Isabel Forward

EDU 4245

SkrlacLo

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Inquiry Project Reflection:

“Redefining the *Bildungsroman*”

I have always thought of education and self-discovery working hand-in-hand with one other. Throughout the semester, I found myself drawn to the conscious exploration of identity as a basis for the learning experience of students, especially of English Language Learners. While I was originally drawn to the idea of creating a unit on coming-of-age stories, I felt as though identity deserves more space than could be afforded in one unit. The exploration of identity and coming-of-age stories then became the basis for a course, “Redefining the *Bildungsroman,”* which aims to both inform students’ reading of contemporary works and to challenge traditional understandings of the meaning of coming-of-age as found in the *bildungsroman* framework. The course outline includes sustained practices that promote critical thinking skills, provide frameworks for meaningful classroom discussion, establish consistent learning practices, and set expectations for assessment — with the needs of English Language Learners at the forefront. I write in the introduction to my course outline, “If part of effective instruction of English Language Learners is the clear communication of expectations and purposeful choices, the outlining of methods that are backed by research in this content outline could serve as a tool for instructors or students.” The outline serves as a utility for teachers in providing content ideas, practices, and assessment, but the included components could also serve as a guide for students upon entering the classroom.

Several questions informed the topic of exploration for the course: What does it look like to put traditional frameworks in conversation with contemporary texts? As 21st Century learners and thinkers, how can these traditional — and sometimes, exclusive — frameworks still be of value in a contemporary and more inclusive classroom space? How can contemporary ways of thinking help us look at traditions more critically?

Paulo Freire’s ideas about the space for change in the classroom inform my justification for the unit, as he recognizes the place of the classroom as a “deeply civic and political project that provides the conditions for individual autonomy and takes liberation and the practice of freedom as a collective goal” (Giroux 2010). In my handout, I write that “in this way, the course itself also functions as an act of resistance, as the coursework and discourse challenges a framework accepted as standard, acknowledges a diversity of unique barriers and privileges of growing into different identities, and narrative construction exercises that gives power to students to take agency as writers of their own identity.”

In this class, I chose the bildungsroman for its value as a framework exploring the coming-of-age and identity exploration, themes that give space to learning about perspective, identity, and different understandings of Americanism. Yoon’s idea that the typical bildungsroman assumes “the image of a self-made man, being free from aristocratic relations, and valorize the democratic ideals of individual freedom and autonomy,” provides grounds for redefinition (2018). The premise of Bolaki’s work, “Unsettling the Bildungsroman,” is based on the argument that “the Bildungsroman is not an outdated and exhausted form but one that can be detached from its initial context and used productively across different historical periods and cultures” (2011). However, there are counterarguments: a prominent one being that employing the bildungsroman as a form through which to understand contemporary texts “run[s] the risk of inflicting yet another Eurocentric body of thought onto texts which have a life and history of their own” (Stein 2004). In my research and work, I’ve come to believe that both arguments are valid — the purpose of this class is to give students a space to explore this for themselves, giving them an analytical framework to think independently and critically analyze texts and genres.

This exploration can also be applied to a range of literary theories. For example: How can traditional feminist theory expand our understanding of contemporary texts? How can these texts challenge our understanding of feminist theory as exclusive? How can ecocriticism inform our understanding of contemporary texts? How can contemporary texts inform a criticism of ecocriticism as based on a settler-colonist understanding of humankind’s relationship with land? The course has the potential to provide a lens through which to read, challenge, and understand texts — both those pushing the envelope, and those deemed as traditional and canonical.

I have so heavily emphasized the importance of teaching transferable critical thinking skills because I have designed this course with English Language Learners in mind. Shirkhani and Fahim outline in “Enhancing critical thinking in foreign language learners” that critical thinking skills play an integral role in the success of English Language Learners:

“Firstly, if language learners can take charge of their own thinking, they can monitor and evaluate their own ways of learning more successfully. Second, critical thinking expands the learning experience of the learners and makes the language more meaningful for them. Thirdly, critical thinking has a high degree of correlation with the learners’ achievements” (2011).

They continue to outline methods that enhance the development of critical thinking skills in language learners, which I implemented in my course outline. I outline their findings and my implementation below:

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| “Enhancing critical thinking in foreign language learners” Findings | “Redefining the *Bildungsroman*” Course Implementation |
| “Use ongoing assessment rather than one-shot exams at the end of the semester.” | Lower stakes assessments (as a part of a student’s participation grade) throughout the semester are combined with higher stakes assessments and the revision process (as a part of students writing grade). |
| “Include activities in your assessment which encourage the learner to think about the major objectives of the course, including developing critical thinking skills.” | Essential questions of the course and for each work both serve as touchstones and questions for assessments. |
| “Better activities for the purpose of promoting critical thinking skills are those which require the learners to think, cooperate, ask questions from themselves and others, etc.” | Small class and whole class discussion, informed by speaking frameworks from Walqui and Heritage’s “Framework for Oral Production,” wherein formulaic expressions provide initial guidance in constructive discussion. |
| “Provide learners with feedback which gives learners understanding that thinking is an integral part of their learning experience… Feedback needs to occur frequently.” | Instructor feedback is guided by the framework of “what worked well and why” and “what could be improved and why,” as informed by both specific instructed goals and leaves room for feedback on critical analysis. Specific feedback happens on both the more frequent lower stakes assessments and the less frequent higher stakes assessments. Walqui and Heritage's framework also informs instructor feedback on oral participation. |

While I am focusing on the utility of the specificities of the course for English Language Learners, I designed the course, the desired critical thinking skills it will foster, and the specifically designed assessments with a ninth grade American literature class in mind with a range of diverse learners. I chose ninth grade with the understanding that teaching writing skills in the ninth grade would provide a basis for future high school writing and thinking. However, in terms of transferability, I think that the course, its content, and its outlined practices could serve as a framework for many different types of classes.

I outlined three specific focuses in designing the course — content, practice and assessment —  each specifically informed by research catered towards fostering critical thinking skills and incorporating scaffolding and methods proven effective for English Language Learners. I have incorporated critically acclaimed texts that make room for different understandings of the *bildungsroman*, but that are also representative of populations with immigrant, multilingual, multilingual, and queer identities. As a part of the desire to challenge ideas surrounding who is worthy of individuality and coming to an individual identity, I wanted to include stories that follow the growth and formation of people with many different and intersecting identities.

The course outline also includes classroom practices that promote natural learning opportunities for English Language Learners. Group work and strategic class interaction play a role in the daily experience in the classroom in order to get as many students as possible. Wright writes that “the most important and beneficial listening and speaking that students will do is through interaction with the teacher, their fellow ELLs, and proficient English speakers within the sociocultural contexts of their classroom, school, and neighborhood” (2019). I listed some of Wrights suggested modes of classroom interaction: discourse, cooperative learning think-pair-share, roundtables, and concentric circles. Providing modes of group work to instructors offers a variety of ways for students to interact beyond whole class discussion and provides greater opportunity for more students to speak. In the first several weeks of class, guiding students through these types of interaction with students allows for students to have an understanding of expectations throughout the course.

Additionally, Walqui and Heritage’s article “Meaningful Classroom Talk: Supporting English Language Learners Development” informed my inclusion of speaking frameworks as sustained practices within the classroom. Walqui and Heritage argue that “formulaic expressions are extremely useful in students’ development of English and in making their interaction with peers possible and more effective” (2018). In beginning to guide discussion with formulaic expressions — and then in later leaving room to depart from these expressions — instructors have the potential to provide frameworks for constructive dialogue where students listen to one another, use evidence to support their arguments, and clearly articulate the purpose of their contribution.

I have also included a Sustained Silent Reading practice as a part of the course. DelliCarpini cites relaxed and continually pracited Sustained Silent Reading as a continually proven method for effective vocabulary acquisition and language development (2012). For accountability, one teacher I observe at Sacred Heart assigns “book talks,” which I wrote in the course outline provide “informal presentations of a summary of a book, the relation of a concept we’ve learned in class, and their review. Book talks promote a students independent reading practice, oral presentation skills, and their own choice in the literature they read.”

Three sources largely informed my outlined assessment of writing in the classroom. DelliCarpini’s article, “We Are All Writers! Building Second Language Writing Skills in the ELA Classroom” provided specific assessment practices with justifications. Key takeaways Dellicarpini brought to the construction of my assessments include the following:

* Teachers need to make sure ELLs are aware of the purpose and form of different types of writing, and ultimately communication, in their respective discipline.
* ELLs should have extended exposure to evaluation of their writing through low-stakes activities that are evaluated.
* ELLs should engage in Sustained Silent Reading in which they are relaxed and enjoy the content.
* Instructor feedback and evaluation should accomplish specific goals (DelliCarpini 2012).

I also adapted Linda Christenson’s *Teaching For Joy and Justice,* which provides a framework for clear revision guidelines that help students evaluate their own work in the writing process (2009). Additionally, I used semantic differential scales in my instructional sheet in order to provide a common framework for students for writing instructions (Brett 2016).

In creating a course design, I hoped to come out with a greater sense of clarity in what sustained classroom practices and assessment guidelines I should enter with if I want to go beyond just being aware of English Language Learners in my classroom. Additionally, selecting content thoughtfully and writing correlated guiding questions allowed me to really question what type of space I am fostering, who I am privileging in this space, and the messaging students receive from both the content we explore and the lenses through which we see this content. Learning methods of fostering critical analysis proved to be one of the most useful research topics. Even as I was growing up, I felt as if instructors always assumed I knew how they wanted me to think. I still believe in the power of getting to know students individually in order to understand the best route. However, researching frameworks that have the potential to assist a diverse range of English Language Learners — and a diverse range of students overall — in order to support greater learning development in students and a more constructive classroom environment. I imagine creating my own course might not happen in the beginning of my career. However, my imagination of this course has the power to inform, and maybe even challenge, the way teachers understand growing into one’s identity and the role students can play in defining what that is.

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