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ENG 506
Prendergast
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Constructions of Asian American Student Identity in the
Race and the University Rhetoric Course

Statement of the research problem:

This research project explores the effects of a multicultural curriculum on Asian American students in the college writing classroom. By studying a Race and the University (RATU) section of the first-year rhetoric course, I plan to explore the extent to which a curriculum designed around issues of race affects Asian American students' negotiations of a racial identity within this curriculum and how it affects students' understanding of the writing they are expected to produce.

By examining these issues, I believe this research will benefit writing instructors who use multicultural curriculum and base their pedagogy on theoretical frameworks associated with race. More specifically, I plan to explore what pedagogical resources would aid instructors of RATU and what RATU instructors might consider about their pedagogy to better benefit students who take part in these courses.

Review of literature relevant to the research problem:

This study will draw on educational scholarship, composition scholarship and ethnographic studies of language and race in classroom settings in order to examine the goals and effects of the RATU course. RATU is an optional section of the first-year rhetoric course that encourages students to examine the ways that race is lived out and experienced on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) campus. Instructors from the Undergraduate Rhetoric Program at UIUC apply and volunteer to teach a RATU course. RATU is housed under the Ethnography of the

University Initiative (EUI), a project that extends to different departments across campus and different Illinois colleges. The initiative encourages students to utilize ethnographic research strategies to examine the culture of their own university campus (“Ethnography of the University,” n.d.).

With the racial demographics of university students changing dramatically in the last two decades, scholars in composition studies have called for a shift in writing curriculum and instruction that adjusts to this changing student population (Olson, 2003). In addition, composition scholars have long discussed the political and social factors associated with the writing classroom and the institutional politics that influence writing instruction and the place of writing in the university (Rose, 1985; Bartholomae, 1985; Berlin, 1988). Others have called the writing classroom a site of conflict where discourses of marginalized students often found in basic writing classes collide with the discourse of the mainstream. (Lu, 1992; Lu & Horner, 1999). Despite much study into the relationship between race and writing, Olson (2003) claims that the field of composition has not yet been able to create a sustained examination of race, racism, and the effects of both on composition instruction and effective writing program administration. Thus, the field is still in need of research that examines the ways in which instructors have incorporated these issues of race and ethnicity into their instruction and curriculum, how effective these moves have been in achieving goals of the curriculum, and what effects these moves might have on students in the classroom.

Other fields across the university have researched the relationships between race, racism, instruction, and curriculum. Educational scholars have created extensive literature on this relationship and have articulated several theoretical frameworks, which include at the forefront critical pedagogy, multicultural education and critical race pedagogy. Critical pedagogy has been

an active part of educational theory since the 1980's (Jennings & Lynn 2005). Proponents of critical pedagogy see all educational sites as political and they encourage their students to question and challenge dominant power structures, develop a critical consciousness, and work for social change. (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992; hooks, 1993, 1994; Kincheloe, 2008).

Critical pedagogy and multicultural education have similar ideological, conceptual, and operational parallels, but the movements are not identical (Gay, 1995). Among the key principles of multicultural education are ideals of social justice and the end of prejudice and discrimination, affirmations of culture in teaching and learning, visions of educational equity, and cultural pluralism (Bennett, 2001). In addition, Gibson (1984) outlines five approaches to multicultural education which she claims overlap and interrelate, yet have differing objectives. These include: education of the culturally different or benevolent multiculturalism, education about cultural differences or cultural understanding, education for cultural pluralism, bicultural education, and finally multicultural education as the normal human experience. Yet because multicultural education includes many concepts and frameworks of understanding, it has been criticized for its lack of clarity, definition and purpose (Gibson, 1984; Bennett, 2001).

Despite its widespread adoption, critical pedagogy has also been critiqued for not fully taking into account race, ethnicity, culture, language, immigrant status and other contextual factors (Jennings & Lynn 2005). Thus scholars have turned to critical race pedagogy, which is based on critical race theory (CRT), a theory that originated in the work of legal scholars examining the dynamics of race in the American legal system. (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Proponents of critical race pedagogy claim that it recognizes the widespread nature of racism while remaining mindful of the necessary intersection of other oppressive social constructs such as class, gender and sexual orientation. Like critical pedagogy,

critical race pedagogy recognizes the power dynamics inherent in schooling and advocates for justice and equity in schooling and education (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Yet critical race pedagogy has not been without critique. Parker and Stovall (2005) explain that scholars have criticized CRT for actually reinforcing a racialized politics of identity and representation. In addition, they claim these constructs of racial identity ignore issues of class in a globalized economy and class divisions within racialized communities, while also providing limited answers to feminist issues (Parker & Stovall, 2005).

The debates over these complex frameworks for understanding race and education provide the backdrop for incorporation of race into writing instruction. Scholars in the field of composition studies have pulled from CRT to aid in understanding the relationship between race and power structures that are embedded in the politics of the writing classroom and call for writing instructors to incorporate CRT into their instruction and curriculum (Prendergast, 1998; Olson, 2003). Yet this move in pedagogy has not come without critique and other composition scholars have criticized the ways in which critical race scholarship limits the racial identities of students in the classroom. Young (2002) argues for the importance of addressing issues of race and ethnicity in the basic writing classroom, but challenges writing instructors to question the reasons that they bring race and ethnicity into the classroom. He cautions that bringing in these issues might continue to give minority students the identity of “other” and he argues that there are other modes of identity and experience in addition to race and ethnicity that can affect understandings of identity. In addition, several composition scholars have specifically critiqued the concept of “whiteness” emerging from critical pedagogy and critical race pedagogy and have called for more complex and fluid notions of white student identity that consider class and other social factors (Trainor, 2002, 2008; Beech, 2004). Trainor (2008) also critiques the effectiveness of multicultural pedagogy and critical race

pedagogy that seeks to challenge students' views of racism by simply exposing them to texts about race or texts written by writers of color. She maintains that students react to this curriculum in complex ways due to emotioned responses reinforced through larger school discourses, as well as their class and family backgrounds.

Other than Trainor's work, a year-long ethnographic study at an all-white high school, there is little scholarship in the field of composition that engages in long-term study of the effects of multicultural and critical race pedagogy on one racial group of students in a writing course. Therefore, my research examines the models of identity that multicultural curriculum or critical pedagogy creates for instructors and students through a focused examination of Asian American students, a racial group whose position in this scholarship remains unexamined. I explore how Asian American students respond to and are affected by multicultural curriculum and how their understanding of their racial identity is influenced and interrogated through instruction and curriculum based on critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and critical race pedagogy.

In my research, I will be building on ethnographic research outside of composition that has attempted to understand the complex networks of meaning and culture that affect the construction of identity of Asian American students. Goto (1995) used ethnographic research methods to study a group of Chinese American high school students and argues that Asian American students work out their identity not through traditionally conceived means of family and home culture, but through a language of school success, which includes academic identity, fitting into social groups, and adherence to the norms of the school's curriculum. In addition, Goto claims that the Asian American students he observed were able to negotiate and fluctuate their identities by appealing to acceptance to different social groups and choosing whether to adhere to academic expectations. Thus, Goto points to a particular flexible and fluid rhetorically constructed racial identity that was

available to Asian American students and not available to other racial groups in the school as easily.

Park (2008) also argues for the complication of the pan-ethnic identity label given to and used by Asian American students. In his ethnographic study, he interviewed eighty-eight Asian American students at several universities across the country and found that two cultural discourses have created a tension in the Asian American identity: one that emphasizes the racial otherness of being “Asian American” and another that emphasizes cultural diversity within the label. He calls these interrelated and simultaneous influences “racialized multiculturalism” (pp. 556). Students, then, are presented with conflicting ways in which to understand their Asian American identity. I will expand this concept of “racialized multiculturalism” to the place of Asian American students in the writing classroom to examine how a students’ understanding of an Asian American identity interacts with a multicultural or critical curriculum and writing pedagogy.

Despite the growing research on the Asian American student identity in other disciplines, research on Asian American students in college writing classrooms is limited and nebulous. Much scholarship has focused on ESL research in composition, but little has focused on writers who are not recent international students who have plans to return to their native country. Robinson (1995) is an exception in that he focuses his work on students that are considered immigrants or the children of immigrants. But his study focuses solely on student writing with little attention given to the complex racial identity Asian American students bring with them to the classroom. Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) also examines the 1.5 generation of immigrant students and seeks to complicate writing instructors’ definitions of second language writers, though she does not focus on Asian American students specifically.

I will, however, draw on several studies from composition scholarship to provide a basis for my own research. Two studies in particular discuss the relationship between racial identity and education. Young (2004) examines the ways a student's racial identity is negotiated through schooling. Though he focuses on African American students, he argues that students in the writing class make choices to perform a racial identity through writing and language and argues that their choices are also influenced by home life, institutional structures, and methods in writing instruction. Similarly, Tasaka (2008) studies how Asian American students rhetorically construct their racial identity through autobiographical writing. Her sample, though, is limited to three university students from Hawaii. In addition, two studies that I will draw on foreground racial identity and writing assessment. Walters (1993) examines Asian American students who participate in basic writing courses in California and blurs the boundary between these students' home lives and school lives to further understand their lack of success in writing assessment. Spack (1997) follows a Japanese international student, Yuko, as she negotiates her way through academic discourses in the university. Spack interrogates how Yuko understands her own racial identity in relation to her understanding of writing conventions and herself as a writer, as well as how instructors also constructed a racialized identity of Yuko that influenced how they evaluated her possible success in the course. Collectively, these studies show that there exists a solid foundation on which to build further research on Asian American student identity and writing pedagogy, and that more research is needed to explore how multicultural education and critical pedagogies influence this relationship.

Thus, an extended study of the RATU course at UIUC will foreground the processes of constructing a racial identity for Asian American students, the complex relationship between race and writing, and what happens when the two are taught together. Through an interview with a

current RATU instructor, my preliminary research findings show that little work has been done to articulate the goals of the RATU writing course. Yet in the classrooms that participate in this program, racial identity, researching race issues on campus, and writing conventions have brought up tensions and conflicts in the classroom between and among students, instructors, and the curriculum. In this interview, the informant explained the highly racialized environment of the writing classroom and the complications that a curriculum focusing on race raises when encountering academic discourse practices and when discussing multicultural and critical texts about race.

In addition, the subject explains her own racial identity as an Asian instructor was a factor she considered in her instruction and that the racial nature of the course heightened her awareness of her racial identity and the racial identities of her students. She maintained that students also carried with them complicated notions of identity driven by cultural expectations and experiences that created tensions with the curriculum. Asian American students in particular held fluctuating and conflicting positions in relation to the curriculum. Finally, the subject expressed the difficulty of dealing with racial conflict and racial difference in the classroom and that more pedagogical resources and support would greatly benefit her instruction. Therefore, this research will provide local benefits to RATU instructors who are looking for more resources to better understand the dynamics between racial identity and writing, and a better understanding for what is at stake for students when utilizing multicultural and critical pedagogies.

Research Plan

In this study, I blend an ideological critique of multicultural, critical, and critical race pedagogies with literacy ethnography and discourse analysis.

Observations and field notes: To collect data, I will perform a single case study of one RATU course and observe the course for one semester through “naturalistic observation” (Angrosino, 2005). In consultation with the Director of Rhetoric, I will send a solicitation email to instructors of RATU. Instructors will be informed that participation in the study is voluntary and confidentiality of the instructor’s identity will be maintained. Throughout observations, I will maintain the stance of participant observer (Stocking, 1983) and will observe the course once a week. Field notes will be taken at the field site of the classroom. I will also collect syllabi and other course materials from the instructor and will collect copies of student writing (i.e. journal writing or formal essay writing) from students participating in the study. Finally, to keep track of my research process, I will keep process notes or “writing stories” (Richardson, 2000) where I monitor day to day activities, methodological notes, decision making procedures, instrument development information, and personal notes of experiences with informants.

Interviews: I will conduct a series of individual interviews with the instructor of the course that I am observing. Interviews will be digitally audio-taped and transcribed. The instructor will be informed that s/he can withdraw from the study at any time. To protect the rights of the informant, s/he will receive and sign an informed consent form that will guarantee confidentiality. Interviews will take an unstructured approach, or what Fontana and Frey (2000) call “the open-ended, ethnographic (in-depth) interview” (pp. 652). I intend for the relationship I have with my informant to be “collaborative” (Fontana & Frey, 2000). I will interview the instructor during the first week of the course, and then once a week throughout the semester to keep track of the

instructor's thought process as it changes throughout the semester. The following are projected questions that may change during the course of research.

Initial interview questions for instructor:

1. How long have you been a writing instructor?
2. How did you decide to teach college writing?
3. How long have you been a RATU instructor?
4. How did you decide to teach a RATU course?
5. What are the goals you have for your RATU course?
6. How do you typically prepare to teach a course each day?
7. How did you choose the texts to include in your syllabus?
8. What experiences have you had in the past with multicultural readings, classrooms, or activities? When did you first begin to learn about issues of race? What was your first memory learning about race? How do you think those influence your teaching?

Follow up interview questions for instructor:

1. What texts have generated what you believe to be successful student response?
2. What texts have generated what you believe to be disappointing student response?
3. What assignments, discussions, or class activities do you think prompted the most successful student work?
4. What assignments, discussions, or class activities were the least successful?
5. What do you think is the most difficult part of teaching the RATU course?
6. Has there been anything that students have said in class or in their writing that has bothered or disturbed you?
7. Do you think students of different races respond to the course differently? How do you think Asian American students respond?
8. During class discussion, [you/a student] said _____. What are your thoughts on this discussion?
9. In [this student's writing], s/he wrote _____. How did you respond to reading this?

I also plan to conduct interviews with students in RATU courses. In consultation with the Director of Rhetoric and RATU instructors, I will send a solicitation email to students enrolled in RATU courses. I will explain to students that I am conducting research on Asian American students in RATU courses.

In the past three decades, research in educational studies and social sciences has established the benefits of focusing research studies on particular cultural groups (Labov, 1972; Heath, 1983;

Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Klass, 2006). I plan to research Asian American students for the benefit of further understanding how curriculum affects a specific minority group and for the benefit of better understanding an under-examined racial group, though my research procedure will also ensure that no specific students or student population has been targeted. Students will be asked to contact me through email if they are willing to participate. Students will be responsible for identifying their own racial identity. I will interview all students who are willing to participate.

Students will be informed that participation in the study is voluntary and confidentiality of the students' identities will be maintained. Students will be informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time and will be told that participation in the study in no way affects their work or assessment in the course, nor will their instructors be informed of their responses or their participation in the study. Interviews will be digitally audio-taped and transcribed. To protect the rights of the informants, all subjects will receive and sign an informed consent form that will guarantee their confidentiality. Interviews will take place in a public location and will take an unstructured approach, or what Fontana and Frey (2000) call "the open-ended, ethnographic (in-depth) interview" (pp. 652) which will be constructed out of the shared language of the class. I intend for the relationship I have with my informants to be "collaborative" (Fontana & Frey, 2000). I will interview the students once during the first week of the course, and once every month during the semester. The following are projected questions that may change during the course of research.

Initial interview questions for students:

1. Tell me a little bit about your background. Where did you grow up? How would you describe your family? Friends? Community?
2. What activities are you involved in or want to be involved in outside of course work?
3. Why did you enroll in this class? What did you hope to get out of this class?

4. What did you think when you heard this course was a RATU course?
5. What kinds of experiences have you had in the past with multicultural readings, classrooms, or activities? When did you first begin to learn about issues of race? What was your first memory of learning about race?
6. What does it mean to be Asian American? What does it mean to be Asian American in college?
7. How would you describe your experience as an Asian American?
8. What do you think perceptions are about Asian Americans?

Follow up questions for students:

1. How would you describe the readings you're reading for your RATU course?
2. What has been your most/least favorite reading so far?
3. What does [this class reading] mean to you? What is it about?
4. Is [this reading] a good reading for a writing class? Would you assign it if you were a teacher? What do you think it teaches students?
5. The instructors said _____ in class. What do you think s/he meant by that?
6. What were your opinions about [this class discussion]?
7. Have the readings or class discussions shown you anything about race, gender, or class that you didn't know before?
8. Do you think other students in the class understand [this text/discussion] differently than you? Why?
9. How has your writing or understanding of writing changed in this course, if at all?
10. How has your understanding of race change in this course, if at all?
11. Do you think race should be studied in a writing course? Why or why not?

Confidentiality: To ensure confidentiality of the data, I will keep digital copies of interviews on a password protected personal computer. Field notes and other materials will be kept in a secured file cabinet. No records will be created or retained that could link participants to personally identifiable descriptions, paraphrases, or quotations. Actions or interview data may be presented without specific reference to the participants, reference only by pseudonym, and combined anonymously with the actions and words of other participants. Data will be preserved to support ongoing analysis.

Risks: The probability of harm or discomfort for subjects of this study is minimal. Subjects are not projected to be exposed to risk greater than that which is encountered in everyday life. Students

and instructors will be asked to reflect on their interactions and performance in the classroom, which may influence their attitude toward their work in the course. Students will be informed that their participation in the study will not be disclosed to their instructors and participation in the course in no way affects their work or assessment in the course.

Benefits: Locally, this study will benefit instructors within the RATU program, where an understanding of the goals of a RATU course are ambiguous. My hope is that this study will lead to the collection of practical resources for RATU instructors on multicultural curriculum and course materials, and that this study will benefit future RATU instructors and RATU students. More generally, the value of this study is in expanding the scholarship of multicultural and critical pedagogies for composition instructors in order to better understand how students are affected by the choices of instructors and how to better achieve goals or social equality and justice through their curriculum.

Informed Consent for Instructors

Description and Purpose of the Research

Through the University of Illinois and the Center for Writing Studies, Eileen Lagman is conducting research on Asian American students participating in Race and the University (RATU) courses. The purpose of this research is to understand how multicultural education influences Asian American students' understanding of their racial identity and their writing. Due to your position as a RATU instructor, you have been asked and have volunteered to participate. Participation in this study will involve weekly observation of your course and a weekly interview lasting 20-30 minutes for the duration of one semester (16 weeks).

Confidentiality and Voluntary Nature of Participation

In this study, every effort will be made not to reveal personally identifiable information in publications based on this research. To accomplish this, no records will be created or retained that could link you to personally identifiable descriptions, paraphrases or quotations. Your actions or things you say may be presented without specific reference to you, reference only by pseudonym, or combined anonymously with the actions and words or other participants.

The interviews will be audio-taped. The audiotape and interview notes will be kept in a secured location and accessible only to the researcher. You can refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may participate, decline, or withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

Risks and Benefits

Your participation in this project should not involve risks beyond those of ordinary life. You will not be paid for your participation in this research, nor is it expected that your participation will bring you any benefits, tangible or otherwise. It is hoped that researchers in composition, education, and race, future RATU instructors, and future students of RATU will benefit from the results of this study.

If you have questions about the project or wish to withdraw, you may contact the Principal Investigator Professor Catherine Prendergast at (217) 333-2345 or cprender@illinois.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at Suite 203, 528 East Green Street Champaign, IL 61820, (217) 333-2670. (You may call collect if you identify yourself as a research subject) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Consent Statement

I have read and understand the forgoing description of this research project, including information about the risks and benefits of my voluntary participation.

I give my permission for interviews to be audio taped _____ (Please check to grant consent)

Signature

Date

Print Name

There are two copies of this form. Please sign both. Return one to the researcher and keep one for your records.

Informed Consent for Students

Description and Purpose of the Research

Through the University of Illinois and the Center for Writing Studies, Eileen Lagman is conducting research on Asian American students participating in Race and the University (RATU) courses. The purpose of this research is to understand how multicultural education influences Asian American students' understanding of their racial identity and their writing. Due to your position as a student in a RATU course, you have been asked and have volunteered to participate. Participation in this study will involve an interview during the first week of the semester and monthly interviews lasting 20-30 minutes for the duration of one semester.

Confidentiality and Voluntary Nature of Participation

In this study, every effort will be made not to reveal personally identifiable information in publications based on this research. To accomplish this, no records will be created or retained that could link you to personally identifiable descriptions, paraphrases or quotations. Your actions or things you say may be presented without specific reference to you, reference only by pseudonym, or combined anonymously with the actions and words of other participants.

The interviews will be audio-taped. The audiotape and interview notes will be kept in a secured location and accessible only to the researcher. You can refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may participate, decline, or withdraw from participation in the study at any time.

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If you have questions about the project or wish to withdraw, you may contact the Principal Investigator Professor Catherine Prendergast at (217) 333-2345 or cprender@illinois.edu.

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