

Internationalizing “America”: Critical Pedagogy in the Multinational Community College Classroom

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“It would be absurd to be concerned about integrated schools without being concerned about the survival of the world in which to integrate.”

Martin Luther King, quoted in *New York Times*, May 11, 1967, “Dr. King Rebukes Critics of His Stand on War in Vietnam” Resumo

As teachers at LaGuardia Community College, part of the City University of New York (CUNY), we are fortunate to work with an exceptionally diverse student body. We are dedicated to helping our students—many of whom are first-generation college students—achieve their educational and professional goals. Yet we know that encouraging individual achievement is not enough. Our teaching must allow students to explore the political, social, and cultural forces shaping their lives and the lives of their communities. It must empower them to be active participants in public life, in the political process, and in the debates that affect their lives. It must acknowledge the realities of inequality, racism, sexism, and homophobia. We must consider the fundamental question about critical pedagogy as articulated by Henry Giroux (1988): “[H]ow can we make schooling meaningful so as to make it critical and how can we make it critical so as to make it emancipatory?” (p. 2).

We are also fortunate to work at an institution that supports critical pedagogies mindful of students' lived experiences and multiple identities. In his ethnographic study of second-generation Latino students at LaGuardia, Alex Trillo (2006) found that "the location, student demographics, activities, curriculum, and even aesthetics of the college, which were grounded in earlier immigrant and minority communities, were all instrumental" in engaging students, building identity and "empower[ing] these young people to want to overcome the barriers facing them and do better than previous generations" (p. 58).

At the same time, as an historian and an English professor, we realized that even the most student-centered, politically engaged, and multicultural courses and pedagogies in our fields too often contained unstated U.S.-centric assumptions. The culture Trillo describes is particularly conducive for student-led inquiries into issues of race, class, and economic inequality, and the social movements that have led struggles around these issues. Through LaGuardia's urban studies program, in which we both teach, for example, students investigate their city and communities through on-site observations, interviews with community residents, and original ethnographic investigations. How, we wondered, could we facilitate the same engagement while addressing the global as well as the local? Although issues of war and peace, international migration, and power relationships between nations as well as within the United States have great relevance to our students' lives, they are often shielded from democratic debate, treated as the purview of a few selected experts. Moreover, the ideology of American exceptionalism often shapes public discourse around these issues in ways that can be difficult to uncover and identify (Zinn, 2005). Even the teaching of immigration—so central to LaGuardia's identity—may inadvertently reinforce mythologies about America as a uniquely free and equal nation rather than allow for a full exploration of the historical, political, and cultural contexts that inform our students' experiences and communities (Hayduk, 2009). We began to discuss the ways our courses need to change to serve students who are multinational and multilingual as well as multiethnic.

In response, we developed "America in the World," an interdisciplinary set of courses with integrated aims, pedagogies, and assignments, as a First Year Liberal Arts cluster, part of the Learning Communities program at LaGuardia. In so doing, we drew on the work of scholars and teachers who have described international critical pedagogies that challenge American exceptionalism, including Ron Hayduk (2011) and Howard Zinn (2005) as well as on recent historical scholarship dedicated to "America in the World," described by Thomas Bender (2002) and Paul Kramer (2011), in which author one is an active scholar. We also developed interdisciplinary, integrative techniques to help students explore more deeply the

ideology of American exceptionalism and alternative perspectives. It is composed of four courses: American History, 1865-Present (taught by author one); Composition, the Research Paper (each taught by author two), and World Geography (taught by a colleague in the Social Science department). Students also participate in a weekly co-taught integrative seminar.

OUTLINE

In this paper, we argue that a truly critical pedagogy must be global as well as multicultural. It must empower students to think about hierarchies of power that exist between as well as within nations. We believe our teaching has a responsibility to challenge the ideology of American exceptionalism just as we challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, and class-based hierarchies. Coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in the early nineteenth century, the term refers to the belief that the United States stands alone as a nation that has avoided “class conflicts, revolutionary upheaval, and authoritarian governments” and “present[s] to the world an example of liberty for others to emulate” (Tyrrell, 1991, p. 1031). This idea, which contains clear “overtones of national superiority,” suggests that the U.S. developed in unique ways, follows a trajectory different from that of other nations, and warrants being studied in isolation from the rest of the world (Wrobel, 1996; Zinn, 2005). In the last twenty to thirty years, historians of the U.S. have become more interested in examining what many have called “transnational history” or the “history of the United States in the World,” exploring the relationships forged by everything from familial connections to U.S. military engagements. (Tyrrell, 1991; Siegel, 2005; Briggs, McCormick, & Way, 2008). Drawing on this new scholarship, students explore how unequal relations of power, both between and within nations affect the everyday lives of individuals and communities, as well as the ways in which those who seem to be without power have responded to and resisted these hierarchies. Throughout our courses, we explore the notion of empire as alternative to more familiar narratives about the inevitable expansion of freedom at home and benevolence abroad.

We recognize that this summary might appear to describe a teacher-centered rather than student-centered approach, one in which we use our authority to impose one narrative in place of another, to engage in what H. Bruce Franklin (2008) calls, in his discussion of teaching the Vietnam war “a dose of counter-brainwashing brainwashing” (p. 28). Such an approach would be unacceptable to us; moreover, it would be ineffective. At best, students might dutifully recite a new set of beliefs and facts and promptly forget them, a process Robert de Beaugrande refers to as “bulimic education” (Bain, 2004, p. 41). It is true that, because the dominant narrative is so powerful, we believe it is necessary to explicitly present a counternarrative and discuss our reasons for doing so. However, as we argue

in this paper, the very tensions between the dominant narrative (which, given its power and ubiquity, we could not ignore even if we wanted to) and the counter-narrative allow students to articulate and explore their own questions, beliefs, and interests. Moreover, as Franklin argues, students' experiences and beliefs—even when they are contradictory, underdeveloped, or based on unquestioned assumptions—are themselves a valuable classroom resource, offering insights into the process of acculturation and forming the basis for intellectual exploration. In the following sections, we discuss our experiences implementing specific pedagogical approaches to facilitate student-led, problem-based explorations of the United States' role in the world.

First, we describe the specific application of critical pedagogy to the teaching of history from an international perspective. By staging the conflict between the dominant narrative of America as a beacon of freedom at home and abroad and a counternarrative that emphasizes power hierarchies both within the United States and between the United States and other countries, students become participants in an ongoing intellectual and political debate, one with real, tangible stakes. Students explore questions about the meaning of the past, parallels to the present, and the way different stories about the past are told.

In the second section, we discuss our students' multiculturalism, multilingualism, and internationalism as often under-utilized intellectual and pedagogical resources. Our students possess a variety of knowledge, experiences, and perspectives that no individual—including their teachers—can duplicate. We discuss the ways students draw on these resources through integrated and process oriented low-stakes writing, in their choice of research topics, and in the use of international and non-English sources. We also discuss how students' overlapping and interdependent identities of race, nation, gender, and class guide us to a richer vision of history, asking, for example, what it really means when we say that “the United States” has done something or has a certain quality.

In the third section, we discuss how critical pedagogy is enhanced by the interdisciplinary, collaborative nature of these classes. Exploring a set of problems through the lens of multiple disciplines, students think about how to apply the tools of these fields towards research projects of their selection. Students search for, analyze, and integrate into their own writing texts that vary in purpose, methods, point of view, and intended audience. Rather than simply deeming sources reliable or unreliable, students make their own judgments about what these texts tell us. Through staged research explorations, we emphasize process as much as product, guiding students through the challenges of the research process, encouraging them to explore what may appear to be dead-ends or tangents. We argue

that through our unusually integrated form of collaboration, students come to see us, and ultimately themselves, not only as teachers and students playing roles in the classroom, but as scholars with particular interests and as political people in the world.

THE UNITED STATES IN THE WORLD: TOWARDS A CRITICAL HISTORICAL PEDAGOGY

Teachers devoted to critical pedagogy and student-centered learning know that students learn best when driven by curiosity and intrinsic motivation, and that to foster this environment, they must be given the opportunity develop their own intellectual questions and projects (Bain, 2004). In the history class, we begin by inviting our students to write about what they think they will learn over the course of the semester. Most find this assignment confusing, since the answer, "facts about history," seems so clear to them. Most students enter our courses believing that history is a compendium of sometimes random, often incomprehensible dates and facts about powerful people and important places. They expect to memorize and regurgitate disconnected details in tests and papers and to promptly forget this information, since it is completely disconnected from their lives, experiences, and interests. As Peter Vickery (2008) argues, bringing critical pedagogy into the historical survey course begins with decentering the textbook-based, authoritative notion of history. Just as we explicitly engage their preexisting beliefs about America's role in the world, we are explicit in introducing alternative ways of thinking about the kind of work they might do in courses like ours.

We explore the assumptions behind this seemingly simple idea of an historical fact. What makes a particular fact significant and worthy of knowing? How do we know the facts that we know? How do we find out the ones we don't? Why do we remember some facts and not others? Students then write about a childhood experience they remember. Next, they write about what that experience represents and how it illustrates who they are in the present. We discuss how historical memory functions in much the same way: individuals and groups produce stories about the past to illustrate how the world works in the present. Our ability to remember non-personal stories from the past is connected to our passion about understanding and possibly changing the world in which we live. Just so for the historical monographs students will read: the individual details of the stories they tell will be interesting and memorable insofar as they provide evidence for or bring into questions our notions of how the past has shaped our world.

Moreover, our experience suggests that students' relationship to the study of history cannot be separated from the influence of the dominant view of the United States in popular culture and many educational settings. As Bain (2004) argues, no matter how slight students' actual knowledge of a subject area, they do

not enter the classroom as blank slates. Rather, they bring a range of conceptual models that are likely to be outdated, partial, or contradictory. Unless we engage the fundamental premises of these models, students are likely to absorb information without altering these preconceptions. Bain cites a famous study of students in an introductory physics class who clung to pre-Newtonian, Aristotelian notions of motion despite having spent a semester solving problems in ways that don't make sense without the concepts of modern physics. The pull of "common sense" understandings of the physical world—which are often contradicted by specific knowledge of a given scientific field—served as an obstacle to deeper conceptual learning. Moreover, for educators dedicated to liberatory critical pedagogies, the ideologies and unstated assumptions of the dominant culture will often shape the "common sense" frames students bring to their work.

In the case of our cluster, many students believe the study of U.S. history to be a patriotic project. It is a lesson that many have absorbed deeply, even those whose political impulses are more liberal than conservative and even though there is much in their own experiences to suggest otherwise. During the first semester we taught the cluster, four weeks into the course, we offered a variation of the usual query about the argument of the week's reading, asking if they thought the course so far had a "thesis." The first person to speak said we were attempting to show how the United States became the great country it is today. This was after we had already talked about Chinese Exclusion, the wars and conquests of 1898, Redemption, the loss of African-American suffrage in the American South, and the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century. Other students reject this morality tale, but they often throw away history education itself along with its most conventional ideological messages, since history classes have failed to offer the critical insight they crave. These students are highly skeptical towards anything that seems to embody authority, including academic writing, and are often "subjective knowers" who view all knowledge as a matter of opinion (Bain, 2004, p. 42). Alternatively, they may find the discussion or analysis of this power to be pointless because inequality and the abuse of power are "just the way the world works."

From one point of view, each of these positions may appear to be an obstacle to the kind of intellectual engagement we seek to foster. If, however, we take our students' experiences and perspectives seriously, each of these positions offers useful points of engagement. For example, given many of our students' experiences of racism, discrimination, and poverty, a belief in the inevitability of power hierarchies should not be dismissed as simple cynicism. Instead, across our courses we ask students to look at examples of how power is wielded and justified—but also how those without power have responded and resisted. For example, early in the semester, students read Tara Hunter's (1997) examination African-American women's lives in Atlanta after the Civil War in connection with Sven Beckert's (2004) study of the Civil War in relation to the international context of global

cotton production. Hunter illustrates how black women negotiated new terms of employment with their white bosses after the abolition of slavery. White Atlantans continued to sustain more access to political and economic power, including support from courts and vigilante organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, as well as favorable treatment by the Freedman's Bureau. However, black women's freedom from chattel slavery and access to citizenship empowered them to devise new strategies for asserting their rights. Students often express surprise that African-American women living long before the modern Civil Rights era had agency in the first place, let alone that their work and activism might have global as well as local implications. This reaction offers us the opportunity to discuss what it means to think of those who have been kept from power as subjects as well as objects of history, and to challenge students to think of power as multifaceted and contested rather than uniform.

Similarly, the very fact of students' immersion in the ideology of American exceptionalism itself represents a kind of knowledge. As H. Bruce Franklin (2008) notes in his discussion of teaching about the Vietnam War,

Emerging from the quarter century of post-Vietnam War American fantasy are the students sitting in our college classrooms today. . . This should not be looked upon as merely an impediment to education, or worse still, some infection to be cured with a dose of counterbrainwashing brainwashing. Why? Because these students are in some sense the world's greatest experts on the late 20th century and early 21st century American culture. . . For them, the words Vietnam and the sixties are powerful, complex, and disquieting signifiers. Precisely because these signifiers have become so falsified, today's students are potentially capable of experiencing something close to what millions of us experienced during the war: a direct confrontation with one's own false consciousness. (Franklin, 2008, p. 23)

Here again our students' diversity is a strength: some may be familiar with the signifiers Franklin refers to; others may be familiar with some of these images but be unsure of their intended meaning. Teasing out these meanings introduces students to the stakes of what may otherwise seem to be irrelevant academic debates. Similarly, drawing on James Loewen's (1995) *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, students explore how popular, invisible, and often seductive assumptions about U.S. history were embedded into their high school history curricula. In the composition course, we explore the impact of U.S. popular culture around the globe in both manufacturing and disseminating these mythologies in readings including excerpts from Eric Schlosser's (2005) *Fast Food Nation*, Rajiv Chandrasekaran's (2006) *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, and H. Bruce Franklin's (2001) *Vietnam*

and Other American Fantasies. By connecting texts with various contexts and methods, we invite students to reflect on what gives an argument authority and how and why they do or do not find these visions persuasive.

Taken together, the tensions between these perspectives and the questions they raise help students become active participants in the historical debate. They raise the question of how particular historical events fit into and provide evidence for larger narratives. Throughout the semester, students begin to situate these questions in relation to ongoing intellectual and political debates about the role of the United States in the world. Early on students write about two quotations from texts they will read later in the semester: President Obama's speech at Cairo University in 2009 and Martin Luther King's 1978 "Beyond Vietnam" speech. We ask which comes closer to describing their sense of the United States' role in the world:

America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire. (Obama, 2009)

I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government. (King, 1967)

This is a disorienting exercise for many students because of the iconic and authoritative status of both of these figures. By positioning themselves in relationship to these texts, they begin to think about the ways that even the most seemingly authoritative sources and texts can invite critique and become more confident in their own ability to take part in the conversation. Moreover, in thinking about the gap between Obama as a Civil Rights icon and as the leader of the most powerful country on earth provides a useful basis for discussing not only the relationship between the past and present but between multiple and conflicting interests identities obscured by blanket categories of race and nation.

MULTICULTURAL, MULTILINGUAL, AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AS UNTAPPED INTELLECTUAL RESOURCES

During our time at LaGuardia, we have been struck by the ways the multicultural, international, and multilingual backgrounds of our students represent a pedagogical and intellectual resource. LaGuardia's student body includes many immigrant, working-class, and first-generation college students. In 2011, just over half of LaGuardia students were born outside the United States, representing a total of 164 countries and 128 native languages ("Enrollment," 2012;

“Student Demographics,” 2012). LaGuardia has a long tradition of drawing on these experiences when designing curriculum. It is the only college or university in the country to have an urban studies requirement. This program draws its inspiration from John Dewey’s notion of experience-based learning through which students are treated as producers as well as receivers of knowledge. Because the majority of our students are placed into “remedial” courses for which they receive no college credit, we are particularly mindful of Dewey’s critique of the notion of education as “preparation” for some future and presumably truer experiences (Dewey, 1916/2007). We design our courses with the belief that whatever their educational background, our students are already intellectual agents with a right to define and explore their own intellectual inquiries.

At the same time, despite LaGuardia’s admirable celebration of student diversity, students born in other countries often express anxiety about being expected to possess specific knowledge of American history, society, and culture in courses that do not have specific prerequisites and do not make expectations explicit. In composition courses, they may be asked to respond to readings filled with cultural references with which they are unfamiliar. Similarly, students often experience their linguistic backgrounds as an obstacle, especially if they have been placed into remedial reading and writing courses. They are likely to equate success in writing and speaking with “sounding like a native.” Students too rarely have a chance to use this intellectual advantage. Every semester students ask us whether it is permitted for them to use research sources written in a language other than English. Most often they are surprised when we say that it is not only permitted, but that as bilingual or multilingual scholars they have access to primary source materials that we as their instructors may not.

As noted earlier, our students come from incredibly diverse backgrounds and bring to the classroom a variety of beliefs about America’s role in the world. Nevertheless, it is almost universally the case that their experiences rarely reflect the patriotic popular mythology at the heart of mainstream history education and popular historical memory. They live in a deeply unequal and segregated city, surrounded by extremes of affluence and poverty. Most come from working-class and poor families of color, testify that they have experienced racism in their lives, attended underfunded public high schools, and qualify for financial aid at an institution with annual tuition of less than \$4,000. According to our 2011 institutional profile, 81.4% of students living with parents and 90.9% of students living away from their parents have a family income of less than \$25,000 per year (LaGuardia Institutional Profile, p. 6). Many students are keenly aware of the racialized nature of inequality in their communities, having experienced segregated and heavily policed schools or having been targets of the NYPD’s stop and frisk policy. Many also face the fear of deportation and harassment due to their immigrant status. Nor is our own campus immune from such fear: last fall, the

Associated Press reported that students in Muslim student groups at LaGuardia and other CUNY campuses have been the target of NYPD infiltration (Hawley & Apuzzo, 2011).

These experiences form a kind of unofficial education, coexisting uncomfortably with the dominant ideologies of the society in which they live. From the beginning of our classes, students discuss and reflect on what they have (and have not) been taught about American history and the relation between the United States and the rest of the world. We discuss the images of the country those who were raised in other countries absorbed through their families and images in film, television, music, and consumer culture. We explore the ways that coming of age during a time when the United States has been at war for longer than any time in history has (or has not) affected their daily lives. These discussions illustrate the contested nature of America's relationship to the world better than any programmatic lesson we could hope to devise. Immigrant students talk about the false perception of family members that they must be rich because they are living in the United States. Others describe how they came of age with little awareness of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and begin to think about why this might be so.

As Trillo (2006) demonstrates, narratives of immigration are central to LaGuardia's curriculum and self-image. Composition courses, for example, often make use of narrative accounts of immigration, inviting students to draw connections to their own experiences. Yet immigration narratives presented without context often uncritically affirm of the United States as a beacon of freedom and equality, presenting a picture more rooted in mythology than a critical understanding of U.S. history. Regardless of their background, students are familiar with this mythology and often invoke it as a kind of shorthand even when it does not correspond to their own experiences or beliefs. At the same time, we have found that they are eager to have the opportunity to explore the contexts this mythology ignores. In his article about teaching immigration at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, another CUNY community college with many immigrant students, Hayduk (2009) describes how we can go beyond discussions of tradition and acculturation, asking such questions as: "How is migration both a consequence of changes in the political economy and trade policy . . . and how does it affect politics and society?" (p. 20). Such a framework allows teachers to "challenge popularly held myths" related to immigration "such as the notion that immigrants 'choose' to migrate (rather than being displaced) and that 'race' is biological (rather than socially constructed)" (pp. 19-20). We also explore the ways our view of immigration is shaped by American exceptionalism. For example, many students believe that a huge proportion of the world's immigrants came and continue to come to the United States. They are surprised to learn that less than one percent arrives here ("Immigration Myths and Realities," 2010). By

understanding that other nations are also home to huge numbers of immigrants, students can put U.S. policies and practices into a wider context.

We are also mindful how the seemingly inclusive rhetoric of the United States as a “nation of immigrants” excludes and distorts the forced migrations of African-Americans to the United States and of Native Americans within the nation. As a result of one of these discussions, we decided to include these groups as possible topics in students’ research projects, investigating the relationship between the United States and a nation of their choice. The very question raised by this possibility and the way it seemed to break the “rules” of the assignment by troubling what it means to be a nation resulted in some of our students’ strongest and most original work. Similarly, students frequently ask whether they can write about Puerto Rico and whether it “counts” as a country, leading to an interesting discussion of what defines Puerto Rico’s colonial status. Moreover, we discuss migrations that do not fit the conventional trajectory, such as Richard Wright’s 1951 essay “I Choose Exile,” an account of the writer’s decision to leave the United States and settle in Paris, which was commissioned but then rejected by *Ebony* magazine, underscoring the power of ideologies that unquestioningly define the United States as the destination for those seeking greater personal and political liberties. We look at the political context of other forms of border crossings, such as tourism and international adoption (Kincaid, 1988; Seabrook, 2010). With these readings, we strive to avoid what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie (2009) has called “the danger of the single story.” Instead, we strive to provide a framework and context for students to think about their own overlapping, multifaceted identities: as immigrants, the children of immigrants or as members of “generation 1.5,” as working-class students in a wealthy city, and as residents of a the most powerful country in the world who themselves do not often benefit from the policies being enacted in their name.

WRITING AND RESEARCHING AS MODES OF CRITICAL INTEGRATION

Our courses were developed in collaboration with LaGuardia’s Learning Communities program. Through this program, all first-year liberal arts majors at LaGuardia enroll in a group of integrated courses developed collaboratively by faculty from different departments. The program creates intellectual community at a commuter college where students’ work and family obligations limit participation in extracurricular activities and other aspects of campus life. Our vision of critical pedagogy rests on our belief that by shaping and exploring meaningful intellectual and political questions, students are empowered to speak about and take action around the issues that affect their daily lives. As we have discussed, this means

developing courses that speak to the reality of their experiences and the ways in which those seemingly without power have become historical actors.

This vision shapes the way we think about interdisciplinary and the integration of our courses. Just as our students think about questions of power in the relationship between the U.S. and the world, they also think about questions of authority and knowledge: how we know what we know and how the meaning of historical events is shaped and contested over time. The interdisciplinary nature of the class allows these questions to take shape as students approach a set of questions from a variety of angles and through texts that vary in type as well as in content. Looking at popular culture, they think about texts as reflections of popular memory and ideology. Looking at primary texts, they explore how contemporary accounts of historical events diverge from later accounts. For example, when teaching King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, we include not only the speech itself but the editorial the *New York Times* published in response, chastising King for inveighing on an issue too "complex" for him to understand and urging him to stick to Civil Rights. We discussed the editorial's response and its condescension and racism. One student asked why, if this was the case, we were reading it. We realized that students were used to thinking of texts assigned by the instructor as authoritative. In presenting a text that embodied racism rather than discussing it, students had to evaluate not only its arguments (which they were easily able to identify as faulty and superficial), but the point of view and biases it represented, despite coming from a presumably respected and authoritative source. Such an exercise is not merely an academic skill. In recognizing that a source often taken as authoritative would embody these biases, ones they were capable of recognizing and decoding, students experience the way their views have as much or more legitimacy than those with more power and social status.

In the composition course, we explore these questions through an in-depth unit about the Vietnam War. Because the war the United States waged in Southeast Asia engendered such a passionate debate about the role of American power, it makes vivid for students questions that may otherwise seem abstract. For example, after viewing the 1974 documentary *Hearts and Minds*, many students are struck by the documentation of that war's atrocities through the eyes of ordinary Vietnamese civilians. This helps facilitate a discussion of whose stories are remembered and why. In one class, students began to ask about the relative absence of such images of the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They began speculate about possible explanations, debating about the role of these images in turning the U.S. population against the war and the ethics of publicizing such images. We subsequently brought in new readings and changed an upcoming essay prompt to include an option in which students developed an argument in response to these questions.

In response to the same film, another class was struck by the extreme racism expressed by the war’s defenders, as in a former prisoner of war’s declaration that Vietnam would be a beautiful country “if it weren’t for the people” or in the famous scene which juxtaposes a widow’s heart-wrenching cries at her husband’s grave to General Westmorland’s declaration that “Orientals don’t value life the way we do.” Other students found these expressions less shocking and argued that Americans today are likely to hold similar attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims. We discussed the role of racism in United States foreign policy and the connections between opposition to empire and civil rights struggles in the United States, and students drew connections to Martin Luther King’s speech. Discussing the testimony of veterans in the film who question their own beliefs and acculturation as Americans, the students were able to think about how young people had debated and made decisions about the same questions we were discussing under great pressure and personal risk.

By bringing these questions into the composition course, we engage students more deeply in the writing process. Just as students often experience the material of a class as a mass of unrelated content, they often view courses in different departments as unrelated, each guided by a set of different but equally arbitrary rules. We are determined to link our courses thematically so that students experience our classes as part of a common conversation and exploration. In so doing, we work to avoid the pitfalls of strategic learning, in which students dutifully attempt to master and then forget “tricks” to succeed in each of our courses.

We also believe that the way we approached writing was crucial. However dynamic our discussions, when it comes time to write, students who are engaged in exploring and debating ideas often retreat, attempting to figure out what teachers want to hear, anxious about taking intellectual risks. This is usually a rational decision on their part, as they rightly fear jeopardizing their grade if the process takes them away from their initial argument. When teaching stand-alone courses that demand a high level of writing, but that are not explicitly writing classes, instructors are often understandably conflicted. They know the writing process is central to their students’ success, but they worry about having time to address the content of their class and are often not specifically trained in the teaching of writing (Cox, 2009, p. 145). We believe that students benefit from a curriculum where writing is a central part of their process of exploration. Thus, rather than casting the history and geography courses as dedicated to “content,” and putting all the writing work into the composition and research paper courses, we strive to offer our students writing as a tool for solving intellectual problems across the disciplines. We demonstrate that we are not interested in compartmentalizing their work: that their English professor cares about the quality of their historical analysis and that their history and geography professors care about the quality of their writing.

In order for writing to remain a space for student exploration, we emphasize the process of student writing as much as the product. We also ensure that student writing itself becomes a text in the class. We invite students to discuss and write about the challenges, frustrations, and seeming dead-ends of the research project and share our own experiences as students and scholars. Our research project, divided into stages across the semester, is an especially useful culmination of the conceptual work of the semester, as students apply the concept of empire to the relationship between the United States and a country or colony of their choice. This framework helps avoid context-free rehearsal of facts that plagues so many research assignments. At the same time, by making use of the conceptual framework with which students have worked in all their courses, they have a vocabulary and sense of the core debates that are often missing when students are asked to make their own arguments. Such a framework gives students a greater opportunity to reshape the conceptual frames they brought into the class and reconsider the ideologies that underlay their previous beliefs. We respond each step of the process—formulating a research question, finding and evaluating sources, creating an annotated bibliography, drafting the essay, creating a visual presentation, and grading—collaboratively. Evaluating a range of sources, including primary sources, students draw their own conclusions about which texts are authoritative, useful, and persuasive. Many are surprised to discover that the coverage of events in the United States media at the time was far different from the way they are most often discussed today. For example, one student looked at the contemporary coverage of the Cuban revolution and was surprised to see the positive depiction of Castro in the United States media, prompting her to explore the shifting ideologies and motivations of historical narratives.

CONCLUSION

By coincidence, we began our collaboration during the 2008 election, amidst discussion of the international background of then-candidate Barack Obama and the possibility that his election would change the image and role of the United States around the world. A year later, as we were finishing our first semester teaching the cluster, President Obama gave a speech about the Afghanistan War in which he reiterated a familiar argument about why the United States differs from historical empires: “For unlike the great powers of old, we have not sought world domination. Our union was founded in resistance to oppression. We do not seek to occupy other nations. We will not claim another nation’s resources or target other peoples because their faith or ethnicity is different from ours” (Obama, 2009). We recognized this as a teachable moment, and put together an exam question asking whether, based on their learning throughout the semester, their reading of

American history supported Obama's claim. Many were able to make connections between inequality and the struggle for racial justice in the United States, through which Obama's election had largely been viewed, and the role the United States plays in the world. These intellectual concerns may seem merely academic in another context, but at LaGuardia, we need to make U.S. history relevant to a group of students who have international experiences, points of reference, and families.

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