



English Studies in Latin America

Roundtable “Jornada de Enseñanza de Literatura en Inglés 2012”: *Education of the Marginalized*

Speaker: Reynaldo Reyes

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Roundtable “Jornada de Enseñanza de Literatura en Inglés 2012”: *Education of the Marginalized*

Speaker: Reynaldo Reyes

What I want to talk about relates a lot with what I have done in my research. I taught in middle schools, fifth to seven grades, and I have also taught third year at university. Where I teach in El Paso, almost 40% of the population is defined in the U.S. context as living in poverty. Many of those students come to our university, many of them. In fact, almost 90% of students at UTEP University come from El Paso region. The remaining 10-15% come from other places outside El Paso.

Where I taught and currently teach, many of my students come from marginalized backgrounds. Who are the marginalized? They are students who are in poverty, students who have been bullied, students who have been struggling with issues with their identities –gender issues, sexual issues – and students who have been perhaps in gangs. Maybe students who have worries about their life and families and they are often self-marginalized or, most of the time, they are marginalized by some sort of dynamic, something that happens outside of themselves or society or schools. Imagine some sort of circle -their school, their families are some of these circles- marginalized students are outside of this circle, In the middle of the circle imagine, in the classroom context, the target learner; the place where you want your students to be, to arrive in the learning of whatever it is that you are teaching: language, Literature, math, or science. In this case: Literature. You want them to arrive at that point but the marginalized exist on the boundaries of the outside of that circle, that is your classroom. They might be there in your classroom, but they are often not there. They are physically there, but it is almost symbolic because the marginalized do not exist, do not want to exist, or feel that they can't exist in that classroom in a meaningful way. Those are the

marginalized students who many of you may have had or may have been yourselves in the classroom.

I am going to focus on the marginalized students and in the job I have done in my research and in my teaching. I will talk about a few ideas about teaching Literature to the marginalized, and I am going to give you specific examples working with English first, one of my main areas of teaching and research.

When students are marginalized, they are disconnected. They are often disconnected from either home or society, and here, they are disconnected from school. They do not see themselves as students and they do not see themselves as *successful* students. There is a difference between students seeing themselves as students, existing as students, and students who see themselves as successful students who are getting close to that point, that target or place that you want them to be, those can see themselves as more than just existing students in the classroom. Any student can exist as just a student, but they need to exist and see themselves as a *successful* student; to feel that they can contribute to the discourse of the classroom, to the curriculum, to the ideas, in small group interactions they have, or in the interactions they have with their teacher. That should be the ultimate goal for us as teachers, whether it is a primary school, secondary school, or in college: to create a place in our classroom, to allow students to move students from a marginalized position to a place where they can see themselves as a successful student, as a good student, and as someone who can contribute to the discourse, to the ideas, to the learning, and even to the teaching in the classroom.

What do you do in your classroom? What can you do in your classroom for marginalized students to move away from that place of being marginalized to that place in the center of feeling like they have a place, an identity, a successful student identity in the classroom?

Marginalized students are disconnected. They struggle with their identities and ultimately, many of them do not do well in the classroom or do not do as well as they could. They maybe will do an essay or a paragraph but it won't have much meaning to them. They are disconnected from the work that they do. Often times they will do it just for the sake of doing it, just to get by, which is many of our students, too many of them. They do enough just to get their marks, to get their grades, to get to the next level, and what often contributes to that, unfortunately, is that teachers allow that to happen too much and too often. Sometimes the students are good students, they get high marks,

they get good grades, but they do the work for the sake of doing it. Imagine what a marginalized student would feel like, someone who comes from poverty, someone who is in a gang, who wants just to be antisocial and not be connected to school. Imagine what they feel if they are continuously disconnected from school, from teachers, relationships with others. Of course they remain in the gang, they stay with the gang, and never feel connected to the school, to the curriculum and, in this case, to Literature. Now you see what they are going through, imagine feeling disconnected, struggling with your identity, and not doing well at school.

When you lose Literature in your teaching, and Literature is not only Literature that can be used in the classroom. In the US context, for example, there is a push towards Literature collaboration. People in Literature collaborate with people in science, English language, arts or even people in math, engineering, and technology; a combination of all those disciplines overlapping and making them more powerful, more enriching and more meaningful for our students. Not saying that everyone must remain within a particular discipline. In education there is also a requirement for all teachers to learn how to work collaboratively with other disciplines, other subject areas beyond what they have studied in college, beyond just Literature, science, or math, so that we can see and use Literature and other subject areas in meaningful ways. What Literature does is that it helps the students to make connections.

Sometimes you may be reading a story and there is this one special word. You read into that word and you find its definition to know what it means. But you read the definition and you are still not sure what it means. So you go back and you read the sentence, you read the paragraph again and then it comes to life for you, the meaning behind that one word, and it has an impact on you. Maybe it changes the way you think, and it changes the idea you had of the whole story or whatever it is that you are studying. Words can have a powerful impact and meaning, especially for the marginalized student population because they can see potential ideas there, and they can visualize themselves in those words, in the ideas, and in the Literature.

Sometimes, however, the marginalized do not come into the classroom or do not read at all. There have been a number of studies that have documented that the overall reading rates of students has gone down significantly. Students do not read books anymore, do not read novels, and they do not read for enjoyment or for pleasure. It has drastically declined, especially in the United States, but I also would say that around the world, students cannot complete a novel and actually say

“I read a book”. You go and ask some of your students you are teaching now “What book have you read recently?” and they might not be able to answer that question. Or they might say they started one but they only read until the 5th chapter because that is all the teacher required.

I am going to give an example of how I would approach a situation like that. I teach mostly pedagogy, English language acquisition, teaching English and this is something I teach my students in general, many of whom work with a marginalized student population. I am going to focus on English language learners. One thing that I emphasize is about making particular connections with students at a personal level first. I feel that is most important. When you are in a class, many times you will have students who do not want to read a paragraph, much less a book. For English language learners, you also have students who are in a beginners level of English learning, intermediate level and advanced level. The beginner level, of course may know too little to no English when they come in to the classroom. One thing that the teachers can do is allowing students to use their own voice. That is important when trying to get students to love Literature and to read it. One thing that I would emphasize is to let the students create the Literature first. If students, especially marginalized, have had problems making connections to language, Literature and books before, it may be difficult for you to come and say “This is the book we are going to read. This is the assignment. Let’s do it”. So I tell my students to let their students create their own Literature first. Let them write the stories, and to see themselves in Literature because words, ideas, sentences, even just a few lines is Literature. Imagine if they allow them to create Literature and see themselves in it. Maybe then, they will be able to see the power of the ideas that they see imprinted in other places and pieces of Literature.

For language learners, I tell my students to allow their students to create oral stories. They might not be able to write in English, but they can produce. They do not come with nothing to your classroom, nobody comes with nothing to your classroom. They come with their lives, they come with experiences, good and bad. One idea for beginners is to allow them to create stories in their first language, have them recorded by you, a friend or a family member. They can take family photos, have fun with them and create a fictionalized account of what is occurring in the photo. That would be fun for them, and it would be engaging for them and meaningful because that is their family. It could be a picture of a brother or a sister and they can make fun of them in that oral recounting. They can create their own drawings and, again, record their oral stories or tell them, present them to others in the class. Students, just to have more fun, create sound effects when they

are telling their stories. They knock on wood when someone is at the door. Allow students to have fun with that.

For intermediate students who may know a little bit more English, we look at the idea of reading comic books and graphic novels and creating their own. As they know a little bit more of English they are able to navigate and manage those types of Literature better. Then, there are advanced students who have a better grasp on the English language, and you can get them at that point to read more Literature, but especially Literature they can relate to. For example, Luis Rodríguez in the U.S. who wrote a book about his life as a gamer. There are books that have been written in the US that can very nicely and powerfully relate to the some of the marginalized students that we have in our classrooms in the US: the Chicano students, Mexican-American, English language learners, African American students, or gay members. The gay members are some of those marginalized student population out there. Many teachers will just give up on them immediately, right away, because they suspect that they are dabbling in gay membership they often just give up on them immediately. But this book for example, *Always Running*, could work for both English learners and native English speakers. Finding Literature that relates to them can be very powerful to get them back in to the classroom, to get them interested in Literature.

I did a study with five students in the first year of college. One of them was a former gang member and he talked about how, since he was 11 years old, he was in gang all the way through high school. He talked about how he only went to school to meet up with his gang buddies and leave. It was very rare that he would actually go to class, so he did not really know what was required to learn in class, to be successful in class, to have a successful student identity. Their presence is rare and if it is, the teachers often give up on them anyway and continue to marginalize them. That's why the rate of dropping is so high, especially in Chicano members and in the U.S. in general. So at the advanced level, you definitely need Literature they can relate to and engage with in writing activities, writing about what they are feeling in poetry, stories, and academic writing tasks. At that point, they can engage more on academic and technical aspects of writing because they become connected and learn to love Literature, writing ,words and ideas.

These are the steps that I believe are essential for engaging marginalized populations, and it begins with giving voice to their marginalization. Seeing *their* voice in words and in writing. It begins with the creation of their own Literature and seeing themselves in those words and ideas and,

hopefully, evolves into a love of ideas, words and reading books. Then, they will eventually begin to read and engage with Literature that you will assign. You will say “Here’s a book, let’s read this, let’s read *The Circle*, let’s read *Always Running*, let’s read this Shakespeare play. There is a connection, I promise you. Remember we made a connection with this other book? Well I will show you that connection here with this other book, and it will take you some time to get to that connection, and to understand it, but there is one and you will see yourselves, or you will see humanity and you will see that connection in this other book or in this other play, in this novel”. Hopefully, after they have learned to love and create their own Literature, they will begin to learn *from* Literature and they will have better language skills, improve cognitive, critical thinking and, most importantly, empowerment. To be able to know that they can navigate a book or a poem, to understand it, to use words and allow those words to have an impact on their lives, and contribute to their identity and their future identity. To develop their identity as a successful student and not just a student existing in the current paradigm of schools we have. There is way too many students that just exist in school and move through it. The marginalized students is something we need to be concerned about. We cannot allow them to simply go to school because they will continue to be marginalized and they will continue to be disconnected, disengaged. We need to help them become a part, to enjoy language, Literature and words, and the power in the words that they can read.

Thank you.