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Footnotes from the 'Margins': Outcomes-based Literary Nonfiction Pedagogy in Puerto Rico

Introduction: Developing a Pragmatic Creative Writing Pedagogy in the Caribbean

This essay was co-developed with Latin American graduate students during a Spring 2019 Literary Nonfiction seminar at the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez, a Spanish-dominant STEM university in the Eastern Caribbean. A broad question we addressed was: *how does the pedagogy of nonfiction operate in international contexts?* The narrative response develops from a departmental and institutional context, using a theoretical framework and an assignment provided by the professor, then shifts to close readings elaborated by students. There are two different focal points, one pedagogical (arguing for and demonstrating the use of Learning Outcomes), and one more thematic, about using nonfiction as a means to facilitate cross-cultural or transnational communicative competence. The logic, as students argued, is that nonfiction is particularly well suited to meeting the Outcomes on which we focused.

Learning Outcomes are essential in Writing Studies. We argue that Outcomes-based pedagogical approaches are especially necessary for international contexts such as the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez. The second thematic unity—*engaging our cultural others*—is connected to the Outcomes on which we focused in this seminar: developing different kinds of voice for different rhetorical contexts, and learning how to better engage in intercultural dialogue. Of particular note is the student-developed theme that there are a variety of openings in cultural and literary texts through which the “other” can speak.

Working with a metaphorical understanding of *footnotes* as entry-points, the student-generated case studies suggest ways of coming in “from the margins” in order to claim a space to speak in/ to the center. The collaborative process involved discussion of how specific Outcomes related to student research projects, and repeated peer reviews as the teaching demonstrations evolved into research papers. As the professor, I encouraged students to think about writing these essays in a form that could be published. After marking student essays, I asked for and received written permission to excerpt student writing in this final write-up.

As professor of this seminar, my three-part approach (*Genre, Pedagogy, and Practice*) was one of frank advocacy. The students in a Masters of Arts in English Education were all teaching composition, so I presented creative nonfiction as part of the tool kit or repertoire which they could use in the composition class, as well as in their own writing or research. In a collaborative mode, we questioned some conventional wisdom in composition studies, including the belief that researched academic essays should be the lodestar of writing courses. We also viewed literary nonfiction as part of a move away from a traditional conception of rhetoric as primarily or exclusively *persuasive*.

Contemporary participants in mass media contexts are often skeptical of direct attempts to change their opinion. Thus successful rhetorical strategies more often require holding an audience’s attention, and allowing them to identify with characters through affective means, rather than trying to sway them towards accepting a particular argument. Building on arguments for reflexive writing and positionality, I encouraged students “to write in the margins” of existing texts and genres, as David Lazar puts it (xii), as a step towards developing their own voice. Students took this opening and ran with it. Writers on the periphery could enter through the footnotes, one argued, and fill blank pages with their own experiences in their own genre-appropriate voices. These student writer/teachers challenged static views about what “writing from the margins” means.

Personal, departmental, institutional, and disciplinary contexts shaped this project. I began teaching creative writing classes in Puerto Rico in Fall 2014. My approach is rooted in non-academic contexts (songwriting and journalism), and later benefitted from a historical approach to communication studies. So my version of creative writing—as a practitioner and teacher—developed outside of institutional creative writing contexts. Some eighty percent of my undergraduate students were STEM majors who took creative writing as an English elective. Therefore I emphasized creative writing pedagogies which were useful in interdisciplinary and post-academic contexts. The departmental and institutional contexts were further characterized by lack of oversight of English writing classes. Part of this dysfunction can be attributed to a worsening economic crisis in Puerto Rico. But the institution made its generalized indifference to English evident, despite a dire need for better English and communication skills among engineering students in particular. I determined to double down on the pragmatic elements of my creative writing classes. My focus on Outcomes grew in part out of dissatisfaction with “isolationist” tendencies in academic creative writing, leading to “insularity” and a “vehemently ahistorical” approach (Andrews, 244-46). However, my decision to require grad students to ground their teaching and writing in Learning Outcomes was driven by what I saw as a failure in my own department to listen to what other departments wanted. Outcomes offered a starting point for inter-departmental dialogue, and hopefully a restructuring of the curriculum for GE writing courses. Given this context, I adhered to Charles Bazerman’s notion of an emergent writing studies field as practicing (and even embodying) a form of “disciplined interdisciplinarity.”

Writing Studies as Disciplined Interdisciplinarity

Two thumbnail explanations of “disciplined interdisciplinarity” come to mind:

1. One must be disciplined about not falling into mono-disciplinary lingo;

2. One must be disciplined in staying focused on the primary objective of Writing Studies, which is *to translate ideas outside of disciplinary bubbles*.

Interdisciplinarity is not just picking and choosing strands from various disciplines, or throwing ideas into a post-disciplinary gumbo. The practice of *working between and across disciplines* requires *being disciplined* in choosing disciplinary ideas/theories which can help one translate the essence of a concept beyond the boundaries of a discipline. Seeking to communicate beyond specialist bubbles, interdisciplinary scholars (and, for my purposes, nonfiction writers) adapt narrative skills to *tell the story* of the core idea at hand, in embodied fashion, across and outside of academic contexts. I cut my writerly teeth in journalism and songwriting, and was trained in interdisciplinary communication studies, so I was impressed by Bazerman's interdisciplinary knowledge. But he had learned the hard way that disciplines valued the knowledge of interdisciplinary "outsiders" only if it could help them (the insiders) win intra-disciplinary arguments. Bazerman and Charles Johnson lay the foundation for a view of Writing Studies as an endeavor which rhetorically translates research.

Thinking about the interdisciplinary possibilities of literary nonfiction, Lars Rodseth's work (2015) comparing Bruno Latour and Franz Boas became useful as I constructed the class under consideration here. Latour admires anthropology's ability to look at larger repeating patterns. Drawing on Boas' emphasis on keeping sight of connecting threads, Latour felt that one should maintain the capacity to trace each "fragile thread" through the network rather than slicing them into disciplinary "segments" (Latour 1993: 3-4). This also describes the potential of literary nonfiction, as a domain sharing a certain kinship with ethnographic writing. Both can look beyond disciplinary over-specialization (the "segments") in order to maintain a view of the connecting threads, the lattice-work moving between disciplines which has a logic and a narrative mode of its own.

Centering Outcomes

Working with undergraduate STEM students has influenced the graduate student instructors with whom I am working. Class discussion and individual consultation indicate that they have become keenly aware, after teaching for a semester or two, that few of their students are English majors. If 28 of their 30 students are STEM majors, an adjustment is required. To do so, first we studied the 1999 Outcomes Statement (and later the 2014 revision). This was developed by the Writing Program Administrators, and has served a template for Outcome statements for many departments/ institutions. A representative Outcome reads: “By the end of first-year composition, students should [be able to] respond to the needs of different audiences ... in different kinds of rhetorical situations, and “adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality.”

The responses published in 1999 in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* indicate (seen as a historical case study) how far removed The Outcomes Statement was from the ideological trench warfare going on when the document was being discussed in the late 1990s. For example, Clyde Moneyhun remarked that “I side with those who wish that the document had more to say about teaching writing to heighten social and political awareness among students, about writing as a civic act.” But Moneyhun concluded that “the document (like all such documents) is necessarily and inevitably conservative” (63). Mark Wiley observed that both “the conservative right and the radical left may both agree over what it lacks,” since “The Outcomes Statement is a ... a negotiated document, ...one articulated at a sufficiently general enough level to allow local interpretation and implementation” (67). The Outcomes Statement was “hardly revolutionary,” which Kathleen Blake Yancey suggested was a good thing, above all, because “it doesn’t prescribe. Let me break that line out so we don’t miss it: *it doesn’t prescribe*” (67).

Given the necessity for a “neutral” document that could provide pedagogical guidelines in a variety of institutions, one begins to see the wisdom of doing a sort of “backward design.” Building backwards

from the orienting horizon of learning outcomes helps instructors to design a curriculum which teaches students how to “adopt appropriate voice and tone” for “different audiences ... in different kinds of rhetorical situations.”

We looked at the revised language in the 2014 Outcomes statement, which acknowledged emerging interests such as life-span writing, and non-academic genres. The revised statement showed concern with what happens *after freshman composition*: “students move beyond FYW ... into new settings where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge.”

Finally we examined how the Outcomes drafted by the WPA and the National Council for Teachers of English had been taken up and revised in local institutions. For example, Portland State University’s “Institutional Assessment Council” published its own Campus-wide Learning Outcomes. This included the subtle but in some ways radical pairing of “Creative and Critical Thinking.” Within a Literary Nonfiction seminar for graduate students teaching freshman composition with little direction, we discussed how that inter-relatedness of the creative and the critical could be encouraged in curriculum design, and in the students’ own writing.

Teaching a Text in Context

The semester’s key assignment for the graduate students was to build a “teaching a text in context” demonstration, framing the demo with Outcomes which students chose. They were tasked with utilizing various forms of context in order to “build a bridge” for their students into the text (historical context, genre, author bio, ideological themes, etc). They then did a close reading of a short section of a literary nonfiction text which they had selected (Andrés Padró, however, chose to study the nonfiction footnotes within Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*). Within the strict discipline of a 45-minute ESL Freshman English course, their objective was to help their students move towards the designated

Outcomes through the use and study of nonfiction. Their final research papers then grew out of this teaching demo.

Early in the seminar, students wrote responses to historical figures in literary nonfiction. Then they explored intertextuality in versions of “Why I Write” by George Orwell and Joan Didion, and iterations of “Death of a Moth” by Virginia Woolf and Annie Dillard. Most of the semester was dedicated to preparing for the “Teaching a Text in Context” demo. A model for such an approach was provided by my presentations of Esmeralda Santiago’s “How to Eat a Guava,” and Chang Rae-Lee’s “Sea Urchin.” From these models, graduate student Andrés Padró examined a footnote from Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* to consider how it serves as a framing device for the novel. Díaz uses the metaphor a “página en blanco,” a blank page, which can be filled by readers. Most Puerto Ricans “get used to” being “less than a footnote to the world at large,” Padró observes. Padró’s pedagogical strategy “provides students with a model with which they may devise their own entry points into the text, speaking out from the margins of global society in order to fill in their own blank pages.” Christian Fernández analyzed Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* as an “anti-guidebook” in which she turns “what was supposed to be a pleasurable read for any tourist into an insult.” In examining competing truths about travel are examined, Fernández sought to achieve the outcome of “understanding issues from a variety of cultural perspectives”—here listening to anger against “Ugly Americans.” Gabriela Ruiz highlighted immersion-style research methods in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, while arguing for “empathy writing” in the composition classroom.

Now we enter excerpts of the graduate students’ own research papers, developed through an elaboration of their “teaching a text in context” demonstrations.

Andrés Padró: Entering Center Stage through the Footnotes

Intermediate ESL students often struggle with the context of the material they read in the English classroom. In keeping with our assignment of “building a bridge between text and students,” I chose Junot Díaz’ novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The text is rooted at the intersection of English and Spanish, in a setting that is familiar to, yet set apart from, Puerto Rican culture. I focus on several nonfiction footnotes Díaz uses to provide a historical backdrop.

Although Díaz often uses the notes to provide context for the “text proper,” at other times “Díaz... actively erases key context for understanding...pivotal moments in his text” (O’Brien 76). For this reason, Díaz’s novel requires an active role on the part of the reader. Through these footnotes, Díaz calls attention to aspects of history that he sees as having been silenced. He also mimics the digressive and dynamic oral story telling mannerism of Caribbean culture. While the main plot progresses, touching and alluding to themes and historical events, but never quite digging into them, the footnotes serve as a backdrop. In this way, they serve the role of an informant or gossip, an insider perspective for the reader; a unique take on the Greek Choir. They are a bridge across the margins of history.

Páginas en blanco [pages left blank] is one of the central metaphors on which Díaz builds his story, and it is introduced in a footnote. In the novel, the *página en blanco* allegorizes the impunity with which marginalized voices are silenced and erased from history by exploitative political forces. The act of filling these blank pages, then, is framed as redemptive and a method of individual and cultural self-actualization.

Frequent digressions and asides in the footnotes can be allusions to the Latino habit of gossip—either a deadly or profitable habit to have in the era of Trujillo. Much like gossip, Díaz’s footnotes hold grains of truth among the hyperbole and the superstition. In particular footnotes 9 and 11 describe a significant historical event through the lens of literary nonfiction. In footnote 9, Díaz presents the metaphorical concept of the *página en blanco*; in footnote 11 he introduces the meta-historical concept of writers and dictators being natural antagonists, while also in some ways having similar tendencies.

Through a close reading of footnote 9, I help students see how Díaz weaves his own personal narrative into the narrative of history by shedding light on a figure that, while not pertinent to the story, is invaluable in providing cultural context to the Dominican identity. It is through the figure of Joaquín Balaguer that the symbol of the *página en blanco* is introduced, which becomes a reoccurring motif of the novel. Balaguer's *página en blanco* in footnote 9 is both literal and figurative. Balaguer literally left a blank page in his memoirs which he claimed would be filled upon his death, revealing the murder of writer Orlando Martínez—a case in which Balaguer is known to have been involved. Díaz notes that even after Balaguer's passing in 2002, “the página is still blanca.”

Christian Fernández: A Small Place as an “anti-guidebook”

Outcomes are a great way to establish overarching goals for students. I chose the outcome of “understanding issues from a variety of cultural perspectives.” A text that can help achieve this outcome is Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*. This “travel memoir” presents an opportunity for students [in my composition class] to reevaluate their views of themselves and the world through literary nonfiction. Two outcomes which can be achieved through a close reading of Kincaid are *listening to the voice of the other*, and *addressing the audience through a second person point of view*. I chose travel writing as a sub-genre of creative nonfiction because I think it can best help students *understand issues from a variety of cultural perspectives*. Literature of travel can be intended “to provide leisure or to express political or socio-economic discontent with an oppressive status quo,” Ocasio states (33). This type of writing is diverse, and flexible.

After introducing students to creative nonfiction, which has not been taught in their secondary schools or college classes, I would introduce the concept of literary canons. Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* brings Caribbean travel writing into an expanded sense of the literary nonfiction genre. Students will come to see how creative nonfiction gives them what Sarah Wright calls “constructive power,” which is the

complete power and liberty to write about something that happened to them while also being stylistic and utilizing literary tropes.

After I sketch the historical background of Antigua, students can see that Antigua today is portrayed as a tourist heaven; lush beaches, green mountains, exotic vistas. The island's economy revolves around tourism, so the island's only airport and its different hotels are most of what tourists experience. I would present images of Antigua's tourist destinations and then ask: how much of Antigua are tourists seeing? Most of the recognizable sights in Antigua are near the shores, so it would be unlikely that tourists would see the deeper sides of the island where the way of living by the locals is different from what is experienced in the tourist locations.

To help students understand Kincaid's tone, I would ask another question: how do you feel about tourists? I would want them to consider the times, if any, in which they have been tourists and if their time was spent mostly at tourist sites or any other places.

The last context I would address is the genre of Kincaid's *A Small Place*: travel writing. I would focus on the type of text Kincaid is trying to recreate, i.e. the guidebook. Guidebooks are usually generic constructions that showcase the best spots or more interesting locals for tourists to visit. They tend to include pictures and brief descriptions of the places they portray. After our discussion of guidebooks as a genre, I would task my students with creating a few sentences for a guidebook. This will let the students see their thoughts concretely, in comparison with how Kincaid uses the guidebook schema as a base for her text.

Gabriela Ruiz: "Literary Journalism" as Immersion Research, and Empathy Writing

Course outcomes are descriptions of essential skills that students should acquire through the course. The outcomes selected by the Instructor should reflect skills that the students will take with them and use in

their academic and post-academic careers. It is important to note that these skills should be useful for students of all majors, not just English.

Through a close reading and discussion of Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, as well as a corresponding assignment, students would acquire an expanded repertoire of research methods. This Outcome encompasses re-acquainting students with traditional methods of research like: Interviewing; the Reference Library; and Internet search engines like Google Scholar. I would highlight two of the specialized methods used by literary nonfiction writers: Immersion Journalism (where the writer reaches an understanding through first-person experience, i.e., living it); and Ethnographic research. Truman Capote's use of these two methods will be shown in the next section. Immersion and ethnographic research—especially the interview—were imperative to the creation of his “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood*.

Capote spent more than five years doing extensive, in-depth research on the crime and its aftermath. Once he set his sights on the sensational murders he wanted to investigate, Capote set out to the town of the crime, in Kansas. There he proceeded, with the help of his friend/research assistant Harper Lee, to insert himself into the community of Holcomb, ingratiating himself and connecting with the townspeople as well as the murderers, who he would study and interview.

By reading parts of this book through the alternative research Outcome, students can gain insight into Capote's use of immersion journalism, through which he “directly and intimately” (D’Anastasia) engages with his subjects, including the murderer Perry Smith. Capote also used Ethnographic research, conducting interviews, and studying artifacts. Through these methods, Capote ended up with “6,000 pages of notes, including correspondence, court records, extended interviews, newspaper/magazine accounts, diary entries and weather reports” (Parker) that he then used to write his book. By learning how Capote did his research, albeit on a grand scale, students are introduced to some research skills they can use, albeit on a much smaller scale.

I also hope to introduce the topic of empathy writing. Smith's mother, like Capote's, was an alcoholic who early on neglected him, dropping him off at her relatives and running off, creating a sense of abandonment in her son. Like Smith's parents, Capote's went through a messy divorce. Both boys lived, unhappily, with their mothers. Capote was constantly criticized and humiliated by his mother for something he couldn't control (his 'effeminate' ways), while Smith was humiliated and mocked by the cottage mother in the Detention home for wetting the bed, due to his "weak" kidneys. Through Perry's statement, which Capote provided, readers learn about the hardship and physical and emotional abuse the young Perry Smith went through. Capote demonstrated an "ability to provoke an emotional response in his readers," which Elliot Parker cites as the "one of the cornerstones of the controversial author's legacy."

One part of Smith's testimony reads: "I was frightfully scared, in fact all of us children were terrified. Crying. I was scared because I thought my father was going to hurt me, also because he was beating my mother. I really didn't understand why he was beating her" (Capote 583). Who could read the part where Smith describes his father beating his mother when he was a young child, and not feel empathy for the boy, and a bit of understanding, even knowing what he would later go on to do?

Conclusions: From the Margins to the Mainstream?

As professor and lead writer, I want now to connect the dots of the student research about literary nonfiction pedagogy in international contexts. *Un-authorized* or "unofficial" voices are valuable resources, offering a wider set of literacies that writers can draw on, to come closer to a more representative and readable versions of "the truth." These are three main points that can be obtained through the summaries above of graduate student research about "teaching a text in context":

1. When we go looking for “new voices,” as with international practitioners of literary nonfiction, we need think outside the box, looking for unexpected entry points and places to write, such as footnotes;

2. We should revise our expectations about what we may find there, which may include uncomfortable tones, such as anger towards the “Ugly American”;

3. Working on the “margins,” it is important to take advantage of research strategies such as immersion, in order to create empathy for the “others” which we have set out to locate, and listen to.

Literary nonfiction stories can act like contemporary folktales. “Nothing travels so easily, and seems to be absorbed so readily as a tale,” Franz Boas noted (146). Drawing on Boas and Latour, Rodseth remarks that like a technological virus, “a folktale crosses boundaries/weaves the world together” (870). Nonfiction stories, which have come to dominate the publishing world, serve a similar function, providing points of entry to writers who might be excluded from traditional genres. They burrow into the interstices between nations, languages, and genres. Thinking about backdoor entries into cultural discourse—via “marginalized” spaces like footnotes or travel guides—and comparing such entries to “viruses” that serve an inter-weaving function for previously excluded voices, a dispassionate observer could arrive at the conclusion that “entry via the margins” is in fact a major (if contested) theme of United States culture. To understand the worldview of a cultural other, Mary Douglas argued, one must give up on “expecting to find something that will translate into our language” (vii). Instead, look beneath “the tip of the iceberg” and seek “unspoken understandings,” she advised. How to get there? It is beneficial to look towards, and beyond, the margins of what is traditionally taught, or valorized. As Joan Didion once said, in her revision of Orwell’s “Why I Write,” one might want to allow one’s eyes to wander to those “images that shimmer” on the periphery of our vision—or say, in the footnotes of the mainstream.

These footnotes from the margins may reveal “strange contradictions of the underground,” as Ralph Ellison wrote in *Invisible Man*. For example, at a certain point of Kincaid’s *A Small Island*, one suspects that the “you” she is addressing, with such disdain, is not only those pale North American tourists, but the other brown-skinned North Americans, such as herself, who have “abandoned” their countries of origin, and now ply their trade by offering exoticized representations of their culture of origin. The international face of the fourth genre suggests that rhetorical center-periphery binaries have a tenuous legitimacy, at best.

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