

GREATER EXPECTATIONS

TEACHING ACADEMIC LITERACY TO UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS

ROBIN TURNER



STENHOUSE PUBLISHERS
PORTLAND, MAINE

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	viii
CHAPTER ONE	
Why Focus on Underrepresented Students?	1
CHAPTER TWO	
<i>Familia</i> and Classroom Culture	15
CHAPTER THREE	
Literary Analysis: Reading and Writing Strategies	34
CHAPTER FOUR	
Autobiographical and Biographical Writing Strategies: Using Students' Lives to Engage Them in Writing and School	67
CHAPTER FIVE	
Teaching Argument and Research Writing Strategies	99
CHAPTER SIX	
Exploring Culture-Based Writing	127
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Reflection: The Key to Growth as a Reader, Writer, and Person	155
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Puente: The Bigger <i>Familia</i>	171
CHAPTER NINE	
Conclusion	182
APPENDIX A: SCORING GUIDES FOR STUDENTS	187
APPENDIX B: SCORING GUIDES FOR TEACHER USE	197
APPENDIX C: HANDOUTS	215
REFERENCES	219
INDEX	222

Why Focus on Underrepresented Students?

IT WAS 1985, AND STUMBLING OUT OF BED, DISHEVELED AND GROGGY FROM THE RAVAGES OF THE CAREFREE NIGHT BEFORE AND ITS EFFECTS ON MY TWENTY-YEAR-OLD BODY, I ANSWERED THE DOOR, SQUINTING AGAINST THE BRIGHT LIGHT OUTSIDE. STANDING THERE WAS MY BEST FRIEND, MARK. WE WERE THREE YEARS OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL AND BOTH OF US HAD COMPLETED OUR LOWER DIVISION WORK AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE THAT MAY. TODAY MARK WAS SUPPOSED TO START CLASSES AT CAL STATE FULLERTON; I, HOWEVER, HAD NOT EVEN GOTTEN AROUND TO REGISTERING FOR A SINGLE COURSE.

Mark told me that I *had* to register, and after I got cleaned up, he drove me to CSU at Fullerton and walked me to the admissions office. I paid the fee, which in 1985 wasn't nearly what it is today, and then he walked me to the last-minute registration area. Within a few hours, I was enrolled and registered for classes, and that night, I walked into my very first university classroom.

My life changed that day. My college education has enabled me to work at a job I love, earn a stable living, and more important, to better understand the complexities of life and possess the tools to solve the challenges that have come my way. That day was a significant turning point in my entire life, and it would

not have happened had Mark not taken time out of his schedule to physically take me through the steps necessary for me to achieve my dream of a college education.

Such a small thing, really, not knowing how to apply for admission or how to register, and yet it very nearly kept me from getting my college degree. Coming from a family in which not one aunt, uncle, parent, or grandparent had ever attended a day of college, and no cousin had graduated high school, I was lucky to find guidance and direction from my friends regarding college; looking back, statistics show that for a kid like me, the chances of graduating from college were slim. Yet today my students overcome much greater obstacles than I ever did; my story pales greatly in comparison to the challenges placed before students of color in a working-class neighborhood today. I've never forgotten the day I was given assistance getting into college, and as a teacher, it still fuels me to work passionately toward enabling students to achieve their own goals.

When I first began teaching remedial English, I saw that my struggling students had dreams as well: some wanted to be able to get good jobs after high school, some wanted just to graduate, others wanted to go on to college. However, few of them really knew how to overcome the obstacles in their way, obstacles such as poverty, poor reading and writing skills, peer pressure on teenagers to not succeed in school, and an unfamiliarity with how to do well academically. Unfortunately, these obstacles often included the school system itself, which subtly pressured such students to substitute their dreams with much less lofty goals. The low expectations of school personnel, deficit-based school policies, and pedagogy that failed to address the background of non-white students often combined to create an insurmountable challenge for these students.

For instance, the counselors at registration treated some students differently from others. Students who “looked” collegiate had easy access to honors classes and college outreach programs like EAOP (Early Academic Outreach Program); students who wore baggy pants and oversized shirts were encouraged by counselors to take the easiest possible classes and were steered toward career programs such as Regional Occupational Program (ROP). Too often, the difference in treatment seemed to be based on ethnicity. Whites and Asians

were treated with favor; Latinos and African Americans were assumed to be “at risk.” To make matters worse, too many of my colleagues viewed the lack of success of African American and Latino students as a reflection of some cultural shortcoming rather than a problem inherent in the educational system or the individual educator. As a result, I witnessed too many students who remained poorly prepared for the future.

Veronica, a Latina freshman, was one such student. She was docile and quietly went along with her placement in remedial English and other lower-level classes, even though these classes did not fit in with her plans for college. She worked hard and was a good reader, but she struggled with writing; as a teacher, I was too young and inexperienced to really question why she was in my class. Both she and her mother treated educators with great respect and were reluctant to challenge the system. To be honest, I didn’t provide her with as much academic rigor as a future college student would need. Although she did end up attending a community college and eventually got her B.A., she struggled greatly with the skills deficit that my school and I left her with.

Veronica belonged to a growing community of students, usually either African American or Latino, whose ethnicities were underrepresented at the university level. At the time, I began to notice the division at my school between the honors students—mostly white and Asian—and the students enrolled in my at-risk English class, nearly all of whom were Latino or African American. These students knew where they wanted to go, but didn’t know how to get there.

I was only a few years into teaching, but I had stumbled onto a mission: to keep one eye on the future of my students, and find every resource possible that would help bridge the gap between where they were and where they wanted to be. I passionately wished to see the underrepresented students enrolled in my classes receive similar backing, but I wasn’t quite sure how to pull it all together.

And then Puente came along. Founded in 1981 at Chabot Community College in Hayward, California, the program was expanded to the high school level in 1992; it currently directly serves over 43,000 students in California. The program bears some similarities to college-preparatory programs

like Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a national college preparation program aimed at students “in the middle” with GPAs of 2.5 to 3.5. The Puente program’s mission is “to increase the number of educationally disadvantaged students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities, earn degrees, and return to the community as leaders and mentors of future generations” (Puente Project 1). Underrepresented students are placed together in the same Puente English class for two years and then are dispersed into Advanced Placement and college prep classes for their junior and senior years; a Puente counselor monitors them closely through all four years of high school. In a nutshell, Puente, the Spanish word for “bridge,” provides accelerated reading and writing instruction, intensive counseling, and mentoring. As a result, “Puente high school students enroll at four-year colleges and universities at twice the rate of matched controls” (Puente Project 2).

Several years later, Veronica’s younger sister, Sandra, enrolled in the Puente program. Like her sister, she was a sweet kid who stayed out of trouble and did well academically. This time, however, she was in a program that worked in her favor rather than working against her, valued her cultural capital, allowed her to read and study Latino literature alongside the classics written in English, and treated her ethnic background as an asset rather than a disadvantage. Because of two years of excellent instruction in reading and writing, and powerful guidance from the Puente counselor, Sandra was accepted to UCLA. Puente made it possible for Sandra to achieve her dreams of college; this same story is common to many families at my school.

Today I am two days into the school year. I have just been introduced to my new Puente English class—the ninth graders are excited but nervous, anxious but already feeling at home. One kid in particular, Johnny, has already caught my attention. You know that mischievous nervous energy that kids get when they are really enjoying a lesson? Johnny wears that look from the moment the bell rings until class is over. Today, his expression changed as we looked at the chart in Figure 1.1 that depicts the college-going rates of various ethnicities.

Figure 1.1 College-Going Rates of Recent Public High School Graduates by Racial-Ethnic Group, Fall 1990 and Fall 2003

	California State University				University of California			
	1990		2003		1990		2003	
	Number	Entry Rate	Number	Entry Rate	Number	Entry Rate	Number	Entry Rate
Asian	5,520	16.8	6,300	13.0	5,020	15.3	9,580	19.8
African-American	1,660	9.6	2,160	9.0	690	4.0	820	3.4
Latino	3,930	7.2	8,030	7.0	2,050	3.7	3,720	3.3
White	10,230	8.0	12,180	8.5	7,110	5.5	8,150	5.7

*Entry rate = number of entering freshmen from California public high schools as a percentage of the total number of graduates of California public high schools in that year.
(California Postsecondary Education Commission)

It was almost heartbreaking to see Johnny and his classmates tear apart the information here: only 3.3 percent of Latinos graduate from high school and go on to attend a UC school. Johnny admitted being “embarrassed by the numbers,” and I could see his mischievous energy dim a bit. There’s no way to sugarcoat this—our nation is doing a poor job of getting underrepresented students to the finish line, and that failure is going to have dire consequences for our society when those students graduate and enter the workforce. Johnny’s eyes widened, his jaw dropped, and his head fell back as he absorbed the reality that if his classmates were to succeed, they would be defying the odds. At that moment, Johnny, the fourteen-year-old, one-hundred-pound freshman, had discovered that he had a passion to work toward improving the odds of success for underrepresented students.

Unfortunately, too many of our underrepresented students lack the assistance they need to cross the bridge from high school to university, and as a result, our workforce will surely suffer. From 1970 to 2000, the combined