“When I grade a paper, I do not look at the name. I grade the paper for content”:
Teacher Perceptions of Students at a Hispanic Serving Institution

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Abstract

In spring 2005, at a South Texas four-year university designated an HSI, the researchers hosted focus groups of first-year writing teachers to determine if faculty perceptions fit with findings from a survey that was previously administered to university students to determine literate and language practices. In examining the rhetoric of the participant comments, researchers determined that although faculty members strive to understand the cultural backgrounds and needs of their students, Victor Villanueva’s concept of “color blindness” may be at play in terms of what faculty are attempting to do and what their language illustrates about their perceptions of students. Focus group discussions revealed how teachers struggle with stereotypical views of students and more informed and complex understandings of students, and between “standards” and being attentive to needs and backgrounds of students. Racial and ethnic differences were intertwined with issues of class, familial educational background, scholastic preparation, and regional difference. Based on the findings, suggestions for teacher preparation were made.

As the Hispanic population continues to grow and as institutions of higher education seek to find ways to retain Hispanic students and provide opportunities for success for these students, how should we change our perspectives regarding this “group” and the practices that we participate in to determine and/or learn/acquire beliefs about students in this group? As part of a larger project in which surveys were administered to determine the language and literate practices of Hispanic students our south Texas, four-year Hispanic-Serving Institution, focus groups were conducted to determine if the descriptors revealed in the survey matched the beliefs and resulting practices of instructors of first year English courses in the First Year Writing Program at that same institution.

The survey, conducted with 481 first year students revealed that most of the Hispanic students who participated in the study were monolingual English speakers, and even those students who were bilingual or spoke some Spanish did not predominantly use Spanish when participating in literate practices (Araiza, Cardenas, & Loudermilk Garza, 2007). The survey also revealed that the characteristics of the Hispanic student “group” were very similar to the White student group, with economic levels being better indicators of shared characteristics than cultural group identity.
As Victor Villanueva (2006) explains in “The Rhetorics of the New Racism or The Master’s Four Tropes,” while “we are ideologically affected...our assumptions about how the world works are influenced by—might even be created by—the language we receive and use. Large things, World views,” we are “also affected by the language we don’t use.” And, pointing to Burke’s work, Villanueva reminds us that “we are affected often not consciously.” So, our survey showed us one thing, and we wondered what the language, the world views that affect these instructors would mean in regard to their beliefs and practices toward Hispanic students in their classrooms.

In “Centering in the Borderlands: Lessons from Hispanic Student Writers,” Beatrice Mendez Newman (2003) writes that for many Hispanic students

“Literacy in English develops in school settings and is not reinforced in homes where grandparents, parents, and other relatives and family friends speak some version of border Spanish; where books, newspapers, and other reading materials are rare; and where family comes above everything else—including school attendance and school work” (p. 46).

These Hispanic scripts that Mendez Newman talks about such as the importance of family and oral literacy are the beliefs that many instructors operate under when it comes to teaching practices at Hispanic Serving Institutions.

In “Becoming a Border Pedagogy Educator: Rooting Practice in Paradox,” Elizabeth Garza (2007) advocates for certain critical pedagogical practices to help Hispanic students achieve academic success. She writes, “Incorporating Border Pedagogy conversations into my courses opened the door of possibility. My students frequently made spontaneous connections and applications between their Border Pedagogy experiences and their instructional practice” (Garza, 2007, p. 6). This practice of Border Pedagogy reinforces the belief that when teaching Hispanic students, teachers must adapt to the students’ needs to help them understand academic discourse. Similarly, Dora Ramirez-Dhoore and Rebecca Jones talk about incorporating a “Proper Pedagogy” in the classroom when teaching Hispanic students. In “Discovering A ‘Proper Pedagogy’: The Geography of Writing at the University of Texas-Pan American,” Ramirez-Dhoore and Jones (2007) argue that a “proper pedagogy” will help Hispanic students obtain that academic tools they need to survive in the academia (p. 64). Both authors discuss their experiences in the classroom and illustrate how their students struggle to understand academic discourse due to the fact that English is not their native language.

In contrast, Araiza, Cardenas, and Loudermilk Garza (2007) present a portrait of different Hispanic students when they studied first year students at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. In “Literate Practices/Language Practices: What Do We Really Know about Our Students?”, they presented the results of a study to identify how Hispanic students engage in literate practices in English, Spanish, and/or code-switching. The results of the survey revealed that many of the Hispanic students’ first language was English rather than Spanish, and that they used English when participating in most literate practices, especially those requiring reading or writing. In essence, this study contradicted the assumption that all Hispanic Serving Institutions must operate under an English Language Learners paradigm when teaching Hispanic students.

In this article we will build on this research that illustrates the need to examine our pedagogies and perspectives regarding Hispanic students. We present information gathered through focus groups that are part of the larger research project to examine literate and language practices, and discuss the implications of this information as it relates to teacher preparation.
First Year Writing Program

The institution studied is a regional, masters and doctoral-granting Hispanic Serving Institution that focuses on “students of high potential, especially those from groups who have been historically under-represented in Texas higher education” (Institutional Mission, 2008). It enrolls 37% Hispanic/Latino undergraduate students, most of whom are from Texas and whose first language (and for many only language) is English.

The First Year Writing Program offers two semesters of composition to the approximately 800 (out of approximately 1200) first year students who do not enter the university with prior credit for that course. These composition courses focus on argument, research, and academic writing. The majority of composition courses are linked in learning communities to a seminar course (an immersion in active learning) and one or two large lecture core courses. Students who have not passed the entrance exam (THEA) are mainstreamed into composition and are required to visit the writing center in their first semester. Assuming they pass their writing course and visit the center, most developmental writers “exit” this program at the end of the fall semester.

The students in this program are usually from the local region, many are Hispanic, many are first generation, and many work. Our students struggle with demands on their time from work and family, in addition to school.

Methods

The three semi-structured focus group sessions were conducted during the spring of 2005. The purpose of the focus group sessions was to explore the knowledge and perceptions instructors had regarding Hispanic students and Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Participants were faculty and instructors who were teaching composition 1302 courses during the spring of 2005. Participants included three members of the English department who were tenure-track specialists in writing. In addition, eight graduate student teachers in the masters’ program that focuses on rhetoric and composition participated, so all had some knowledge of current theories of teaching writing. Of the eleven participants, nine were women, three of whom were Hispanic. Of the two men, one was Hispanic. Seven of the eleven were White. No compensation was offered for participation in the focus group study. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, per the consent forms and paperwork submitted to the IRB.

Transcription and Coding

Audio recordings were transcribed in such a way to record turns but not interruptions, pauses, back channeling, or other phatic communication. Each researcher evaluated each session and categorized each turn. Initially, the researchers independently identified common themes from the transcriptions. Subsequently, the research team shared findings and derived a list of the common themes. The findings are presented below.

Findings

Dominant Themes: Students as Individuals and Being Sensitive to Backgrounds

The most prevalent themes emerging out of the focus groups relate to what participants were attempting to do in the classroom. Their comments could be organized into two dominant themes—statements articulating an emphasis on treating/dealing with students at the individual level and statements suggesting an attempt to be sensitive to the backgrounds/needs of the students.
Five of the eleven participants spoke directly about the student as an individual. Sarah says, “Remember to look at your students as individuals rather than as a homogenous group. As an undergraduate in Del Rio, there is a gap in education. I remember that a professor had a hard time helping students because of the gap in the education and knowledge. I believe that the answer to that is having a lot of one-to-one time with students. Keeping things toward individuals” (FG 2, 118). Similarly, Maria states, “I do look at where they come from and try to be sensitive to their needs. When I look at their portfolios, I try to assess them individually” (FG 1, 63).

These and similar comments espoused embodied a meritocratic ideology. Students’ work should be evaluated. Feedback and judgments should be based on the current skill set and work product of each individual. Participants’ comments revealed the idea that stereotypes and pre-conceived notions should not color how instructors evaluate and assist students with their work.

Though there was a strong emphasis on the individual student and what he/she brought into the classroom, participants of the focus groups also expressed a desire to be sensitive to the students’ backgrounds. During a part of the interview that addressed how participants prepared for teaching first-year English classes, Ivy comments, “Going back to what Maria said about respect, [one should try] to get an understanding about their background on the first day. Most of the students that did work were Hispanic and a lot of those students spend a lot of time [coming to see me] during office hours” (FG 1, 41). Stacy continues with the theme saying, “I’m sensitive [to] where they are coming from. I understand that some of these topics are difficult for them...” (FG 1, 52) to which Ivy adds, “I try very hard to find material to make it relevant to their needs” (FG 1, 53). When one participant comments, “The way my courses are set up, it can encompass all the needs of the students. I did not exactly cater to one culture” (FG 3, 183), Harper comments, “I think cultural sensitivity is important not only to faculty but to students as well... I think it is important to address this issue” (FG 3, 184).

To tend to students’ needs, instructors try to be considerate of students’ backgrounds and personal circumstances. This consideration for some participants implied a need to take into consideration the students’ cultural background. And, this consideration, for at least one focus group participant, takes place quickly—“on the first day.” Though participants want to access students individually, the goal to connect what students are learning to “what they need” still requires sensitivity to what students are bringing with them to the classroom. When one participant tries to negate the role of culture in the organization of the instruction, another participant re-asserts culture’s importance which leads to the question of how race/ethnicity/culture is discussed by the participants.

Perceptions about Race/Ethnicity

Nearly all of the participants of the focus groups addressed the issue of race/ethnicity, and their statements can be organized into three schools of thought—those (a total of three participants) whose comments articulated/alluded to differences between Whites and Hispanics, those (a total of four) who de-emphasized race/ethnicity by suggesting other characteristics were more salient, and those (a total of three) whose comments (in) directly reflected both types of beliefs.

Several spoke about experiences with or observations of Hispanics that implied or expressed a difference between Hispanic and White behaviors/values. The importance of the role of family for Hispanics was a dominant theme for those who seemed to notice differences. The importance of family for Hispanics manifested itself in the classroom for Erica; she noted, “...In the Hispanic culture, they use the family as a form of evidence [for support of their arguments in their composition
papers] and that is something I had to get used to” (FG 3, 187). Others’ comments suggest unique intersections of race and gender in Hispanics’ experiences. Erica offered, “I notice a large portion of Hispanic women. I found out that men want to stay and make money and women go to school” to which Jose (who comes from a predominantly Hispanic community) adds, “Most of the men that I know from back home--I heard a lot go to different functions such as the Army and etcetera” (FG 3, 223-4).

While the observations of some suggested the existence of White-Hispanic differences, others made direct and indirect statements that de-emphasize the racial difference. On the one hand, some comments suggested the participants believed that Whites and Hispanics are similar. Stacy asserts, “I don’t see that many differences between my students,” while shortly thereafter, Maria says, “I feel that most Hispanics don’t embrace their culture. Many of the Hispanics here do not know how to speak Spanish. I feel that there is no difference here between Hispanics and Whites” (FG 1, 71 and 74). Echoing a similar theme, Kraver notes, “…This community does not speak Spanish… I feel that it is a pressure to assimilate” (FG 3, 174). On the other hand, there are participants that suggest that characteristics other than the race/ethnicity of students play a greater role in students’ experiences. For example, Shannon notes that international students’ command of the written language is probably better than those of the area the university is serving (FG 3, 212). Shannon’s comments suggest that as a region the student population is similar, especially when one compares local students’ skills with international students.

Comments by several participants either addressed or alluded to both Hispanic-White differences as well as their similarities. For example, Jones recalls, “When we talk about our students being first generation it is very important. There is nobody to coach them or support these students… There was one experience when a young Hispanic female who wanted to come to college here and her father did not understand why she wanted to go” (FG 2, 97). Here Jones’s evokes both themes simultaneously. On the one hand her comments allude to the shared experiences of students who do not have parents/family members that can help them so (students) negotiate college life, while at the same time she evokes a popularly-held view that Hispanics tend to emphasize family over education. Similarly, Sarah noted, “My daughter’s Hispanic friend from high school had a scholarship but passed it up because her family wanted her to get married and have kids…” (FG 2, 98), and later she added, “I run into more quiet Hispanic females than Anglo females. In this atmosphere [Hispanic females] are not used to it. If they don’t have to talk, they won’t” (FG 2, 104). Though Sarah’s comments suggest White-Hispanic differences, she also discusses their similarities. While talking about first-generation students, Sarah noted, “... whether you are Anglo or Hispanic, they are going to have some problems because of the way the educational system is set up” (Focus group 2, 101) Later, while discussing the level of development and comfort with material, Sarah contributes, “More serious students stick together and less serious students hang out together (Focus group 2, 131).

While there were several participants who emphasized the similarity between whites and Hispanics, the remaining participants either directly or indirectly noted the differences. Many of their comments evoke stereotypes about Hispanics that are dominant in public discourse. Present in the participants’ comments is the image of the quiet, submissive Hispanic female as well as Hispanics having a culture that de-emphasizes education. Hispanics, particularly Hispanic men, valued work and family over education, and Hispanic values conflicted with continuing one’s education. There is a strong cultural deficiency tone in the observations participants made about Hispanics and their families. One might infer, then, that the reason for the gaps in educational attainment between
Whites and Hispanics has much to do with the differences in their culture. Even for one participant who did not see the role of ethnic cultural background, the participant still saw students coming from the local area as having less training and preparation than students from elsewhere.

Some of the participants also emphasized the role of external factors shaping educational opportunities. First-generation status was seen as a significant challenge to student success; those who noted the challenges of being a first-generation student were first-generation students themselves. Thus, their own experiences could have possibly made them attentive to that issue. Moreover, the role of generational status (being of the generation Y as opposed to the Baby Boom generation) and technological change were seen as impacting the skills and needs of the students. These characteristics, again, allude to the participants’ own experience. Potentially, the salient characteristics identified by the participants are important issues shaping the participants’ own experience, thereby heightening their sensitivity to those issues.

*Perceptions about Working at a Hispanic Serving Institution*

Whether or not participants believed racial/ethnic differences existed, most espoused the need to get to know the students and be, at least, attentive of their backgrounds. It was apparent that knowing the context from which students were coming was important for the participants. Ironically, not all the participants seemed to be as versed about the institutional context in which students would be learning.

When asked about Hispanic Serving Institutions—what they were and the populations they serve, many participant comments demonstrated a lack of familiarity with either the role of Hispanic Serving Institutions or the diversity of the population such institutions can serve; only one participant actually offered a definition for a Hispanic Serving Institution. Stacy stated, “I never really thought about what that means. I just felt that it is an institution that helps Hispanics or local [universities] that serve Hispanics.” (FG 1, 81). Sarah commented, “I did not know it [TAMU-CC] was designated as a HSI. I [expected it] to have more of a Hispanic population. I am surprised how different it is from Del Rio being a border town; Corpus is not exactly a border town” (FG 2, 84). Others seemed struck that their Hispanic students did not speak Spanish. Harper comments, “The population here I noticed that many of the Latino students do not speak Spanish” to which Kraver added, “In my classes, too. I noticed some of the Hispanic students cannot speak it at all…” (FG 3, 164-165).

Participants’ comments still imply the use of stereotypes. Participants’ comments showed that they held pre-conceived notions about Hispanic Serving Institutions and the student population being served. Participants noticed that students didn’t speak Spanish, that there was a substantial non-Hispanic population at this Hispanics Serving Institution. The image of a homogeneous Hispanic population persists.

The term “Hispanic Serving Institution” is one which, if not informed about what constitutes a Hispanic Serving Institution, embodies an advocacy tone—this institution serves Hispanics. That tone appears to be dilemma for some. Jose stated, “I always felt uncomfortable with the term Hispanic Serving Institution because what about Asians, African Americans, and etc. Why not call it a different name?” (FG 3, 169). Jose is very much interested in seeing his students succeed, but his goal is universalistic not particularistic—everyone’s individual strengths and situations should be considered. While talking about being sensitive to students needs and backgrounds, Maria says, “[Accessing students at the individual level] is difficult to do; however, I believe there should be a standard” to which Ivy replies, “I think there has to be a standard. To a certain extent I think that it is hard to put a standard on a student based on the way I was a student.” When asked if she then
modifies standards to accommodate different backgrounds, Ivy replies, “There is a standard in my classroom. The students know what an A paper, B paper, and etc is. The students understand the requirement... When I grade a paper, I do not look at the name. I grade the paper for content” (FG 1, lines 63-65).

These comments suggest that the participants wanted to be clear that though they were trying to focus on individuals and trying to be sensitive to students’ backgrounds, there was a uniformity in expectations about the work students produce. The participants’ comments return to the invocation of the meritocratic theme discussed much earlier. Participants made clear that they were not extending special treatment to one group of students over the other. Being sensitive to needs and backgrounds was not to be equated with lowering expectations or standards. This is worth noting because the participants emphasis on this suggests that there is a concern that being sensitive to background and culture is synonymous with lowering standards.

Conclusions
Participants’ comments are laden with contradictions. On the one hand, there is the desire to be attentive to individual students, yet when participants discussed Hispanic students and Hispanic Serving Institutions, stereotypes and “common knowledge” about Hispanics were often mentioned. Equally worth noting is that when discussing being attentive to students’ needs and background, some felt compelled to affirm that they did have standards regarding work products.

Though the participants emphasized the desire to focus on the needs and background situations of the participants, participants’ comments still reflected stereotypes and themes prevalent in public discourse about Hispanics. Present in the conversations were images of the docile Hispanic female, the Hispanic culture emphasizing family and work over education, and the Hispanic student as a Spanish speaker. All of these images collectively reflect the perception of the Hispanic student as a member of an at-risk population. The prevalence of those comments speaks to the prevalence of the stereotypes of Hispanic students.

These stereotypes, because they reflect national trends or media biases, run counter to what was found previously in our survey of students. This survey demonstrated that Hispanic and White students’ background experiences were not substantially different. The mothers of first year students (either White or Hispanic) had similar educational backgrounds with more than half having less than a college degree. First-year students regardless of race/ethnicity had similar educational experience. Most first-year students, regardless of race/ethnicity were monolingual English. The dominant theme that arose focused on individualism and working with each student, regardless of his or her preparation or race/ethnicity, while admirable, does also reinforce Victor Villanueva’s (2006) work on colorblindness. “The ultimate reduction, as far as I can see, is individualism. If everything is reduced to individual will, work, and responsibility, there’s no need to consider group exclusion” (5). Thus, one of the teacher’s claims the objectivity of individualism when claiming, “When I grade a paper, I do not look at the name. I grade the paper for content” (FG 1, lines 63-65). Don’t all writing teachers struggle with the concept of objectivity in grading? Are teachers able to work with each student without bias or presupposition? Does the information we gain about each student help teachers teach writing, or does it help us deny a pervasive cultural racism to which we are blind?

How do our perceptions of race and ethnicity fit into our cultural and institutional place? The issue of working at a Hispanic Serving institution is a unique one. It seems to be strikingly different than working at a Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs). When people talk about
HBCUs—like Spellman, Morehouse, Prairieview, Howard, Clark—students and faculty know where they are going; they know the history of the institutions. Faculty and students don’t seem to have that at HSIs, in part because the title is a government definition, imposed based on percent of student population and not the mission or goals of the institution. A cynic would say that the HSI brand is a means to Title V funding.

It’s also worth noting that our participants were emphasizing the idea of standards and meeting the needs of all types of people—as though, somehow, being at an HSI or thinking about race/ethnicity somehow also connotes preferential treatment and/or a loosening of standards. As Villanueva (2006) claims, “the sanctity of individualism within a meritocracy—a color-blind system—was maintained,” or is maintained, if all students are measured by the same standard (14). An HSI is a “respectable” university if its standards are maintained; it can be a vehicle for access of “minority” and “underserved populations,” in our case, primarily Mexican and Mexican-American students, if in doing so the “quality” of performance and learning is not sacrificed.

The disconnect between what the initial survey showed and what we see happening in the focus groups reinforces recent scholarship that calls for different perspectives in how we perceive, teach and interact with diverse populations. Leonardo “argues for a progressive politics of identity” that “must first address the notion that identity is a matter of difference between groups” (25). So, if we are looking for difference, we will find it whether it is there or not. “We cannot discover who we are separately from our common struggle with, against, and beyond each other, for in such a struggle one recognizes that there exists no boundaries separating ourselves from others other than those that we, ourselves, have constructed” (McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2000, p. 23).

**Teacher Preparation**

In spite of having read several articles in the composition theory and practicum courses regarding the inherent racism of the composition course (Horner & Trimbur), discourse communities (Gee, Anzaldúa) and teaching minority students (Delpit), teachers in these focus groups still expressed beliefs about students tainted by common stereotypes from public discourse. Regarding the status of the institution as an HSI, only some of the tenure track faculty had a clear vision of the definition of the HSI, and even that does not clearly provide a mission or role of the institution within its community, or even with regard to Hispanic students. These findings imply for our context that teachers need better and more accurate information about our students and the purpose and role of the HSI.

Certainly, as numbers of Hispanic college students increase across the country, there needs to be more specific and accurate information given to teachers. In addition, we agree with Villanueva that teachers (people) need to be aware of our biases and struggle with them, rather than simply accept a frame of individual merit and colorblindness as an ideal.

Administrators and those with influence should initiate critical discussions about race and ethnicity. It has been demonstrated that non-white students benefit where campus culture is more inclusive (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Programs that embrace discussions of race can help encourage appreciation for difference rather than erasure. In writing programs, certainly, graduate teachers could read Teaching Writing with Latino/a Students or Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies

Certainly, hiring Hispanic faculty and recruiting Hispanic graduate students is something we can do to make the “face” of the institution more familiar and provide a voice for the concerns of this growing population in our policies and activities.
Internal research and communication of findings to faculty, staff, and administrators can help the people at our institutions in general understand who our students are and what are their situations, based on facts rather than media presentations or stereotypes.

As our nation faces an election that is historic in racial terms, a shift in the demographics of our population in terms of race, and increasing economic pressure, it is a time when attitudes and policies will shift. We hope that universities can be in the forefront of change. In order to change attitudes we cannot be afraid to confront racism and racial identity in our classrooms and in ourselves.
References


