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6 Latina/o College Writing Students: Linguistic, Cultural, and Gender Issues

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The U.S. Census Bureau (1990) has recently noted that Latinas/os* are one of the largest and fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States; because of the relative youthfulness of Latinas/os (10.7 percent are under the age of five, compared with 7.4 percent of non-Latinas/os), their impact on higher education will only continue to grow (pp. 8–9). However, up to now, the participation rates for Latinas/os in higher education have been limited. According to the American Council on Education (1993), the college participation rates of Latinas/os have actually decreased, in contrast to the non-Latina/o population. Much of Latina/o students' college participation has taken place in two-year colleges; in 1991 a majority (55.8 percent) of Latina/o students attended two-year colleges, an increase of 14.2 percent from 1990 to 1991 (p. 9). Because of this high number of Latina/o students, two-year colleges can play a significant role in improving the college success rates for these students.

In this essay I will suggest how writing teachers can help Latina/o college students to succeed in higher education. I will address linguistic, cultural, and gender issues. By helping students "to succeed" in higher education, I don't mean simply "to assimilate"; instead, writing teachers need to help students—and themselves—reflect critically upon the dominant culture and their place in it.

Who Are the Latina/o Students?

Latina/o students are as diverse as any other group of students we may encounter in our writing classrooms. As with all students, we

*I will use "Latina/o" throughout this chapter to refer to Americans of Latin American or Mexican ancestry because this label reflects Latinas/os' diverse national origins regardless of language, culture, or race. The use of labels is an ideologically charged issue for many Latinas/os; for one perspective on this issue, see Alarcon (1992).

need to approach them as individuals. This emphasis on individuality is particularly relevant here, for the term "Latina/o" does not refer to a particular race, culture, or language. Latinas/os can include people whose origins can be found in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, or any Central American or South American country. In discussing Latinas/os as a group, my intention is not to negate the significance of individual differences, only to provide teachers with a starting point for gaining more understanding of their students.

It is important that teachers do begin to understand this group of students, for their numbers are steadily increasing. According to the Census Bureau (1990), in 1989 more than 20 million Latinas/os lived in the U.S.—an increase of 39 percent from 1980 (the non-Latina/o population grew by 7.5 percent). Mexican Americans make up the largest portion—62.6 percent; Puerto Rican Americans constitute the second-largest subgroup (12.7 percent); while Cuban Americans represent 5.3 percent of the total (p. 2). The most recent census report also noted that a majority of the Latina/o population is located in four states, California, Texas, New York, and Florida, with Illinois and Arizona not far behind (p. 3).

As I mentioned earlier, "Latina/o" is a term that signifies diversity rather than homogeneity. Latinas/os constitute a broad range of races, nationalities, economic classes, and political orientations. Some Latinas/os have ancestors who were living in the U.S. before the arrival of the pilgrims, while others are recent immigrants. Many Latina/o immigrants, especially those from Central America and Cuba, have come to the U.S. for political reasons. Those from Cuba were often from the well-educated professional class and have established communities in Miami, where the Cuban culture has been preserved and Spanish is the dominant language. In contrast, many Puerto Rican and Mexican American Latinas/os immigrated to the U.S. for economic reasons, to escape the poverty of their native lands.

In recent years, many Latinas/os have prospered economically. According to the National Council of La Raza, Latina/o buying power increased by 70 percent from 1982 to 1990, almost three times more than for non-Latinas/os ("Hispanics Earn," 1991, 1-A). However, the poverty level of Latinas/os is still higher than for the Anglo population; in 1989, 26.7 percent of Latinas/os lived below the poverty level, compared with 11.8 percent of non-Latinas/os (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990, pp. 10–13). The decreasing high school graduation rates of Latina/o students suggest that this poverty rate will continue to grow.

The variety within the Latina/o population became apparent to me when I began to conduct case studies on six first-generation college

students in El Paso, Texas, a city that is almost 70 percent Latinas/os of Mexican descent. One young woman I studied had been born in Mexico, currently lived in one of the barrios of the city, spoke only Spanish at home, and was receiving pressure from her family to drop out of college. In contrast, one of the other students, a young man, was a third-generation American who spoke no Spanish at all, lived in one of the most affluent parts of the city, and aspired to be an astronaut. Economic class, length of time in the U.S., the language spoken in the home, gender pressures, self-esteem—all of these factors play an important role in how Latina/o students, as with all students, react to higher education.

Linguistic Characteristics

As I have noted, many Latina/o students do not speak Spanish. However, given the recent influx of Latina/o immigrants into the United States, it is likely that teachers will encounter some Latina/o students whose primary language is Spanish; depending upon his or her educational background, a student may only speak Spanish, but not be able to read or write in Spanish. Students whose dominant language is Spanish (rather than students who are truly bilingual) will exhibit errors in their writing that are typical of ESL students from various language backgrounds, such as problems with verb tense, verb formations, word order, sentence boundaries, articles, prepositions, and spelling. Spanish-speaking students in particular may demonstrate interference from Spanish phonology in their orthography. For instance, Spanish speakers may write "seating" instead of "sitting" because Spanish does not have the short *i* sound. It also does not have the vowel sound in "than," so that it is common for Spanish speakers to write "then" instead of "than." (For a more thorough discussion of Spanish phonological interference, see Herrick, 1981).

However, for many Spanish-speaking students, lack of knowledge of written English conventions (common to most developing writers)—not second-language interference—is the cause of most sentence-level errors. This is especially true for students who speak both fluent Spanish and English but have had limited instruction in writing formal English, as is common in areas such as Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, and the U.S.-Mexico border cities. These students are bilingual and bicultural, at home in both Spanish and English discourse communities. In her discussion of the influence of English vernacular on Chicana/o English, Penfield (1981) gives this example of a Latino student's writing:

> Youre life. Living together with a person without been marriade is something that our parents don't accept very well, because they were raise in another way. I think if I hade a girl friend and she would like to live together without getin marriade I would accept and move with her. . . . (p. 75)

As Penfield notes, "raise" and "getin" are probably the result of simply hearing these words spoken but never seeing them written. Other errors, such as "youre" and "marriade," point to a lack of knowledge of English orthography. These errors are not a result of interference from Spanish but, rather, confusion between spoken and written English—interference which inexperienced writers from a variety of backgrounds experience.

Although it is helpful for students to understand the errors they make and to receive instruction in how to avoid making them, placing too much emphasis on errors in the writing classroom can make students perceive writing as the production of correct language, instead of a process of communication between writer and reader. Moreover, rather than simply seeing errors as "bad," teachers need to understand why their students make the errors they do—what errors reveal about students' backgrounds, thinking processes, and writing acquisition. Viewing errors as part of the developmental process of language acquisition can help prevent teachers from discriminating against language-minority students because of their limited-English proficiency. Rather than focusing on what students lack, we need to perceive students who bring other languages to the writing classroom as enriching the classroom community, just as the English language has been enriched by the influx of languages it has encountered.

Cultural Characteristics

The range of language proficiencies among Latina/o students—from those who speak only Spanish, to those who are bilingual in Spanish and English, to those who only speak English—indicates the range of cultural worlds they inhabit. Case studies that I conducted on ten Latina/o students at the University of Arizona and at the University of Texas at El Paso revealed to me aspects of these diverse cultural worlds. For the students I examined, the degree of tension they experienced between the "minority" Latina/o culture and the "majority" Anglo culture—and the students' sense of place as "minorities" within the "majority" culture—greatly affected their reactions to their writing classrooms.

As I mentioned earlier, there is no single "Latina/o" culture, and as a result, generalizing about this group of students can lead to distor-

tions of fact. Nonetheless, teachers interested in knowing more about their students can benefit from research studies that have explored the tensions that can arise when students from traditional Latina/o cultures encounter the norms of the dominant Anglo culture. For instance, research studies have indicated a strong focus on familial and community relationships among Latinas/os; in these relationships, cooperation, loyalty, and interpersonal connections are stressed (see Knight & Kagan, 1977; McCready, 1985; and Moore, 1983). In contrast to these values is the American emphasis on competition, individualism, and independence. In particular, in America the tradition is for young people—especially young men—to leave their family to develop an identity separate from that of their parents. In traditional Latina/o culture, families remain connected through the generations; familial achievement is usually valued more than individual achievement (Martínez, 1985).

Some of these traditional Latina/o values are evident in the description written by Raul, one of the students I examined, about what he thought he would be doing in ten years:

> In ten years I hope to have finished school and be into my fourth year of teaching U.S. history in [my old] high school. Happily married to my working wife. Proud dad to my three year old boy.... Be some sort of community leader. To never loose touch with my family and [be] someone who is doing something to repay all the people that got him to where he is right now.

Rather than move away from his community, Raul wants to use his education to strengthen his connections to his community by teaching at the same high school from which he graduated. In an interview with me, he explained that he wanted to coach football at this school in order to help prevent some of the students from joining gangs. Raul was also explicit about his closeness to his family and his desire to have a family of his own. When I asked him why he had decided to go to college, he said, "because my mother said so." Raul laughed when he said this, but he was also serious. He explained that while he had many Anglo friends, only his Mexican friends understood the role that his mother played in his life. This statement supports research that indicates the significance that Latina/o mothers (specifically, their educational achievement rates) have on their children's academic success (Fligstein & Fernández, 1985; Laosa, 1982).

Raul is an example of a bicultural individual with positive attitudes toward both the Mexican culture of his parents and the Anglocentric culture of his school. A second-generation American, Raul speaks Spanish at home, Spanish and English with his friends (sometimes both at once in a complicated and poetic form of code-switching), and English at his college. His mother's emphasis on education has led him to view his performance in the English-language classroom as a way of pleasing his family through his educational achievement. Because he has attended schools in which Latinas/os are in the majority, he has no sense of being a minority student within the educational system. In his writing classes, he is confident of his ability to express himself in English because it has never seemed like a "foreign" language to him, nor has he felt like a "foreigner" in his writing classroom.

Raul is an example of a bicultural Latino student. Some Latina/o students, in contrast, are monocultural. For instance, another student I studied, Eric, is a third-generation Latino who has completely assimilated into the Anglocentric culture. He wrote that in ten years he sees himself as having "finished flight school and [being] on the way to my dreams.... I also hope to be married. I'd like to travel the country and the world with my wife ... I'm not sure if I'll have any children ... " He sees himself as leaving his family and community to establish a separate identity. To Eric, Spanish is a foreign language; he speaks a little only because he studied it for two years in high school. He knows his grandparents speak Spanish, but he doesn't see them often; he's also uncertain in which part of Mexico his grandparents used to live. Although Eric checks off "Mexican American" on questionnaires requiring ethnic identity, he is like many third-generation Americans in that his primary identity is with the mainstream culture, and he feels little connection to his original culture.

Students such as Raul, who understands both the Latina/o culture and the mainstream Anglocentric culture and has found a role for himself within both, and Eric, who knows only the Anglocentric culture, have adjusted smoothly to their writing classrooms. However, some Latina/o students, especially those who are recent immigrants, can experience the effects of a cultural mismatch in Anglocentric classrooms. Lupe and Rosa are both examples of Latina students whose cultural orientation isolates them from the norms of the writing classroom. Both of these students' parents were born in Mexico and only recently immigrated to the United States. Because they were ashamed of their English, both students exhibited extreme shyness in the classroom; they would speak only when called upon, and Lupe even spoke with her hand over her mouth to mask what she considered her poor pronunciation. Both students relied heavily on a support system of their siblings and friends to help them get through college. Although, in their writing classrooms, both wrote about ideas and incidents that were important to them, they felt embarrassed about anyone reading

their writing for fear they would be looked down upon. Some of their writing dealt with encounters with racism and poverty. For instance, in an essay about her self-image, Lupe wrote, "I recall the time I was so excited to go to the Junior High School orientation. 'Look here comes another group of greasers,' have you ever heard this line before? That was the welcome a sophomore Anglo boy gave me and my friends. . . . I felt so ashamed to hear this that I felt a big blind covering my face. I felt too embarrassed to look him in the eyes since them." As a result of experiences such as these, she wrote that she was "resentful towards society as well as determined to succeed." Rosa also wrote of experiencing poverty and racism, but most of her lack of self-esteem seemed to derive from her inability to write or speak Standard American English. For instance, concerning assignments in her high school English class, she wrote, "Knowing that I can't read that kind of English, I thought to myself that some kind of dumm person. . . . Most of the things that I read I don't understand." She wrote about peer reviews: "I don't like my friends or classmates to read my writing because I know that I have alot of mistakes on them. I am afraid that they would tiss me about it." Rosa and Lupe are similar to the type of students encountered by Adrienne Rich (1979) when she taught at the City College of New York—students who have had the language of the dominant culture "*used against* them, to keep them in their place, to mystify, to bully, to make them feel powerless" (p. 63). Both Lupe and Rosa came from school systems that lacked a strong bilingual education program, so they had not had the opportunity to perceive themselves as capable communicators in Spanish, much less in English.

Rose and Lupe are examples of students who want to succeed in the mainstream culture but whose identity is rooted in the Latina/o culture. These students are often tentative and isolated in the classroom and can lack the confidence necessary to use language as a way of generating and communicating meaningful ideas. Research has suggested that Latina/o students in general experience more stress in higher education when compared with Anglo students (Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991); for students such as Rosa and Lupe, this stress can intensify the insecurity and resentment they already might feel when encountering the dominant culture. Paulo Freire (1987) has written that "the [primary] role of critical pedagogy is to lead students to recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them" (p. 49). As teachers, we need to bring cultural tensions to the surface in our classrooms so that students can use language to explore and to begin to resolve their relationships to the dominant culture.

These cultural tensions can be addressed when students are introduced to what Freire has called a "problem-posing" curriculum, in which students are asked to reflect upon and critique aspects of their cultural realities. Students can consider issues such as cultural identity, racism, sexism, and economic discrimination in journal writings, class discussions, small-group activities, and formal writing assignments. I have found that even an assignment as simple as "Why I Am Attending College" can lead to cultural insights; students at first tend to assume that their desire for a college education is an individual and/or family decision until they are asked to make connections to cultural norms or expectations. Ultimately, activities such as these can help students become more conscious of their positions within or against the dominant culture, and thus better able to change the culture(s) in which they live. (Later in this essay I will suggest additional pedagogical strategies for helping students to use language to problematize and resolve cultural tensions.)

Gender

Certainly, some of the tensions in writing classrooms experienced by students such as Rosa and Lupe are a result of their gender. Women from a variety of backgrounds often act differently and are treated differently in higher education. According to recent research studies, women tend to talk less than men in classrooms and receive less attention from teachers (Sadker & Sadker, 1985); they tend to avoid going into fields that stress math and science (Mickelson, 1982); and they often lose confidence as they proceed through school (Stake & Rose, 1985). Preliminary research has also suggested that, in writing classrooms, many women prefer to write on topics that are personal and that often concern achieving connectedness to others, in contrast to more impersonal topics that many men tend to choose which demonstrate individual achievement and separation from others (Flynn, 1988; Papoulis, 1990). Moreover, the emphasis on an "objective," even agonistic, stance in traditional writing assignments can interfere with many women's tendencies to write about their personal contexts and to establish a more familiar stance toward their audience (see Annas, 1985; Hunter et al., 1988; and Lamb, 1991). Despite these gender differences, many woman succeed in writing classrooms—but their success requires that they acquire a type of communication that can be more foreign to them than to their male peers. One researcher, Carol Stanger (1987), has referred to this assumption of a different way of communicating as women "cross-dressing" in men's language.

Many Latinas in higher education do even more "cross-dressing" than Anglo female students as a result of experiencing what sociologist Helen Moore (1983) has called "the dilemma of conflicting norms" (p. 46). As noted earlier, Latina/o culture is often more oriented toward cooperation, respect for authority, and the family unit than is the Anglocentric culture. In particular, family responsibilities can interfere with Latinas' efforts to achieve an education (of course, this can happen with other nontraditional students, too). For instance, Rosa (the student discussed earlier) was the oldest child in a large family; she was expected to assume a major portion of the child care and household responsibilities while attending college. Other Latina students might have to miss classes because their grandmother becomes ill, or because they have to attend the funeral of a relative in Mexico. (Male Latino students can also experience family pressures that interfere with educational pursuits—for instance, they might be expected to contribute to the family income rather than attend college.)

Rosa is an example of a Latina student who came from a family where traditional gender and cultural roles had been preserved; her desire to succeed in higher education meant that she had to create for herself a different identity than the one encouraged by her family. Creating this new identity has the potential of enabling Latinas to reach, in the words of anthropologist James Diego Vigil (1988), "sexual equity without sacrificing ethnicity" (p. 80). But the process of reaching sexual equality without losing one's cultural identity can be filled with ambivalence, even conflict. For example, Saundra, another Latina whom I studied, described in writing one incident that led her father to call her a "defensive feminist snob":

> Dad took the liberty of informing me I was the only girl and it was my job as a female to clean the house as well as to help my mother prepare dinner. I would often ask why couldn't the boys help out from time to time, but the only response I got in return was that boys didn't have to do those things. . . . From that moment on I went on a male-hate campaign.

The focus of this "male-hate" campaign was often Latino men. For instance, in an interview, she said that she thought Mexican men were chauvinists; that she sometimes hated to be around her Mexican relatives because the women wait on the men and "whatever men say, it goes"; and that she often gets into debates about feminism with friends who tell her that "I'm trying to be someone I'm not." Sometimes they called her a "coconut"—brown on the outside, white on the inside. In her writing classroom, Saundra was almost too eager to be a good student; she felt driven to be successful so that she would not end up dependent upon men, as she had seen happen to her mother and to other female relatives.

Sociologist Ruth Zambrana (1988) has written, "How can Latina women make the transition into a world which is different from theirs? How do they reconcile or learn different values and norms without losing who they are? How do they overcome some of the cultural assaults from their peers, the schools, and the like?" (p. 71). Perhaps Saundra's writing class could have helped her make the transition to a new world by affirming her culture—through exposing her to writings by Latina authors and by enabling her to write about the cultural conflicts she was experiencing. By addressing gender and cultural issues, writing classrooms can enrich students' development rather than participate in a narrowing of their personal and social identities.

Pedagogical Strategies

Throughout this essay I have briefly indicated ways in which teachers can address concerns pertaining to Latina/o students—concerns that other nontraditional students often share. My pedagogical goals with Latina/o and other students are the same as Kyle Fiore and Nan Elsasser's (1987) goals for the writing course they founded in a two-year college in the Bahamas; in addition to wanting their students to understand writing as a process,

> We wanted our students to be able to bring their culture, their knowledge, into the classroom. . . . [W]e wanted them to be able to use writing as a means of intervening in their own social environment.

Fiore and Elsasser achieved these goals for their female Bahamian students by having them write about the personal, social, and political issues in their lives. In the following section, I will discuss how addressing such issues can also empower Latina/o students. These issues can be raised in the context of activities that involve collaborative learning, that use culturally oriented reading and writing materials, and that engage students in critical literacy practices. Because of limited space, my pedagogical suggestions do not always take into account individual differences among students; teachers, naturally, need to modify these suggestions according to their students' differing needs.

Collaborative Learning

The benefits of collaborative learning techniques in writing classrooms have been forcefully argued by Kenneth Bruffee (1984), who has explained that "collaborative learning provides a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued by college teachers" (p. 642). My own experience with collaborative learning strategies has led me to agree that these kinds of conversations help students internalize the types of thinking and the conventions of the discourse community of the classroom. However, I emphasize what Joseph Harris (1989) has recently pointed out: such conversations enable students to add their own voices to this discourse community—so that rather than simply mimicking academic forms, they are contributing their own languages and ways of thinking to the classroom.

Collaborative learning techniques such as peer-review sessions (in which students make suggestions on their peers' drafts) can be effective with many Latina/o students because of the cultural emphasis on cooperation and affiliation. Other small-group activities can also help to stimulate conceptual development, especially if the group members as a whole, rather than simply individual students, are rewarded for their efforts. For instance, students in a group can be asked to analyze a particular aspect of a text and then to report on their analysis to the larger class. Such an activity enables students who are insecure about their language abilities to participate in a nonthreatening format—with only a few other students—rather than be asked to respond alone in front of the whole class. I have found, however, that I must carefully select group members so that shy students are not overwhelmed by more gregarious students. I also monitor these groups to encourage the quieter members to speak their minds. Similarly, to protect insecure students, I am careful to not share an example of their writing that might embarrass them in front of the whole class. Instead, I might ask one student to contribute an idea from his or her writing to the class, and then ask another student to add to that idea. In discussions, my emphasis is often on bolstering similarities among students rather than focusing in on differences, so that students who are keenly aware of their "minority" status—through their language, class, or ethnicity—might be able to position themselves more comfortably within the large group. For example, I might point out similar reflections on a text under discussion or ideas produced in students' drafts which echo each other. This emphasis on commonalities can also help to limit the competitive edge that often occurs in class discussions.

Cooperative learning, then, can enable students to add their ideas and voices to the classroom community in a way that allows them privacy: they do not have to be exposed to the rest of their classmates. Also, they are not competing for their instructor's attention or approval. Additionally, a supportive classroom setting can help students who have been taught respect for authority to perceive their teacher as someone who can be approached for assistance. This can be especially important when personal problems interfere with students' work; if students are intimidated by the instructor, their sense of pride and dignity can prevent them from seeking help.

Culturally Oriented Reading and Writing Activities

Writing teachers who build connections between reading and writing can help students improve their conceptual and linguistic abilities. Writing teachers can also use reading material to help students affirm their cultural backgrounds and to explore their relationships with (or against) the dominant culture. One way of doing this is to juxtapose two texts—one from a minority culture, one from a majority culture—so that students can examine diverse cultural treatments of a common theme. For instance, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), a young Latino's coming-of-age story, can be read with Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Both books explore minority cultures, ways of making meaning, and the development of identity, but in radically different settings. Students can examine different perspectives on similar themes by reading several texts written by the same author, as in Arturo Islas's *The Rain God* (1984) and *Migrant Souls* (1990), which concern ways of dealing with the Mexican and American cultures in border settings. The sexual and social pressures often confronted by Latinas are described poetically in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991). Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), reveals what it is like to be a lesbian Latina living on the border between the Mexican and Anglo cultures.

These examples of Latina/o texts can also serve as models of different types of writing that can enrich our students' views on the function and form of classroom discourse. Of course, we have a responsibility to teach our students the types of writing that will enable them to succeed in higher education and in the professional world. This goal, however, should not keep us from using other kinds of writing to foster the development of students' voices and insights. Nontraditional forms of classroom writing can also help students better under-

stand traditional forms of writing through the comparison of different text features. But no matter what form they use, students need to feel they can bring their own lives into their writing.

As an example of a writing assignment that encompassed various forms of writing and was oriented around students' personal and social contexts, I will describe a writing unit I have taught to basic writing students from a variety of backgrounds. The unit dealt with family and cultural rituals. We first read about rituals from a variety of cultures, and then I asked students to describe a ritual from their own culture. Some of the Latina/o students wrote about annual pilgrimages to a religious shrine, or the *quinceañera* (coming of age) ceremony for girls, or an annual visit to relatives. These essays were descriptive narratives. I then asked the students to write a profile of a key member in their ritual, to write a poem about their reactions to the ritual, to write a letter to their children persuading them to maintain the ritual, and to write a short research paper concerning the origins and symbology of the ritual. For this last assignment, the students were allowed to use oral interviews as well as library materials for their research. This assignment on rituals served various purposes. It allowed students to explore different forms of writing, it let them understand a particular event through various perspectives, it taught them about an important aspect of their culture, and it affirmed their ability to become the source of knowledge in the writing classroom.

Cultural Literacy

The written assignment just described is an example of one that can help to promote critical literacy. I am using Ira Shor's (1987) definition of this term:

> A critically literate person does not stay at the empirical level of memorizing data, or at the impressionistic level of opinion, or at the level of dominant myths in society, but goes beneath the surface to understand the origin, structure, and consequences of any body of knowledge, technical process, or object under study. (p. 24)

Shor suggests that to obtain such critical literacy, students should study "their language, their society, and their own learning" (p. 24). Such critical literacy is essential for all students—but especially for those traditionally marginalized by educational institutions, who might feel inadequate, or angry, or overwhelmed by what they encounter in their writing classes. Such students need to become their

own ethnographers so that they can reflect upon and write about their native languages and cultures and/or about the culture of the university and their reactions to it. These reflections can become a part of their efforts to come to terms with the tensions involved in seeking higher education. This kind of empowerment that writing can bring about comes slowly, but it comes. For example, one of the students I have referred to in this chapter, Saundra, reflected upon the effect that an essay she wrote about her self-image had on her: "I realized how I felt. . . . I realized things about myself." About her first college writing course, she noted: "I feel more confident. I can speak out now." Raul, another student referred to earlier, commented about his writing class: "I never thought I could be a writer." These comments are not unusual; all of us at some point have students who say things like this. But these statements are significant, for they show that our students (Latina/o or otherwise) can use language in our writing classrooms to better understand, and change, their personal, social, and political lives.

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