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What Difference Does Age Make?

Stephanie Hall-Sturgis

What difference does age make in an intergenerational writing course? In my research, I have found that age—along with race and class—makes an appreciable difference in a writing course as participants attempt to work across and negotiate conflicts in order to collaboratively research, write, and produce a final product. Why attempt this kind of negotiation in a writing class, and to what end? What is actually involved in negotiating difference? In “English Studies and Public Service,” Deans explains the social perspective on writing in composition studies:

The discipline has evolved from studies of the lone writer to more contextual understandings of composing . . . and from presuming white middle-class culture as normative to analyzing and inviting cultural difference. (8)

This theoretical shift makes composition studies a comfortable home for service or community-based learning initiatives, but, more importantly, it lays the groundwork for dealing with difference through discourse.

Dealing with difference through discourse is crucial to the current academic debate about diversity. E.D Hirsch and Alan Bloom advocate cultural literacy, which “creates a discourse that seeks to minimize or eradicate difference” (Peck et al 203). Proponents of the literacy of social and cultural critique “openly address issues of power, defining social relationships in terms of economic and ideological struggle” (Peck et al 204). Community Literacy, as defined by Peck, Flower and Higgins, “is a search for an alternative

discourse,” which has four aims: to support social change; to support genuine, intercultural conversation; to bring a strategic approach to this conversation and support people in developing new strategies for decision-making; and to openly acknowledge not only the difficulty of empathy and the history of failed conversations, but to purposefully examine the genuine conflicts, assumptions, and practices we bring to these new partnerships” (205). In “Negotiating the Meaning of Difference,” Flower advocates dealing with difference through a particular kind of discourse—intercultural collaboration—which she defines as a genuinely problematic act of individual interpretation and knowledge construction. In other words, it is an attempt to embrace the divergent meanings of a shared experience (46). This article is an attempt to explain how difference was negotiated in a 13-week intergenerational, intercultural writing course.

A Site for Intercultural Collaboration

English 3010 (Multimedia Writing) is a community-based course that pairs intermediate writing students at an urban university with senior citizens from the Harbor House—a senior service center within walking distance of the university—to produce writing for radio and web cast. In fall, 2001, I conducted a participant-observation study of this course, offered for the first time that semester. There were two faculty members (both white), a university English Professor and the project director of a radio program called Senior Speak; eight senior partners (African American males and one white female, ranging in age from

60 to 82); and 13 students (African American, Arab American, and Caucasian, ranging in age from 19 to 25). The mission of the Harbor Foundation is to enhance the quality of life for senior citizens in the metropolitan area by identifying their unmet physical, social, and financial needs and maintaining facilities and creating programs that both address these needs and preserve the dignity of seniors.

The Course Intentions

The seniors with whom students partnered are members of Senior Speak—one of the services Harbor House offers—where seniors actively use the media as a medium of change. Senior Speak strives to “empower seniors” through the World Wide Web and public broadcasting services. Writing, interviewing, and editing are integral parts of what seniors do for Senior Speak. Ostensibly, some seniors joined the class to become better writers; others were excited about this course because of its community involvement—one of the few courses of its kind being offered by the university. Seniors’ interests, then, were quite diverse, ranging from writing and teaching to social issues and story telling.

Students and seniors met for the first time on the third class session in a basement conference room in Harbor House. The room was well illuminated, and on either side of the wall were beautiful tapestries, which appeared to be hand-made. Everyone sat (interspersed) in mauve plastic chairs at long rectangular tables forming a large circle and introduced themselves, asked questions, and learned about each other’s interests. At the end of class students and seniors were paired in small groups where they continued meeting each other and exchanged phone numbers. The reception was warm and friendly: lots of talking (on the seniors’ part), listening (on the students’ part), laughing and writing. At this point, I was sure that a sense of community would be built quickly and easily. However, I could not help but notice that the communication was one way: students were informed about senior interests, but students did

not appear to share much, if any, information in return. I (and the faculty) immediately became concerned about the student-senior dynamic: would it develop into one of reciprocity where students would feel free to share stories and not just feel obligated to listen to their elders?

With this concern about reciprocity (or the lack thereof) in mind, Drs. Rice and Law instructed the class on assignment one—a profile of an assigned partner written from interviews. The group I observed gave credence to our concern that seniors and students were in unequal relationships, where students listened while seniors spoke. The group was composed of two students (one Arab-American male and one white male) and one senior (an African American male). Despite the fact that the senior (Martin) was outnumbered, he dominated over half of the allotted interviewing time by telling life stories while imparting “words of wisdom” to students.

For example, Martin was giving background information on his life when he commented that he has been a member of his church for 65 years. After giving this information to his student partners, Martin interjected the following words of wisdom: “The best thing you can do in life is be of benefit to somebody.” During the interview Martin also informed students that he enjoys being a member of Senior Speak because he can espouse his views: “You have to give something positive to people that they can take with them.”

When the roles of interviewer and interviewee were reversed (finally when the interviewing session was almost over), the Arab-American student was (surprisingly) forthcoming when answering Martin’s questions. What was of note was the way that Martin controlled the interview so that the student would be forthcoming about what Martin was interested in—issues of race. There was some reciprocity; however, I suspected the senior’s motivation. Martin seemed much less concerned with acquiring background information in order to write a profile than with finding out about the student’s experiences as a minority. Based on the written profile, the student

acquired a good deal of information on Martin and wrote a descriptive, detailed profile. Martin did not write a profile of the student.

I interpreted students deferring and listening to seniors out of respect as an attempt to work across different discourse (and cultural) styles in order to collaborate with and get input from seniors.

To what could we attribute the lack of reciprocity between seniors and students? Why did students assume the role of listener, while seniors assumed the role of speaker? This could be attributable to a number of reasons: students deferring to seniors out of respect; the result of different discourse styles; or seniors feeling authorized and empowered to speak by virtue of age and experience, with students feeling a lack of authority and experience from which to speak. I interpreted students deferring and listening to seniors out of respect as an attempt to work across different discourse (and cultural) styles in order to collaborate with and get input from seniors. Since few seniors actually submitted written contributions for assignments (even though they received the same syllabus with the same expectations for writing), students often found that their biggest challenge was figuring out how to include or synthesize oral contributions and/or fragments of handwritten notes from seniors into class papers.

For instance, for assignment four (the mini-documentary) one group chose to discuss the following topic in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center: How Do People Respond in Times of Crises? The students (Cheryl, Joan, and Sheri) were focusing on particular charities and organizations people often choose to support, while the senior (Dorothy) was concerned about saving peoples' souls, which was this senior's passion and, therefore, permeated her speech and writing. The students decided to take an informative stance and were going to interview people from the American Red Cross, as well as

donors, to find out their motives for giving money, time, or blood. Dorothy's contribution was the story of the Good Samaritan, which shows us that we are duty-bound, according to the Bible, to help people. The students did not see much relevance in using a story from the Bible until Drs. Rice and Law intervened. Dr. Rice suggested that, "You could include some Bible verses that help make your point." Dr. Law admonished the students, "Don't ignore Dorothy's part; it may be a way of tying the documentary together. Who are today's good Samaritans? The Samaritan story is a lead-in, and then you could move into the good Samaritans of today: the American Red Cross." The students were then able to see how their senior partner's input could be incorporated into the documentary.

Seniors obviously had ideas to share with students and the class, so why did they write so little? This was a concern not only of students but also of faculty as well. In fact, two months into the semester, Dr. Rice started a dialogue with Dr. Law on this issue:

Dr. Rice: *Why aren't the seniors producing and submitting writing?*

Dr. Law: *They don't have time.*

Dr. Rice: *Is that just a cover for "I don't know how," or "I'm afraid of being evaluated?"*

Dr. Law: *Maybe what we're asking them to do (researching and working with students) is foreign. I'll bring this up in class today for discussion.*

During class discussion, Dr. Law tried to inspire seniors to write and submit that writing for response:

To learn writing, there has to be an interchange: someone needs to see and respond to it. You have to get the work done before we can respond. We want to be moved by your writing in your documentaries. I know I haven't had time to sit down individually with each of you, but you have your group members here to respond as hearers of your writing.

Dr. Rice added:

Our philosophy of teaching writing is implicit. We give you a creative environment, an assignment, and we respond to it. We don't

lay everything out for you as some of you may be used to.

Despite faculty's emphasis on collaborative writing, the same few seniors continued contributing short pieces of writing, while the others continued to contribute orally.

In thinking through the issue of why seniors felt empowered and authorized to speak in groups, yet not to write, I turned to David Bartholomae. In "Inventing the University," Bartholomae posits that the largest difficulty basic writers face is the struggle to find authority from which to speak and write because they are unfamiliar with academic discourse, and yet find that they are required to use this skill (135, 143). Most seniors, with the exception of one who holds a doctorate, were uneasy (most likely intimidated) about writing with students because of their unfamiliarity with or discomfort in an academic environment. Even though part of what seniors do in Senior Speak is produce public discourse for radio and broadcast, they seemed to regard the writing component of class as the students' and faculty's domain. This certainly explains why they wrote so little even though they had much to contribute. In fact, in the groups I observed, the students did all of the writing that was submitted for evaluation. This was of concern to students since this was supposed to be a collaborative class. In my interviews with them, I found that students were concerned about both senior commitment and senior availability. Since the students were graded for the work, but seniors were not, and since completion of work is linked with senior partners, how would this impact student ability to do well in the course? In actuality, seniors were graded on the work they turned in. However, grades did not matter to them, and they did not need the course as an academic requirement. Students also wondered if they would have enough time to spend with partners (inside and outside of class) in order to get the information they needed to complete assignments. When one student asked Dr. Law about senior commitment, he responded:

The seniors are motivated and invested in this course. In fact, they insist on receiving the same reading materials as students. The seniors have waged a friendly competition with students.

I wondered how this friendly competition would affect community building for this group: Are seniors attempting to earn respect (from students and faculty) by showing that they can understand and analyze academic texts as well as students, thereby increasing overall commitment to the course? Or are there hidden agendas and personal concerns that would undermine the community-building process? Let's look at examples of student-senior interaction to see if participants shared the goal of community building.

The Interviews

For the first example, I would like to re-visit assignment one (the interview and profile). During the first interview, where the group was comprised of one senior and two students, the students interviewed the senior first. The senior gave lengthy responses, so lengthy in fact that he monopolized (consciously or not) almost the entire allotted interviewing time. When the roles reversed, I was impressed with the senior's comfort level on both sides of the interview: he seemed genuinely interested in the student's life story. What is of note here is the fact that even though Dr. Rice had given participants a list of questions to keep them focused, this senior asked a few from the list, then proceeded to ask the student questions about race and ethnicity. The senior asked the student (who was Arab American) to "Close your eyes and imagine that your skin is even darker than it is. How do you feel?" I later found out that this senior is passionate about issues of race and will inevitably bring race into every discussion. Did the senior dominate the interview session because he has lived longer and experienced more than the students? Was it because he wanted to teach the students something? Why did the student defer to the senior and let him lead the interview?

Based on student-senior interaction, I am inclined to say that the seniors in this class were more concerned about issues of personal relevance than commitment to the course goals.

Another example of interaction is the group meeting that represented the next phase of the profile assignment. Each participant was to read her profile in its entirety to get feedback on writing in process. The senior in this group (Wade), did not have a draft of a profile to share and was looking lost and confused. He asked students what the assignment was. After the students and I explained the group's task to Wade, he took control of the group. Instead of listening to his partners read the profiles they had written on him, Wade showed students a newspaper clipping (from *The Michigan Chronicle*) of a picture and article written about him and his peers. Wade then began telling life stories about how different the world is today from the time when he was young. When it was finally time for Wade to listen and give feedback to his partners, he read the profile aloud and prolonged the reading by interjecting life examples. For example, the profile mentioned that Wade had gotten into a fight as a young man. Wade relived the entire incident and provided a vivid account of why the fight occurred and what happened during the fight. Wade's reminiscing led to more stories and less time for his partners to get feedback on their work. The students were getting restless and bored, evidenced by their looking around and smiling politely, though still reticent to interrupt. I intervened by politely interrupting and explaining to Wade that his partners needed to hear his response to their writing. Again, the senior participant showed no sense of reciprocity (or time) for student partners to share their stories. Wade was quite adept at monopolizing group discussion and the majority of group time. This proved to be a consistent behavior among many of the seniors. Their agendas weren't hidden for very long, and they managed to foreground their interests and concerns (usually

race-related) even if they weren't germane to the class agenda. Based on student-senior interaction, I am inclined to say that the seniors in this class were more concerned about issues of personal relevance than commitment to the course goals.

In addition to personal agendas, there were also class issues. I would like to share another incident that occurred in one of the community writing groups to elaborate this point. For assignment 2, students were required to write a pro/con argument, where students and seniors were to take opposing sides of an argument and collaboratively write the paper. In the group I observed, the chosen topic was drugs. Drugs and how they have destroyed the city is one of the issues the senior of the group (Alice) felt quite passionate about. The two students in the group (Debra and Deedra) saw the issue differently: drugs are not just an urban problem; they are a problem everywhere. The students collaborated and met with Drs. Rice and Law to develop an arguable proposition: A Drug Abuse Program Should Be Implemented in Schools.

When the group met, students had these tasks: to explain that the assignment required a proposition, to share (with Alice) the one they had developed, and to inform Alice that the group needed to collaboratively develop an introduction and conclusion for the pro/con paper. After Debra finished her explanation, Alice appeared perplexed. At this point, Debra was clearly (and literally) at a loss for words. She tried to find the right words to get her point across, but after stammering and moments of awkward silence, she was unable to do so. Deedra attempted to make things clearer by repeating Debra's explanation in a slightly different way. Alice was still uncertain about the assignment and her role in it. Feeling just as frustrated as the students, Alice responded, "You all can write what you want, just tell me what you need me to do." She then reminded the students that after the last group meeting, Debra and Deedra had asked her a series of questions about drugs in the city. She informed them that she went home and wrote several pages describing a personal experience she had had many years ago when her

home was burglarized. She informed the students that she wanted to read her story.

After Alice shared her story, Debra and Deedra were frustrated and uncertain about how to communicate effectively with her, since she still was not contributing to the group's proposition. Fortunately, after a bit of faculty intervention, Alice was encouraged to present a solution to the problem, not just a story describing the problem. She agreed to argue that a drug abuse program in the schools would not help the city to deal with its drug problem. Now that Alice seemed engaged in the process, Debra and Deedra asked her if they could use a portion of her personal story as the introduction to the paper. Alice agreed and the group began to make considerable progress.

Was Alice resistant to working with the students, confused about the assignment, or merely distracted? I could offer a cultural/conversational reading of this incident; however, in "Negotiating the Meaning of Difference," Flower tells us that these theories are limited when intercultural discourse "is no longer a collaboration but two ships passing in the night, caught up in a conversation where 'shared social reality' is impossible and deeper reciprocity is unlikely" (65-66). So, this leads me to ask why the students and senior had such a difficult time communicating with and understanding each other. Geertz tells us that intercultural understanding is an attempt to interpret the imaginative universe of others (1973). Flower complicates this notion of the "other" by stating that it "is not a reified culture or discourse but individual students trying to cross cultures" (66). In other words, in order for this group to have better communication, the students had to try to find out what was going on in Alice's world and in her mind that may be interfering with her ability to engage in group discussion and collaboration.

Alice makes it very easy to find out what is on her mind. One needs only to spend a few minutes in dialogue with Alice before she begins to tell you her concerns, fears, and problems. She is worried about survival in her unsafe, drug-infested environment. She is distressed that no

one cares about the city. Alice had an emotional outburst during a group session where she stated, "I'm worried about my family. I haven't seen my kids and grandkids in years. Everything has been taken from me." The communication difficulty was in large part a result of class difference. Ostensibly, the students and Alice had different priorities. The students were concerned with getting the work done and receiving good grades, while Alice was worried about her survival, and was consequently not nearly as invested in the class.

The Town Meeting

Working across race, age, class, and discourse differences was quite instructive. In fact, the intergenerational class theme worked well when the class was required to attend a Senior Speak town meeting halfway through the term. The meeting, entitled "Generations Coping With Fear," was radiocast live from the Harbor House, and intended as a forum for community participants to voice reactions to the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Participants included seniors, university students, local educators, ministers, psychologists, and a moderator.

Both instructors prepared students for the meeting by asking questions to get them thinking about issues that might be raised. Dr. Rice announced that the new class theme would revolve around issues of fear. Dr. Law opened the discussion by stating that

The interesting thing about Thursday is we'll get opinions from your generation and from seniors who have seen wars and the Great Depression. You live in a world that can be split in two by a nuclear bomb. Have you thought about this? How do you cope with fear? What about connecting fear to faith?

He informed students that he was looking for contrast at the meeting and encouraged them to take seniors up on issues: "Feel free to gently and constructively challenge seniors' viewpoints. In this class, we're all challenged to have our opinions

debated, but we can't take it personally. It's a great laboratory for you to learn." Dr. Rice, building on what had been said about challenging seniors' viewpoints, offered reflective listening as a technique: "This is probably the most difficult aspect of the class—learning to communicate in a multicultural, intergenerational environment where you listen to opinions with an open mind."

Whetting student appetite for the discussion was time well spent. The town meeting was very lively, even heated at some points. The commentator was efficient at moving around the room to get diverse viewpoints and allowing the audience to respond to one another's comments. What is of significance to this article is the intergenerational component. When asked what they thought about student participation at the town meeting, seniors had positive comments. One senior stated that "The learning process transpires on both sides, and the meeting was better than textbook learning because it was an opportunity to come together and discuss issues." Another senior commented that "It was a learning experience for everyone." Still another senior commented that the students "seemed to get a lot out of it—even the government doesn't have the answer, but we had the answer right in the room." Yet another senior remarked that "Students led us with their comments, and we were very impressed by that."

Final Thoughts

During a de-briefing session with students, Dr. Law mentioned that the discussion went in a different direction than he had anticipated. He thought the discussion would focus more on how people were responding to and coping with fear; instead, the discussion focused on race, specifically on how racial profiling has become an Arab American problem, not just an African American problem since September 11th. On a more positive note, Dr. Law added that "It accomplished an exchange of where we all are in relation to what has happened." Dr. Rice gave a feminist reading of the meeting: "Men relate to people competitively, while women relate more relationally, engaging

with people on their own terms. I saw a lot of competitive posturing." She went on to ask the class if they felt that the town meeting was the place for people of difference to get together. Most students responded by nodding or saying "yes." Dr. Law had a more elaborate response: "It's good to get people together, even if they don't necessarily engage each other. We're trying to empower seniors to participate in our democracy, and this class is an attempt to empower participants by helping them to write."

Age, along with race, class, and discourse styles, made an appreciable difference in this intergenerational writing class. Participants had to work through conflicts in understanding, goals, interests, and agendas to collaboratively produce writing. Why bother with all of this in a composition class? Because our culture and our classrooms are becoming more diverse every year. In order to deal with or negotiate difference, we must understand difference. Flower's concept of intercultural collaboration is a valuable tool to help us avoid becoming ships in the night as we cross cultures and try to interpret the imaginative universe of others.

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