

Writing Across Communities of Difference

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Abstract: Marty earned her Master of Arts in English from Cal State LA in 2022. For her master's thesis, she cataloged the progression of narcissistic representation in an early modern play and a nineteenth-century novel. To expand on this project, she considers how modern-day higher education can reproduce narcissistic structures. She argues that Eurocentric ideologies permeate first-year writing students' minds and contribute to feelings of impostorism. In her work as a graduate assistant and first-year writing instructor, she encouraged first-year writing students to question social roles and feelings of inferiority.

Pedagogy-focused scholars have recognized that the first-year writing classroom is tied to social mobility. I have always believed that the first-year writing classroom can promote upward mobility by centering marginalized groups' voices. Now having taught Cal State LA students, seventy percent of which are first-generation college students, I have watched students exercise their voices to uplift themselves and others.¹ My students taught me that the first-year writing classroom can be a lifeline for those who are drowning in feelings of loneliness and inferiority. I assigned confidence-building writing activities in the first-year writing classroom to discover the ways in which professors can unify and embolden students' voices to encourage a sense of belonging and purpose.

During the second week of school, I asked my students to get out of their seats and stand in the back of the room. I said, "Take a step forward if you want your writing to benefit the Latinx community." The majority stepped forward. I continued to rattle off various communities, such as ESL students, the LGBTQ+ community, first-generation college students, the Japanese-American community, the Black community, international students, and the Hmong community. By the end of my lengthy list, most of my students were scattered around the room. I asked my students if there were any other communities that they wanted to mention, and we added another community to our list. I asked my students to sit down and read the following quote from Martin Niemöller off the monitor: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Upon reading my students' reflections, most students expressed joy in having learned that their voices can be best heard in unison across communities of difference. Many students felt pride in knowing their peers would stand up for one another through their writing. Some students were itching to do the activity again, ready to show their newfound willingness to uplift all communities through their writing. One student wrote about how they did not take any steps forward because they believed their writing was not powerful enough to benefit others.

That student was one of many who felt disempowered and disconnected from the world. A week after the walking exercise, a student expressed suicidal ideation through their poetry. When prompted to write about what was on their mind, a different student discussed their suicidal thoughts, self-loathing, and inability to be the perfect student amidst their chaotic life. Students came to my office hours to discuss their traumas within the school system, share their fear of being

¹ Cal State LA. *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging*. Trustees of the California State University, 2023. <https://www.calstatela.edu/diversity>. Accessed 28 June, 2023.

deported, and read me their bucket list with the intent of committing suicide. While filing CARE reports, I thought about what it is like to believe that you are so worthless and unwanted that nothing you say matters. Professors need to address students' feelings of loneliness and inferiority before addressing their writing. The "walk forward" assignment teaches students to consider everyone when they write, while also showing them they are capable and worthy of writing as a form of activism and community-building.

To unpack students' feelings of inferiority, I asked my students to consider who made them (in)secure writers. They wrote letters to that person, explaining why they were either right to make the student feel like a strong writer or wrong to have made the student feel like a bad writer. Almost all my students wrote letters to their past English teachers, telling them they were wrong to have made them feel stupid, followed by a list of reasons why they are excellent writers. My student, who previously believed that their writing could not benefit anyone, wrote about how they are a good writer because it is their hobby, and creating their own universe through plot and character development allows them to explore difficult topics. Their newfound realization was that if they enjoy writing as a practice, then that is enough.

Students' internal dialogues are the internalized voices of those who have held power in their lives, childhoods, and early educational experiences. Professors of first-year writing teach a course that was initially invented for minoritized students to fail so they would be excluded from the university and experiences of upward mobility.² English professors have the power to flip the switch and give power back to the students. Acknowledging the ways in which students were disempowered during their past educational experiences can change students' previously held self-perceptions that were instilled in them by previous educators who upheld Eurocentric writing standards. After all, some differences in English cannot be accounted for by an opportunity gap but rather an identity gap. Minoritized students have often been penalized for their inability to write white, standardized English and told that their differences define their academic identity as inadequate. Teaching students that their differences were wrongfully marked as deficiencies will show students that they are not inherently bad writers, and that writing is a craft that can be honed.³ Redefining what it means to be a good writer and reaffirming that students' writing is powerful through positive feedback can change students' self-perceptions, encouraging them to believe that they are worthy writers and that writing is worthy of their time.

In addition to analyzing educators' impact on students' identities, students may also examine how influential figures outside of academia have contributed to their self-concepts. To prompt these reflections, I asked students to read an article on the psychology behind procrastination and agree or disagree with it by providing evidence. Almost all my students wrote down the line, "If you grew up in a family where love was earned and support in short supply, you're more likely to assume that any failure reflects your flawed status as a human being" (Fagan 6). Students agreed with the idea that students internalize failure because of how their caregivers ascribed their failures to their identities. They cited parents having called them hurtful names or treating them poorly for not performing well academically as evidence. Other first-year writing students, who were not belittled, felt as though they may crumble as the pillars of strength for their family members whose futures hinged on their academic successes. These students spoke more of providing support than receiving it, demonstrating that their feelings of impostorism may stem from a lack of support in their familial home. After discussing the impact of one's family, we also

² Crowley, Sharon. "The Invention of Freshman English." *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998, pp. 46–78.

³ Dyckhoff Stelzriede, Danelle. Syllabus for English 1005AB. Fall 2021, California State University, Los Angeles.

discussed how receiving poor grades, red marks, and negative written feedback for students' best efforts made them feel incompetent. Some students' past English teachers told them that their writing was "elementary" or that they were "not college-ready." I ended the conversation by telling my students about how I almost did not pass high school after receiving negative feedback from parents and teachers. Then, I started to believe in myself and invest in myself after encouragement from my undergraduate professors and my academic advisor, who told me he thought I could teach at the university level. I told my students, "I believe in you, even if you don't believe in yourself, and I'm here to support you in any way I can." Students often cannot believe in themselves unless someone else believes in them first. They often cannot support themselves unless someone else supports them first.

Students continued to explore academic insecurities' origins through dialogue they wrote between their present and childhood selves. Many of their "childhood selves" were surprised they made it to college because they did not believe they would after being torn down so many times by the people who were supposed to build them up. In the same writing exercise, I also asked students to answer the question, "Why are you here?" "Here," meaning college, Cal State LA, or possibly even the particular chair that they have chosen to occupy each class period. Most students wrote about making their parents proud, providing for their families, positively impacting people's lives through their future careers, and wanting to hide off to the side of the classroom. In addition to the hopeful reasons students attended college, a few students wrote about how they felt disappointed in themselves for attending Cal State LA, falsely believing it showed a lack of academic prowess. I wrote back, "I wonder, who does it benefit if the general public believes that Cal State LA is second-rate and the people who go there are second-rate because of their perceived academic status?" One of my students went to an on-campus writing workshop and explored this question. By the end of their experience, they were proud to submit work from my class to a literary magazine and excited to have experienced workshopping their article with their fellow peers at Cal State LA. They said if they did not get published this time around, then they knew they could reconnect with their peers for support and try again.

My writing exercises teach students that they are worthy citizens of the world who can write against narratives that make them feel inferior and alien. Whether students have thoughtfully chosen Cal State LA with pride, or they have regretfully wound up at Cal State LA, all my students who can conceive a future for themselves amidst their struggles demonstrate a desire to carve out that future for themselves through writing. When students cannot focus on writing, it is because they are focusing on surviving first. One of my students went from doing none of their assignments because they had planned to commit suicide to writing about their future. In response to the "why are you here" prompt, my student said they are here for the people they have in their life now and for the people they will have. They imagined a bright future, lit up by a view of the Los Angeles skyline and the warmth of their future family.

One of my students went from sticking themselves to the back wall of the classroom, unable to find their voice to uplift themselves and others, to coming to my office hours to discuss how to rework their finished essay. They wanted to expand their paper to discuss how certain colloquial language promotes violence against Black people and the LGBTQ+ community. They also added a well-developed discussion about the exploitation of immigrants from Mexico and Venezuela in the Bracero Program and DeSantis's migrant flights to Martha's Vineyard. Finally, they discussed Roe-V Wade and women's rights. Not only did my first-year writing student write powerful, concise political papers, but they also bonded with their peers and helped translate for their Spanish-speaking peer who was originally afraid to speak or write. More recently, I caught up with

this student over coffee. They told me about their new writing professor and the current essay they were working on. We worked through their writing struggles together. They seemed lighter and happier. I like to believe that this student now knows how important their voice is to the world, their peers, and future generations.

Before prompting students to write about their futures, we need to consider if they can see a future at all. Students may see a future if you can illuminate a brighter present within the writing classroom. In this space, insecure, first-generation college freshmen can become soon-to-be published authors who attend writing workshops outside of the classroom for fun (as well as extra credit). They can become friends with one another, call one another when one is absent from class, and playfully argue with one another in Spanish. Walking alongside their first-year writing community shows students that they are not alone. Asking students which communities they want to positively impact through their writing shows them that their words, thoughts, and existence alongside one another are powerful. Change occurs inside oneself and in the world around oneself when authors write across communities of difference.

Dr. Michelle Addison argues that imposter syndrome is not an individual problem of self; rather, it is a problem manufactured by institutions to exclude first-generation college students and other minoritized students.⁴ In addition to discussing ways to dismantle exclusionary institutional barriers that individualize students as the problem with their educational goals, professors must also work with individuals who have internalized institutional trauma through community-building writing activities. It is not the students' job to fix imposter syndrome within themselves, and it is not necessarily their job to fix the institutions that manufacture imposter syndrome as an exclusionary tool. However, when students come to me because they are made to feel like they do not belong, it is my job to help them cope within the academic institution. It is a professor's job to make students feel included and welcome in academic spaces. One way professors can accomplish this is by teaching students to find moments in their life where they were made to feel like they do not belong or that they are unworthy of success. By illuminating these scenes from their lives, students can realize their imposter syndrome is not a problem of self; rather, it is a phenomenon that comes from existing as a minoritized person in an academic space that historically excludes minoritized populations.

⁴ Addison, Michelle. "Imposterism In Education: An Individual Problem or Public Feeling?" *Canvas*, 4 May, 2022. Accessed 28 June, 2023.

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