Framing the “Arguments on Global Issues” Project Assignment

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Sometimes I look at other professors at my college and I briefly envy the fact that they teach courses that are much more content-driven than skill-driven (as composition courses are). Some days I feel like it must be so much easier to design and implement assignments that assess students’ learning in that type of class. Most of the time, though, I am grateful that as a composition professor I can be so very creative in designing assignments to assess students’ abilities to write, to understand and create rhetoric, to form sound arguments, and so forth. That said, because there are so many possible ways to evaluate writing students, it is sometimes difficult to choose how to focus my efforts as a composition instructor. I want my assignment design choices to be supported by pedagogical reasoning and research from my peers. This paper will provide an example of my assignment design process and rationale: specifically, I will share how I chose to frame a major project for my English I (FYC) course using critical and cultural studies pedagogical theories and research.

The Genre and Context of My Project Assignment

I created an assignment sheet for a major, multi-step project that take place in the middle of my FYC course’s semester (we’d use it in the class after I have introduced and reviewed the basic principles of writing, rhetoric, and argument but before I have asked students to practice a formal, academic style of writing). Students will be familiar with the basic concepts at the beginning of the Arguments on Global Issues project; the project will serve as a practice ground to deepen their understanding and to further develop related skills. It will also serve as an opportunity to teach students more about research—i.e., how to find, evaluate, summarize, cite, and integrate sources.
Because the project is so large, entailing a number of smaller assignments along the way, the assignment sheet I have created will serve as the introduction to the project’s approximate month-long module in my course. Specific assignment details—including those related to evaluation—would not be provided at that time to avoid overwhelming students. The purpose of the assignment sheet is to introduce students to the “big picture” of the project on Day 1 of the new module. After handing out and reviewing this assignment sheet, we as a class would then begin a discussion on the types of global issues that students might consider working with for the project (e.g., climate change, women’s and minorities’ rights, globalization as an economic force, etc.).

**The Pedagogical Theories & Research that Inform My Assignment’s Design Choices**

As noted in the introduction, my choices regarding the design of the “Arguments on Cultural Issues” Project were primarily influenced by critical pedagogy and cultural studies pedagogy. The two pedagogies work well together, since both share—to some extent—the aim of encouraging students to value social justice and diversity. I will begin by discussing how aspects of critical pedagogy influenced my assignment design and then do the same in regard to cultural studies pedagogy.

**Critical Pedagogy**

I could have very easily dictate to my students the global issue that I would like them to research and analyze but doing so would remove some of their individual agency. However, like Ann George, I am more “attracted to student-centered pedagogies and themes of social justice” (77); therefore, as much as possible I like to leave room for students to make their own choices regarding their writing, particularly in terms of topic selection. George identifies one of the aims of critical pedagogies to be a “respect for difference” (80), which is exactly what my assignment
is designed to encourage students to develop: a respect for foreign (non-U.S.) perspectives on issues that impact the world. Furthermore, by asking students to break down a foreign argument on a global issue, I think the exercise also specifically encourages students to practice the type of critical thinking and argument development that is so important in democratic cultures, in the civic realm.

Critical pedagogies and their social justice values have informed my assignment design in other ways, as well. For example, in writing about social justice education, Heather W. Hackman argues that “information acquisition is an essential basis for learning. Without complex sources of information, students cannot possibly participate in positive, proactive social change. Importantly, factual information must not merely reproduce dominant, hegemonic ideologies but instead represent a range of ideas” (104). By requiring my students to find, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize research that offers complex and perhaps even alien-to-them arguments and facts, I am supporting such information acquisition endeavors that Hackman describes and I am teaching students how to conduct such endeavors so they can continue to do them in the future on other issues. Hackman adds that students must be asked to “critically examine” such information (which is what I do by asking them to write an annotated bibliography and to break down an argument using Toulmin’s model) and to “dialogue about it with others (which I will encourage in class throughout the project, including when students share their multimodal pages on their findings with each other) (105).

Furthermore, critical pedagogy encourages instructors and students to question traditional power structures, including, as Hackman said, the dominant narratives on political and social issues. Felecia M. Briscoe and Muhammad A. Khalifa argue, “people who have been silenced, excluded, or otherwise oppressed have all too often had their stories told by those of the
dominant group (middle-class, European-American males)—and all too often those stories have constructed negative identities for those who have been traditionally oppressed (e.g., Briscoe, 2005). When [people] from diverse social spaces and places tell their own stories, they produce counter-narratives” (6). While I am not suggesting that other people outside of the U.S. have necessarily been oppressed by Americans (though that may be true in regard in some circumstances), I do feel that my students are used to receiving information on global issues primarily from an American perspective—U.S. media acts as the dominant source of “storytelling” on many global issues for my students. Asking them to seek out alternative narratives will, I hope, enlighten my students and lead them to think critically of the dominant narratives in other areas of their lives.

*Cultural Studies Pedagogy*

This idea of storytelling and dominant narratives also has its place in cultural studies pedagogy, which in part concerns itself with the “politics of signification” (Drew 413). Julie Drew points out that “The term cultural studies is, from the outset, highly contested: contested in name, contested in practice, contested in politics” but adds that some of the general questions that this pedagogical approach concerns itself with are (1) who creates meaning and (2) who (re)shapes and defines culture (413). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, most of my students are used to hearing American perspectives on global issues. I wanted to challenge that by asking them to consider other, non-U.S. authors of meaning and culture by having them read texts that focus on alternative perspectives. Ideally, the texts themselves would be authored by non-U.S. citizens but I while I will encourage my students to look for such research materials I hesitate to make it a hard and fast requirement for my assignment at this time. I simply don’t know if it would be feasible because my students will require texts written in English. Based on
how my pilot semester (Fall 2017) with this project goes, I may make this an additional requirement for the sources I ask students to find and use. Regardless, cultural studies pedagogy has informed my assignment in other ways, as well.

To be honest, I could have easily selected a different theme for this project and it still would have taught students the necessary writing, research, rhetoric, and argumentation skills (and even some of the “social justice” principles) that I want them to practice. For example, I could have just as easily asked students to research issues related to gender or our local community or … really, just about anything. I specifically chose to focus on global issues because I think it is valuable for my students to expose themselves to alternative perspectives that seem particularly foreign to them. As I explained in my plans for this project, I seek not only to teach my students writing skills but also to improve their understanding of and appreciation for the lives and opinions of people who they currently disregard or view as wildly different from themselves. I believe that in our globalized world, it’s important to prepare all students (even the ones who may never leave their county or state or even county) to communicate effectively with others with different life experiences and perspectives and to learn how to research such alternative perspectives. This is partly why my opinions on this issue have been widely informed by cultural studies pedagogy.

In asking students to consider issues that impact not only themselves but also people around the globe from a non-U.S. perspective, my aim is not to diminish or devalue my students’ largely American perspectives (the vast majority of my students are native-born U.S. citizens). Rather, my intent is to open their minds (and hearts) to other non-U.S. perspectives and then have them reflect on the similarities and differences between those perspectives and their own. I’d like them to come to the conclusion that both non-U.S. and U.S. perspectives are valid and
based on real circumstances, values, and beliefs—even if they are different circumstances, values, and beliefs in some regards. This is why I designed my project to include the reflective piece described at the end of Step 2. Ultimately, I’d like my students to develop what Diana George, Tim Lockridge, and John Trimbur call a “transnational perspective” (see 102-04)—one that extends beyond their own national boundaries but doesn’t exclude their own experiences. I’d like to work on dismantling the binary Them-Us just as Paul Gilroy “proposed a transnational perspective to replace static First World-Third World, core-periphery binaries” (George, Lockridge, and Trimbur 102).

By focusing on global issues from non-U.S. perspectives, I also hope to create a learning environment that demonstrates an appreciation for diversity of all types. By valuing diversity in perspectives, I hope to model for my students that an appreciation and respect for differences doesn’t have to be threatening to personal identities. Briscoe and Khalifa write:

> University and public schools are becoming increasingly diverse: “By the year 2020, minority students will account for 45 percent of the nation’s public high-school graduates, up from 38 percent in 2009” (Hoover, 2013). This diversity presents a number of opportunities and challenges for teacher education programs, educational practitioners, and those interested in social justice. Unlike recent uses of the word, by diverse we include all races/ethnicities…, genders, economic classes, (dis)abilities, and sexual orientations. (5)

While my student population is relatively low in terms of international students, it still experiences other kinds of diversity (like those noted by Briscoe and Muhammad as well as others) and I want to show that I value such diversity by adding this “cultural studies” component in my class by way of my Arguments on Global Issues project.
Conclusion

In concluding their article on cultural studies, George, Lockridge, and Trimbur note how “cultural studies … in the late 1980s … seemed to offer an answer to the persistent question that had troubled composition over the years—namely, does composition have a subject matter? Does it have its own content?” (104). In a way, this has been the question that I have been exploring here. It’s my opinion that various pedagogies can inform the type of content composition instructors select for use in their classrooms: e.g., an instructor who values community engagement can use that to inspire her classroom activities and writing projects; an instructor who is interested in new media pedagogy might be led to design multimodal assignments; an instructor interested in a feminist pedagogy might use gender as his course theme; etc. For my part, I’m interested in all of the aforementioned pedagogies and each has had an impact in my course design in its own way. For this particular project, I have mostly been influenced, of course, by critical and cultural studies pedagogies but so long as I am able to point to a clear rationale for it, I believe I could employ just about any pedagogical approach in my composition classes. As overwhelming as the options may at times become, I truly value that freedom as a composition instructor.
Works Cited


