we might call the outward appearances of academic culture are familiar to students who have been in American schools all their lives.

However, this student seems to assume that "sitting still and being quiet" will be valued by members of the academic culture. To a certain extent, he is correct, of course, but he implies that disruption of any type is frowned upon, that

academics expect students to "walk in lines." He also implies that failure to conform has consequences: people who break "cultural norms," as he terms it, go directly to work without a degree. A proponent of Bourdieu's social reproduction theory could hardly have put it more concisely!

Other students see differences between academic and high school environments, but do not think of them in cultural terms. A gifted high school student who was enrolled in my composition course while simultaneously completing her high school requirements wrote at the beginning of the semester:

> *The thing that confuses me when I think about the "culture of the academy is that when I think about "culture," I think about it in a social sense. However, I believe what you mean is academic, the way reports are written and work is completed, and I have trouble thinking of that as "culture." To me, that stuff is just the way classes are run, and what teachers want.* (excerpted from longer text) (#271/p.309)

Although this student focuses more on assignments than on deportment, she still sees the classroom as a place where teachers get "what teachers want," and the student's role is to comply with the teacher's wishes—a situation, she implies, that is "just the way it is" and not reflective of culture.

Both of these young students seem insensitive to a subtle shift in the power distance and individualism-collectivism dimension identified by Hofstede as hallmarks of national culture (Goodman 1994: 137). Goodman comments that the U.S. national culture ranks high in individualism and low in power distance, meaning that individual attainments are more highly valued than group attainments,

and that teachers and students interact in a give-and-take exchange with less emphasis on the "wisdom" of the teacher. (Goodman 1994: 138-139). While these aspects of national culture are present in all levels of American education, they are perhaps strongest at the university level, when "what teachers want" becomes more and more focused on students' abilities to think, learn and act independently. Nonetheless, the cultural dimensions themselves have not changed: students are still within the familiar low power distance/high individualism model that has educated them up until this point.

With the basic framework and outward behaviors of academic culture so closely matching their other educational experiences, it is not surprising that some students do not see a distinction between cultures. The commonality leads some students—and I would venture many professors as well—to assume that their underlying values transfer to the academic situation. In other words, because there are shared language and customs, there is an assumption of shared values as well. In this chapter, I will discuss student perceptions of classroom language and power dynamics and how they contribute to student perceptions of academic culture. The chapter concludes with an examination of the how the underlying values of students often differ from those supported by academic culture, and the role intercultural pedagogy can play in bringing these values into a relationship, rather than conflict.

Language and Power Dynamics in the Composition Classroom

For ease of discussion, I am going to consider my students as belonging to one of two groups: students who have received all or most of their education previous to entering community college in the American educational system, and students who have received all or most of their previous education in another

nation. Most of the latter group will speak English as a second language, although a significant proportion of the first group may also be ESL students.

Students who have no experience with American educational culture before college often initially experience academic difficulties that may be compounded by lack of familiarity with the underlying low power distance/high individuality dynamic of the American classroom (depending, of course, on the individual student's country of origin.) Ironically, though, these students often do well as long as they have had sufficient language training in English as part of their primary education and have experience in reading complex texts and writing about them in their native languages. Although these students may sometimes experience culture shock in terms of classroom interactions, they have the advantage of having the right expectations about the difficulty of the tasks. They approach texts expecting to have to look up words, to struggle to understand context, to have to read passages over and over again in order to grasp first a literal meaning and, eventually, to begin to interpret. Because they are expecting to face these obstacles, they are often more prepared to mount them and probably suffer less frustration than their American counterparts who are used to "getting" a text easily and who do not have experience with *consciously* making meaning from a text, at least not since their "See Spot run" days of making meaning.

However, some international students, while doing well with making meaning, are hesitant to express their interpretations, particularly if they hail from nations with high power distance cultures, where expressing a dissenting opinion is often seen as disrespectful to the teacher. They may need extra encouragement in order to feel that they have the right and the responsibility to interpret a text, and the more original their interpretation—a source of pride for an American student—the

more reluctant the international student may feel. However, some students, like the student quoted below, adjust quickly to American expectations. About midpoint in the semester one student wrote:

> *I through out my high school and in two years of college in Pakistan was taught to follow the rules and regulations. We were not allowed to give our own feelings about the book it was very conservative way of writing I would say. But over here in American schooling system I am free to give my ideas and I am free to think. Specially in this class it was quite a nice experience for me because I have never been that free while writing about a certain book or any character of that book.* (#42/246)

Not all students new to the American classroom experience the responsibility to interpret a text as "nice"; in fact, international students often experience the "freedom" of American classrooms as stress. Reflecting on his semester-long experience, one student wrote:

> *I had lots of assignments and final during end of semester. I don't know how I take all of this finals and assignments. Thus, I copied the idea for my assignments. The result is terrible. My teacher knows my wrong act and warns me. I disappoint myself. Even if I don't have confidence to do my assignments, I should work my self! Even if I finish my paper to use other's idea, that doesn't belong to me and make me feel be looser. After I realize my dishonesty act, I do assignments by myself. I realize that working myself and doing honesty is more valuable.*

> *I try to survive from the culture of academy. This semester give me valuable things to work for studying. I'll keep what I've learn in my mind.* (excerpted from longer text) (#262/p.307)

Despite the shock of being in a different power distance relationship, both of the students quoted above earned higher than average grades for the semester. They were able to identify what was "foreign" to them—the English language and American academic culture—and develop successful coping strategies. But what about students in the first group, who have had extensive experience with American classroom norms? Most of my students have been taught Standard American English, and most can speak and write it with a satisfactory degree of competency when they are called upon to do so. (Please note: the excerpts of student writing quoted here do not represent their formal writing, such as the writing they do for graded assignments. Some of their formal writing will be presented and discussed in Chapter Nine.) However, it is clear that some of my students don't use Standard American English as their "first" language, despite years of exposure to it.

Lisa Delpit posits that this is because some students—particularly African-Americans—don't feel welcome to and a part of the culture that uses Standard American English and therefore never learn the ability to "code switch" because they do not identify with that culture or wish to become a part of it (Delpit 2002: 39). She charges teachers with the responsibility of making sure their students can identify Standard American English with "all that is self-affirming and esteem-building, inviting and fun" (ibid). Because the students I see have elected to attend college, the vast majority have learned to code switch in their earlier schooling, and

the few who have not are motivated to learn how now. And yet, the sense of English as the "other" may linger for some students. For example, when asked if he had experienced culture shock in English 101 at the beginning of the semester, a young African-American male responded:

> *In this class I haven't really gone through a huge "culture shock" due to the fact that to me English is English and either way I'm not going to really enjoy it.* (excerpted from longer text) (#44/p.246)

When asked about his attitudes toward reading and writing at the end of the semester, the same student wrote:

> *My attitudes toward reading and learning are different from each other. When it comes to reading, I only read when I have to or when its something that really interests me, other then that I don't read. The reason is because I never really liked reading because I found it boring and I never enjoyed it but when it comes to school, ill do it if I have to. Learning on the other hand I don't mind, I kind of enjoy learning because its something that I want to do to learn what I want to know so that I may get a good job and become successful…I still do hate reading but when learning English has always been my worst subject so making adjustments probably wont happen and I know that I haven't adjusted at all. My attitudes toward reading and learning in general and in English will always stay the same.* (#234/p.298)

Although this student is clearly not engaged by academic culture, he is still motivated by his desire to "get a good job and become successful," even though he does not enjoy the process at all. It is a means to an end for him, and in order to reach that end, he is willing to do what has to be done, including code switch. Even this informal response is written in fairly Standard American English, rather than Black English; perhaps his community does not normally use Black English, or perhaps he is aware that not all the members of his audience are fluent in Black English, or perhaps he uses standard English just because he has internalized the idea that Black English is not "right" for school, even in informal situations. In any event, it seems safe to assume that he does not identify Standard American English with Delpit's concept of "all that is self-affirming and esteem-building, inviting and fun," but he is willing to put up with the annoyances of academic culture in order to achieve a higher socio-economic status.

Even though virtually all of my composition students know how to code switch or are willing to learn how, familiarity with Standard American English is very often not enough to make them successful in academic culture, and in fact may contribute to delaying their realization that academic culture is different from the educational culture they've previously encountered. As one student wrote at the beginning of the semester:

> *The way you want us to read and write has been a real shock to me. In high school, when we read a story all we had to write was if it was good or not and reasons to support our answer. Basically, the English classes I had before were very easy...The way you want us to read and write for this class can sometimes be confusing. At times it can be frustrating but then again it*

> *could be fun. I never had a teacher that wanted me to look at the text the way you do. I learned you could miss a lot of things if you don't really look at the text and I never realized this till I got to your class. It's so interesting to me how the words in this book could have so much meaning to it. Another thing that I found out is when I write something and then I have to find the "why is it important" answer can be very difficult...* (excerpted from longer text) (#10/p.238)

Many students echoed similar sentiments: that previous English classes were "easy," while this class was "hard," and most students expressed at least some frustration with the difficulty of reading Joyce. Of the 56 students who wrote responses to the prompt asking about culture shock, 39 (69.6%) expressed some degree of shock about the type of reading and writing they were asked to do. Interestingly, of the 17 students who responded that they had experienced no culture shock in the course, four withdrew from the course before the end of the semester, while none of the "shocked" students withdrew. This suggests that a mild degree of culture shock helps the student to identify academic culture and develop coping mechanisms, whereas students who do not experience any culture shock do not develop coping strategies and become increasingly out-of-sync. Of course, some students did not experience culture shock because they had already experienced academic culture before entering my composition classroom, as reported by seven students. These seven students also earned higher-than-average grades, suggesting that they carried over and perhaps refined coping strategies that they had developed in previous exposures to academic culture. (Coping mechanisms will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.)

In the end, then, it seems that before entering my class, many students assume that composition class simply requires the ability to use Standard American English with accuracy. The students who realize this assumption is incorrect and suffer a mild culture shock, that is, "a form of anxiety that results from the loss of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Adler 1987: 24) can go on to be successful through the development of coping strategies. However, if students never realize their underlying assumption is incorrect, they also fail to develop appropriate coping mechanisms.

The realization may not come as the form of a one-time shock, but may appear to the student gradually over time, as this student reported around mid-semester:

> *At first when I started this class I did not undergo a "culture shock" but as time progressed, as well as the work, then the shock set in. The way I was to write was to change and was now to be more informative then ever before. When writing a response to a question not only am I supposed to react to the question but when answering the question I need to have valid information as well as reasons and examples why I thought of that answer and explain how it connects with two different individuals. This is a big shock considering in the past I would just answer a question with haste and get it over with. Versus now I have to actually think about what I want to say before I say it.* (#70/p.253)

This student has uncovered one of the underlying differences between his previous school culture and academic culture: having the right form—while still

somewhat important—is not enough. Now critical thinking—and the ability to express it in writing—is paramount. The student's realization supports the notion that while the experience of culture shock is stressful, it can foster "self-development and growth" (McLaren 1998: 11). Also, the experience has caused the student to recognize and assess the assumptions he brought with him to class. As Adler points out, "The greatest *shock* in culture shock may be not in the encounter with a foreign culture, but in the confrontation of one's own culture and the ways in which the individual is culture-bound" (1987: 34).

The Hidden Disparity Between Academic Culture and Students' Cultures

With so many similarities between academic culture and the culture of American high schools, students and faculty alike are likely to think that there really are no significant differences, and really all that is required is for students to work a little harder than they may be accustomed to from their high school experiences. But merely working harder does not necessarily result in success if the student does not comprehend that there is a fundamental difference in the tasks she or he has been asked to complete, and that now critical thinking, rather than mastery of form, is the essential skill. Part of this fundamental difference can be described as simply a difference in academic standards. American high schools are under a great deal of pressure from the US Department of Education, under the aegis of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, to make sure all students achieve predetermined levels of competency at certain set points in their education. As part of their graduation requirements, high school students must demonstrate that they can write a five-paragraph essay that follows a prescribed rhetorical format. The essays are not assessed for content as long as the essay addresses the prompt in some way,

even if only to relate the prompt to the student's own experience. The essential ingredient for passing the assessment is adherence to the format: an introductory paragraph that states the main idea of the essay and three supporting points; three body paragraphs, each of which begins with a transition and treats one of the three supporting points exclusively; and a concluding paragraph that restates the main idea and the three major supporting points. Interestingly, basic writing mechanics, such as spelling, syntax and grammar, are not part of the assessment. If an insufficient number of students are unable to produce the essay in the prescribed format in the time allotted, the school is put on a warning list and if the school fails to improve test scores, further actions, including closing the school, may follow.

As a result of NCLB, schools and classroom teachers are under significant pressure to make sure students are well versed in the five paragraph essay and can produce one that fits the format under time constraints. Students realize the importance of the essay, as their graduation from high school depends on their successful completion of this task. The confusion arises over the purpose of the test: students are being prepared to take the test, but they believe they are *also* being prepared for college. Somehow in their preparation for the final assessment essay, they have internalized the idea that the five paragraph essay is "school writing," and therefore the appropriate—and preferred—mode for college writing. As one student noted at the end of her first semester of college:

> *...everyone that I knew [in high school] was able to piece together a five paragraph essay within an hour. That was something they drilled into us there. No matter how hard I tried I could barely complete a whole paragraph in the time that was given. The plus side to my lack of learning and growing in*

high school was there was plenty of room for improvement. It also made it easier to learn the style of writing required in college. There wasn't much adjusting to be done, just learning. It was a bit of a shock to learn that knowing how to write a five paragraph essay in an hour is rather unnecessary. Especially when they made it seem so important. (excerpted from longer text) (#25/p.242)

It strikes me as significant that the student says her peers could "piece together," rather than "write," the required essay, suggesting an idea expressed by several other students: their high school writing didn't require them to *think critically*. The student also believes that her inability to learn the five paragraph essay made it easier for her to tackle college writing; in effect, she didn't have to go through a secondary socialization process in order to accommodate the new behaviors preferred in her new culture.

Some students, like this one discussing the culture shock he experienced at the beginning of the semester, even suggest that the writing demanded of them in the past is almost a betrayal of the teacher's duty to prepare students for college:

...I will need to make some adjustments and attempt to refine my writing style so that my teacher will see my efforts and recognize that in fact I've learned something through the lectures about Academic Writing in this class. This is definitely seen as a shock to me because it makes me wonder why didn't my old English teachers show me this style of writing so that I could be more prepared for it now. Is it because I was too underdeveloped intellectually to do it properly or to understand? (excerpted from longer text) (#54/p.248)

This matter seems at first to be simply a matter of academic misalignment, but it reveals a deeper disparity between academic and high school culture: the *purpose* of writing in the first place. High schools began emphasizing the five paragraph essay as a response to NCLB, and NCLB was enacted due to the perception that Corporate America is unhappy with the "product" produced by American schools and wants new hires who have mastered basic skills (cited in Giroux, 2002: 2). While "problem solving" is often included in the list of basic skills, the type of critical thinking developed through academic writing is not necessarily called for in corporate culture. Henry Giroux, a staunch critic of corporate culture and rampant consumerism, charges that "curricula modeled after corporate culture have been enormously successful in preparing students for low skilled service work in a society that has little to offer in the way of meaningful employment for the vast majority of its graduates" (Giroux: 2002: 5).

Yet most of my students are very specific about their reason for taking composition class. Over and over again, they write in their responses: *"to get a good job," "to have a successful life," "to be successful in business."* Despite the beliefs of many postmodernist composition specialists that students won't understand texts and assignments that aren't relevant to their own experience (see Chapter Two), my students tend to see reading *Portrait* and writing about it as relevant to their lives in a very fundamental, practical way: they are learning skills that they believe will improve their employability and therefore their economic lot in life. The truth is many of them already have the writing skills they need to perform the types of writing tasks required in the corporate world, such as writing business letters, memos and business reports. While they probably have not

practiced these particular formats, the lessons of the five paragraph essay carry over well: state your point at the beginning, explain how you will support your point, support your point, restate your point. Therefore, as a result of their high school training, many students may have already achieved the level of competence they seek in terms of writing ability, although they probably do not realize it because they believe, like most of the American public, that all "good" jobs require college degrees. They are right to believe this, because while a degree may not be required to *do* the job, it usually is required to *get* the job.

It is ironic that the same corporate culture that makes getting a college degree *de rigueur* for those seeking to enter it does not necessarily value what students will gain from higher education, at least beyond specific skill sets in certain disciplines such as accounting or computer systems. In a sense, by requiring its new hires have college degrees, corporate culture by default requires that students take composition class, the keystone of American higher education (see Chapter One), even though academic writing is fundamentally different from the five paragraph essay and most varieties of corporate writing. While academic writing, like the five paragraph essay, is organized into parts, has a main idea or purpose, and provides support for the main idea, it is not simply a process for communicating information. True academic writing engages its author in *learning* as she writes. The academic writer not only communicates information, but discovers ideas about the information and develops theories, through the exploration of the information, that support those ideas. These are not skills that one needs to call upon in order to write a memo or brief report.

Composition professors tend to view the purpose of composition as something more noble than mere work preparedness. Even those of us who shy away from the

perception of composition as redemption from the contamination of capitalism and classism (see Chapter Two), still believe that composition enriches students' lives—with language, with literature, with greater self-knowledge and world knowledge—in ways that can't be measured simply by the size of their future salaries. We want our students to read and to write because we believe it will make them knowledgeable citizens, and we have an optimistic sense that better citizens will lead to a better world in the long run. In short, academic culture, particularly in the liberal arts and within the ranks of the composition profession, sees itself as "part of a broader battle over the defense of the public good" (Giroux, 2002: 4). This attitude is confirmed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) 2002 National Panel Report "Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College" which reports that most faculty see the college experience as an opportunity for students to "engage intellectually" and develop "rational and reflective minds," while most students see college as "the ticket to a good job" (AAC&U, 2002: 8).

In a nutshell, then: my students want to take composition because they believe it will provide them with the skills to get desirable jobs. But the skills they learn in composition class aren't directly transferable to the corporate world, so why should students, who want access to a better life via a white-collar job, value academic writing? The fact that they do value academic writing is only due to corporate culture's insistence on a college degree, which fortunately ensures my continued employment even as it makes ambiguous the value of my work.

On the other hand, academic culture is deeply suspicious of corporate culture and styles itself as the only hope of avoiding "a democracy of goods, consumer life styles, shopping malls and the increasing expansion of the cultural and political

power of corporations throughout the world" (Giroux, 2002: 2). This clash of values is not often apparent in the day-to-day activities of the composition classroom, but it is the reason why some students fail to "get" academic culture, and why so many academics feel offended and frustrated by their students. At the same time, composition instructors who overtly politicize their classrooms risk alienating their students by offending their values and belittling their ambitions (see Chapter Two). Community college students come to class asking to be saved from a life in the socioeconomic margins of American society. If class becomes about saving them from themselves and their own desires, they may rightfully bristle, especially since the professor proposing to do the saving appears to be a representative of the socioeconomic class they hope to enter—a well-educated person with a good job!

Interculturalism as a Means of Bringing Academic Culture into Relation with Students' Cultures

The value clash I've described may seem to present the proverbial "no-win" situation: failing to recognize and address the clash merely perpetuates misunderstanding, but proselytizing for a new world order that transcends or even overthrows corporate culture patronizes the very populations it would lift up. Clearly what is called for is the establishment of a neutral ground where all cultural values are allowed to exist, where they are made explicit, and where each individual is encouraged to examine not only the cultural values of the other, but also his or her own—the creation of a "third space" or "thirdness" as it is often called. Kramsch says that thirdness, "highlights difference, hybridity, transience, migration, the dangerous unreliability of language but the equal dangers of silence" (Kramsch, 1988: 48). With these characteristics, thirdness is not an easy state to

create or occupy, but it is only by stepping out of oneself and into the third space that one can begin to see oneself in relation to others.

Judith Baker advocates a method she calls Trilingualism, in which she separates the English that her high school students use into three distinct dialects: home English, formal English and professional English. She then has the students who speak the same dialect of home English work together to state the rules for the language, such as using participles in place of past tense verbs. She finds that students who learn the mechanics of their home language easily transfer that knowledge to Standard English, and that studying their home English as a language with rules helps them to feel legitimatized. They see that their home English is not wrong; it is just different. At the same time, they realize that speaking Standard English needn't be a cultural barrier but just another skill that they can learn (Baker, 2002: 51-53). Although Baker does not present her methodology in intercultural terms, she is clearly engaging her students in an intercultural activity that "encourages us to think of communication as the relational making of signs, the responsive construction of self, and the interdependence of opposites" (Kramsch, 1999: 48). In order to be effective in her classroom, Baker has to step out of her notion of "correctness" in English, and she warns those who would try her method, "one cannot *pretend* to respect students' home language" (Baker, 2002: 56). Like her students, she must believe that home English is not wrong; it is just different. Because she has achieved this stance, she demonstrates, as Geertz says, "the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham" (cited in Kramsch, 1999: 58). Like Baker in her high school classroom, community college professors cannot *pretend* to respect their students' values and

ambitions. We must reach for the same "largeness of mind" that we ask of and wish for our students.

I am still left with the question of my purpose. After all, I am not really engaged in helping students get those "good jobs" they so avidly seek, and continually striving to adapt the intercultural stance, with all the trial and error it entails, really can be wearying. Sometimes I'm tempted to take a less stressful tack. Who would know or really care if I made my class less demanding for myself and for my students? My students probably would be satisfied with almost any type of course content, particularly if it required less time and effort from them, and I would continue to collect my corporate culture-ensured pay check as long as students need degrees and degrees continue to require English 101.

But when I start to become too jaded, I recall the explanation of my work given to me by one of my students. He approached me after class one day and, with a sly grin, said, "I know what you're doing. You're teaching us to ask 'How do I know,' and 'Why is this important' about *everything*," he said.

"That's right," I said. "*That's* what I'm doing."

Chapter Summary

Do my students perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture? Before beginning this project, I hadn't anticipated the need to examine this question, assuming that my students would perceive the same cultural gap that I perceive. However, as I approached my research question, I realized that I first needed to understand if it was even possible to ask the question. I needed to know not only *how* my students perceived the target culture, but *if* they perceived it, before I could consider whether an intercultural approach could help them to function within it.

I now think that most of my students have been socialized in a high school setting that approximates a college environment in so many superficial ways that they do not immediately perceive a new culture. However, as they have more interactions with academic culture and encounter situations in which their previous cultural training no longer works, most students begin to distinguish academic culture as a distinct culture. In my study, those who made this distinction usually went on to develop coping mechanisms that helped them to succeed. The few students who never perceived a difference between cultures were more likely to struggle and even withdraw from the course. Students most often began to perceive academic culture as different from high school culture through the reading and writing assignments, which made clear to them that their previous cultural expectations and strategies for meeting those expectations were no longer operative.

The disjuncture between high school and academic cultures brings up issues of the purpose of writing in contemporary American culture and its role—both real and perceived—in securing economic stability for students seeking to enter the ranks of the middle or upper middle class. Underlying the disjunction is the

differing value sets of academic culture and corporate culture. Intercultural approaches can be used to make these value sets explicit and to allow students and professors to decenter from their own cultural positions and enter the third space, where they can begin to see themselves in relation to others.

Chapter 7:

Coping with Culture Shock and Cultural Discomfort in the Composition Classroom

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, not all my students perceive the experiences in my classroom as a new cultural experience, a few because they have had experience with academic culture prior to taking my class, and some because they fail to recognize academic culture as a distinct culture. However, when specifically asked about culture shock in the first writing prompt, nearly seventy percent of the respondents said that they had experienced some degree of shock in my classroom during the first two weeks of the semester. In most cases this shock was fairly mild, but some students reported experiencing a fair amount of anxiety and self-doubt. With so many experiencing culture shock, I expected a majority of the students to also report feeling dissonance or "otherness" in their ongoing interactions with the culture of the academy. Yet, about three weeks after responding to the initial prompt, when asked whether they felt different from others at MCC, 41 of the 68 respondents (60 percent) said they felt comfortable in the environment, especially in terms of their social interactions with other students. The seeming discrepancy between student responses to the first and second prompts led me to my **second key question: Do students who perceive the culture of the academy as a distinct culture experience culture shock? If so, does an intercultural classroom experience help them to overcome the shock?**

In asking students to address the first prompt, I hoped to discover what academic elements, if any, caused my students to experience culture shock. The intention of the second prompt was to discover what issues, other than the

academic, might contribute to students' feelings of dissonance with academic culture. The second prompt began by referencing the experiences of Stephen Dedalus and then asked:

As you think about yourself dealing with going to college and trying to succeed, do you ever worry about not being "like everyone else" and being "outclassed"? When you encounter people you feel may "outclass" you, what "luckier circumstances" do they have that you feel you don't have? How do you respond to situations in college when you feel you might not be "like everyone else"?

At the time I was designing the prompts, I was reading a great deal of current composition theory and, while I was not expecting my students to portray themselves as victims of the hegemony, I did expect some students to express a sense of social injustice, particularly in terms of economic opportunity. To my surprise, I was hard put to find responses that addressed the prompt in the way I had imagined. Even the forty percent of respondents who did report feeling different declined to mention the social justice issues I had expected, and, in fact hoped for, at least in terms of building the case for this thesis.

However, the unanticipated direction of the responses opened new areas of inquiry for me and helped to bring into better focus the boundaries my students perceived between academic culture and non-academic culture. This chapter, then, discusses issues of cultural discomfort for students interacting with academic culture for the first time and posits some explanations for why issues I expected to trouble students—such as socio-economic class, race and religion—did not figure as largely as anticipated. It concludes with a discussion of the ways in which

students developed and used intercultural skills to overcome feelings of shock or cultural inadequacy and function successfully in academic culture.

"I don't worry about not being like everyone else or being outclassed at all"

For sixty percent of the respondents, the quote above is a typical expression of their reaction to the prompt. Most students reported feeling quite comfortable and content with their circumstances, and two themes appeared repeatedly: students felt much less peer pressure and need to conform in college than they had felt in high school; and the diversity of the college made for a non-threatening and interesting environment. Recent high school graduates were especially likely to express these themes:

> *Here in college, no one cares about who you are. Your background, personal income, how intelligent you are seems to disappear among the people. Here I do not have to worry what other people think of me, hence I don't really care about anyone else's background, like I did when I was in high school. I also have a reduction in stress while at college now, because everyone is easy going and you do not have to compete with anyone else. What is great about college is you will not be criticized for anything, whether it is what you wear or how smart you are. Other than this, I do not see a problem with everyone else. You get to express you beliefs and opinions here, which is great. If you do not like what someone is doing, you can simply walk away. I seem to get along pretty well with everyone here. Students that went to my high school which back then I really was not that close with or did not get along with then get along pretty well. I do not want to be best friends with everyone, but as*

long as we get along, that is what matters the most. (excerpted from longer text) (#140/p.271)

Many students expressed relief that they no longer felt subjected to the judgment of their peers, as they had in high school. Some attributed this to their own maturity, commenting that they had outgrown the need for others' approval. Others, like the student quoted above, felt that the actual social dynamics had changed and they now found themselves in a situation where "no one cares" (a frequently used expression). More discussion of these responses reflecting a sense of cultural comfort can be found in the next chapter, which focuses on student perceptions of the intercultural experience. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to discussion of the issues students raised as reasons for feeling "different."

Overview of Student Issues

A total of 27 students (out of 68) admitted to feelings of being different or outclassed. These 27 responses fell into five distinct categories: students who had financial worries (4 responses); ESL students who worried about their command of English (4 responses); students who felt awkward for reasons they attributed to their personal make-up, such as being naturally shy or self-conscious (6 responses); non-traditional students who felt too old for college (6 responses); and finally, students who worried they simply lacked the intelligence and/or previous education to succeed in college (7 responses). While no one category can be pointed to as a significant cause of stress or alienation, the responses contained within the categories are interesting for what they reveal about the multitude of issues facing

community college students. I have arranged the following discussion of stress factors in ascending order of frequency.

The First Stress Factor: Monetary Stress and Class Awareness

Four students—14.8 percent of the 27 respondents who identified themselves as "different," and five percent of all respondents—specifically identified financial stress as the reason that they felt different from their peers. Like many of their more culturally-comfortable classmates, all four of the students who reported that they felt outclassed because of money worries concluded that the financial stress they felt now might, in the end, be an advantage, as this self-supporting student expressed:

> *I can definitely understand how Stephen feels becuase I often feel like I am different and others are so much luckier then me. I live on my own and I am only nineteen. I have to worry about bills, groceries, the house being clean, and what I am going to make for dinner. It is so much harder than what it seems. Going to school I see people in my classes hardly go to school. They're taking advantage and not appreciating the fact that there parents are paying for there school. I am sure if they were in my position they wouldn't take anything for granted. I often wish I could have a place to live and not have to pay for anything, but then again I am greatful for this because I learn a lot about resposibility and when I look around everything I have is because of me.* (#82/p.256)

While money issues obviously weigh heavily on this student, she doesn't express her frustration with her lack of financial support as social injustice. Three additional students who said they experienced discomfort for similar reasons expressed much the same point-of-view. They did not see their financial problems as a fixed social issue, but a temporary inconvenience that might even turn out to be an advantage for them in the long run. Even if these four students had perceived their economic stress as a class issue, four out of 68, a measly five percent, can hardly be considered a significant number.

Except for one student (discussed below), all of the students who expressed frustration with financial stresses focused on the difficulty of maintaining a middle class lifestyle. According to the US 2000 Census, Connecticut is the wealthiest state in the US in per capita income, but it also contains four of the nation's ten poorest cities, including Hartford, which is the fourth poorest city in the nation (US Census Bureau, 2000). The town of Manchester is a suburb of Hartford, and MCC draws many of its students from Hartford and other struggling communities, but also from some affluent communities. To illustrate the socio-economic diversity at the college, I looked at college enrollment by Educational Reference Group (ERG). The ERG designation was created by the State of Connecticut to enable the comparison of mastery test scores by similar towns. The ERG grid divides Connecticut's 169 towns into nine ERGS, designated A through I, based on the per capita income of the community and whether it is a rural, urban or suburban community (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2006). The most affluent communities, such as the so-called Gold Coast towns of Greenwich and Westport, are in the A Group, while the poorest communities, like Hartford and New Haven, are in the I Group. Comparing the ERG grid to the distribution of MCC's student body by hometown, I

discovered that MCC draws 14 percent of its student population from the top two (A and B) ERGs, and 19 percent from the H and I ERGs. An additional 32 percent of the student body hails from communities included in the F and G ERGs (MCC Fact Book, 2006). Because these towns are in close proximity to MCC and each other, it is common for me to have students from Glastonbury and South Windsor (B towns) sitting next to students from East Hartford (H) and Hartford and Windham (I towns). Despite the inequity of wealth distribution in our area, I found no expressions of class consciousness or even of envy, dismay or disillusionment in the students' responses. Even a student who had virtually no possessions and was living in a homeless shelter did not complain about her financial reality, but the fact that she felt lonely and unsupported due to her living quarters:

> *I wish that I had someone, anyone who would tell me, "hey it's time to do your homework, you have to be home by 8pm." Just anyone. But I deal, I have to be self motivated, when I see kids laughing with eachother, and having friends, going out, It hurts me, Because I don't feel like I fit in, and I don't I guess. Not having anywhere to live, sleeping outside sometimes, only being able to afford tuition and books is hard. The thing that keeps me from getting caught up in the social aspect of school is the simple fact that, I paid for this, that if I waste my mind, that would be a shame. So I guess, F* it, I like be different, because I am an individual who can think and behaive on my own, and no one can tell me what to do, they can only tell me what I SHOULD do.* (excerpted from longer text) (#98/p.260)

Since American society, by and large, is preoccupied with wealth and wealth acquisition, it is interesting that so little mention of class or class-related issues is found in my students' writing. On the other hand, it is really not so surprising when one considers that the term "middle class" is used to describe just about every economic stratum of American society except for the extremely wealthy—the billionaire class—and the extremely poor, i.e., the homeless or institutionalized. The Census Bureau defines the middle-class as the 20 percent of American families who have annual earnings of $40,000 to $95,000, but fifty percent of the families who earn less than $40,000 a year also define themselves as middle class, as do 16.8 percent of the families who earn more than $110,000. (PBS 2004). In other words, a lot of Americans consider themselves to be middle class, regardless of how their income stacks up to their neighbors'. Some economists suggest that other factors might be better indicators of class, such as economic researcher Anirban Basu, who points out, "You can say the middle class shops at the Gap and Banana Republic or that they drive Honda Accords. It can be a difficult thing to gauge" (cited in Baker, 2003). While this type of measurement seems highly unscientific, it does strike me as truer to the experience of contemporary American society: you are middle class not because of what you earn, but because of what you spend. My students may come from low income communities, but since there is no shortage of credit card companies willing to give them high-interest credit accounts, they can spend—and feel—like the middle class.

America is often called a classless society, and while this can be proven untrue for those at the extremes of the income scales, it is true that social and economic mobility—both upward and downward—is possible for the vast majority of Americans. My students frequently expressed the idea that people with more

money enjoyed more privileges, but they also expressed the idea that by earning the money, one earned the privileges:

> *I usually feel confident in myself and position in society, and don't usually feel that other people are better than me, I'm pleased with myself. However if I do feel that someone is better and has "luckier circumstances" it could be due to their family being very wealthy and not worrying about having to work or have responsibilities. I feel like they just have the freedom of doing nothing and having things handed to them and not having to work hard for anything they have or have accomplished. I usually don't respond outloud or publicly when I feel outclassed, but I just think of what I have to do to get to that position. I would like to enjoy happiness and money but I want to work for where I get. I want to have the satisfaction of knowing that I have what I have because I worked very hard for it and deserve it. That way it means a lot more.* (#101/p.261)

I know that my colleagues who subscribe to more postmodern, postcolonial philosophies than I would point out my responsibility to disillusion this student. While I agree that no matter how hard he works, he will never be a Kennedy or a DuPont, I don't think he is deluded to believe that "happiness and money" are available to him in modern American society even though the student in question is not from a privileged background. But putting the feasibility of my student's aims aside, many postmodern/postcolonial compositionists would find the fact that I see nothing morally wrong in my student's desire to "enjoy happiness and money" as more problematic than my failure to point out the many obstacles that may stand in

his way. They argue that capitalism is inherently bad and the root cause of most oppression: "Capitalism's need for workers relies upon a readily available source of inexpensive, and exploitable, labor. This labor pool, throughout US history, has been provided through slavery, immigration, and the continual underpaying of women" (LeCourt 2004: 113). I cannot argue with the historical veracity of this statement, nor with LeCourt's assertion, "Such arguments serve not merely as a history lesson; they also highlight how intimately tied to capitalist processes are the social constructions of identity that continue to operate in our present historical moment" (ibid).

Yet when I look at the social constructions of identity expressed by my students, to my way of reading, they repeatedly fail to describe themselves as "other." Returning to the passage quoted above, I suspect that LeCourt and others might focus on the student's use of "better" to describe his feeling about a person who is wealthier than he is as a subtle yet telling glimpse of his feelings of social inadequacy. They might also point out that he doesn't define his own social class except as the Other in opposition to the wealthy. However, I am more swayed by the student's first statement: "I usually feel confident in myself and position in society, and don't usually feel that other people are better than me, I'm pleased with myself." This student seems to have no problem defining himself without reference to a standard: he is *confident* and *pleased.* Furthermore, we have to remember that the prompt specifically asked for him to think about someone in "luckier circumstances," so his comments about wealth being "better" may be simply his attempt to address the prompt. It is also possible that "better" is really meant as "better off," since my students frequently use "better" in this way, as in, "You're better taking the bus than walking that far." Finally, he does not see any boundary

between himself and the wealthy; he easily imagines himself in that position and even imagines strategies ("thinks what to do") to get there.

In addition to perceiving equal economic opportunity, students also expressed belief in the idea of American social equality:

> *I am not a class conscious type of a person, even though in my native country (Pakistan) class is a very important part of the society. I have seen how low class people are treated badly. On my parents farms I have witnessed cruel behavior and attitude of my father's manager with the peasants. And I think this whole experience had made me stronger and more against the class system. I was told by every one that it is suppose to be like that, but I knew deep inside my heart that it was wrong. I knew that another human being shouldn't be treated as an animal. I think the main reason behind that is literacy. Lack of knowledge is making all those poor people peasants. But in United states I was really glad to see that there is no class system at all. I cant say that there is no difference between rich or poor, but sure can say that both are treated the same way every where. This has built not only my confidence but also has given me a reason to stay.*

Once again, this endorsement of the American ideal of the classless society would probably be met with pity by most postmodern/postcolonial compositionists, and I would be subjected to criticism for allowing this opinion to stand unchallenged. They dismiss the idea of a meritocracy as just another way in which capitalism "fools" the underclass:

> In the never-ending cycle of identity politics, those who achieve in the terms of the dominant participate in creating differential relations through the seeming 'example' they set of the meritocracy's viability, ironically ensuring the very difference meritocracy is meant to ameliorate becomes even more fixed as a collective difference inhabited by bodies marked in historically specific categories. In these ways, power works to ensure discriminatory effects within an equalizing rhetoric that seemingly proffers transparent identities to all bodies while simultaneously ensuring differences are continually produced (LeCourt 2004: 120).

According to this way of thinking, then, my idealist Pakistani immigrant will unwittingly make things worse for all other immigrants by his achievements. His success will reinforce the existing power structure, because "The individual moves across the binary [i.e., self/Other] via social success and equal opportunity, while those who do not remain mired in inevitable comparisons and categorical identities" (ibid).

Once again, it is not my intention to argue that American society is a true meritocracy or that a multitude of social injustices do not exist in capitalistic economies. However, I find the supposition that individual achievement is harmful to the overall betterment of society deeply troubling. This insistence on collectivism seems not only futile to the point of despair, it also strikes me as downright cruel. While it speaks so fervently of identity, it really sees less privileged populations as faceless masses who make their choices out of ignorance and blindness caused by consumerism, rather than as thoughtful responses to their lived, individual experiences. As Chinese-American political writer and critic Eric Liu points out:

> ...because class is the only thing Americans have more trouble talking about than race, a minority's climb up the social ladder is often willfully misnamed and wrongly portrayed. There is usually, in the portrayal, a strong whiff of betrayal: the assimilist is a traitor to his kind, to his class, to his own family. He cannot gain the world without losing his soul. To be sure, something is lost in any migration, whether from place to place or from class to class. But something is gained as well. And the result is always more complicated than the monochrome language of "whiteness" and "authenticity" would suggest. (Liu, 1998: 207).

I have rejected the extremes of postmodern/postcolonial composition theory because it does precisely what it claims capitalist society does: circumscribes what the individual can and *should* be. In its zeal to read all social and cultural history as *only* power struggle, colonialism and oppression, it brands perceptions that see anything *more* than these issues as misguided, opportunistic, or just plain evil, and seeks to undermine and change perceptions that contradict its tenets. However, as an interculturalist, I am interested in understanding how perceptions shape individual identity and, in turn, how identity shapes perception. What is becoming clear to me as I look more deeply into perceptions is that the idea of Otherness, at least as it pertains to social and economic class, has existed more in my mind than in the minds of my students.

The Second Stress Factor—¿Habla Ingles?

When I designed the second prompt, I also expected that, in addition to socio-economic concerns, issues of race, religion and ethnic/national identity might appear. To my surprise, few students raised these subjects, and then often in an indirect way. These issues are sensitive, of course, and it may be that students did not feel comfortable broaching these topics on the discussion board. However, we routinely discussed these topics as part of our exploration of *Portrait*, and while not all students chimed in with their opinions and experiences, I never noticed any strong reluctance among the students when it came to bringing up and addressing sensitive issues. If they were willing to speak out in front of a live audience of their peers, so to speak, it seems likely that at least some would be willing to touch upon these topics in their writing. I concluded, then, that most of my students really did feel comfortable in the academic environment, just as they reported.

However, four out of the 68 respondents (five percent) did raise language issues that touched upon other social issues. Again, I expected more students to mention struggles with English, since roughly a third of the students who participated in my project were not native English speakers, and about half of those students were native Spanish speakers. Once again, my expectations proved wrong. Interestingly, three of the four ESL students who expressed discomfort with expressing themselves in English were also women over 30 who had recently immigrated to the US. They included a Spanish speaker, a Portuguese speaker, and an Urdu speaker. The fourth response was from a young male Vietnamese speaker. None of the traditionally-aged (18-22) native Spanish-speaking students mentioned English in their responses. All of these young Spanish speakers had attended high schools in Connecticut, so even though English is not their first language, they were

acclimated enough to its use in academic settings that they apparently didn't perceive it as a source of alienation. Also, because there were always several Spanish-speakers in class, they were able to chat together before or after class and to do group work in their first language. Unfortunately, not all students were so lucky:

> *To be honest, I feel most of the time "outclassed". This is something that really bothers me. I am a very reserved person and my " broken English " are the main causes of my "outclassed" feelings. Sometimes, I think if I was a little bit extroverted and speak a better language, I would be more comfortable in college. I found some people who were in my situation, but they were more lucky, because they have people of their culture who are studing in the same class that they are. Even though these people do not have a lot of friends, at least they have someone to talk. At the begining of my academic career, I had days that I did not wish to go ahead, but now I am feeling a little bit more excited.* (#83/p.256)

This student clearly feels isolated because she is self-conscious about her English skills. She refers to her "broken English," even though she was in fact quite successful in communication from a "receiver's" point of view. But when I told her this to try to reassure and encourage her, she said that she was frustrated because she could only express a small part of what she was actually thinking. She implies that her frustration with her inability to fully communicate has caused her to despair—"days that [she] did not wish to go ahead"—reminding me of Ruesch and Bateson's statement, "The ability to communicate successfully becomes

synonymous with being mentally healthy" (cited in Kim, 1988: 62). No wonder she wished for someone with whom she could communicate in her own language.

Another interesting aspect of this response is the self-blame the writer implies when she says, "Sometimes I think if I was a little bit extroverted..." Other ESL students also implied that their discomfort was at least partially, if not entirely, their fault. This sense that new entrants to the culture must accept responsibility for engaging the new language and the new environment, even if they do not intend to become part of it, is echoed by the response of a Spanish-speaking mother of three:

> *If I start to compare Stephen's changes and putting in my life I believe that I will find many things in common. First, I came from Puerto Rico 4 years ago to Connecticut and I wasn't prepared for face the situations I have to work with when I came here. As Stephen when he start in Congloves (different town) he wasn't prepared to face the different situations that he face with his class mates .So I feel that this reading bring to my memory the things that I had to work when I get to this country . Even when I wasn't prepared I did work to be able to success in this country that is very different than where I came from. So the second thing that I had to work with was the language. I have to take English as a Second Language to be able to success with my class at the college. And the third thing was that after 16 years out of college. Because I want to success here I get back to college and face most teen age and take class and repeating the same class because my language that something that I have to keep working on it because I want to be as a good example for my three teen age kids. In conclusion, I think that face different situation in a different culture that you not belong to is something that you*

> *have to use a lot strategies to be able to success in a different culture of be as Stephen and use your imagination and "fly" to get want you wants your freedom.* (#145/p.273).

This student actually sees her struggle as being three-fold: she is unfamiliar with the culture in general; she has difficulty with English and has had to take English as a Second Language classes before attempting college; and she is older than the typical college student. She admits that she has had difficulties and has had to repeat classes because of her problems with the English language. She declines to explain exactly which "strategies" have worked for her but clearly perseverance is one of them. It is interesting that she concludes her remarks by talking about the value of imagination and links her own struggles with those of Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of *A Portrait of the Artist*. She does not indicate a desire to assimilate—at the end of her entry, she refers to being "in a culture that you not belong to" as if that is an unchanging condition. Yet she still sees herself, like Stephen, ultimately achieving her goals through the application of her "strategies" and rising above her difficulties to "freedom." In this way she suggests a struggle similar to Stephen's: the struggle of one human to create an individual identity. Stephen ultimately realizes that his struggle also includes the responsibility "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." I hear an echo of this in my student's declaration of her inspiration, "to be a good example for my three teen age kids."

Only one respondent looked outside of herself for the sources of her discomfort with her new environment:

I think, I feel myself I am "not lucky," as many of my friends and neighbors are able to read, write and speak English fluently and able to do job. I feel they are smarter and intelligent than me. I feel myself "outclassed". I wish to come out of this feeling and do job. I analyze, myself why they are able to do job and better in communication skills. I realize that because I brought-up from village atmosphere, I do not able to know lot of things as my friends and I studied my bachelors degree in my native language that is why I am not as good as others. Now I got the opportunity to take classes. My husband can pay the expenses about to take classes because he is working in the software field, so that I can improve my reading, writing and speaking skills in English. As I am living in US now, I found the lot of avenues to improve my general knowledge, communication skills and intelligence. I am confident that I can also do job very soon. (#129/p.269)

This student describes a process of self-analysis that begins when she compares herself to others and judges herself to be inferior because she cannot speak and write English well enough to hold a job. However, she goes on to ascribe the reasons for her feelings of inferiority to issues outsider her control—rather than feeling she is not outgoing enough or that she is not working hard enough, she reasons that she doesn't speak English simply because she was raised in a village and educated in her native language. By making this critical analysis of her own cultural training, she is taking a step identified by Byram as becoming "conscious of [her] own perspective, of the way in which [her] thinking is culturally determined" (Byram 2000). She also looks outside herself for resources to help her—her husband is able to financially support her while she takes classes, and she

has found many "avenues to improve [her] general knowledge, communication skills and intelligence" in her new environment. Although this student's grasp of written and spoken English is still in the developmental stages, her willingness to enter a third space, "where negotiation takes place, where identity is constructed and re-constructed, where life in its ambiguity, complexity and hybridity is played out" (Cho, 2006), seems to give her more a positive outlook. Unlike the other ESL students, she doesn't feel that she must go it alone even though she is the only Urdu speaker in the class, nor does she convey a sense that she is facing a daunting challenge requiring more than the usual amount of courage that everyday life exacts. She is also the only student who expresses confidence in the outcome of her efforts.

The Third Stress Factor: "Am I feeling old yet?"

Students who felt different from their peers because they were older than traditional college students accounted for 8.8 percent of all responses (6 out of 68), and 22 percent (6 out of 27) of the responses that reported feeling different for any reason. These "old" students were often under 30 and almost all were under 40. The following response was written by a 27-year-old male:

> *I was anxious about returning to college. It was to be my first return to a formal learning environment in close to ten years! I was more nervous about what my academic performance would be as opposed to whether or not I would fit in. Someone told me that colleges love older students since they add diversity and maturity to the student body. After running the gambit of financial aid deadlines and registration woes (as well as paying lots of money*

for books!) I faced my first class. Eight 'o clock Algebra was interesting. I think I was part of a select group of older students in there. A handful to say the most! Most of these people were fresh out of high school and, as with my other classes, almost ten years separated me from them. Am I feeling old yet?! They still remember the base knowledge that college work demands while I was amazed that I just found my way to class. I felt at a disadvantage...(#90/p.258)

Even though he is in a minority due to his age, the student makes it clear that he is not the only "old man" in the class. However, he doesn't imply a sense of group identity with the other mature students. Instead, he focuses on his "otherness" as a member of the minority group of older students. It is also interesting to note that while the student does refer to socio-economic issues (he had to apply for financial aid and found the cost of books a burden), his focus is on the academic, rather than the financial, advantages of younger students who are generally supported by their parents.

It is interesting that even though older students faced monetary pressures that young students were quite often spared, they tended to see the differences between themselves and their younger classmates not in terms of having less time for studies or having more outside distractions, such as the need to earn a living and care for a family, but as being less academically able than young students. This academic "ability" often included the idea that younger students were more familiar with the culture, as this young working mother suggests:

For me going back to college after a number of years had me feeling very anxious and uncomfortable. I was not only worried about the fact that some of my fellow classmates would be fresh out of high school fully prepped for exams and papers, I was worried that I would be overwhelmed by the fact that they would better prepared in their knowledge of what was expected than I was. In a word I felt "outclassed" because of my own foolishness of not taking college seriously the first time. I try to counter my feelings of anxiety be reminding myself that I am older now. I realize how important college is to my future. I am ready now, where before I wasn't ready to be an adult. (Not, to say that any of us ever get rid of the kid in us.) (#84/256)

It is not just the actual academic work that worries this woman; she is anxious that she won't know how to behave correctly—to know "what was expected"—and that her lack of cultural competence will stand out in comparison to the younger students. She mentions that this is her second attempt at college and suggests that she did not finish her degree the first time because she did not make education her priority, though she doesn't explain exactly what her "foolishness" entailed, whether it was the distractions of a full social life or marriage and children that led her to leave. Clearly this early failure, as she perceives it, still haunts her, and even though she rationalizes that she has gained wisdom in the intervening years, her parenthetical statement at the end of her response reveals her fear that her "foolish" identity may stick with her, and this time she will not have the excuse of being young. She has been willing to endure "feeling very anxious and uncomfortable" for the opportunity to rewrite her self-perception.

It is easy to see how students with these types of identity issues would push themselves to succeed, and older students who are able to stay the course (unfortunately, many find it impossible to manage their school schedules and their "real life" responsibilities) tend to be among the most engaged and highest achieving students, a fact that is not lost on their younger classmates. Yet only one recent high school graduate reported feeling the age issue in reverse:

> *...In one of my classes, the majority of the class has years experience of what the class pertains to, whereas, I'm the youngest one, have no experience and feel that the other students are way ahead of me. They'll answer questions that they know from experience, but I have to read it in a book.* (excerpted from longer text) (#143/p. 272)

This student appears to be describing a class in a specialist area that attracts a number of students from professional areas, rather than a more traditional liberal arts setting, where young students tend to form the majority. She has the experience, then, that many older students have of being a distinct minority in the classroom. This student is an African-American, but it is her age, not her ethnicity, that causes her to feel different from the others. She also shows an appreciation for empirical knowledge, and seems to think it is preferable to the abstract knowledge she has acquired from study, while older students tend to shrug off their experiential knowledge as merely "common sense" and to be intimidated by younger students who they perceive as able to absorb information from texts quickly and easily.

The age differences among community college students creates interesting classroom dynamics and tends to be the most noticeable way in which students

employ self/Other identifications. The age dynamic and its role is self/Other ascription is discussed in greater depth in the next chapter.

The Fourth Stress Factor: "I have always felt a little on the outside"

An additional six students (8.8 percent of all responses and 22 percent of the responses that reported feeling different for any reason) attributed the feelings of being different to individual personality traits. For some students, being different is a source of pride:

> *There are plenty of times when I feel that I'm not quite like everyone else, especially in college, but it doesn't bother me. I've never really worried about being like everyone else, because I don't want to be. Being the same as everyone else is boring, and I prefer to be unique and to do what I want to do. That's why I'm here, in college. I'm a little different from all the other students because I'm younger than they are. I'm only sixteen. Instead of being like all the other sixteen year olds and continuing in high school onto the 11th grade this year, I decided to take my education into my own hands. I started homeschooling in the fall, and I started college part time this semester. Next year I'm going full time for a degree in business. I'll have finished another year of college by the time my peers graduate high school. So I have done things differently than most kids do, but being different has never bothered me. I've done these things by choice.* (excerpted from longer text) (#102/p.261).

Other students attributed their lack of comfort with others to a lack of comfort with themselves, as this young woman describes:

I guess that growing up the way that I have has really shaped my view on myself and how I feel others look at me. Sadly, it may be a warped view, so I have been told. Self esteem is something so hard to hold on to once you finally have it and I've found it almost impossible to get back after you've lost it. Throughout my life I've always felt a little on the outside of the crowd. I feel that other people have had "luckier circumstances." The circumstances that I'm talking about regarding my life have been a better home environment and feeling like they have a place in their family. I guess feeling on the outside started there for me. I come from a family of three boys. My mom always favored them, I guess because they didn't need quite as much attention. Now I work on gaining self esteem on my own by accepting that I am a worthy person even though I may not have always been as "lucky" as my peers. (#109/p.263).

Although these young women have very different reasons for feeling different from their peers, as well as very different emotional experiences of being different, both display a good deal of self knowledge and a willingness to take responsibility for their lives. Interestingly, all six of the responses that attributed being different to personal qualities were written by women under 21 years of age. Five of the young women were white and one was of Puerto Rican descent, but born in Connecticut. The two responses quoted above represent the extremes of the emotional experience of being different described in the student responses, with one young woman

describing herself as "unique" and in some ways superior to her peers, while the other notes that she is "working on" overcoming her feelings of inadequacy. However, the other students described their "otherness" as simply their habitual way of interacting with others and that being slightly alienated from their peers was, in a way, their preferred way of operating. As one student noted, "Now I would rather be an outclass in college because I feel if I get to know a lot of people I won't concentrate as much as I should in school. I just like to meet at least one person in every class just in case I have to miss a day. That way I can ask them what I missed." Her desire to "meet one person" is not to fulfill a social need, but to have an academic back-up plan in case of absence. All six of the responses attributed the source of feeling different to either family socialization (as in the case of the young woman with self-esteem issues) or to the individual's preference for her own company. None of the responses identified social or environmental factors as reasons for feeling different.

The Fifth Stress Factor: "I wish I could be smart"

The final reason identified by students for feeling different from their peers had to do with issues of intellectual and academic preparedness. This was slightly more common than any other reason for feeling different, accounting for seven out of the 27 responses that reported feeling different for any reason, or 25.9 percent, and 10.2 percent of all responses (7 out of 68). I feel there is an argument to made for including the four responses from older students in this group as well, since all four of the older students commented that they felt young students' academic skills were sharper than theirs. If we add those four responses to this group, it would

account for 40.7 percent of all the responses that reported feeling different for any reason, and 16.1 percent of all responses.

Some students who struggled academically compared themselves to more successful students. Rather than focusing on any societal markers, such as race or class, or examining their own or other's behavior, the students concluded that the more successful students were simply more intelligent, and this accounted for their greater academic success:

The only thing that I would say I wish I could be as smart as other people, it's hard for me to do work and try to get good grades, but I know I just have to try. It's hard to balance school and work and try to have some time for your self, but I guess when your in college you don't get that much time to your self... (excerpted from longer text) (#174/p.272)

Although this student comments on the difficulty of managing her academic life with the need to make a living, she assumes "smart" students can do it with ease. Interestingly, this student is bilingual, with Spanish being her first language. It is tempting to suggest that she might feel "smarter" in Spanish, but her response does not support this supposition.

A young African American male wrote:

...In college there are many different levels of students, there are the one's that need help from everyone on just to get by and there are the one's that are smart enough to do everything themselves. Everyone is going to feel like there is someone better then them and they might think that they don't have the

brains to do what they do. I definitely feel that way because there are a lot of people who do better then me and yes sometimes it bothers me and I think I'm outclassed. (excerpted from longer text) (#119/p. 266)

The student begins his response by framing his feelings as normal: "everyone is going to feel like there is someone better [than] them," as he puts it. However, the student quickly moves from portraying himself as being like "everyone" to revealing his insecurities; he notes that "a lot of people" are more academically successful than he is. He is no longer safely in the middle of "everyone," but someone who "definitely feel[s]" that he doesn't have "the brains to do what they do" and that he is "outclassed" by others. The word "outclassed" is used in the prompt, so the student may be merely mirroring the language I provided; in fact, mirroring the language of prompts is a skill encouraged in composition classes to help students learn to address essay questions successfully. Even though the word may not be "authentic" language for the student, it seems apt—and poignant—in this response.

However, students who felt at an academic or intellectual disadvantage, like their peers who felt at a disadvantage for the other reasons discussed in this chapter, did not paint their situations as hopeless. The African American male quoted above concluded his response this way:

The way I deal with these situations is that I just suck it up and do the best I can because I know if I put my mind to it I can do anything. I may not be the best at what I do but I can sure try and get it done to the best of my ability and work at it some more so that I can become the best at it. (#119/p. 266)

The student's conclusion is almost poetic in its repetition of the word "best" as he applies the word to both his efforts and his aspirations. Some more militant postmodernists might focus on the student's use of standard American English as an indicator of the student's oppression and perhaps the source of the student's insecurity. They might posit that he feels disenfranchised in the college environment because his (assumed) "natural" speech—black vernacular—is not empowered in my classroom. Despite the student's choice of standard American English—which may, in fact, be the language he "naturally" speaks—the emotions he expresses ring true. I see dignity and nobility in this student's self-assessment and in his determination. If "*I can sure try and get it done to the best of my ability and work at it some more so that I can become the best at it,*" does not express empowerment, what does?

Student Strategies for Coping with Stress Factors

Contemporary writing on education contains many accounts of *oppositional behavior*, a phenomenon in which students who feel marginalized by the curriculum and/or the general school environment take (or are driven to) an extreme self/Other view, in which everything related to academics becomes the Other and therefore *not* self. Students who absorb this perspective often come to identify certain behaviors or attitudes so strongly with the Other that it is impossible for them to engage in those behaviors or share those attitudes and retain their "self" identities. They may even come to see those behaviors and attitudes as threats to their identities that they must defend against with hostile behavior. Perhaps the most famous example of this type of thinking is the oft-repeated notion that some African-American students

identify academic success as a behavior belonging to the Other and therefore permanently and immutably "not black" (Delpit 1995, Finn 1999), but of course all human groups tend to perceive selected behaviors or attitudes as "ours" or "theirs"—if not, stereotypes would not exist.

Being familiar with theories of oppositional behavior, I was expecting some of the responses to the prompts to reveal indications of bicultural stress, particularly among some of my black and Spanish-speaking students who hail from low-income, inner-city neighborhoods and simultaneously aspire to academic success. According to Paulston and other writers, bicultural stress occurs when inhabitants of two cultures find themselves having to choose the "right" behavior for a given situation in an either/or dichotomy. When the two cultures come into conflict, the individual must choose one culture over the other; he or she cannot inhabit both cultures simultaneously (Paulston 1992, Byram 2002).

Perhaps half a dozen times in my experience of teaching *Portrait* to several classes per year over the past ten years, students have referred to bicultural stress in class discussions of Stephen Dedalus' unresolved issues of Irish identity. On these rare occasions, a student has responded to Davin's jab at Stephen of, "What with your name and your ideas, are you Irish at all?" (Joyce, 1916/1994: 147), by relating the comment to middle-class African Americans who are accused of being "not black" because of their socio-economic status. Frankly, I hoped that my prompts would lead some students to explore this bicultural stress in more detail. I must admit that I also hoped that they would make comments that would justify my intercultural approach as an effective way of alleviating or even removing bicultural stress. However, I was disappointed on both counts. While some of my students did, in fact, reveal self/Other perceptions, the Other was identified as "not academic,"

while "academic" was identified with self. Furthermore, the identification of "academic" with self crossed all racial and socio-economic lines. The binary conception of self/Other is discussed at greater length in the following chapter, but it is important to note here that the conception revealed by the data was the opposite of what I had expected based on my reading of the literature: rather than feeling academic culture represented the Other, my students who developed binary conceptions identified academic culture with Self.

In retrospect, I now think my expectations were really rather stupid because they ignored my actual classroom experience. The truth is, I have never been confronted with the acting out of hostility associated with oppositional behavior. This is not to say that I don't believe my students experience disconnects from academic culture, but that the effects of those disconnects take much subtler forms than open hostility. Oppositional behavior is most often cited in younger students who are forced by law to be in school; however, my students are adults who attend college as a free decision. Students who do not wish to be in my classroom simply do not come in the first place, or, if they do come and feel rejected as the Other, they can withdraw from the class or drop out of the college without engaging in confrontational behavior. Probably the most common form of subtle oppositional behavior that I see is the failure to complete assignments. However, like withdrawing or dropping out, failure to complete assignments can occur for any number of reasons—conflicting responsibilities with work and family, academic difficulty, and changing life goals or priorities among them—and it is rarely possible for me to find out exactly why students do some assignments and not others, or more worryingly, why they disappear from my classroom half way through the semester. At any rate, I no longer think it is so surprising that none of

my students wrote about feeling angry at their displacement from academic culture. The students who felt hostility in the classroom environment probably were no longer there to address the prompt.

While students who expressed feelings of otherness did not report angry or hostile reactions, they did offer a number of coping strategies, all of which were cooperative, rather than oppositional, in nature. The following is a discussion of the coping strategies used by students who said they sometimes felt "outclassed."

Working Harder

Regardless of whether students felt at a disadvantage due to age, language or educational experience, almost all prescribed the same cure for themselves: the need to work harder than their peers. These students seem to be examples of the type of stress that often results from adapting to a new culture, when new entrants tend to feel that their own inadequacies explain why they feel out of place in the new culture (Paulston, 1992: 121). However, because all of these students are eager to be successful in academic culture, they are motivated to "[create] a whole new internal structure that is better adapted to the host environment" (Kim, 1988: 55), in this case, by spending more time working on their assignments.

Institutional Support Systems

In addition to diligently applying themselves to learning the new skills expected of them, students noted that institutional support systems, such as tutoring and mentoring programs, helped them to cope with their new environments. One of the adult students credited an orientation program with helping her to overcome her feelings of being different:

Like Stephen, I am not quite like my peers! Only I am older than most and it did bother me a little at the start of school but taking that Adult in Transition class did help me realize that I am not the only one! (excerpted from longer text). (#147/p. 273)

In this case, a "refuge" (a single class) with other students like herself gave the student the confidence to interact with the greater college community. This type of insular support program shares similarities with the common phenomenon of recent immigrants forming a community within the community, where there is a respite from the stress of interacting with the new culture as well as the support of others who are coping with the same shocks. If this student limited her interactions to only students like herself, she might remain less than communicatively and culturally competent (Kim, 1988: 64), but she has entered the wider college community.

Students also credited the availability of extra academic help for assisting them in overcoming their feelings of being different:

I just always worry that I'm not going to succeed because the challenging classes that I have always take me forever to get through. For instance, in my computer graphics class, I had all the trouble in the world with Photoshop. For three weeks, I stressed over the fact that I wasn't getting it like some of the more advanced students in the class. It made me feel like I was far behind, and I was never going to be able to use the program. But then I asked for help and I got through it, now photoshop is like second nature to me. (#151/p.274)

Unlike the older student who has a pre-made community she can turn to, this younger student has to confront her feelings of inadequacy on her own. Her first response, predictably, is self-blame as she compares herself to other students. However, her stress eventually leads her to ask for individual tutoring in the subject, and she overcomes her obstacle, though her fear still remains; she says, "*I just always worry...*" Clearly the student knows she can turn to others for help, but she would prefer to be independent. Her feelings share similarities with the entrant in a new culture who has acquired a fair degree of competence but is still not entirely confident in the new environment. Kim describes this behavior as a "draw-back-to-leap" pattern, in which the stranger "draws back" during stress, which "activates their adaptive energy to help them reorganise themselves and 'leap forward' (Kim, 1988: 56), such as the student's decision to seek tutoring. Although the process probably feels anything but "normal" to the student, the stress she describes is not only normal, but necessary for reaching her goals of cultural competence and perhaps even for achieving mental and emotional stability:

> The stress, adaptation, and resultant internal growth essentially characterize the strangers' conscious and unconscious movement forward and upward in the direction of greater success in meeting the demands of the host environment. The resolution of stressful difficulties promises the qualitative transformation of strangers toward a greater internal capacity to cope with varied environmental conditions. The increased internal capacity, in turn, facilitates the subsequent handling of stress and adaptation, learning and unlearning, acculturation and deculturation, crisis and resolution (Kim, 1988: 57).

We can surmise, then, that although stress is a necessary by-product of intercultural experience, it can also be the catalyst for personal growth and, ultimately, lead to the reduction of stress.

Interactions with the Other

Students also noted the importance of encounters with those whom they perceived "belonging" to academic culture more than they. As they found mutual interests they shared with the Other, they came to see themselves as also belonging to the culture. Sometimes these shared interests were superficial in nature, but still provided an avenue for interaction:

> *My first experience with English 101 caused me to be uneasy. I found myself in a classroom full of [students] that were a number of years younger that I am. I found myself trying to reach out to the students around me by finding a common ground. In one case I was able to start a conversation with a fellow student based on a team we both liked. I found myself relaxing in the next class because I no longer felt apart.* (#4/p. 236)

In the above case, the older student made the overture to the younger student based on a shared interest in sports. However, the class itself can become the shared interest that brings students together:

> *It really does not matter how old I am and how out numbered I am. The thing that matters most is the fact that I am here to learn...I have met some*

wonderful younger school buddies and have paired up with them for class and that is nice. We have the same interest, school and what we can get out of it (excerpted from longer text). (#147/p. 273)

Interestingly, none of the older students mentioned trying to adopt younger students' habits or language as a way of attempting to fit in, but the young African-American woman who found herself the only recent high school graduate in a class full of working adults did try to modify her behavior in order to feel accepted:

I always felt that I had to like them in order for them to take me seriously. However, after half of a semester with them I found that they are really cool and fun people to hang out with... (excerpted from longer text) (#143/p. 272)

Although many students reported that they anticipated rejection from students they perceived as Other, none reported actually being rejected. In fact, all commented on ways in which they had discovered and acted upon common interests. Most of the students who reported anticipating rejection also indicated that they made the first overtures toward the Other themselves, whether by making a friendly comment about a baseball cap or by starting a study group. In some cases (such as the young woman who felt she had to speak and act like the older students in order to be taken seriously), the writer does not specify who made the first advance; however, no students described receiving overtures from someone they considered very different from themselves. It seems, then, that students who were able and willing to step outside of their cultural identities of "old" or "young" were rewarded with positive interactions.

The Role of the Instructor

The previously discussed coping strategies were original to the students and undertaken through the individual student's initiative. The following is a discussion of activities that I devised that were also used as coping strategies by students. In each case, the intended roles of the activities were academic in nature; I developed the activities as ways to bring the curriculum content to the students through different venues to suit different learning styles. Only after studying student responses to my online research journal did I realize that some students also used these activities as part of their coping strategies for overcoming feelings of being different from or less than others. Studying my students' responses also led me to conclude that separating academic activities from intercultural activities may be a false distinction; in many ways, the intercultural experience is the medium in which almost all learning takes place.

Use of Online Discussion Boards

I began using online discussion boards in my composition classroom as an academic tool. I thought students might benefit from being able to discuss the readings outside of class and to compare interpretations of selected passages. However, the use of online discussion boards also afforded students a way of interacting with each other and negotiating differences that made actual face-to-face interactions much more comfortable. Perhaps the best example of this is the case of a student I'll call Nate, a recent high school graduate who had Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism. Although Nate was an exceptionally intelligent reader and strong writer, he had many social disabilities, such as an inability to make eye

contact and a nervous compulsion to pace, that made him appear odd to his classmates. Nate's discomfort was compounded by his large frame, which made it impossible for him to "hide." In an attempt to make himself less visible, he wore a huge parka at all times and combed his hair so that it covered most of his face. These habits made him appear rather threatening and other students tended to avoid him. Nate always attended class, but he chose a seat as far as possible from anyone else and stared fixedly at his desk top for the entire class period.

Even though Nate did not participate in class discussions, Nate's insights into *Portrait* had not been missed by his classmates because of his postings to the discussion board. One day one of the older women in the class asked me loudly, "Which one's Nate? He understands this book!" When I pointed Nate out to her, she hesitated only a moment before she approached him and demanded that he join her study group. Nate appeared both stunned and terrified, but apparently the woman's "I don't take no for an answer" attitude communicated itself to him and he meekly followed her to join her group in another part of the classroom. From that point on, Nate participated in class and group activities, albeit tentatively, and seemed to thrive in his role of group study guru. The woman who initially approached him continued to take him under her wing socially and to consult with him about the reading, so that both students benefited from the connection.

Within a year of completing my class, Nate had cut his hair, gotten a new, less "suicide-bomber-looking" jacket, and become a reporter for the college newspaper. He is now a communications major at a large state university in the West. While the discussion board certainly was not the only factor in Nate's blossoming (he was working with a counselor to learn techniques for overcoming his anxieties and coping with his asocial tendencies), I believe it paved the way to

one of his first successful social interactions and helped to build his confidence both socially and academically.

In addition to completing assignments (such as Nate's postings about selected passages), students used the discussion board to make connections with each other and with me. In the midst of a lengthy group project, one young man, a recent immigrant from Korea, posted the following comment in my research journal:

> *I think that I'm a bad leader. I have thought a lot of thinsgs about group project before discussing what our group will do. however, when we disscuss about the project, I feel that I screw up all of my idea and just follow what other group member are going to do.*
> *actually, I feel that I owe other members apology not to be good leader for this project.* (#338/p. 326)

The members of the group responded to their leader's despair, also via the research journal discussion board:

> *H--- what are you thinking? If it wasn't for your help in the group i doubt we'd be as far as we are. If you have a point to bring to the table bring it. We won't judge, we'll just see how it'll fit to what we have to do. You don't owe any apologies at least i don't think you do. Being a leader is a pain in the ass but take it slow.* (#339/p. 327)

This student's comments (he is another young male, but of Puerto Rican descent), are clearly directed to the student leader of the group and not to me, the

teacher. He matter-of-factly assures the leader that the group is happy with his leadership and encourages the leader to feel free to be more assertive with his own ideas as well as supportive of others' ideas. Another member of the same group responded:

> *Im in the blue group [I designated the groups as different colors] and my leader is a great one. He might not be the most outspoken man in the world but he gets the job DONE! Our group is a little tough to get on task, but once we all get focused and work we make a good team. I believe that a great leader with bad followers has little to no control of the final outcome* (#340/p. 327)

Again, this young man took the time to reassure another student in the group, although he may also be addressing me as the final evaluator of the group's work. However, his identification with his group is clear; he refers to "my leader" and "our group," which is not only a group but "a good team." While these young men, all of different ethnic backgrounds, might have felt too reserved or embarrassed to admit these feelings to each other in person, they made use of the discussion board to air insecurities and provide reassurance. I think it is also significant that the two group members who responded to their group leader's posting were not in the habit of posting comments to the research journal discussion board. Prior to this incident, they had confined their postings to the assigned topics on a separate discussion board. But when they read their colleague's cry for help, they rushed to comment.

Collaborative Learning

I routinely introduce projects and assignments to be completed as small groups. Most of these assignments are of a short duration, taking up only a part of one class period, though I occasionally extend group projects over two class periods, and I usually assign an extensive research project, extended over several weeks, that students complete while working in small groups. (The availability of the online discussion board greatly facilitates group work in the community college environment, where many students have limited time outside of class due to work and family obligations. The discussion boards allow students to "meet" without having to physically gather in the same location.)

In my research diary, I often commented on the group activities and whether I thought the day's activity had accomplished the pedagogical goal. I was interested to learn that my students also had a lot to say about group work. In addition to commenting on the learning benefits of group work, students also expressed perceptive insights about group dynamics:

> *Overall today's class went well. I always like going over the readings as a class since there are some things I miss in the reading at times and it clears things up a bit. The group work is fine and I don't mind the change from the usual teacher-student learning method. I get to know who I work with better and over time you get to know the thinkers from the class from the ones who don't want to contribute as much. I still find most of the people in class mature and willing to at least listen to the instruction. But hearing and understanding are two different things. It takes lots of patience to understand this stuff! I still get the "vibe" that most of the class is either unsure of the*

material or is apathetic and just choose not to contribute. It appears a few people contribute day after day and unofficially "lead" the class. This still must place a challenge on the professor that has to teach the material while still making sure we don't fall asleep! In time, as has been in my other classes, this class will take on a group personality. Hell, we're in this room until late May!!! We may as well break the ice! I'm still getting used to the desks though. I always seem to get the only one in the room with the arm thing that doesn't fold back! Is this a conspiracy or what? When asked what I remember of college I will say "James Joyce and broken desks!" (#418/p.346)

A second student commented:

When it comes to group work, I think that it can go from one extreme to the next. It is hard to learn something from every group activity for several reasons. When I am in group with people who are shy and not very up front about their opinions, I am not really learning anything new because all I really have is my own opinions still. The success of a group activity also depends on how many people in the group wish to participate one hundred percent. I know that if I am in group where more people don't care than people who do care to be productive, I am easily influenced to just do the same. I enjoy participating, but I am not a leader type to gather everyone's attention in order to benefit from the activity. I also really value other people's opinions, especially during this particular piece of literature because it is very difficult to understand on my own. Maybe a class discussion is more

effective for me. The leader type students are never in my group, but during a class discussion they make points I may have missed. (#422/p.347)

Both students comment on how a group can take on the personality of its members and that a directed individual ("leader type") can influence the whole group to accomplish tasks. The first student, a male, seems confident in taking on that role himself and trying out different groups to see who he works with best and who are "the thinkers," as he calls them. The second student, a female, is much more passive in her approach. She admits that she absorbs the work ethic of the other group members and is not comfortable asserting herself as a leader or even approaching other students she perceives as leaders, since she notes, "the leader type students are never in my group." Despite the obstacles that group work presents to her, she still "enjoys participating" and feels that hearing others' opinions are helpful to her, though she seems to be hesitant to trust the opinions presented in her group and would prefer to hear what "leader type" students have to say.

Group dynamics and the construction of group identity, by-products of collaborative learning assignments, become intercultural tools as well as academic tools. Students noted that they made use of collaborative learning activities to approach both academic culture and students who they perceived as Other, and to find their own sense of identity within the group:

When I graduated from High School I was so excited about going to college and meeting new people. I was also excited about finally getting closer to where I want to be in life. When I met many of the people in my classes I felt

different and out of place. I felt like some were better than me or some smarter. So after my excited feeling left me, I felt outclassed and different. I wasn't sure if it was because of the clothes I wear, my hair style, or just my personality. Finally I got the nerve up and the group discussions helped a lot for me to meet people and get to know them and know that each person is similar in some way. And that way is knowing they want to go to college to pursue a dream they have of becoming successful. (#86/p.258)

This above comment made me smile because it reaffirmed my own notion of what all my students, as diverse as they are, have in common: they're all here. And what is more, they have all *chosen* to be here. Like me, this student has discovered that one similarity is enough, and we can begin to understand each other from that small patch of common ground.

Intercultural Feedback

Finally, students noted that my habit of giving feedback in the form of questions to be answered provided an avenue for them to engage academic culture while maintaining a sense of self. Once again, my habit had grown out of my desire to help my students academically, and teachers have known since Socrates that asking questions is one of the best ways to engage learners. I wanted my students to be able to support their interpretations with the kind of evidence and explicit thinking that is appropriate for academic writing, so I got in the habit of constantly asking my students, "How do you know," and, "Why is this [evidence] important," in order to keep their writing focused on the text.

This academic exercise also became intercultural when I faced the first hurdle in putting these questions to the students: making sure my students knew they were asked sincerely. Knowing my students were largely unfamiliar with academic culture, I feared they would hear the first question as, "How do *you* know?" and the second question as a supercilious way of implying, "That isn't important at all!" I found the best way to deal with this fear was directly. I simply kept saying, "I'm not being a wise guy! I really want to know," even after my students started asking, "how do I know," and "why is this important" for themselves. In fact, those two questions have become unofficial "slogans" in my classroom, and students often make jokes with (and about!) me that incorporate them.

Once the students accepted the sincerity of the questions, they set about trying to answer them, and once again I found that intercultural and academic approaches overlapped. Students were often confused and even psychologically deflated when such seemingly simple questions turned out to be complex explorations. Being unfamiliar with academic culture, many did not recognize at first that these complex explorations are the point of academic writing. Instead they assumed that "good" students would know the "right" answers instantly.

In these instances, rather than focusing solely on the text, I would ask the student to look back at his or her notes about the "artifact" we studied on the first day of class and to remember that in some situations, all we can offer are "good" answers as opposed to "right" ones. In response to the first prompt about culture shock, one student noted:

My own primary socialization was right up there with most dysfunctional families. I am the oldest of six children, all girls except one boy, him being the youngest. I never knew my biological father. I unfortanately had not one, but two abusive step-fathers in my primary years. I grew to be a care-taking, peacemaker, do anything to please or make things ok little girl. Self-doubt and perfectionism battle it out within my mind. A culture shock for me in coming toEnglish 101 is for me to comfortably step out of the box and dare to share my thoughts. What if they're wrong or don't make sense? I want to do well, hey, I want to do great! I love your reassurance that there is no"wrong" answers, just better. I will do my best to stretch and learn. (#6/p.238)

This student makes the point that she wants to succeed in academic culture, but her primary socialization has not prepared her to take the risks success involves. I'm pleased that, through an intercultural approach, she was able to find a comfortable space where she felt she could "stretch and learn."

Conclusion:

Even though most of my composition students experienced shock when they first encountered academic culture, and despite the many reasons they have for feeling "different" once they enter the target culture, my students demonstrated remarkable resiliency in quickly adapting. They bring a variety of coping skills—including the willingness to adapt and to have interactions with the Other—and apply them to the situations they face in the classroom. However, the instructor has the power to assist them in becoming comfortable and functional in academic

culture by creating academic activities that include or provide intercultural approaches, as well. While I hesitate to take full credit, I do believe that the fact that so many of my students stopped feeling shocked and started feeling "like everyone else" in a relatively brief period of time can be attributed to the ongoing and cumulative effects of intercultural activities.

Chapter Summary

Although the majority of students reported experiencing some degree of culture shock at the beginning of the semester, three weeks later, about sixty percent reported that they never or very seldom felt "outclassed" at MCC. This result was a surprise to me as I expected more students to report discomfort. Even more surprising to me were the reasons students provided for feeling outclassed by peers. Given the diversity of my classroom, I had expected issues of race, class, religion and language to be raised, but of these, only language was mentioned directly, and by many fewer students than anticipated. The other reasons for feeling different from others included financial worries, being older than most other students, a natural tendency towards shyness or self-consciousness, or simply feeling less academically prepared and/or mentally able than their fellow students.

Students who did report feeling different from their peers described several ways of coping with their distress, but none described engaging in oppositional behavior or having the emotions, such as anger, resentment and alienation, that underlie it. This may be attributable to the fact that, despite coming from communities that are noted for producing oppositional students, community college students are adults who elect to attend classes rather than adolescents who are forced by law to attend.

Most students coped with academic culture by making additional efforts to fit in, whether that meant studying harder, making use of institutional support systems or making conversation with other students. However, several instructor-designed activities also became coping mechanisms, such as the use of online discussion boards, collaborative assignments and intercultural feedback. The

"cross-pollination" between academic and intercultural activities appears to create a supportive learning environment, especially for students new to academic culture.