

The Importance of [Non]Identification

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Abstract: Emily Aguilar and Taylor Marty discuss how their combined teaching strategies transformed an international, ESL, Latinx, and first-generation college student’s experience in the first-year writing classroom. Not only did their teaching strategies contribute to a sense of belonging for their student and immense academic growth from the student, but they also demonstrated the importance of teaching by listening, with and without a need for understanding and identifying with a student’s background.

Marty’s Teaching Strategies: Listening Without Understanding

Adelina always sat in the back of the classroom. She often did not turn in her “quick write” assignments or “exit tickets,” which were markers of her attendance, even though she was often in class. I would ask her if she needed help understanding the prompts, and she would smile and shake her head no, clearly uncomfortable whenever I spoke to her. Then she would slowly translate the prompts using Google Translate. Naturally, at that pace, she could not keep up with her lessons or her peers. Occasionally, she would turn her assignments in, and I would ask her to turn the rest of them in, to no avail. The assignments she did submit were often decorated with beautiful drawings and short, kind messages to me, wishing me a good week.

She did not turn in any of the first major writing project assignments, and she missed her mandatory one-on-one conference with me to discuss her first paper. When I assigned my students to groups and required them to present a chapter from the reading to the class, she sat quietly away from her group. I was stunned when I explained to her that we were doing group work, and she just shook her head, declining to participate. Despite feeling slightly offended that one of my students did not want to participate, I said, “Okay.” I walked away, and in my head, I acknowledged that I have no idea what was going on with my student or why she seemed to refuse to do some of the coursework. Clearly, she cared enough about the class to keep coming, so why come and sit quietly while declining to speak or write? Adelina even stayed after class to ask me questions, though they were always unrelated to English. Then she stopped coming to class. When she did show up, I asked her four times to meet with me to discuss her standing in the class. Each time, she smiled and nodded her head, agreeing to meet with me during my office hours, but she never showed.

One of my fellow teaching associates recommended that I “assert my dominance.” She recommended I give my students a “tough love” speech in which I ask questions such as “Why are you here, if not to work hard?” She said I could hold them accountable by calling on them, saying, “Hey! You didn’t read, so why don’t you answer this question?” My peer said she played into the aggressive professor trope, so much so that it was humorous. She said her students began to match her high energy by faking confidence to avoid being called on. After reflecting on my own teaching style, I thought I could not take her approach. Though one of my undergraduate professors once described my teaching style as “energetic and engaging” years ago, my students more recently described my teaching as “relaxing and motivational” with dry humor. I decided then that a calmer, softer approach was more authentic to my teaching style, my writing, and my personhood.

I make jokes too, but not in the same way that my peers do. When my peer's students start packing up early, she yells, "Hey! What the hell are you guys doing? I got you for five more minutes. You there—share what you're writing instead of packing up!" I, on the other hand, see my students rustling and packing up after I said they can wrap up their writing and quietly say, "Hey, so when I say, 'wrap up your writing assignment,' I actually mean finish writing out the thought—I do not mean pack up and get ready to leave class." I continued, speaking more lightly, "We will never leave class early. I want to spend every possible minute that we can together. I would rather us sit and stare at each other than dismiss you early." One of my students laughed, understanding that I wanted to maximize our class time and writing sessions by asking students to be present for the whole period in any way they can—even if that looks like students sitting and staring off into the distance. I think my jokes are funny because I mean them very seriously, and jokingly scaring students into participating or doing work does not work for me personally. Despite hearing many suggestions like the aforementioned one and not knowing exactly how to handle the situation with Adelina, I kept relatively quiet when interacting with her. All I understood about her was that I did not understand. I did not know what was going on with her or how to move forward with her past my previous attempts to speak with her, so I kept being quiet and gentle in my reminders that my office door was open for her if she wanted to speak with me.

Then one day after class, Adelina wrote me a note expressing that communicating in English was intimidating for her as an ESL student. I thanked her for telling me and told her I could accommodate her. I had already reached out to our campus's Center for Academic Success during the first month of classes, and there were peer mentors assigned to my student, but she said she did not meet with them. There were no on-campus resources available for ESL students. I do not speak a word of Spanish, and I knew the language barrier was hurting my student's chances for success, so I reached out to one of my Spanish-speaking peers, Emily. I asked Adelina if she would like to have Emily translate our meetings, and she said yes, but still failed to attend our meetings. Emily patiently sat with me during my office hours one afternoon when Adelina said she would come but then did not show up. Adelina emailed me saying she could not find my office. After my next class meeting, Adelina and I walked to my office together and had a nice time chatting together. I asked Adelina why she did not show up a few times before, and she said she was intimidated by me. She added that she thought I was pretty, and I laughed hard, saying she could not butter me up and that she had to attend our meetings.

From there on out, Adelina became a lot more comfortable with me and with Emily, who translated every single one of our meetings. Adelina saw some Spanish vocabulary posted on the wall behind my desk after one of our meetings and asked what it was for. I laughed and said I could learn Spanish to help her faster than waiting for campus resources. I connected her with a Spanish-speaking tutor at the writing center for weekly meetings, but she would not show up for them until I walked her there after class one day. Then, after getting that initial support, she went on her own every week. She also came to my office with me after class twice a week to go over what the class was about with Emily's help.

During one of our first meetings, I told her it was mathematically impossible for her to pass unless she completed extra credit. She responded by saying she thought she was going to get deported, and that is why she had not been completing coursework or attending classes—because what was the point? Emily and I listened, and I said I will make sure she excels in the class if she starts completing her work and coming to class starting now. She pointed at some plushies I had on my desk, saying she liked them, and Emily so generously promised I would give her favorite one to her. She picked a Pooh Bear plush; I gave it to her, and I told her I would give her another

one once she passed my class. She did just that and more. She went from having the lowest grade in the class to having one of the best grades in the class. More importantly than grades, she was one of the most determined students I have ever met. She came from a background that made her life in the classroom difficult, isolating, and intimidating, both socially and academically. By the end of the class, she was the greatest writing student because of her hard work and willingness to undergo the lengthy revision process. Most of my students never mastered MLA format, but she did, and we high-fived when she completed her final essay before the deadline, perfectly written in the standardized format. With the support and translation services of her newfound friends in the class, she was even able to present in front of the class in Spanish. She spoke loudly, by her standards, and very eloquently. She was cheeky in my office hours too. I told her to take as many prizes as she wanted from my prize bin, and she picked up the whole bin and pretended to walk out until I said “Hey, not all of them!”

Even though I typically work with adults as a college educator, I approach learning through the lens of childhood. If a child did not know how to accomplish some feat, should one yell at that child, even jokingly? Would a child understand your humor? There is a difference between compliance and understanding, and I aim for genuine understanding and passion for one’s writing and writing methods. After all, how effective is one’s productivity when they yell at themselves to get out of bed and begin writing? How much more effective would our writing classrooms be if professors let students lead their own writing processes? “Teaching by listening” has been used to mean teach by allowing students to guide their own discussions, but I take “teaching by listening” to mean more than that (Murray 305-308). My students can take charge of their learning because I listen to them talk about their struggles, even the ones I cannot personally understand. Students that are silenced by an internalized belief that their languages, accents, or identities are unacceptable in the writing classroom can find their voice within a professor’s quiet, reliable presence and not necessarily within a professor’s loud, domineering presence.

During our last meeting, I taught Adelina how to enroll in Emily’s class for next semester because I would no longer be student teaching. In Spanish, Emily explained that I was a teaching associate who was graduating, so I would not be able to teach her next semester. I thought Adelina would be leaping with joy to have a professor who speaks the same language as her, but she said she was sad to see me go. She also said “Oh” very loudly, like she was having an epiphany, and she told Emily that she understands me now. She said that I was understanding because I was a student, so I could understand her struggles. I thought about all my past reflections on my teaching style and remembered that my understanding, contrary to Adelina’s theory, came from a lack of understanding. I was able to be understanding because I acknowledged that I do not understand her struggles, but I decided to accommodate them anyway. It was not our commonalities that helped me to understand her and support her in the ways she needed, rather, it was me acknowledging our differences.

Aguilar’s Teaching Strategies: Listening with Limited Understanding

Adelina once said that her favorite place to study is at the university library. She said this in her Author’s Note, which is a 250-word preface that students write before a professor or a peer reads their essay; put more bluntly, it’s a chance for students to explain why their writing might not be up to par. Here, they explain—or sometimes beg—that their essay shouldn’t be judged too harshly because they had to study for an important math exam, or maybe they were dealing with personal issues in their life. In her Author’s Note, though, Adelina said that she was confident

about her essay because she made sure to put herself in a productive headspace. This confidence is in part because she felt welcomed in the library. She explained that the library was a space where she felt accepted and welcomed enough to write her essay with ease and patience. Because she wrote her essay in some place where her confidence was high, Adelina was sure that her essay was the best she could have written.

Comfort and belonging are important to Adelina. She is a STEM major, so many would say that she definitely belongs at a university since she's smart enough to pursue a "hard" major. In spite of her intelligence, though, Adelina struggled to believe she would remain at this university at all. I first met Adelina when I sat in on Taylor's first day of English 1005A. Taylor and I began our TA-ship the same year, so we were both nervous; because I didn't want Taylor to feel alone, I decided to sit in on her class for moral support. I sat at the back of her class because I did not want to interfere with her lesson—funny enough, though, all the other students sat at the back of the class, too. If my memory serves me right, I sat either next to Adelina or a seat apart from her. When Taylor gave students five minutes to introduce themselves to each other, Adelina sat next to me and introduced herself. I politely told her that I wasn't a student, and she sat next to another student. They exchanged names and majors, and said a few other things. Their conversation was short and their silence was palpable. I moved closer to them to get them to speak. The boy next to Adelina told me his life story, but when I turned to Adelina, I realized that she was speaking English with an accent. Her reluctance to speak prompted me to ask "prefieres hablar espanol," to which she smiled in relief. She told me that she was a STEM major who arrived in Los Angeles when she was a high school junior. I asked her some questions about her home country, and we talked about our shared disdain for Los Angeles traffic. Adelina was comfortable being herself—she was funny, upbeat, and witty, but most of all, she finally seemed happy to be in class. After our conversation, Taylor turned the topic to something else. Once students were instructed to engage in a new activity, Adelina sat next to me again, asking me to translate Taylor's instructions into Spanish. I was more than happy to help. When class ended, Adelina thanked me, and I told her that I would be happy to help her again if she needed help. And to my surprise, we were reunited a month later in Taylor's office hours.

Time was not kind to the once upbeat and funny student I knew Adelina was. Not only was Adelina struggling to come to office hours, but it seemed as though she was going to have to repeat English 1005A. At our university, undergraduate students either take one semester of an advanced composition course or two semesters of a stretch-composition course. The stretch-composition course requires students to take two English composition courses: English 1005A and 1005B. Students learn rhetoric and presence and participation, their interaction with other students in person and online, and then their willingness to challenge themselves. Choosing not to participate in class can count as an absence, and accumulating enough absences could warrant a failing grade, and to make matters worse, failing even one of these classes can push a student's progress back by a year. So when Taylor and I met Adelina in office hours, we were in for a tough conversation.

Taylor wanted me to work as the translator who had to deliver the bad news to Adelina: Taylor faced both Adelina and I, but when the conversation became serious, she turned to me, making me feel like I was receiving the bad news. As I listened to Taylor, I struggled to come up with Spanish words that could soften the harshness in "fail" and "impossible." Unfortunately, I had to tell Adelina plainly and brutally that she was behind on her work, and that even if she were to work hard and submit extra credit, the highest grade she could manage was a B-. This fact, delivered in any language, holds a similar sentiment: the facts signify impossibility, poor performance, and dissatisfaction. I paused as I spoke to Adelina, hoping she could understand that

I felt bad for her, but that I wanted to help. I deviated the conversation from Taylor's words, and I instead engaged Adelina into our own conversation. I asked her how she felt, and she admitted that despite feeling disappointed, she was determined to get the highest grade possible. We agreed that her first task would be to complete three extra credit assignments, which would make up for her lack of attendance; if she could complete these assignments in a week, she would be allowed to resubmit missing work. To our relief, she did everything on time. The three of us met again to talk about her progress, but again, Taylor reiterated that she could only get a B- at this point. And again, out of sympathy, I wanted to assure her that such a grade should not deter her from trying hard or feeling bad. Adelina and I spoke about determination—she told me that she began watching inspirational videos on YouTube to motivate herself. From that point on, we chatted, we got comfortable, we made jokes, and the atmosphere was welcoming. So much so that Adelina made a confession. The awful truth was that she had gotten into some trouble with ICE, and for many weeks, she was convinced that she was going to get deported. Her headspace was scattered, and completing schoolwork was the last of her worries.

I kept Adelina in mind the rest of my day. As I was teaching my own class, I wondered who else might be in a situation like Adelina's. I didn't know. No one can guess based on a student's writing, participation, or work ethic whether or not they're going through something traumatic, let alone, could anyone make a rightful guess that their student might be facing deportation. I relate to many of my students on the basis that I am a first-generation Latina, but because I was born in the US, I do not understand the complexities of being undocumented. I am never going to understand what it feels like to live in secrecy knowing that at any moment, my progress, my very life, will be interrupted because someone found out that I am not allowed in this country. I am instead stubborn, which has helped me get ahead in life—I have a privileged presence that does not echo the average Latino experience.

The experience of many Latinos in America is about providing documentation—our citizenship status, our addresses, and for some of us, our driver's licenses prove that we belong in this country. It has not been until recently that college diplomas were added to this list. The majority of my English 1005A students were first-generation Latino students whose work ethic ranged from completely dedicated to absolutely detached. Regardless of the work they produced, I never wanted them to feel excluded from my academic space; even if they did not learn a single thing about composition and rhetoric, I curated lesson plans on activism, voting rights, and sociopolitical optimism. I wanted my students, regardless of grades, to walk away from my class knowing that the university—and by extension, their society—was at their discretion; that they can change things for the better for themselves and the people around them, but it had to start with their education. I emphasize this sentiment because for several Latinos, education is a path toward freedom. To me, though, education *is* liberation. And in my opinion, it should be free to everyone regardless of their ability, their age, and obviously, their citizenship status. Students often feel hopeless when it comes to asking for help, let alone believe that they can make a difference; likewise, professors are often too busy or too privileged to make any necessary accommodations. I, though, want to—have to—change that sentiment. I am a Latina woman in a position of power—in my classroom, I can make any rule and any exception that I want, and even though Adelina was not my student, she was a student in my university. She was there and she wanted to learn; therefore, I had to help her.

Even before these meetings, I never doubted that Adelina was a successful student, she was just someone who needed accommodations. Going out of my way to help Adelina was never a stressful or unbearable factor. I commuted to our Los Angeles campus from Riverside County

every morning, and even though my class did not start until 12:15 PM, I woke up at 6:00 AM to meet with Adelina and Taylor at 9:00 AM. Even waking up this early hardly guaranteed that I would arrive on time—as soon as I parked, I had to run across campus to our office in under 10 minutes just to meet them. After giving them an out-of-breath apology, we got started on our work. I translated conversations between Adelina and Taylor, I helped Adelina translate ideas onto paper, and when necessary, I tried cheering her up. Over time, Adelina rose to the ranks in Taylor’s class. She far exceeded the expectations we had set up for her. When she was ready to progress into English 1005B, I had the honor of taking her on as my student. I read her essays in awe, amazed at how far she had come since the first time I met her. Although she frequently asked for help, she was a confident writer who finally found her place at the university. When the Spring semester ended, I asked my students to submit an original artistic representation of their college experience. While others made collages, poems, or Tik Tok edits, Adelina submitted a hand-drawn illustration of her victoriously lifting her fist in the air. Such a feat is accomplished when students are eager to learn and willing to challenge themselves; at the same time, more students can reach this level of victory if professors are also willing to learn from their students and accept that they can overcome challenges and adversity if they just accommodate their teaching style to their students’ needs.

Conclusion

Adelina was able to transform her academic identity, in part, because of our work to make her feel a sense of belonging within the university. Marty’s willingness to transform the traditional, institutional conception of an English classroom to accommodate Spanish-speaking voices allowed Adelina to begin speaking in her native tongue with Aguilar. Aguilar’s translation services then carved the way for Adelina to make communal bonds amongst her Spanish-speaking peers. Together, Aguilar and Marty chose to go above what was required of them to meet Adelina where she was at, instead of demanding she meet their expectations for writing students. In Marty’s last class, that was conducted over Zoom due to COVID-19, Adelina said her first semester of college was amazing because she had a professor who tried to learn Spanish for her. It appears that students learn how to show up for themselves as students within the university setting by watching their professors show up for them first.

Too often, Aguilar and Marty have heard fellow professors say, “I don’t understand why this is so hard for [my student]” or “I don’t understand why my students can’t turn in their work in on time.” To that, we say, you do not have to understand. The classroom is not a fight club; one cannot assert dominance over someone who is already intimidated to force productivity. Professors often help students sink or swim, and some are less accommodating when students need a buoy or a break for reasons that are beyond the professor’s understanding. When a professor trusts their students, their students will trust them to lead the way to a brighter future.

Works Cited

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