

Exploring Diversity, Borders, and Student Identities: A Bilingual Service-Learning Workplace Writing Approach

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Being situated on an international border allows higher-education institutions to explore diverse cultural and linguistic venues for teaching and learning. Such is the case for workplace writing courses at the University of Texas at El Paso. Workplace writing, intercultural communication, service-learning, and bilingualism became the tools for exploring diversity, strengthening student identities, and bridging disciplinary, geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders. This article includes the voices of service-learning students, agency mentors, and faculty involved in an English-Spanish workplace writing course and shows how service-learning empowers students to explore and strengthen their diverse identities.

I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.

— Gloria Anzaldúa

R redesigning the National Alliance on Mental Illness newsletter. Serving as English-Spanish translators at the Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center. Revising and translating pamphlets for the Child Crisis Center. Researching and assisting in writing grants for Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Paso. Helping adult learners prepare résumés and job application letters at La Mujer Obrera Center. These are but a few examples of the tasks performed by bilingual service-learning workplace writing students at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP).

Workplace writing in the Department of English at UTEP is offered both monolingually and bilingually with service-learning as an option. Within the context of workplace writing, intercultural communication, service-learning, and bilingualism

became the primary tools for exploring diversity, strengthening student identities, and bridging borders: disciplinary (academic and workplace), geographical (United States and Mexico), cultural (American, Mexican-American, and Mexican), and linguistic (English and Spanish).

The context for the course

UTEP is ideally positioned to create diverse cultural and linguistic venues for teaching and learning. El Paso, Texas / Juarez, Mexico border residents are exposed to English and Spanish daily, and both languages play major roles in the extended community. More than 70% of El Paso households speak a language other than English as the primary language, and 97% of these families speak Spanish at home (Scenters-Zapico). Border residents are also exposed to numerous cultures, making El

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Paso a truly multicultural community. At UTEP, nearly 72% of the student body is Hispanic and another 10% are Mexican nationals (UTEP University Communications).

Many El Paso / Juarez residents commute daily from one country to the other. They may cross the international bridge to attend school, go to work, find entertainment, or visit family. Interaction between and dependence on each other are what make these two sister cities, El Paso and Juarez, function as a single bilingual, multicultural community.

With UTEP's distinctive student population and local community in mind, UTEP's Department of English is continually exploring community outreach venues, including service learning courses. Workplace writing is one such course, and we offer the class both monolingually (English only) and bilingually (in which students are required to produce documents and give presentations in both English and Spanish). In both versions of the course, students are given an option to serve as workplace writing/ communication consultants for non-profit organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Paso, Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe, and the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. All students, whether or not they take the service learning option, are required to complete various written and oral assignments: memos, e-mail correspondence, bad news letters, proposals, project presentations, progress reports, peer critique reviews, résumés and job application letters, team performance evaluations, and final professional reports and oral presentations.

The workplace writing course, a required course for all business majors, has been taught at UTEP for many years. It was not taught bilingually, however, until 2000, when a grant first funded the *Bilingual Professional Writing Certificate* project. To be certified, English-Spanish bilingual students must complete each of four required courses with a grade of B or better and must receive a satisfactory score on a bilingual exit exam administered and evaluated by a committee comprised of faculty from the Departments of English and Languages and Linguistics. The required courses are: (1) a bilingual section of either *Workplace Writing or Technical Writing*; (2) a bilingual section of the *Senior Writing Practicum*; (3) *Introduction to Translation*; and (4) either *Commercial and Legal Translation*, *Translation from the Information Media*, or *Literary Translation*.

The first bilingual section of Workplace Writing was piloted in spring 2000, and because of its success, bilingual sections of this course have been taught every semester since. In addition to students pursuing the Bilingual Professional Writing Certificate, students who are confident in their English-Spanish bilingualism and want to practice both languages also enroll in the bilingual section. Given UTEP's student population, these sections are full to their capacity (25 students) and at times multiple bilingual sections are offered.

The objectives of the workplace writing course (taught in English only) center on having students learn how to make critical decisions in professional contexts. Principles of professional rhetoric and strategies for the different stages of the composing process in both written and oral communication for workplace contexts are applied and emphasized. The bilingual section of the workplace writing course requires students to produce workplace documents and give oral presentations in both languages, using professional rhetoric principles and composing strategies as well.

Principles guiding course design

UTEP's bilingual workplace writing class was designed with several key principles in mind. Workplace writing instructors who teach classes comprised primarily of second-language learners face distinct challenges. Janet Bean and her colleagues ask, "Should We Invite Students to Write in Home Languages?" and conclude that the question is not whether writing instructors should invite students to write in their mother tongue, but rather, "when and under what conditions" (225-39). English-Spanish bilingual workplace writing courses provide ideal conditions. These courses allow second-language students to utilize, practice, and improve their full range of linguistic re-

sources and skills in both their languages. This type of course embraces diversity, both linguistically and culturally, and, very importantly, encourages students to recognize their bilingualism as an asset, not as an obstacle to writing and communicating in their second language.

The National Commission on Writing similarly urges educators who teach bilingual or dual language students to build on these learners' language strengths and concludes that students who learn to write in two languages simultaneously may learn more than those who only practice one language (34). By practicing both languages and seeing the critical need for both, students can come to appreciate the value of all languages and the importance of being able to communicate with diverse cultures in the workplace and the community.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) not only endorses these goals, but offers guidelines that support service-learning as a strong and effective pedagogical practice for achieving them, setting standards for what foreign language students should know and be able to do. These standards focus on *communication, communities, cultures, comparisons, and connections*. Students enrolled in the bilingual workplace writing course meet the ACTFL guidelines in multidimensional and inter-related ways. They use both Spanish and English, in written and oral forms, to *communicate* within a workplace setting and *cultural* context, holding face-to-face conversations, participating in class discussions and peer critique sessions, and giving oral presentations. Students *compare and contrast* the different dialects, values, and norms involved in professional contexts and intercultural *communication*, particularly as these apply on the United States / Mexico border. Students also *compare* academic discourse to workplace discourse and discover how these are different and how they must be able to use both to succeed in academia and the workplace. Students explore how they belong to different *cultures* and use and practice different discourses; they begin to *connect* to others outside the classroom and experience a sense of *community*, becoming more aware of their community, its diversity, and its communication needs. By writing documents, such as memos, letters, reports, promotional items, and web pages, and by giving presentations and translating, students practice real business communication, learn about their community's needs, and realize the power language holds in society.

In addition to experiencing a sense of community and learning their community's literacy needs, students practice writing outside academia, making service-learning an effective teaching *and* learning methodology. As Stuart Stewart argues in "Crossing

Borders/ Forging Identities” and Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott demonstrate in *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication*, community-based learning allows students to conduct significant projects that cause them to interact with community members and ultimately improve the community, school, and/or students’ lives.

Kathryn Rentz and Ashley Mattingly, in “Selling Peace in a Time of War: The Rhetorical and Ethical Challenges of a Graduate-Level Service-Learning Course” argue that if a writing instructor’s goal is to prepare students for writing careers, the focus of the service-learning course should be on writing and developing a strong professional ethic, not on “doing good.” In other words, writing well and doing good work for the agencies and the community should be primary, and civic responsibility and caring for others should take a secondary role. I contend that service-learning workplace writing students have an equal opportunity to do both; they can grow as professional writers and still “do good” for the community. Students can learn while serving, and serve while learning. The challenge is in structuring the course carefully, placing students appropriately, and communicating effectively with the three key parties involved—the agency mentor, the student, and the writing instructor.

Course Design

The service-learning component was first integrated in the bilingual workplace writing course in spring 2005. Students who wish to earn extra credit and be exempt from one of the writing assignments can choose the service-learning option and are then required to serve as bilingual communicators for a non-profit organization for a minimum of twenty hours during the semester. A list of potential agencies is provided, but students have the freedom to work with an organization of their choice with the instructor’s approval. Students complete agreement forms

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with their agency mentors and submit descriptions of the communication tasks they will complete in English and Spanish for the agencies. Students are required to keep time sheets to be signed by the agency mentors; both students and mentors complete evaluation forms. At midterm, students give oral progress reports on their service, and at the end of the semester, they give final presentations to the class, reflecting on their service as bilingual communicators. Thus, students must meet both course and agency requirements to receive full credit for the service-learning option.

Recruiting a diverse group of non-profit organizations provides the students with a better understanding of the communication and literacy needs of the community and helps in successfully matching students with appropriate agencies, based on the agencies' needs and students' different skills and identities. Following Paul Heilker's principles for ensuring that placements will be of benefit to the student, agency, and the community (72), non-profit agencies are asked to describe their needs, which vary in type, degree, and urgency. Agencies are also asked to complete an agency profile and name the person who will act as the agency mentor for service-learning students. The following is a list of some of the self-described communication and literacy needs of several non-profit organizations:

Women's Intercultural Center

"It would be beneficial to have someone who is bilingual. We can prepare a practicum for someone who is not, but we would prefer someone who is. The population we serve and the audience for our correspondence and marketing materials are both English speaking and Spanish speaking. We could also accommodate someone who can or needs to work from home as long as he or she has a computer and e-mail access."

Advocacy Center for the Children of El Paso

"We are very interested in developing/translating child abuse identification and awareness brochures and training materials in Spanish."

Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center

"Bilingual students are welcome, because we do translations for cases."

AVANCE

"We run an educational program: early childhood development, parenting, and adult literacy for low income families with young children. We are interested in a student newsletter or storybook."

Feedback from agency mentors also highlights the successes or glitches of the matching process. At the end of the semester, one agency mentor wrote: "It would have helped if *our* program were not in so much flux due to underfunding and general underdevelopment of this sector of the workforce which affects the efficiency of lim-

ired-time volunteer hours in general, but overall it was a very good match of skills to needs.” This agency mentor continued, “I wasn’t sure if someone so young could work well with mature adult learners who are learning English and Spanish written skills for office work, but she has done an excellent job....[This student] is going places! I hope she will continue with us in some other capacity, as she has the ‘right stuff’ for this Center.” Such evaluations from agency mentors show the positive impact student volunteers have on the community and demonstrate how bilingual student communicators help meet important needs.

Guest speakers from different workplace settings who are bilingual and who understand the importance of effective intercultural communication are important contributors to the success of the course. Speaking to the students in both languages, these guests stress the importance of knowing two or more languages and understanding not only the language but the culture of an intended audience. For example, in fall 2006, Jesus Manuel Munoz Delgado, Vice-President of Merchandising and Marketing of the S-Mart supermarkets in Mexico (a 34-store chain with warehouses on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border), visited the bilingual workplace writing class and spoke to the students about how knowing the language is not enough when conducting business in other countries. Knowing the culture is also essential. Munoz spends considerable time using both English and Spanish since he works with different suppliers and consultants from Mexico, Argentina, and the United States. He stressed how even a single language changes from country to country and within the same country. Argentinian Spanish is not the same as Mexican Spanish, and the Spanish spoken on the U.S.-Mexico border is not the same as the Spanish spoken in Mexico City. Dialects come into play, and to be effective communicators, international entrepreneurs and business negotiators must know and understand the norms, values, and protocols of the cultures where they work. Munoz commended the students for enrolling in a bilingual workplace communication course, confirming that, especially with the experience they gain working with community organizations, they will be at a tremendous advantage when they enter the job market.

Workplace Writing and Student Identity

Service-learning students in the workplace writing course explore their identities in multiple ways. They explore different cultures and discover their membership in more than one—they belong to an academic culture, workplace culture, ethnic culture, gender culture, language culture, and more. Students explore their multiple identities through service-learning and learn that communicating with diverse cultures and

serving others can make them stronger and more productive. One student, Flor, wrote the following reflection:

I have been involved in doing many tasks for this organization. I started off by just doing anything that had to do with workplace writing. I translate documents from English to Spanish/Spanish to English. I also help them by creating spreadsheet templates for the organization and writing training modules for the students. I also provide help for students when writing their résumé and cover letter in Spanish, by translating it to English and making the necessary corrections. After working with La Mujer Obrera for about two weeks I got involved with working directly with students. I teach and reinforce English skills both oral and written. Aside from teaching Basic English, I tutor and provide the essential help needed to facilitate their Citizenship class. To me this is very important because as I tutor I reinforce my own historical knowledge....This experience has really changed me for good not only professionally but personally as well. I have grown in all aspects and I have built a strong relationship with my mentor as well as with my students... Volunteering at La Mujer Obrera has really opened my eyes towards reality and it has showed me the importance of getting involved with my community.

Azucena, a student who served as a bilingual communicator and writer at La Posada Home, a shelter for women and their children, concluded:

This semester has given me the opportunity to seek a learning experience outside of the normal university settings.... As students in the undergraduate level, we become absorbed with ourselves and our career goals. We forget that there is a whole other world waiting for us to reach out.... Some of us never stop and reflect upon our real surroundings. We can make a difference now!

Through the service-learning, workplace writing course, traditionally marginalized populations are given the opportunity to learn to reach across boundaries and bridge cultural, linguistic, and physical borders. Non-profit organizations and agencies that are consistently looking for volunteers and funding are greatly assisted by these diverse learners as service providers. Students become assets to these agencies; they produce much needed workplace documents, such as memos, proposals, and newsletters, often

in both English and Spanish. And students evince significant changes in identity as they write for these agencies.

Academically, as students learn to handle multiple discourses, their identities change from being academic writers addressing a professor to being professional writers in real workplace settings. Students discover for themselves what Gerald J. Alred refers to as different cultures, explaining how he found “a clear dividing line between works valued by academics and those valued by practitioners” (81). Veronica, for example, while enrolled in the bilingual writing practicum, reflects on her service-learning experience:

Although many of the assignments were difficult to put together, I enjoyed writing for the ‘real world.’ I received a different satisfaction out of writing for an organization than I did when writing academically. The writing I did for the Nonprofit Enterprise Center made me feel like I was making a crucial difference in this organization. I feel like my articles and the newsletter...will help the Nonprofit Enterprise Center achieve its goal of changing the mentality many have of the nonprofit community.

Ernesto, feeling free to use his first language in the bilingual workplace writing course, reflected on his service-learning experience with Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Paso: “Aprendí que no es solo traducir, tal y como se lee, hay que traducir primero y luego darle sentido a toda nuestra traducción y tal vez agregar palabras” (I learned that it’s not only a matter of translating as it reads. You must translate first and then give the translation meaning and maybe even add words to it).

Students’ personal identities are also enhanced. They become civically engaged by helping meet their community’s literacy needs, recognize the value of their native or second language, and appreciate their own and others’ cultures by practicing intercultural communication, leading to professional growth. When students’ languages are respected and appreciated, their self-esteem improves and they are more willing to experiment and take risks as communicators and language learners.

For instance, when Antonio entered the bilingual workplace writing course, he believed his writing skills in English, his second language, were weak. He opted to work with a community organization, and at the end of the semester, he shared with the class his conviction that his literacy skills in both languages had improved. Had he really improved as a writer? The documents he produced for Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe (a health clinic) demonstrate improvement, and this improvement not only

shows in his class assignments but is also recognized in his agency mentor's end-of-semester evaluation. She says, "Antonio has a keen eye for copy editing and translation. He was a great help on several projects," and goes on to commend Antonio for his bilingualism, writing skills, dependability, and cultural sensitivity. Both the positive feedback and the opportunity to use his mother tongue to help others built Antonio's confidence and motivation to set higher standards for himself both in his community work and in his courses.

Adrian, a student in the same course who worked with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, expressed similar concerns at the beginning of the semester. His agency mentor stated, "Adrian has strong writing skills. He was in charge of writing memos, e-mails, and proofreading letters and our newsletter articles." Adrian, too, presented the documents he completed for the Chamber to the class at the end of the semester and expressed newfound confidence as a fluent, English-Spanish workplace writer and speaker. Students' reflections, agency mentors' profiles and evaluations, and progress reports from students on their service-learning each provide evidence that students are bridging borders, crossing regions, and building bridges while exploring and strengthening their own identities.

Looking Ahead

It is important to document the long-term impact of this course. Studies are needed to understand the impact of students' writing in this course on the community. Longitudinal case studies would also be beneficial to determine what, if any, long-term transformational changes occur for the service-learning bilingual students. Richard Kiely's investigation of whether and how students were affected by their participation in an international service-learning program, documenting significant changes in political, moral, intellectual, personal, spiritual, and cultural orientations, provides one model for such a study. And, although no study has yet been conducted on the long term impact of UTEP's service-learning bilingual workplace writing course, based on students' reflections I venture to say that changes in career choices, and even job placement at the various non-profit organizations, are evidence of profound intellectual, personal, and/or cultural changes and transformations.

The service-learning workplace writing course I've described uses bilingualism and intercultural communication to bridge borders and strengthen students' identities. The course becomes a journey which may take the student, the agency mentor, and

also the instructor to unexplored regions and often helps each of them to rediscover his or her origins, story, and purpose in society. The journey continues as the students move on beyond the course to fulfill roles as professionals and citizens engaged with their communities, society, and world.

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