

One Poem at a Time: Using Culturally Sustaining and Disruptive Pedagogical Curriculum to Engage Students in Critical and Reflexive Thinking

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Abstract: One way to disrupt traditional Eurocentric teaching practices is through modifying curriculum in classes. Particularly, in an English Composition 101 course, an ongoing assignment called the Poetry Journal may assist students in thinking critically and reflexively. The concept was inspired by a high school English teacher, Brett Vogelsinger (2016), called “4 Reasons to Start Class with a Poem Each Day.” His four reasons: 1. Poems are short; 2. Poems are intense; 3. Poems connect (to other readings); 4. Poems inspire (writing). When building the assignment for a community college class, an instructor may make intentional (disruptive) choices for the poems. This article explores the project, which is grounded in culturally sustaining (Paris, 2021) and disruptive pedagogies (San Pedro, 2018)—both of which encourage the rethinking and dismantling of traditional Eurocentric-based instruction—and how the author (full-time faculty at a community college) applied said pedagogies to a specific in-class student activity to engage students in critical and reflexive thinking.

Keywords: poetry, pedagogy, English Composition, curriculum, community college

Introduction

In the spring semester of 2017, I introduced a new activity to my English Composition 101 students: poetry responses. Using literature in a classroom is not a new idea. Once upon a time, composition classes were based in and built upon literature and literary analysis. That pedagogy fell out of favor and was replaced with pedagogy focused on rhetorical analysis, writing modes (compare/contrast, evaluation, cause/effect, etc.), and critical thinking on events related to everyday life and happenings.

The change from literature to rhetoric began in the 1960s according to Tate (1993), but from my experience, rhetoric did not take full hold until the early twenty-first century. Tate explained, “What was waiting to replace literature was rhetoric, supported since the 1960s by the Rhetoric Police” (p. 318). Tate described the Rhetoric Police as “that hardy band of zealots who not many years hence were to become the dreaded enforcement arm of the Conference on College Composition and Communication” (p. 318). In other words, once rhetoric found favor over literature, researcher-scholars and instructors had to bow to the popular choice even if they disagreed with it. Tate claimed that we (first-year college English composition instructors) have lost valuable concepts and denied “our students the pleasure and profit of reading [canonical] literature” (pp. 318-319). Including literature—and specifically the canonical texts, according to Tate—offered inspiration and modeled imaginative and stylistic writing for incoming students.

Contrarily, Lindemann (1993) confronted and countered the common arguments for literature-based composition and offered five reasons for *not* including literature in writing courses: 1. “First, literature-based courses, even most essay-based courses, focus on consuming texts, not producing them” (p. 313)—instructors talk too much, students read too much and write too little; 2. College curriculum already includes humanistic content (in humanities, arts, and literature courses) (pp. 313-314); 3. Reading literature does not help teach style. “Examining literary language has limited usefulness in a writing course because our students do not write literature; they write about it or respond to it” (p. 314); 4. Interpreting literary texts “represents only one way of knowing, a process of knowledge-making peculiar to the humanities” (p. 314), and not all students (perhaps not even most students) will pursue humanities degrees; 5. “The final argument for teaching literature in freshman composition is the most insidious: it would enrich our training programs for graduate students” (p. 315). Lindemann asserted this fifth reason is especially problematic because it does not consider the actual students enrolled in freshman composition.

Per Tate’s assessment of the situation, the Rhetoric Police won out, and freshman composition changed. Like Tate, at the time it changed at my community college, I mourned the loss of basing composition on literature. As a graduate-level teaching assistant, I had learned how to teach writing using literature (Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Bean Trees* (1988) will forever have a special place in my heart). However, after making the change at the direction of the division chair, I began to understand and side with Lindemann’s points. I discovered *more* freedom in teaching by using short, relevant-to-students-and-their-life-experiences articles. Ultimately, the concepts of critical thinking and analysis being taught were the same, but the material(s) used for

delivery had changed, and many first-year students seemed relieved at not having to relive high school English (which is still literature based).

From 2008 to 2016, I maintained a strict separation of literature from composition; then, I read an article in 2016 by a high school English teacher, Brett Vogelsinger, called “4 Reasons to Start Class with a Poem Each Day.” His four reasons: 1. Poems are short; 2. Poems are intense; 3. Poems connect (to other readings); 4. Poems inspire (writing). I agreed with Vogelsinger, though I did not want to overwhelm the students with poetry, nor did I have that kind of class time to spare. I compromised. I understood the pedagogically sound practice of not using literature in a classroom and also recognized that including diverse poetical voices would disrupt traditional first-year composition hegemony. I managed to work in seven poems throughout a 16-week semester.

As a literature and writing major, I was thrilled to introduce poetry into my writing class. However, I needed a truly student-centric reason to justify its inclusion. I began reflecting on my motive and what I hoped students would learn or gain. After pondering, I established two desirable outcomes: 1. To help students understand the complexities of lives beyond their own through exposure to diverse voices (incorporating both culturally sustaining and disruptive pedagogies); 2. To align the activity with the learning outcomes of English Composition 101.

The assignment—named the Poetry Journal—became a critically reflexive tool for the students and for me. The various poems presented allowed us to gain “a depth of understanding of who we are, our social context, and our positionality” (Coburn & Gormally, 2017, p. 111), which are the core elements of critical reflexivity. Though the students may not use the words “social context” or “positionality,” the concepts appeared throughout our discussions. May and Perry (2017) explained the importance of reflexivity:

Yet our perception is mediated by ideas and the social landscapes we inhabit—we do not have unmediated access to an unproblematic reality that is then placed beyond question for all time. Specific methods to understand and explain the social world can illuminate, but are not sufficient, to overcome these issues. We need to investigate the interactions between ideas, cultures, and practices. Reflexivity is not just about the ability to think about our actions—that is called reflection—but an examination of the foundations of frameworks of thought themselves. The focus is on a second-order question concerning thinking itself and not-taking-things-for-granted. (p. 3)

The justification to include literature in my composition classroom started to materialize. Having students examine, reflect, and write on poetry—particularly poetry that represented lives and experiences outside of their own social landscape—encouraged critical and, hopefully, second-order thinking.¹

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Disruptive Pedagogy in English Composition 101

Developing curriculum based on culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and culturally disruptive pedagogy (CDP) to create the Poetry Journal activity assisted me in dismantling the too-common classroom environment where an “all-knowing” instructor imparts knowledge onto “ignorant” students. Freire (1993) called such teaching methodology the banking concept of education and explained it as follows: “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (p. 45). Instead, the Poetry Journal offered students a low-stakes assignment and an opportunity to engage in various perspectives. It also encouraged them to think critically by participating in what Freire considered humanist dialogue and critical thinking, or

thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action but constantly immerses itself temporarily without fear of the risks involved. Critical thinking contrasts with naïve thinking which sees “historical time as a weight, a stratification of the acquisitions and experiences of the past,” from which the present should emerge normalized and “well-behaved” (p. 65).

Before delving into the assignment, it is important to fully elucidate the terms CSP and CDP.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Alim et al. (2020) introduced culturally sustaining pedagogy, or CSP, which, “at its core, proposes educational contexts as sites for sustaining the lifeways of communities rather than eradicating them” (p. 262). CSP promotes a cultural shift in education from “assimilation to cultural pluralism” (p. 262) to the benefit of all students, but especially those who have been forced to assimilate to succeed according to US standards of success, which are traditionally based in memorizing and being tested on Eurocentric culture norms. CSP examines education through a critical lens that directs the flaws of the system *at* the system rather than at the learners forced to participate in an inherently biased (racist, oppressive, exclusionary) structure. CSP promotes critical thinking by:

producing learners that can interrogate what counts as “acceptable” or “canonical,” what language varieties are heard as “standard,” and what ways of knowing are viewed as “academic”—and ask how did these perspectives come to be the dominant ones, even sometimes in our own communities? (Alim et al., 2020, p. 263)

In other words, rather than accept the status quo, researchers, educators, *and* students would be best served by resisting, challenging, and *changing* the norm to include and celebrate students’ backgrounds, languages, and lifeways rather than demanding assimilation and thereby the loss (or defeat) of personal identity.

Irizarry (2017)—another advocate for CSP—posited:

a vision for culturally sustaining pedagogies that honor and seek to sustain the diverse and complex linguistic repertoires of Latinx youth, underscore the need for curriculum that is connected to the histories and present sociocultural realities of students, and provides students with opportunities for civic engagement. (p. 85)

While Irizarry specifically related CSP to Latinx students, it is applicable to all BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) folk and benefits white students as well. The author further explained that transforming curriculum is not enough to transform “the educational experiences and outcomes for students embedded in school systems that seek to reproduce race- and class-based stratification” (pp. 91-92). It is a start. To affect sustainable change, Irizarry (2017) noted building coalitions, maintaining the feeling of empowerment, and the ability to recognize “the sociopolitical contexts in which they [the students] were being educated are what moves students from apathy to agency” (p. 92).

Culturally Disruptive Pedagogy

San Pedro (2018) acknowledged the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogy and offered culturally disruptive pedagogy, or CDP. The author explicated, “As educators, researchers, and community members seek ways to sustain and revitalize cultural practices, we must also consider the ways hegemonic norms—as perpetuated by ideologies of whiteness²—require a needed disruption” (p. 1193). In an education system that continually validates white culture, history, literature, and experience, active disruptions benefit all students, but especially white students who, having been overly represented in all schooling situations (history, literature, government, etc.), have likely rarely had to deal with the tensions and conflicts that arise from learning about BIPOC cultures.

Disruptive pedagogy helps white students unlearn racism. bell hooks (2003) explained: Working with white students on unlearning racism, one of the principles we strive to embody is the value of risk, honoring the fact that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe, that the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict. (p. 64).

For many white students (and instructors), feeling unsure or unsafe may be a new experience because the long-established and upheld mainstream norms accommodate white people. San Pedro (2018) explained, “Schooling structures play a large part in reproducing Whiteness through curricular and pedagogical choices that normalize (unmark and unname) Eurocentric, monocultural knowledges” (pp. 1209-1210). Even if immediate awakening does not happen, once the “ideal” has been marked and named (disrupted), the seeds of critical thinking have been planted. Prakash (2010) maintained that literal seeds of disruption may also be sewn by moving learning outside of a classroom. The author explained:

When teachers take the initiative to create community gardens in Detroit [or any urban city], they are not only bringing new life to the city but reclaiming the art of learning. They are giving their students the opportunity to learn about themselves, about their

society, about their communities, about nature, about a different way of being—with lessons impossible within the confines of classrooms (p. 88).

Dismantling and disrupting the Eurocentric agenda in college courses (and beyond)—for me, in composition—has the potential to make the “whole school system better” (Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 7). I have specifically and actively incorporated culturally sustaining and culturally disruptive pedagogies in English Composition 101 through the Poetry Journal activity, which encourages students to consider and reflect on diversity, equity, and inclusivity.

The Poetry Journal Activity

Description

Taking guidance from CSP and CDP while combining Vogelsinger’s suggestions and my own desire to ensure diverse representation, I chose seven poems of varying lengths, subjects, and styles from various authors and genres. I gave the students the following prompt:

Throughout the semester, poems will be shared in class (at least 7 times). After the poem has been read, you'll write for 5 minutes about the poem.

You may focus on any of the following:

- Your personal reaction to the poem (you loved/hated it and why).
- Your interpretation of the poem (can you paraphrase the poem in your own words?).
- Your analysis of the poem (what is the deeper meaning of the words; what type of poem is this, etc.?).
- The topic of the poem (how does the topic or meaning of the poem relate to your life?).
- Something else that I haven't thought of, but you find interesting.

You will receive 5 points for each response. You need only write earnestly; you will not be graded on grammar or length of the response.

After we discussed the prompt, I offered an explanation to the students of why I would choose such an activity, especially because too often students consider poetry analysis a form of torture, and I want them to fully understand the assignment and take it seriously. I reminded the students of the learning outcomes, particularly numbers 1, 2, and 5: 1. Use writing for learning, thinking, and communicating to solve problems, draw logical conclusions, and create innovative ideas. 2. Identify and evaluate the main idea, major points, and supporting details in a text, film, image, or presentation. 5. Identify multiple viewpoints pertaining to a given topic and engage in verbal or written discussion of those viewpoints.

I also proposed practical reasons to participate in the Poetry Journal, including that poetry is a short, sweet way to exercise one’s brain (critical thinking), and they benefit from being exposed to what Western culture considers its highest art form. I also gave them a link to the original Vogelsinger article in case they wanted to investigate further.

The following were the seven poems in the order I assigned them with the original year of publication:

1. "Introduction to Poetry" by Billy Collins (1988)
2. "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes (1951)
3. "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question" by Diane Burns (1989)
4. "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" by Randall Jarrell (1945)
5. "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus (1883)
6. "Early in the Morning" by Li-Young Lee (1993)
7. "Hair" by Elizabeth Acevedo (2009)

Immediate Results

Each semester I have offered the activity, I have received a variety of responses to the poems, and I responded (conversationally) to each student post. Sometimes, my responses were short: "Great analysis!" while other times, they were more personal: "Thank you for sharing your connection to the poem"; still other times, I offered elaborate, critical considerations for students. I found it most important to engage with the students, not only so they knew I was reading their responses, but that I was genuinely absorbed by their ideas. At a following class session, we would also engage in brief conversation about the poem they had examined, and I would offer additional interpretation and analysis.

I have gathered student responses to each poem that, for me, demonstrate the immediate impact the poems made on students (keeping in mind I have *hundreds* of responses, positive, negative, and (rarely) apathetic)³:

★ **Collins' "Introduction to Poetry"**: *I thought the poem was nice and easy to understand metaphors. The poem seems to be about how the author wants readers to enjoy and explore the writing. Instead of focusing on what it [is supposed] to mean, find what it means to them. I think the poem can be applied to many subjects, such as enjoying all the little moments in life instead of worrying about its purpose.*

★ **Hughes's "Theme for English B"**: *My personal reaction to this poem was that I loved it because as a colored person I felt the words speaking for me.*

* * *

As a young African American comparing this to my life, I know I may look different from many, so everything that seems easy going for others is not for me, knowing the things that may interest me may not someone who is not me, racism does not affect others as it does me.

* * *

I loved this poem by Langston Hughes. I am someone of color so I can relate to the author as I read. When he states "You are white- yet a part of me as I am a part of you... Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me. Nor do I often want to be a part of

you." This hit close to me because this is true. When going to a predominantly white school, I felt that not everyone understood my place in the class. We were all the same but different.

- ★ **Burns's "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question":** *I enjoyed the poem; it's a little different from something I normally read but good. The poem is about stereotypes based off the look of the author because she's Native. It seems she's fed up with all these annoying and racist stereotypes and questions she gets asked on the daily. I can't say it really relates to my life because I haven't had to face those type of challenges, but it gives me insight to someone else's life.*

* * *

I loved Diane Burns, "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question" because I am a Native American myself and when people find out that I am Native American they ask me such questions and assume such stereotypes. They even ask if I am really Tohono O'odham and Hopi because I am light skinned compared to the "usual" Native American visuals as if I am the one that is unsure or mistaken about my ethnicity. So as I read Diane Burns, "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question" I felt seen, I felt heard which felt amazing because usually that part of me never feels represented out in the world but instead repressed and hidden. I would really love to thank you for sharing this poem with me. I am going to read it to my Native American mom so she can feel what I felt, special.

- ★ **Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turret Gunner":** *My personal reaction to the poem was that it's a devastating point of view of the poet in WW2. After listening to the poet read his poem I got the chills. His words turn into sad emotions and I felt it.*
- ★ **Lazarus' "The New Colossus":** *This poem is beautiful but I don't like it. Lady Liberty standing tall offering a safety and shelter to people in need. It is a wonderful thing to aspire to be a beacon of hope to the lost people of the world. But, it is somewhat of a façade to how things really are here in America at the current moment. It angers me that such [an] inspiring idea of America is tarnished everyday by so called "Patriots", who are nothing more than selfish children who want to deny others the opportunities that their ancestors were given.*
- ★ **Lee's "Early in the Morning":** *The way the author describes the mother's routine of putting up her hair before preparing a meal is lovely. It's nice to read about how much attention he pays to his mother to describe it the way he does. I think the underlying tone in the poem might be admiration. I like this poem, because it reminds me of when my grandma use to brush my hair and put it up before I started my day.*
- ★ **Acevedo's "Hair":** *I like how the author refuses to fix her hair to the white standard because she feels that her hair represents her culture's history and she doesn't want to fix it because there is nothing wrong with it.*

* * *

I loved this poem; I think you can hear the frustration in the words, between the lines, the imagery. you can hear the desperate calls to not forget their ancestors, I loved the Spanish language embedded in the poem. Knowing Spanish, I understood it and sometimes it's true, you can hear the unspoken words in a sentence, like a backhanded compliment. I think the steps into the future should be to embrace one's culture, not erase it to be what society wants you to be.

* * *

I have explained this same concept to all of my sisters. I hate seeing beautiful black women straighten their hair to match white woman hair. It bothers me to my soul the way society has made them believe they need to . Going beyond what their friends and media tells them they should look like my biggest fear is that they tell themselves it to. "This is what's pretty"

"This is what i should look like"

I hate to think that anyone would put themselves in that kind of mental prison. Being comfortable [in] your own skin has always been the most beautiful thing a person can be. God made us all different for a reason, our uniqueness is directly connect[ed] to our soul and embracing one requires you to embrace the other. trying to have your soul shine while being held back by others image of what you should be breaks people.

Post-survey Results

While the immediate results I received from students were satisfying to read, to discover whether I had made a genuine impact by using CSP and CDP, I needed to explore further. As such, I began offering an anonymous post-Poetry Journal survey at the end of the semester, once in spring and another in summer of 2023. Between the two English Composition 101 classes, I received 22 responses out of 36 students (a 61% participation rate).

I asked the students to reflect on the seven poems I'd given them over the semester. I began by inviting them to name their favorite and least favorite poems and to explain their choices. To dig into additional critical thinking, I further asked them if they felt the poems represented diverse voices and perspectives and requested an explanation rather than a simple "yes" or "no." To encourage students to tap into their own poetry preferences, I invited them to name a poem or poet they would like to see assigned in the Poetry Journal. Finally, I asked the students if the Poetry Journal assignment helped them meet three specific learning outcomes. (See Appendix for complete list of questions and answer options.)

Question 1 of the survey used a Likert scale to determine whether the students liked the poem; twenty students said they "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that they liked the poems presented to them over the course of the semester. Two students were neutral (not everyone likes poetry!). Nine students expressed that "Hair" was their favorite. I show the students Acevedo's 2015 video recital of the poem. In "Hair," by Acevedo, a "New York-born dominicana confronted perceptions of Black hair and Afro-Latinidad. She wrote of being told to 'fix' her hair" (Castillo, 2022). Acevedo (2009, as cited in Sinny, 2020) begins, "My mother tells me to fix my hair. And by 'fix,' she means straighten. She means whiten. But how do you fix this ship-wrecked history

of hair?” (lines 1-3). Acevedo proceeded to explain life experiences with her family who encouraged her to date and have children with white men rather than Black or Brown men because, “Have you thought of your daughter’s hair?” (line 20). Hiraldo (2003) rationalized that Latinos “tend to laud the desirable mulatto/a type with cream-colored skin, with refined but not too fine European-like noses and lips, and with straight hair” (p. 3). She ends the poem: “Momma tells me to fix my hair, and so many words remain unspoken. Because all I can reply is, ‘You can’t fix what was never broken’” (lines 28-29). The students quickly recognized the metaphor of hair for culture. A student explained why it was their favorite: “I liked the deeper meaning of being proud of your cultural identity.” Another student expressed, “I loved this poem because I could relate to it.”

Another highly favored poem was “Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question,” by Burns (1989, as cited in Winch, 2022). The poem is a one-sided conversation in which the speaker—probably an Indigenous woman, like the poet—responds to a series of stereotypical questions. The poem begins, “How do you do? No, I am not Chinese. No, not Spanish. No, I am American Indian, Native American” (lines 1-4). The responses were relatively polite at first, but as the poem proceeded, the speaker became more (understandably) frustrated and ended aggressively: “No, I didn't major in archery. Yeah, a lot of us drink too much. Some of us can't drink enough. This ain't no stoic look. This is my face” (lines 35-39). One student who could not decide on a single favorite poem stated,

It is a tie for first between “Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question,” by Diane Burns and “Hair,” by Elizabeth Acevedo. They are both poems I can relate to, being a woman of color myself. They are both strong first-person poems that depict the very real everyday struggles that women like us face or a past we have to carry.

Responses of this nature demonstrated to me that incorporating such poems accomplished the goals of culturally sustaining pedagogy because the activity, per Paris (2021), perpetuated and fostered “critical linguistic and cultural pluralism as part of positive social transformation and revitalization” (p. 366). Most of the respondents enjoyed the poems, *and* they made critical and positive connections with them.

In response to the statement “The poems chosen represent diverse voices and perspectives,” 21 students “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the poems chosen represented diverse voices and perspectives; 1 student was neutral. I had carefully and thoughtfully cultivated a list of poems inclusive of multiple races, genders, and experiences, so I was thrilled to see that the students understood my intent, which was to disrupt the traditional hegemony of critical thinking and expose the students to poets and lifeways with which they were likely unfamiliar. Blackwelder (2021) explained “the beauty of so-called disrupting texts” because “they flood the landscape with new voices, new expressions of the human condition, and new methods of showcasing how literary merit can be created” (p. 10). Though the students did not use academic lingo in their responses, they clearly “got it.” One student said,

I felt all the poems had a different perspective life and each one could have someone connect to it in a deep meaningful way. I didn't feel a deep connection to all the poems but I did for others and I think everyone could feel this as well.

Another student asserted, “The poems that were shared this semester were extremely diverse, authors from different backgrounds and cultures. I was actually pleasantly surprised because

normally when a teacher picks poetry its usually the ‘classics’, Dickenson, Poe etc.” A third student confirmed, “I’ve read about African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, and European [descent]. Each poem felt like they represented a voice and I was just happy to read them.”

Question 8 asked students to consider whether the Poetry Journal helped them meet Learning Outcomes 1, 2, and 5 for English Composition 101. Of the 22 responses, 21 of the students “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the poems assisted them in meeting the objectives for the class; 1 student was neutral. One student stated, “Helped me to see the bigger picture when analyzing writing.” Another student expressed: “It’s a good assignment that hits those 3 learning objectives. I thought about the poems, I evaluated how effective I found the ideas, points, and details, and wrote a reflection about each poem’s perspective on their main idea.”

Some students did not directly address the learning outcomes, but they demonstrated reflexivity when they described what they learned from the poems. Holmes (2010) succinctly defined reflexivity: “Reflexivity refers to the practices of altering one’s life as a response to knowledge about one’s circumstances” (p. 139). The idea of “altering one’s life” could refer to a “lightbulb moment,” and a student may look at the world differently and perhaps move forward through their own life differently. A student stated:

Every poem invoked a different emotion or thought process. they gave plenty of room for stepping in the authors shoes and also analyzing them. the more in depth we went into these poems the more we [learned] about ourselves and each other.

Another student responded: “Every poem made me overthink the deeper meaning. Every poem also [made me] more compassionate and empathize with the authors and other[s] living similar experiences.”

Providing opportunities for students to develop complex emotions—such as compassion and empathy—as well as comprehend the life experiences of others, also demonstrates the accomplishment of at least some of the goals of using culturally sustaining pedagogy in a composition classroom. Alim et al. (2020) explained the importance of recognizing “the need to shift the function of schooling from assimilation to cultural pluralism” (p. 262). The Poetry Journal activity dismissed the demand for assimilation by assuring the students they would receive credit for the assignment if they wrote earnestly and honestly. The variety of poems allowed students to see the cultural pluralism present in the United States. One student said, “Every poem we have done in class, I feel, has been from people who come from different backgrounds and deal with different life situations.”

Additionally, the activity aligned with San Pedro’s (2018) concepts for culturally disruptive pedagogy because one purpose of CDP was to “create. . . ruptures for new knowledge and new identities to take hold” (p. 1221). Many students readily admitted they had gained new academic knowledge: “Those poems help me a lot to understand the deep meaning of a poem. and understand people[’s] feeling[s].” However, based on the many responses, the students also acquired new perspectives and, perhaps, even empathy. Kivel and Yaffee (1999) suggested that critical thinking and empathy are “necessary components of social change” (p. 69).

Reflection

During my own reflexive journey regarding this assignment, I came to understand and appreciate the potentially transformative results of the Poetry Journal. One of the great joys of

teaching is learning along with the students. Robinson and Tompkins (2019) established that “critical self-reflection situates teachers as learners” (p. 113). In seeing their interaction with and analysis of the poems, I learned a great deal and was myself continuously transformed; I felt more connected to the students and the entire class seemed more humanized.

I am certainly not the first educator who has used poetry to help teach critical thinking; I borrowed and modified the activity from Vogelsinger (2016). Also, Chavez (2021), in her text *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop*, explained that it was a book of poetry and prose that led to, for lack of a better phrase, a lightbulb moment for her:

I came across a book called *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, a multiracial, feminist anthology of poetry and prose that page after page said: “See yourself here, Felicia? What about here?” Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Toni Cade Bambara proved to be my real mentors, modeling how to be a woman of color who commands her own voice (p. 71).

In other words, *poetry speaks to us* in ways that other mediums do not. By providing the students with a non-judgmental, grammar-police-free, low-credit place (i.e., a place outside of the colonizer doctrines of education) to express themselves (while sneaking in a lesson in critical thinking), the exercise, I hope, allowed them “access to [a] consciousness that fuels [their] best writing” (p. 72). Chavez (2021) further explained, “It’s a rare opportunity to let loose an authentic voice—not original or ground-breaking, but real—written in the way that we speak” (p. 74).

Of course, I would be romanticizing the situation to say that *all* the responses were positive, and every student *loved* reading and analyzing poems. But neither the assignment nor the pedagogies (CSP and CDP) were intended to create comfort; they were intended to acknowledge and disrupt Eurocentric norms and raise awareness “of the role race [ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or class] plays in constructing social inequities” (Pimental et al., 2017, pp. 110-111). Many of the poems may have caused students to confront their own lives, thoughts, stereotypes, and privileges, which, ideally, perpetuated and fostered (*sustained*) “linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (Paris and Alim, 2014, p. 88). However, even the students who disliked the assigned poems, poetry in general, or critical self-reflection were provided an open and safe opportunity to express themselves and critique the activity. With any luck, they gained some insight about themselves and other people’s experiences.

Next Steps

Many community college educators have the unique opportunity to devise and teach their own curriculum. Unlike the high school environment, which is strictly and governmentally regulated, community college instructors may meet the learning outcomes for classes such as English Composition 101 in interesting and creative ways. The Poetry Journal activity is one option that could be reviewed, revised, and restructured to accommodate any professor teaching a composition class. Finding the right poems for a class is a learning opportunity for an instructor, as is connecting the assignment to the class objectives. And the activity is not static; poems may be changed, added, or removed if students do not connect with them, or more appropriate poems are discovered. Kutz and Roskelly (1991) suggested that curriculum may be

reinvented to the benefit of educators and students. “To create new classroom communities, learners and teachers must question that [standard] curriculum and find ways to adapt it to the needs of individual classrooms and learners” (p. 287). The authors offered several suggestions, one of which has become part of the conversation regarding modern curricular development: student-centric or flipped classrooms. “Teachers and students can work productively with an established curricular plan, can mold it to suit their needs as writers and thinkers, and can thereby transform it into something vital rather than something static” (p. 287).

Inventing new curricula may not be an easy task, but based on the results of the Poetry Journal, it is a worthy task. The activity and post-activity responses successfully demonstrated that culturally sustaining and disruptive pedagogies were effective in engaging students in critical and reflexive thinking. Furthermore, most students indicated they met at least three of the learning outcomes for English Composition 101.

Educators intent on revising curriculum for disrupting the Eurocentric, traditional status quo are not alone. Other scholars and instructors have advice, suggestions, and a willingness to share their activities, assignments, and journeys. (See Appendix for an abbreviated list of resources as places to start.) The campaign to develop diverse, equitable, and inclusive education for all is an ongoing and valuable undertaking.

Endnotes

1. “First order thinking is the process of considering the intended and perhaps obvious implications of a business decision or policy change. Second order thinking is the process of tracing down and unraveling the implications of those first order impacts” (Pepper, 2018).
2. “Ideologies of whiteness” refers to “the way of being in the world that is used to maintain White supremacy” (Picower, 2009, p. 198). Some white people neither see nor acknowledge the privileges they have been granted, which is why said privileges are often referred to as “invisible” (see Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” —originally published as “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies). Even the most good-intentioned white people may not reflect upon their advantages, which unintentionally may lead to the maintenance of white supremacy culture.
3. Student responses have not been altered. Any changes made to clarify the student’s meaning are indicated in brackets.

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Appendix

Specific questions for the anonymous survey regarding the Poetry Journal activity.

1. Think back to the seven poems I asked you to respond to over the semester.
Please respond to the following statement: I liked the poems that were assigned.
 - a. Likert scale: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree.
2. What was your favorite poem and why?
3. What was your least favorite poem and why?
4. Please respond to the following statement: The poems chosen represent diverse voices and perspectives.
 - a. Likert scale: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree.
5. Explain your response to #4.
6. Name a (as in one) poem or poet you would like to see assigned in the Poetry Journal. Alternatively, name a perspective (viewpoint) or topic you would like to see assigned in the Poetry Journal.
7. Explain your response to #6.
8. Think back to the seven poems I asked you to respond to over the semester.
Please respond to the following statement:
The poetry responses helped me meet Learning Outcomes 1, 2, and 5 (listed as follows):
 1. Use writing for learning, thinking, and communicating to solve problems, draw logical conclusions, and create innovative ideas.
 2. Identify and evaluate the main idea, major points, and supporting details in a text, film, image, or presentation.
 5. Identify multiple viewpoints pertaining to a given topic and engage in verbal or written discussion of those viewpoints.
 - a. Likert scale: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree.
9. Explain your response to #8.

Suggested Resources

- [adrienne maree brown](#) (2017), *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*
- [Felicia Rose Chavez](#) (2021), *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*
- Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young (Eds., 2017), *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*
- Jeffery M. R. Duncan-Andrade (2022), *Equality or Equity: Toward a Model of Community-Responsive Education*
- Geneva Gay (2023), *Educating for Equity and Excellence: Enacting Culturally Responsive Teaching*
- bell hooks (1994), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

- Asao B. Inoue (2015), *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*
- Eleanor Kutz and Haphzibah Roskelly (1991), *An Unquiet Pedagogy: Transforming Practice in the English Classroom*
- Cornel Pewewardy, Anna Lees, and Robin Zape-Tah-Hol-Ah Minthorn (Eds., 2022), *Unsettling Settler-Colonial Education*
- [Iris D. Ruiz](#) (2016), *Reclaiming Composition for Chicano/as and Other Ethnic Minorities: A Critical History and Pedagogy*