” Lessons From the Culturally Diverse Classroom: Intellectual Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching in the American University

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RESUME: Cette publication (2010) est apparue comme le résultat d'une communication faite lors d'un colloque traitant de pédagogie et d'enseignement (Atlanta, 2007). Cette communication (faisant intervenir des Graduate Teaching Assistants d'origine allemande, française, argentine ou chinoise et responsables des cours de composition en anglais et techniques de rhétoriques auprès de natifs anglophones) avait voulu engager une réflexion didactique sur le rôle de "médiateur culturel" dans l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'anglais spécialisé. Traitant de la position du locuteur non-natif face aux locuteurs natifs apprenants, la question centrale était de savoir ce que l'on pouvait entendre par locuteur natif ou non-natif. Pour Adam Chomsky, par exemple, le simple fait d'être humain donne la capacité de discerner entre le vrai et le faux grammatical. Le locuteur natif pour Chomsky n'a pas de réalité sociale. Pour d'autres, au contraire, l'environnement social joue un rôle même inconscient. Dans notre cas, le problème n'est pas d'être intégré dans une culture étrangère ni même de perdre sa culture source mais plutôt d'être accepté et reconnu pour ce que l'on est par l'autre communauté de langue. Plutôt que d'essayer de se rapprocher d'un locuteur natif, l'enseignant de langue étrangère (le non-natif) va pouvoir devenir un médiateur entre sa propre culture et celle de l'autre et inscrire son enseignement dans un ensemble langue-discours-culture.

ABSTRACT: University education in the United States has become an increasingly global environment. In the classrooms of a modern university students and teachers from literally all corners of the world come together and reshape the face of higher education. Without a doubt the multicultural classroom of the 21st century necessitates fresh pedagogical approaches to university instruction that questions both established student and teacher models. This article then addresses intercultural relationships within a multicultural university classroom setting and the resulting changes for the conceptualization of student and teacher roles. While the essay raises interdisciplinary and multicultural issues we wish to encourage international and American readers alike to ponder fresh questions about the transnational learning environment of the modern university and consider how teaching in this ever-evolving atmosphere forces us to question ourselves. Finally, this essay is guided by the conviction that a culturally diverse classroom, both on the level of pedagogical theory and practice, is the foundation of a successful university education in the 21st century.

Keywords: Medici Effect; multicultural educators; autobiographic narratives; teaching assistants; contact zone ; Teaching, Methodology, Linguistics, teacher education, genre studies, classroom discourse studies, and language pedagogy.

PAPER:

The idea for this article grew out of a professionalization conference organized by the English Department at Georgia State University. We, a group of three international graduate students from Germany, France, and Argentina, got together and shared our understanding of what it means to work as teaching assistants in the humanities in an American university from a foreigner's perspective. To our surprise, we discovered that despite coming from different countries (and continents), our university experience at home appeared to have been astoundingly similar. However, we also realized that all of our educational backgrounds varied greatly from the American educational system we were then experiencing at GSU, both as students and teachers. One obvious difference lies in the less strictly defined hierarchies established in the American university, where graduate students in the humanities often become responsible for teaching classes as teaching assistants during the course of their academic pursuits. Yet perhaps the most interesting distinction is the diversity we found at our American alma mater and the immense educational potential of such an environment. Unlike our own fairly uniform college experiences in our respective home countries, what we witnessed at GSU can be best described as an intellectual contact zone: a space in which the most diverse body of students and teachers converge, producing a unique learning environment. We discovered that in the multicultural classroom of the 21st century, "otherness" and cultural diversity are an integral part of the learning process that must be embraced, rather than restricted, in order to provide quality university education in increasingly globalized institutions. Moreover, we realized that becoming a multiculturally responsible educator also means to recognize that teachers and students are part of the larger process of "transforming higher education from a monocultural to a multicultural institution" (Castaeda 41).

In *The Medici Effect* (2006), Frans Johansson refers to early Modern Florence as an "intersection," where "different fields meet" while triggering an "explosion of remarkable innovations" that occur as a consequence (2). The Medici metaphor emerges from the outburst of creativity that took place in Florence during the Italian Renaissance, when different ideas— conceived and circulated by "sculptors, scientists, poets, philosophers, financiers, painters, architects" (Johansson 2) —converged under the patronage of the Medici family. This exceptional "intersection of fields, disciplines, or cultures," Johansson explains, allowed for the combination of "existing concepts into a large number of extraordinary new ideas" (2).

Similar to the phenomenon described by Johansson, we would like to propose, the university classroom has become a place of intersection and combination, a "cultural contact zone," to use Mary Louise Pratt's term, which harbors enormous educational potential. In this respect, a look at the demographics of a modern, urban research university, such as Georgia State University, confirms the heterogeneity of its student population and substantiates the continuing cultural diversification of the American classroom. Therefore, it is not only possible to realize how modern American research universities create a "Medici Effect" of their own but, in fact, every single culturally diverse classroom can produce unique and rewarding forums for new ideas.

If we then apply Johansson's concept to our own teaching practices, it becomes clear that educators should embrace diversity as the breeding ground for fruitful productivity. Teachers should not only treat the diverse classroom as an opportunity to instill tolerance and respect, but also understand diversity as an actual *necessity* for the highest quality of education to take place. From a pedagogical standpoint, then, what in the past could have been perceived as a problem—with the urge to strive for uniformity and accountability — today becomes an opportunity for development beyond barriers. The task of educators, as the epistemological Medici of the 21st century, thus centers around providing ways to allow all the different voices and perspectives to coexist effectively in order to reach more creative solutions to educational challenges that binary teaching models (with traditional Western philosophy at the top of the hierarchy) seem unfit to address. Consequently, multicultural educators, as Carolyn Jackson rightfully notes, "must abandon the use of simplistic recipes for learning and monolithic representations of people based on their cultural backgrounds, physical appearances, and intellectual abilities" (63). Instead, educators must strive to further develop the existing pedagogical methods in order to productively address the new understanding of student-teacher roles, literacy, and identity that the multicultural classroom of the 21st century has produced.

We do not wish to imply here that our own education abroad was faulted because of its apparent homogeneity, but that we recognize the vast possibilities of a classroom where fresh ideas from various cultures cross-pollinate and grow. By scrutinizing, and eventually unseating, our own, often internalized, pedagogical frame we wish to encourage international and U.S. readers alike to ponder fresh educational questions about the transnational learning environment of the modern university, and consider how teaching in this novel environment forces us to question ourselves. In this effort, we follow Geneva Gay in her conviction that autobiographical narratives and personal stories "act as mirrors, opportunities, and

invitations" and therefore help ourselves and others to "look inward and outward in becoming multicultural educators" (7). This essay then hopefully serves as a point of departure for future analytic discussions of the interrelation of educational traditions and contemporary challenges in the increasingly global world of higher education.

Five or Seven Continents?: A Cross-Cultural Comparison Between the Argentinean and the American Student

A few years ago, I was teaching an English 1102 composition lesson at Georgia State University to a group of about 20 American students. We were working with argumentation and support, so I asked my students to try to respond to a proposed argument with "new, original ideas," and not just with something that everybody would know, such as "the fact that the world is made up of five continents." I thought that my random example was self-explanatory, but when my students' faces looked puzzled, confused, even amused, I had to ask what was wrong.

"There are *seven* continents in the world, Ms. Barberan!" "You didn't know that?"

Needless to say, I felt initially perplexed. I even doubted myself: Could I simply not remember such an obvious, basic fact? What followed was one of the most enlightening moments of my cross-cultural teaching experience. Born and raised in Argentina, I had learned that our world is divided into five continents: Africa, America (only one continent), Asia, Europe, and Oceania. The list the students shared with me, on the other hand, included seven: Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, *and* South America. Without thinking twice, I took this opportunity to talk to them about cultural differences, how people can have such dissimilar outlooks about the same thing, and how thinking in binary oppositions of right or wrong oftentimes can be misleading. Instead, I told them, we should try to understand that we form part of a diverse world where people have different but equally valid perceptions (and we were just talking about geography!). I then spent some time with the "cultural conversation," feeling satisfied that I had contributed with my little seed to a heightened and respectful awareness of differences. Once I had finished talking, a student at the back timidly raised his hand and asked me:

"Very well, Ms. Barberan, but now you *know* that there are seven continents, right?"

Everybody laughed. I laughed.

What happened that day taught me a valuable lesson: Coming to a different culture means emptying oneself of assumptions and welcoming new perspectives. What may have

been obvious to me was evidently not obvious to my students, and I can imagine how they may have felt when I unintentionally challenged one of the most basic common knowledge facts they learned at school; after all, they challenged my own understanding of the world, and it felt uncomfortable, to say the least.

Before arriving in the United States to teach in 2002, my sponsoring company, Visiting International Faculty Program (VIF), asked me to compare the educational systems in Argentina and in the United States.[1] They provided me with a detailed description of the American educational system and the "American student," while I had to present the same information about my home country. According to the *VIF Instructional Handbook*, the American student is "verbal, outspoken, and questions authority … is respected as an individual whose opinion is valued … strives for independence [and] values personal choice" (2002, 121). These are, of course, general parameters, but they served me as a good starting point to consider how different or similar students across cultures can be.

I then tried to think of my own experience as a student during the course of my 5-year program (1994-9) at the School of Languages, now Facultad de Lenguas, National University of Crdoba. Being a student in this public university was intense, while those apprentice years are perhaps best described as a Darwinian struggle for survival. At the time, just to be accepted into the program, students had to pass a competitive exam after taking a leveling course. Once in, classes were generally conducted inside vast auditoriums (where bringing food would be unthinkable), with professors lecturing at the front to a group of often hundreds of students. In an environment where one gets lost among the many faces and where professors and students relate only from a distance—a "fountain of knowledge" educating the "eager recipients"—the boundaries establish themselves from the beginning. While students in the United States generally pay substantial amounts of money for their education, in my home country public universities are highly subsidized by the government. This benefit allowed me to study practically for free, but did not entitle me to make any special demands on the university such as having frequent one-on-one meetings with professors or email conversations. Unlike here in the United States, professors in Argentinean public universities do not generally conduct office hours, so personal contact becomes a rare occurrence. A student typically sees the professors only for class and for the day of the gargantuan final exam. As far as Teaching Assistants, the closest to the American GTA position in my home country involves helping the professor in charge of a class with some objective tasks, but never assuming complete control, while access to such privilege depends on the student's academic merits and it is often *ad honorem*.

With this academic background, I came to work as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at Georgia State University while completing my Ph.D. in Literary Studies. What initially caught my eye was the size of my class (never more than 25 students) and its ethnic and cultural diversity. Argentina can be considered relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, religion, customs, etc., so the richness of this new environment immediately attracted me. At the same time, it forced me to rethink who the "American student" is, because what I found in my classroom did not fit one single category. In this respect, GSU's body of students creates a microcosm of the world. An ordinary group of freshmen a GTA may encounter any semester can include first- or second-generation immigrants from India, Iran, Colombia, Kenya, Palestine, Mexico, China—just to name a few of the cultures I had the privilege to meet. Students, on the other hand, seem accustomed to having instructors from every corner of the world, as a look at the faculty working at GSU proves. As the instructor, then, I make it my duty to bring attention to the necessity of finding new and varied alternatives to a problem, while the challenge lies in drawing everybody's perspectives into class discussions in an atmosphere of respect and collaboration. Half-way through the semester, my students already understand that for any topic discussed, we will examine every possible angle. In fact, what the text does not mention or does not represent will help us find the prevailing ideologies under the surface, while the more culturally diverse the class is, the easier it becomes to unsettle and question such ideologies. Once the students discover this *need* for difference, class discussions reach a level of depth and involvement that I believe can translate into their practices in society. My hope is that, as future professionals, they will require difference in order to achieve the most original and ground-breaking results in their work endeavors, and that "multiculturalism" loses its status as a "buzz" word we often hear about but rarely understand what to do with it, and actually gains the relevance it should have: Cultural diversity facilitates and promotes positive change, creativity, and innovation.

Understanding that basic premise changed my whole teaching practice. In this regard, as a now happily adjusted international teacher, I have no secret formula. I only try to design learning tasks relevant to my students' needs, challenge them intellectually, and provide a space where diversity of perspective is not only desirable but also necessary to reach productive conclusions. If we want to educate contributing citizens in today's increasingly heterogeneous society, our role as teachers lies in facilitating instances where cultural "differences," as Louise Rosenblatt explains, "are to be seen as alternatives" (53). The connections that arise as a result of combining cultural perspectives in turn foster creative solutions to problems to which one-sided approaches can only provide limited or partial

answers—and here I echo Edward Said's concern in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) with the "modern university's secular mission … to be a place where multiplicity and contradiction co-exist with established dogma and canonical doctrine" (321).[2]

On my part, as a South American teacher, I had to meet my students halfway, yet they had to travel the distance as well in order to benefit from my "foreign" experience. In this respect, it is clear to me that the classroom of today in American universities is a space where both students and instructors can look at the world and question the weakness of apparently fixed "facts"—whether one speaks of a map with five or seven continents—in order to find meaningful, innovative answers to the challenges facing our present moment.

Teaching in the Global Classroom

Students and teachers of English in the 21st century inhabit a global classroom. As this cross-cultural learning space provides seemingly endless opportunity to improve university education, it also creates unprecedented challenges for all participants. Creating a truly multi-cultural classroom depends therefore on the prior recognition of the different elements that come together in the transnational melting pots of university education. From the particular classroom methods of university professors to the fundamental differences in mapping and imagining the world, identifying and acknowledging a student's or teacher's unique cultural heritage becomes a pivotal requirement in the English classroom of the 21st century. Standing in a composition classroom and suddenly realizing that your students think about the world as a conglomerate of seven continents rather than five illustrates beautifully the pedagogical and even personal challenge teachers face in a cross-cultural classroom environment. However, the anecdote also acknowledges the importance of sociocultural pedagogies that see "identity as fluid and changing" (Hammerberg 649). Moreover, it exemplifies that one of the most crucial skills for a multicultural educator is to be able to teach students to respond constructively to comprehension break-downs (Hammerberg 653).

In a university classroom, "cultural differences may often go unnoticed by learners [and teachers] until they actually create a problem (Liddicoat 278). Thus, detecting, acknowledging, and embracing these differences, what Giroux calls "border pedagogy," is one of the most fundamental features of a successful multicultural learning environment. Besides variations in cultural identity and cultural practice, however, there are oftentimes profound variations in the way different nations structure their university education. These variations may include teaching methodologies, the relationship between students and

professors, or the learning environment, but they are especially evident in the way graduate students are prepared for their future as university professors. In some countries, as in my native Germany, there is very little preparation.

"Teaching, No Thank You:" Accounting for the Absence of Teaching Assistants in the German Academic Environment

Graduate teaching assistants are, without a doubt, an undiscovered species in the German academic system. Although a speedy “discovery” and subsequent employment of motivated and able graduate students would, I believe, prove beneficial, there are very valid systemic reasons for the absence of graduate teaching assistants. On an organizational level, German university students traditionally enter their degree program of choice straight out of high school without the additional burden of having to complete core curriculum requirements. Thus, students seeking a master's degree in American Literature will take classes solely related to their field from the moment they enter the university. This ability to limit class requirements to major-related courses, grounded in the stratified German high school system, allows for concentrated 5-year degree programs. In an academic environment that does not require students, regardless of their intended major, to take basic composition classes such as English 1101 or English 1102, the teaching load of, for instance, an English department faculty as well as the dependence on teaching assistants becomes drastically reduced.

While the structural organization of German universities contributes greatly to the absence of graduate teaching assistants, it is the perceived relationship between professors (the “learned”) and students (the “learning”) that best explains this phenomenon while revealing a general, transatlantic difference in the conceptualization of fruitful academic education. Graduate students in Germany are exclusively students. Professors, as well as instructors, on the other hand are clearly defined as those who have left the world of exams and term papers behind, earned their degree, and established themselves within the academic community. This belief in strictly separated student-teacher roles serves mainly to maintain quality academic education, but, of course, also connotes the hierarchical nature of traditional German university learning. Detaching graduate students from both teachers and teaching does, on the one hand, further a sense of self-determined academic education which allows, sometimes even forces, students to take responsibility for their own learning. Unfortunately, on the other hand, many graduate students, especially those who strive for a career in

academics, perceive their time in graduate school as both sheltered from and unconnected to the realities of their future occupation.

"Teaching, Yes Please": Becoming a Teaching Assistant at Georgia State University (While Being German)

After a year as an exchange student and an additional term finishing my master's degree, I entered the PhD program at Georgia State University in the fall of 2005 and became part of a legion of approximately 75 graduate teaching assistants. Being the product of the above-described German academic environment, the perspective of teaching lower-division composition and literature classes *while* being a graduate student myself filled me therefore equally with anticipation and angst. Not only did I doubt that I was adequately prepared for teaching— mainly based on the fact that I never had myself, nor ever witnessed any other fellow graduate student, teach a class in my native Germany— but I further questioned that my understanding and expectation of academia would be compatible with the American university classroom. How could I be a figure of authority when I was still a student myself (and a foreign one)? How could I teach a composition class when my specialty is literature? I was about to find out.

Before I walked into the classroom on my first day of teaching in the fall of 2005, I promised myself to stick as closely to the teaching objectives our department had given out as a safety net for graduate teaching assistants. I further decided that it was in the best interest of the students, and myself, to not reveal too much of my "Germanness." Well, it turns out I didn't have to do any revealing anyway. The students, from the very beginning of the course seemed fascinated with the idea, and the apparent paradox, of having a German guy teach them English composition. As the semester progressed I realized that my fears had been the product of my inability to see beyond what I had learned and experienced myself. I had been afraid of insufficient authority on my part because of the simple fact that I perceived authority as the result of age and accomplishment, two characteristics I clearly lacked. But I learned that the American composition classroom is not a strict hierarchy. Instead, the two classes in that first semester taught me that a productive learning environment can rest on respect for the individual qualities of both the student and the teacher, including their specific cultural background. In a sense, I believe, my students were motivated and respectful *because* I am from another culture.

Now, after almost three years in the classroom, it has not only become apparent to me that enlisting graduate students early in their academic career as teachers allows them to collect invaluable, practical experience. More importantly, my own experience as a foreigner teaching in an American academic institution has taught me the fundamental importance of

transnational teaching practices and learning environments in an increasingly global world. In a multicultural environment such as Georgia State University that unites students from "every state in the nation and over 145 countries," an ethnically coherent classroom has ceased to exist. Instead, increasing educational globalization has generated, what Mary Louise Pratt coined, the classroom as "contact zone"—a transnational social space "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (34). It is thus exactly the diverse experience and background students and teachers bring to the classroom that creates a rewarding learning environment for both. Attempting to realize a truly global classroom means to embrace, rather than limit, different perspectives and responses from the students and the teachers to both classroom discussion and assignments. However, in order to fully realize the cultural democratization of the university classroom, professors and teaching assistants alike have to abandon the spell of Western pedagogical hegemony that still bewitches many, foreigners and natives alike, who enter the American classroom. Of course I am not trying to suggest that we should hastily abandon our cherished pedagogical foundations and personal values. Instead, I am promoting a heightened sense of cultural awareness inside and outside the classroom. I believe, for example, that if I would have been aware of the fact that my initial challenges in the classroom were the result of the internalization of the "German system," I might have been a better teacher in that first semester. If we are trying to become transnational educators in a transnational arena, we have to understand ourselves as translators between different, and even competing, cultures. I therefore believe that we have to become ambassadors of a "culturally responsive pedagogy" (Irvine 73) that promotes "border crossings" between the various groups within the classroom and encourages the teachers to become "translators of culture" (Shapiro et al. 116). The foremost responsibility of the teacher then becomes to appropriately identify one's own personal and cultural limitations as well as the advantages of a German, Argentinean, or French education and share them beneficially with the many other cultures in the classroom of the 21st century.

The French Way, the American Way: Learning to Negotiate Cultural Differences in the Global Classroom

When I was awarded the Georgia Rotary Student Program Scholarship in 2002, I had no idea that my initial year of study at Georgia State University would lead me to enter the PhD program and start a new degree in an American university. Only a year after my arrival, I began teaching for the modern and classical languages department, and a few semesters later, for the English department. I knew what it meant to teach undergraduate students (I had

already taught in France) yet I had never imagined—among other things—that I would be "left" on my own and as such find myself responsible for preparing and giving lectures, monitoring, grading written examinations, or even answering students' questions on a daily basis.

Of course, teaching assistants do exist in France, and their workload varies from teaching in private graduate schools to public universities. However, rarely are teaching assistants asked to have full responsibility for planning and conducting a course.[3] I can still remember the anxiety I felt when I arrived on the campus no more than a week before classes started. I was handed a document labeled "Resources for Instructors of English" together with a small package of books, was told to read it, and was thrown into the classroom. I must confess that I was probably more frightened than I had ever been before, not really by the work or the responsibility itself but by the way professors trusted me as fully capable of doing it. As I perceived it, I was a foreigner, not only in terms of culture and identity, but also in terms of competence.

U.S. universities have long employed graduate students as teaching assistants to work as part-time instructors. As Judith Levinson-Rose explains, TAs are trusted as professors in the becoming and "perform several important functions at the university … Their responsibility ranges from supervised, quasi-clerical assistance for a professor to completely autonomous instructional decision making for a large undergraduate class" (Levinson-Rose and Menges 102). Seen through the eyes of a French university student, the transition from *graduate student* to *teaching assistant* (or negotiation between the two), however, seemed far more complicated than what is often regarded as a "common" phenomenon in the American classroom. I was in for a shock, for I was in charge of teaching a course that students were required to take (not an elective), which, in France, would probably have been "reserved" to certified professors.[4]

I knew what it meant to be a student, at least a French student: Follow the schedule, sit in large auditoriums, write essays or papers with subjects already assigned, and rarely ask any questions to the professors who, once the lecture was over, would quickly leave the room until the next lecture. It must be added that, in France, only a relatively small portion of high school graduates go on to the university, since most students choose to go to "grandes coles," private business schools, music schools, or independent technical institutes. And within the same university system, the law school, the arts and humanities, and the sciences, are regarded as "independent" entities, which means that students studying physics will never share a course with a student majoring in English, for instance. At Georgia State, however, I

remember taking my first class and sharing my views on a specific subject with a vastly diversified group of students. As a consequence, a vital part of my own experience abroad was to be able to understand the mindset of people from different cultures, majors, and interests. The specificity of the American system, in that regard, comes precisely from the "globality" of a mandatory course like English Rhetoric and Composition, for instance, in which a student majoring in Business can sit next to a student majoring in English. The ensuing exchange of ideas triggered by this "melting pot" of students is unique and contributes largely to the diversity of the American classroom beyond a social, religious, or even ethnic diversity. When students bring their cultural strengths with them, both they and the classroom is enriched.

When I became a teacher myself, I quickly discovered that the classroom behavior in the United States and the students' attitudes toward their teachers was "informal," to say the least. On the first day of class, afraid that students would throw me out of the classroom because of my French accent (let us not forget that I am teaching English to native speakers), I soon realized that they addressed me in an informal way that I would have never dared in an auditorium: "Oh, really! You're French, where from?" or "I went to Paris last summer. Gosh, French people smoke!" If American students look at the classroom as a space to feel at ease—a space to bring soft drinks, food, and sometimes books—they also tend to consider the teacher as someone who would not only come to lecture but who would also learn their names, smile, and be willing to engage in some informal conversation outside of the class. Interestingly, the University of Iowa specifies those to its foreign teaching assistants:

The U.S students… may have had a less rigorous academic experience than … those students in your country who follow an academic or university-bound curriculum. U.S. freshmen and sophomores may also be at least as interested in their social lives as in their academic lives. For them, "college life" is not just an intellectual experience, but a phase in their lives that is intended to focus on social and cultural activities as well (Althen 3).

Georgia State being a very heterogeneous community, my students expected me to share something about my own background and culture. Yet, accustomed to a wider social distance between lecturer and students, I found myself trying to adapt to a new culture where the teacher needs to maintain a delicate balance between flexibility and discipline. As Bailey, Pialorsi, and Faust explain, "the foreign TA, like any foreign student coming at an American university, must undergo a process of acculturation in order to be effective in the U.S. classroom. In other words, he or she must, to an as yet undetermined degree, 'become more like us' in order to function" (17). More than the switching of languages, teaching English to

native-speakers has entailed for me the necessity to switch between various roles, to become not only a professor, but also a mediator between cultures.

I had been a student, I had been a teacher, but I quickly realized that I had never been a mediator. I had no idea of how to diplomatically deal with my students' questions about France or their complaints when they found that lectures and readings were boring, or out of date, and when they argued that the syllabus I followed did not make sense. Obviously (in my case at least), the classroom became the site of cross-cultural encounters which also involved identity negotiation in a "global contact zone," in which people with disparate historical trajectories and cultural identities interact, "often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt qtd in Singh & Doherty 11). Therefore, if I wanted to become an understanding mediator between cultures in the classroom, I needed to be able and willing to recreate, what Lothar Bredella terms, "the context of the foreign, take the others' perspective and see things through their eyes" (29). This process does involve embracing differences and in turn being "able to distance [oneself] from [one's] own categories, values and interests" (Bredella 29). I experienced an interaction of this kind when I taught a class of American literature, for I quickly realized that the specific literary training that I had received (and later taught) in France posed a problem in the American classroom.

Of course, there is not one way of appreciating literature, even less a French way. Yet, the close reading of one particular passage of literature, as the French structuralists call it, consists of following a set of "reading" rules that does not focus on the reader (or "audience") and his or her individual or personal experience of a work. Criticizing a text means focusing attention primarily on the author or the content and form of the work. Understanding the meaning of a text becomes a very unifying experience, since most text-oriented critics assume that one can understand a text while remaining immune to one's own culture, status, personality, and hence "objectively.

In the American classroom however and, to my surprise, students would impart "real existence" to the work. There was a tendency for most of my American students to complete the meaning of a text through interpretation by projecting their own background onto the story. In that context, it was the classroom, more than the text itself, that generated meaning and knowledge. Soon enough, debates, open questioning, individual responses, or paraphrasing imposed themselves (at least for my students) as valid alternatives to the close-reading exercise I initially had in mind. Of course, such an exercise was not conventional in the specific context of the American classroom; yet, I could not help but think that my students were "corrupting" the act of reading. In my demand for "authenticity" (at least my

own vision of authenticity in reading a text), I was pushing for a uniform way of reading and writing, which failed to reflect the diversity of contexts in which literature is supposed to be learned and used. The conceptual framework that I had internalized from years of study in France, I realized, could become a major source of misunderstanding. As Claire Kramsch and Steven Thorne specify: "[w]ithout a knowledge and understanding of … genres, no 'understanding of each other's lives' and no reconfiguration of one's own is possible" (100).

As time progressed, I therefore decided to aim for appropriateness rather than authenticity. Seen in that light, interpretation and reader-response no longer felt like an alternative but as a reading exercise that was complementary to the French one.[5] Such a reading, by pointing in directions never considered before, forces students and teacher alike to enter unknown territory: that of embracing new perspectives. It is precisely, I believe, at the intersection of the individual differences among readers' responses that a contact zone is created within the classroom: the "foreign" teacher and the "foreign" students met when literature became not only an object to apply unitary literary techniques but also a way to reveal the diversity and creativity of individual interpretations. As my individual experience shows, this encounter, however, could only be achieved when I accepted to challenge the myth of the "teacher" (or authority) as the sole arbiter of learning and when I engaged in discourses that, while acknowledging differences, helped learners achieve understandings across cultural boundaries.[6]

CONCLUSIONS

It has been a good 500 years since the Florentine city state became the epicenter of the Italian Renaissance under the patronage of the Medici. While the political accomplishments of their reign quickly faded, it was the cultural and artistic legacy of the period that achieved historical immortality. And although it would be presumptuous to assume that teaching assistants and university instructors can measure their educational impact against the patrons of Donatello, Fran Angelico, and DaVinci, it is nonetheless fruitful to learn from their method.

Similar to the city of Florence during the golden age of the Renaissance, the American classroom of the 21st century has, undoubtedly, become a marketplace of both contrasting and coexisting ideas and cultures. Edward Said had already diagnosed this tendency early in the nineties when he argued that to "match knowledge in the arts and sciences with [the] integrative realities [of multiculturalism and minority discourse is] the intellectual and cultural challenge of the moment" (331). This ongoing diversification, as our personal experiences testifies, is clearly not limited to the student body. In fact, the increasingly heterogeneous

nature of the global classroom has by now permeated every fiber of the educational matrix of our society, including teachers, curricula, and institutions at large. Whereas some might lament the vanishing of the traditional educator, we believe that the affirmation of a culturally diverse classroom produces unique opportunities that will, in the end, benefit both students and teachers alike; for it not only enables its participants to contribute to and comprehend a global reality, but also allows educational institutions to become forums where remarkable ideas emerge and intersect.

We have tried to share here three visions from different continents that have met in one of the most productive intellectual grounds: the university. When we entered the American university system, our expectations of both teacher and student roles in the classroom of higher education was largely based on our own experiences. For all of us our mono-cultural background initially seemed to be a hindrance and even a source of insecurity, in that our new surrounding appeared to be vastly different in its socio-pedagogical make-up. What we learned, however, over the course of the last couple of years, is that cultural difference, and especially the introduction of unfamiliar practices and concepts to the humanities classroom (from both teachers and students), can be an invaluable component in creating an interactive, interesting, and innovative learning experience for all parties involved. Out of this experience grew our conviction that a culturally diverse classroom, both on the level of pedagogical theory and educational practice, is the foundation for successful university education in the 21st century, and that the teachers are blessed with the unparalleled opportunity of becoming epistemological Medicis, but also face the challenge of managing it responsibly.[7]

Notes

1. The Visiting International Faculty Program (VIF) is the United States' largest cultural exchange program for teachers and schools. It began in 1987 with the intention of bringing to the United States teachers from all over the world in order to foster an international approach to education and advance cultural understanding.

2. Said takes this description from Alvin Gouldner.

3. In France, the traditional Attach Temporaire d'Enseignement et de Recherche (ATER) position is indeed something that is earned after careful analysis and selection among the

numerous PhD applicants. The number of positions offered is quite limited, and the appointment regarded as an honor. This year (2008-2009), at the University of Avignon, France, for instance, two ATER positions were offered in the English Department.

4. Lia.D. Kamhi Stein, in her article "Preparing non-native Professionals in TESOL: Implications for Teacher Education Programs," further explores this issue of self-perception.

5. We find here an example of what de Beaugrande calls "discourses of solidarity," which "promote negotiation and collaboration among [all] participants," rather than discourses of power, which "promote authority and confrontation and pursue goals of some participants at the expense of others" (de Beaugrande 2).

6. Addressing the teaching of the English language (not literature), Jane Crawford comes to the same conclusion in her enlightening article, "Becoming an L2 User: Implications for Identity and Culture in the Language Classroom."

7. Our understanding of pedagogy follows theorists of critical pedagogy, such as Giroux and Popkewitz, and asserts that teaching and learning is at all times embedded in cultural practices and political power structures, while being concerned with issues of identity formation. Therefore, in order to meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse classroom, it is imperative to constantly improve existing teaching models and methods. Following the important work of earlier models by Kitano, Chesler, and Jackson, Jacueline Jordan Irvine, for example, proposes six helpful revisions of traditional teacher roles: teachers as culturally responsive pedagogists, teachers as systemic reformers, teachers as members of caring communities, teachers as reflective practitioners and researchers, teachers as pedagogical-content specialists, teachers as antiracist educators (73 ff.).

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