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Expanding students' conceptions of writing: The inclusion of social-justice-themed texts into writing courses

Abstract:

Amid a growing need for critically informed and socially active publics, higher education institutions strive to illustrate the value of their curricula for their students and their communities. Critical pedagogy theorists like Paulo Freire and Henry A. Giroux argue that students should be taught to use their course materials to critically engage with others in discussions about inequalities in their communities and to imagine ways of addressing those inequalities. Writing scholars such as Alexis McGee have highlighted the potential of using social justice themes to teach writing concepts in ways that help students connect what they are learning in their courses to the world around them. Here, I analyse data from a study of four college-level writing instructors who used critical pedagogy to guide their incorporation of a social-justice-themed text into their first-year composition courses. The instructors used the text to illustrate the importance of the concept of voice to students' conceptions about the power of writing. My findings show how the inclusion of such social-justice-themed texts can help students in a diverse range of courses to critically reflect upon the larger relevance of what they learn and to apply that new knowledge to issues impacting their communities.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Critical pedagogy, voice, social justice, writing courses, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

Educational work at its best represents a response to questions and issues posed by the tensions and contradictions of the broader society; it is an attempt to understand and intervene in specific problems that emanate from those sites that people concretely inhabit and in which they actually live out their lives and everyday existence.

– Henry A. Giroux 2011, p. 79

Introduction

As Henry A. Giroux (2011) argues in the epigraph, education is best when it is located within the issues that circulate through our students' lives, helping them link the material they learn in their courses to their everyday lives. In this article, I explore the pedagogical choices four college-level writing instructors made when including a social-justice-themed text into their composition courses at a research university in the Southwestern United States to illustrate how its inclusion helped them to better illustrate the relevance of their course material to students. For these instructors, the inclusion of *The Undocumented Americans* by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio (2021), a book which critically analyses the experiences of people living in the United States without legal immigration status, was more than simply a way of adding interest to their courses; instead, its inclusion helped students learn more deeply about the power of writing and the role it plays in and through social justice issues in their lives.

I present the findings of an in-depth study of the instructors' pedagogies and the students' responses to those practices. Through multiple instructor interviews and student surveys, I discerned the ways that the instructors used Villavicencio's (2021) work to highlight key principles about writing and to do so in ways that illustrated their usefulness beyond the writing classroom. The instructors first asked students to closely engage with Villavicencio's (2021) rhetorical choices and then taught students how to apply what they learned to their own writing choices. They focused on the ways in which Villavicencio constructed voice in her text so as to critique the injustices experienced by undocumented people. Voice, then, became a key point at which the instructors illustrated the importance of affective knowledge-making and author positionality. The social-justice-themed text helped instructors challenge students' conceptions of what counts as effective writing and helped instructors highlight the larger social relevance of what students were learning in their writing classes.

Critical pedagogy, which can be best understood as an amalgamation of strategies situated in specific contexts, is a helpful lens through which to analyse the instructors' inclusion of Villavicencio's (2021) text. My critical analysis shows the context-specific ways in which the theoretical principles of critical pedagogy got enacted in specific courses. By analysing how college-level instructors at a particular institution enacted key principles of critical pedagogy through their inclusion of a social-justice-themed text into their writing courses, my study adds to current conversations circulating about the importance of critical pedagogy in higher education. Further, my study demonstrates that social-justice-themed texts can be included into a variety of curricula, powerfully helping instructors to illustrate the social relevance and situatedness of the material they are teaching.

Methods

In my Institutional-Review-Board approved study, I conducted three interviews with four writing instructors who adopted Villavicencio's (2021) *The Undocumented Americans* for their college-level, first-year composition courses in Fall 2022 in a Research 1 University in the Southwestern United States [1]. Villavicencio's (2021) text was the Common Read for the university's Writing Programs. The Common Read is a non-fiction book selected each year by the Writing Programs' director and a committee of instructors that all first-year composition instructors have the option to use in their courses. Texts selected focused on issues directly relevant to the local community. Given that the university is located in the Southwestern part of the United States, the issues of undocumented people are widely discussed and debated and thus have an impact on students' lives.

The instructors that I studied taught introductory undergraduate writing courses that focused on expository writing. The courses (or their equivalent) are required of all students. The demographic information of the four instructors in my study is presented in Table 1. I have used pseudonyms for each instructor. The three interviews were as follows:

- Interview one was conducted before the beginning of the semester, asking the instructors about their plans and goals.
- Interview two was conducted midway through the semester, asking them how their use of the Common Read was progressing and how their students were engaging with it.

Interview three was conducted at the end of the semester, asking them to critically reflect on what had transpired throughout the semester, with a particular focus on what impact they thought their inclusion of the Common Read had had on their students' learning about effective writing.

Instructor Name	Degree	College-level Teaching Experience	Racial Identification	Gender Identification
Andrea	MFA in Creative Writing	8 years	White	Non-binary
Felix	MA in English Literature	23 years	White	Male
Rose	Phd in English	9 years	White	Female
Nicole	MFA in Creative Writing	7 years	White	Female

Table 1: Instructor demographics

I also collected survey data from students in the four instructors' classes. The surveys were administered as follows:

A beginning-of-the-semester survey asked students about their perceptions of what writing the course would entail.

An end-of-the-semester survey asked students to reflect on the impact their work with Villavicencio's (2021) text had on their knowledge of writing.

One hundred and twenty-six students voluntarily and anonymously responded to both surveys.

After transcribing the instructor interviews, I completed a qualitative analysis of the data which allowed me to study how my participants attached meaning to their classroom experiences. Drawing on Johnny Saldana's (2021) qualitative research strategies, I coded the interviews for pedagogical strategies the instructors used when incorporating the social-justice-themed text into their writing courses. Voice was a key writing concept that was referenced repeatedly throughout the instructors' discussions of their uses of the social-justice-themed text. Identifying voice as central to the instructors' approaches, I then analysed how the instructors discussed their teaching of voice in the interviews and devised a list of common pedagogical strategies that many of the instructors used to teach students about voice.

I then began to analyse the data using the lens of critical pedagogy to guide my analysis. I chose to use critical pedagogical theory for my analysis because in the pre-semester interviews all of the instructors indicated that they wanted their use of the text to not only expand students' knowledge of writing but to also expand their perceptions of the ways writing can be an important tool in working toward social change. This common goal aligned well with critical pedagogy's focus, so I adopted that lens when analysing the interview data.

Finally, in order to understand students' perceptions of their teachers' use of the social-justice-themed text, I read through the student surveys, paying particular attention to their answers to the question "What did you learn about writing as a result of engaging with Villavicencio's book?" While very few students directly used the word "voice" in their answers, many of them indirectly referenced the concept. I marked those entries and analysed them for the specific claims students made about how their understanding of writing was or was not influenced by the instructors' pedagogical strategies. Through these analyses, my goal was to get a deeper understanding of where the students' perceptions of the course intersected with the instructors' pedagogical goals and to also identify if those views did not align.

Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching and education that is most often associated with Paulo Freire's (2018) liberatory pedagogy and with the Frankfurt school of theory which has extensively explored uses of Freirean ideas in Western schools. Freire (2018) critiques the banking model of education in which the teacher-as-knower "deposits" knowledge in the "bank" of students' minds; instead, he advocates for problem-posing education where "people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" and "they come to see the world not as a static reality, but a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2018, p.83). As such, education becomes a space for critiquing the inequities in the world and for imagining alternatives to them. Giroux (2011), a theorist in the Frankfurt School, argues that "Freire believed that education was part of a project of freedom in its broadest sense and eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and empowering forms of critical agency" (p.154). Critical pedagogy thus helps students hone their critical awareness and analysis of the power dynamics operating in their communities. From that space of critical awareness, students can then be guided to explore other alternatives to the current power inequities that are uncovered through their analyses.

Giroux (2011) identifies the hallmark of critical pedagogy as a critical reflexivity that involves "bridging the gap between learning and everyday life, understanding the connections between power and knowledge, and extending democratic rights and identities by using the resources of history" (p. 72). This highlights the importance of illustrating to students the relevance of the material they are learning in their courses by linking that knowledge to ways it can be used for social change. Further, Peter McLaren (2020) argues that in critical pedagogy "the idea is to create conditions of critical consciousness or critical self-reflexivity among students. This helps students to understand how various systems of intelligibility or systems of mediation within the wider society . . . are mutually constitutive with the self" (p. 210). In education, raising students' awareness of social injustices and their part in them is central to critical reflexivity. Looking at what social factors influence knowledge construction and how that knowledge is validated by others is likewise significant in critical pedagogy. Personal experience is thus validated as an important part of the meaning-making process, given the connection between the self and the material conditions in which the self is located.

Despite its possibilities, critical pedagogy has been critiqued for "its failure to address real practice in the classroom. In other words, a tendency to talk in generalities and to focus at the macro or social level, rather than the detail of the micro level where students and academics actually learn and teach" (McArthur, 2010, p. 500). Jan McArthur (2010) addresses these criticisms by emphasizing that critical pedagogy is a theory for approaching teaching, not a simplified set of strategies and techniques. She argues:

The essential point is that one cannot tell someone else how to do it. The broad ideas and ideals of critical pedagogy need to be challenged, interpreted, and reinterpreted within each context. For individual academics within the classroom, critical pedagogy

should be a way of approaching what they do, not the detail of the particular choices. (McArthur, 2010, p. 501)

Instead of providing a fixed set of practices, the principles of critical pedagogy need to be applied contextually. Rather than prescribing a fixed set of pedagogical practices, critical pedagogy offers a diverse yet cohesive theoretical lens for teachers to use as they make strategic decisions to achieve their emancipatory goals within their own educational contexts. It is important, therefore, to study particular uses of these principles in specific classroom settings in order to add to our understanding of how these principles work in specific contexts.

Rather than seeing it as a narrow body of thinking, then, “critical pedagogy needs to be understood as a movement that should be made up of diverse ideas, opinions, backgrounds, groups, and theories” (McArthur, 2010, p. 494). Across those diverse perspectives, though, “is a fundamental aspect that is true to all critical pedagogies: a belief in the inter-relation between education and society, and a commitment to change in education and society to ensure greater social justice” (McArthur, 2010, p. 495). As Giroux (2011) explains, critical pedagogy is

about offering a way of thinking beyond the seeming naturalness or inevitability of the current state of things, challenging assumptions validated by “common sense” soaring beyond the immediate confines of one’s experiences, entering into a critical dialogue with history, and imagining a future that would not merely reproduce the present. (Giroux, 2011, p. 155)

As such, critical pedagogy focuses on critical analysis of the current power dynamics in an effort to envision alternative possibilities for the future.

Voice and critical pedagogy

While voice may seem like an odd concept to focus on through the lens of critical pedagogy, in this section I illustrate the complex theoretical conversations circulating around the concept and how those conversations directly relate to the empowerment sought after through critical pedagogy. Analysing others’ voices and deliberately creating their own voices can help students analyse the current power dynamics in rhetorical situations and envision alternative possibilities for engagement in them.

When we talk about voice, we are inevitably talking about the relationship between the individual and society. As Christine Tardy (2016) elucidates, the most widely embraced view of voice in Writing Studies is a dialogic one which posits that meaning is collaboratively constructed in a rhetorical situation (p. 351). Rather than seeing voice as primarily the property of the individual (as an individualised view does) or the property of the social world (as a socialised view does), the dialogic view positions voice as produced through interactions between writer, text, reader and context (Tardy, 2016, p. 358). This widely embraced view of voice is reflected in Paul Kei Matsuda’s (2001) oft-cited definition of voice as “the amalgamation effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive

features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoire” (p. 40).

In this view, voice is never neutral. From a dialogic perspective, writer, reader, and text are socially situated and are thus influenced by the prevailing social winds. Certain voices are given more of a hearing than others, for complex reasons. For instance, the gender, race, class and sexual orientation of the writer and the reader will impact how a text is interpreted. Analysing voice in others' writing, can map the power dynamics in the rhetorical situation because

Reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world. Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (Freire, 1982, p. 5)

When we critically analyse a text, we are also learning about the context in which the text was written. This critical reflection involves readers in an analysis of the power dynamics operating within the situations and provides a deeper understanding of how those dynamics shape and limit the possibilities that are currently available to writers.

A critical understanding of voice opens a space for creating alternatives that challenge the status quo. As Carmen Kynard (2018) points out, in college courses, “students most often produce linear, thesis-driven essays in standardized English within the norms of Western discourse and logic” (p. 131). This writing is assessed through practices that “often fixate on the singular result of a student essay rather than on a student’s openness to emergent ideas” (Kynard, 2018, p. 132). Kynard (2018) argues that “this assessment landscape only privileges those students who can already mimic school-based, standardized, essayist literacies” (p. 132). Constructing voice differently, then, can be an act of rebellion against the staid, reified assumptions and power dynamics underlying the voice that is privileged in academic writing. Marcela Ossa-Parra (2022-2023) argues that we can teach students to critically analyse the voice operating in academic discourse and to create new voices that are based in their life experiences. When constructing voice in their writing, students must learn to critically analyse “the ideologies that establish what counts as valid and authoritative textual voices in academic contexts” (pp. 48-9) and envision other possibilities by getting “in touch with their perspectives, beliefs, and experiences” (p. 50). Engaging in this process not only teaches students what has traditionally been acceptable in specific rhetorical situations, but it also helps students challenge the underlying assumptions and prejudices aligned with the norms they uncover through their analyses.

Further, Alexis McGee (2023) argues that despite the wide-spread acceptance of the dialogic view of voice, current Writing Studies scholarship “still presupposes that the end goal of engaging voice is to achieve the normative status (i.e., being accepted into white mainstream academia and/or being accepted as a [white] citizen in [white] society at large)”

(p. 345). To challenge this trend, she argues that instead of seeing voice as only a rhetorical tool, we need to acknowledge the power voice has to challenge the existing order. Instead of being only a rhetorical device, voice then is seen as a source of meaning-making and agency (McGee, 2023, p. 350). McGee (2023) teaches her students how alternative uses of voice in the world, particularly those by Black and Brown folx, have historically had powerful impacts. She advocates for a black rhetoric of voicing:

Rather than forcing students' adherence to 'acceptable' forms of writing that may diminish or disregard marginalized students' (and teachers') experiences via traditional standards of voice, a Black rhetoric of voice complicates relationships concerned with positioning the self into space and being. Recognizing voice in this way, as it situates students' and teachers' literacies as personal tools for knowledge-making, for example, reflects a long-standing practice by Black folx (and marginalized people of color more broadly) to implement voice as a way to define and validate our agency and personhood. Operationalizing voice as such can correlate with how we construct our pedagogical philosophies to be more in line with our much larger fight for freedom and equality. (p. 337)

I quote McGee at length because she clearly explicates the ways in which voice is not only a rhetorical issue but also a social justice issue. She emphasizes that our pedagogical approaches to voice instruction influence the ways students perceive of and construct their textual identities. Further, she highlights how our pedagogical choices around the teaching of voice can participate in a "larger fight for freedom and equality" by seeing voice as "a much deeper, more profound act of truth, vulnerability, theorization, intention, and rhetorical situatedness that changes from one person's sociohistorical and cultural context to another's" (p. 338).

As both Ossa-Parra (2022 - 2023) and McGee (2023) argue, voice and our pedagogies around voice are social justice issues. Thus, learning to envision alternatives to traditional conceptions of voice can provide students with tools to help them challenge the dominant norms and create textual spaces for their own diverse experiences and ideas. Giroux (2011) argues:

The fundamental challenge facing educators within the current age of neoliberalism is to provide the conditions for students to address how knowledge is related to the power of both self-definition and social agency. Central to such a challenge is providing students with the skills, knowledge, and authority they need to inquire and act upon what it means to live in a substantive democracy, to recognize anti-democratic forms of power, and to fight deeply rooted injustices in a social and world founded on economical, racial, and gender inequalities. (p. 72)

Teaching students to analyse the power dynamics operating around the concept of voice and then encouraging them to construct alternative approaches to voice are important strategies for writing instructors to adopt. Encouraging students to create a voice that takes advantage of their own experiences and linguistic resources can provide students with the tools necessary to claim their own space in the conversations circulating in their

communities. Voice becomes a powerful tool in helping students discern inequities, imagine other alternatives, and enact change through their writing. In the next sections, I will discuss the ways that the instructors in my study accomplished goals such as these through their pedagogical applications of critical pedagogy theories.

Pedagogical strategies for teaching voice

Given the necessary situatedness of critical pedagogy, it is important to study instructors' specific uses of the pedagogical principles in the context of their specific courses. Here, I analyse the ways that instructors integrated the social-justice-themed text, Villavicencio's (2021) *The Undocumented Americans*, into their first-year composition courses in a university in the Southwestern United States. The instructors in my study employed principles of critical pedagogy as they taught their students to both closely engage with texts and to apply what they learned from that close engagement to their own writing. While these instructors were teaching first-year composition in the United States, the principles they used can be adapted to other kinds of writing courses in other countries. Throughout my analysis, I highlight the principles behind their practices in order to help other instructors adopt the principles in ways that are suitable to their own pedagogical contexts.

Close engagement with the text

The first set of strategies employed by the instructors to encourage students' critical reflections on writing and the rhetorical situation centred on close readings of and engagements with the book's content and Villavicencio's (2021) rhetorical strategies. Andrea used class discussion to critically analyse how Villavicencio (2021) used literary devices to construct her voice in order to impact readers' understanding of the social inequities. In one of their classes, they brought their students' attention to a place in the text where Villavicencio powerfully uses repetition to emphasize her critique of the American government's treatment of undocumented Americans during the water crisis experienced in Flint, Michigan in 2014. Villavicencio (2021) writes: "They want us all dead, Latinxs, black people, they want us dead, and sometimes they'll slip something into our bloodstreams to kill us slowly and sometimes they'll shoot and shoot" (p. 114). She then includes the word "shoot" forty more times before ending the sentence with "until their bloodlust is satisfied" (p. 114). Andrea discussed with her students the ways in which the repetition of "shoot" in the middle of a sentence stylistically conveys an angry, critical voice. By analysing the author's use of repetition to highlight a social injustice, Andrea taught a core course concept (voice) in a socially relevant way. This practice was beneficial to students in two key ways. First, voice was presented as a tool that students could use to critique inequalities which is a central principle of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011, p. 78). Secondly, students were shown ways that the knowledge they were gaining in their writing class connected directly to the world outside the classroom which is yet another important principle advanced by critical pedagogy.

In her classes, Nicole also used close reading of voice in Villavicencio's (2021) work as a way to teach students the power of incorporating personal experience into their writing. Linking voice directly to the author's presence in the text, Nicole reported that she emphasised the importance of including the personal into writing – even writing with social justice purposes. She stated:

The human element is, I hope, what they see possible after reading her text. I do think that's what's so terrific about Karla. Her voice is so present. You know, it's not a dry, investigative journalist's take on these subjects. It's her take but also her presence and her impact, and I think that maybe, hopefully, in that they see that their voices can matter in these conversations, even if it doesn't seem to be so exciting in the beginning.

By linking the voice in *The Undocumented Americans* to Villavicencio's (2021) personal experiences and presence in the world, Nicole taught students how voice construction is incumbent on writers' lived experiences. She highlighted that in learning about voice, students were not only learning a technique for writing essays but also for curating their identities and, potentially, critiquing social inequities in their own communities. In this way, voice became more than a rhetorical strategy, as McGee (2023) advocates. Nicole's discussion of Villavicencio as an embodied human writing about a particular social injustice worked to shift students' conceptions of what writing is and what it can achieve. Because she showed her students how one writer's choices were shaped by her societal context, Nicole helped "students to understand how various systems of intelligibility or systems of mediation within the wider society . . . are mutually constitutive with the self" (McLaren, 2020, p. 210). Situated as a former undocumented American, Villavicencio is shaped by her own experiences along with her research of other undocumented Americans' experiences. Leading her students through a close analysis of the ways Villavicencio's voice is connected to her embodied presence in the world encouraged them to consider the ways in which their personal experiences could be used to shape their own writing.

My study thus illustrated that making course material socially relevant is a valuable practice that could be taken up in a myriad of writing courses to help students better understand the power of writing to be part of changes in students' communities. Andrea's and Nicole's strategies of close reading helped students challenge their sense of what writing can be and what writers can accomplish through mindful voice construction. By critically analysing Villavicencio's (2021) embodied and culturally-situated construction of voice, the instructors helped to show how writers "construct authentic voices based on the critical awareness of the contexts in which they situate their text and their intentional use of the rich cultural and linguistic resources they have available" (Ossa-Parra, 2022 - 2023, p. 51). These teaching strategies illustrated how voice is constructed through rhetorical choices, how the personal is an important aspect of those choices and how they do not have to write in a staid, standardized way in order to powerfully communicate their message. Villavicencio's (2021) text served less as a model for what students' writing should look like and more as an instructive guide about how to approach writing in fresh and embodied ways.

Emphasis on the importance of the personal in writing

A second key set of strategies that the instructors in my study used was teaching students how to apply what they learned from their close analyses of Villavicencio's (2021) text to their own writing. Overall, these strategies helped students to understand the importance of incorporating their experiences and perspectives into their writing. These strategies aimed to help students expand their conceptions of the purposes of writing and their understanding of writing's relevance to their lives.

One way that the instructors worked to teach students the importance of incorporating their experiences and perspectives into writing was through carefully crafted assignments. All four instructors included a personal narrative in their courses. Felix explained:

I always start with a narrative and encourage use of first person, although it's certainly not demanded. I give them that opportunity, and I think most of them take it for good reason. But it also provides context and confidence in using their own voice and recognising their own agency when it comes to dealing with projects . . . My first job is to bring the rhetorical context to them and have them embrace their own voice.

For Felix, starting with a personal narrative worked to build students' confidence in their writing, both in the personal narrative assignment and in the other assignments that follow it. Through that assignment, he taught them to analyse the rhetorical situations in which they were writing and to craft a voice within them. He explained to students the power of using first-person in essays, emphasising the different rhetorical effects that first person has compared to the more traditional academic third-person approach. Seeing Villavicencio's (2021) voice as a strong, distinctive use of first-person narrative, Felix used her book as an example of what a first-person personal narrative can look like in writing and drew upon specific sections of the text to teach students how to develop their own agency through voice construction in their writing.

In addition to assigning personal narratives, the instructors also challenged students' conceptions about the voice they could use in all their writing. Analysing Villavicencio's voice helped instructors illustrate alternative constructions of voice in essays. Andrea described their approach:

I think they are so prepared to write the typical essay in the essay voice that they have developed over their whole educational career, and then they come to my class and they're like "wait, you want us to do what? Oh, man!" I mean, they did timed tests in a very perfect kind of way, a very structured kind of way. In their minds, they have already perfected their writing process and I, like Karla, want to "fuck shit up," which is what she says in her introduction. I want to break that all up, and using Karla's book is a fantastic example of that, the genre-breaking, the language.

Using Villavicencio's (2021) text allowed Andrea to challenge standardised writing rules their students had learned in previous writing courses and provided students with an example of how to write in ways that exceed the limits of the five-paragraph essay format.

In that way, Andrea's pedagogical practices are in alignment with McGee's (2023) resistance to "forcing students' adherence to 'acceptable' forms of writing that may diminish or disregard marginalized students' (and teachers') experiences via traditional standards of voice" (p. 337). Instead, Andrea worked to help students see voice and writing as "a much deeper, more profound act of truth, vulnerability, theorization, intention, and rhetorical situatedness that changes from one person's sociohistorical and cultural context to another's" (McGee, 2023, p. 324) because she encouraged them to draw on their personal experiences and perspectives when constructing their textual voices. They highlighted Villavicencio's (2021) strategies as examples of the power of the personal in different kinds of writing.

Further, the instructors used Villavicencio's (2021) text to expand students' conceptions about how to position themselves and their own perspectives in their writing, teaching them how to establish a different relationship with their sources. In the mid-semester interview with me, Rose described a writing assignment she asked students to undertake:

In their current essays they are responding to an editorial, and part of their job is to synthesize their own experience, their own knowledge, with what they're reading and other sources. And again, it's a place where they're struggling. A lot of them are very comfortable reporting what others have said and not as comfortable with developing their own way into academic conversations.

Her students were hesitant to put their own ideas into their writing. They positioned the sources as the experts and tended to leave out their own experiences with and interpretations of the issue. To address her students' struggle, Rose taught them the importance of learning to position oneself in relation to the issues being discussed:

I'm trying to use myself as an example, to show that what Villavicencio is capable of in this book is not the same as what I'm capable of doing with my research, just based off our positionality, based off where we're coming from, what we know and what we don't know. And that's something that I'm really trying to get them to be able to synthesize information with their own experience and to be able to make a contribution to the conversation that's their own.

Rose compared her possibilities as a writer with Villavicencio's (2021) possibilities to highlight the social situatedness of voice construction. In essence, Rose worked to teach her students a different relationship to sources and ideas, one that sought to empower students by encouraging them to draw on their own experiences and interpretations. She emphasised the ways in which their experiences of the issue matters and highlighted for them that they have a contribution to make to advance the current conversation circulating around an issue.

Finally, no matter what kind of essay was assigned, the instructors emphasised that students should have a personal investment in the topic. For the third project in their course, Andrea asked students to investigate an issue connected to the undocumented Americans' experiences in the United States. They guided their students through this process by

collaboratively brainstorming a list of over one hundred topics that intersected with Villavicencio's (2021) topic. Their students then wrote an essay on one of those topics to which they related. An essential piece of the assignment was for students to find ways to connect their own personal experiences with the experiences shared by Villavicencio (2021). As they explored the connections between Villavicencio's (2021) discussion and their own lives, their students were surprised by what they discovered. Andrea explained:

I had a student in my class who is a business major and when we started reading this book, he couldn't really imagine how he was going to be able to connect with it enough to write a whole project on it for the third project, but I said "let's take the ride and see what happens when we get there and see how your interests develop." Well, he ended up writing in his final reflection that the last writing project was his favourite because it meshed his business background with the content we were learning in class . . . So, some of the thinking from the class came into it, but also how it intersected with his major. And he also was looking through economic reports and legal journals, and I'm like "okay, that's amazing." I love the way that came together for him.

An important component of critical pedagogy is for students to connect what they are learning in their coursework to what is happening in the world around them (McLaren, 2020, p. 210). Andrea's assignment required students to build those kinds of connections. By using Villavicencio's (2021) social-justice-themed text as a jumping off point and then extending out to connect the issue of undocumented Americans to students' everyday lives, Andrea helped students to add richness and meaning to their authorial voice. Andrea worked to expand students' perspectives of what is possible in their own writing but also to encourage them to see writing as an important part of engaging with social issues and, possibly, enacting social change in their communities.

Together, these instructors' use of Villavicencio's (2021) text helped them to expand students' understanding of the purpose of writing and the importance of using personal experiences and interpretations in their writing. Linking their lessons about writing concepts to discussions of Villavicencio's (2021) work helped instructors show students the social relevance of what they were learning in their courses. They illustrated how writing can be a powerful way to critically reflect on social issues and to respond to those issues. Further, students were encouraged to consider their own relationships to the topics being discussed, emphasising the importance of the personal in knowledge-making. The use of the book encouraged students to consider how to position themselves and their experiences in relation to the social justice issues being discussed.

Students' reflections

In the pre-semester and post-semester surveys that I administered to students in the instructors' courses, I asked students what they had learned about writing as a result of engaging with Villavicencio's book. In their survey responses, students reflected on how their approach to writing changed, based on their instructors' inclusion of a social-justice-themed text. All the survey responses indicated that reading Villavicencio's text influenced students in a variety of ways. Many of them questioned their definitions of what counts as

effective writing, expanded their conceptions of possible purposes for writing and challenged ideas of valid knowledge-making. Further, many of them began to see the larger relevance of what they were learning as it related to their lives.

In their responses to the question “What did you learn about writing as a result of engaging with Villavicencio’s book?” students frequently reported that the inclusion of Villavicencio’s work expanded their conceptions of effective writing. They realized that their work did not have to fit with the traditional conceptions of writing they may have previously been taught. One student stated:

I learned that there is no ‘standard’ or ‘right’ way of writing because writing can be personal to you and expressed in any way you want. I also learned that a piece of writing that isn’t ‘grammatically professional or correct’ can be just as powerful, if not more, than one that is conventionally correct in grammar.

Representative of many students’ survey responses, this student’s comment reflected on how they learned to question their assumptions about what good writing is. As a result of the inclusion of this social-justice-themed text, the student rethought what made a piece of writing powerful. Instead of thinking that correct grammar was what is important to a piece of writing, this student realized that the inclusion of their own personal voice gave power to their writing. Villavicencio’s (2021) text served as a model of this principle for them. The above student’s comment illustrates that they learned to question “the ideologies that establish what counts as valid and authoritative” writing (Ossa-Parra, 2022 - 2023, p. 50) and instead to get “in touch with their perspectives, beliefs, and experiences.”

Further, while the student did not directly reference the concept of voice in their survey response, their comment hearkened to principles of voice construction discussed by theorists like McGee (2023). As McGee (2023) argues, voice is about more than just making rhetorical choices; instead, voice construction (and, perhaps, writing itself) is “a much deeper, more profound act of truth, vulnerability, theorization, intention, and rhetorical situatedness” (p. 338). The student’s acknowledgement of the importance of the personal to writing’s power suggests that they were beginning to see writing as a “more profound act of truth” (McGee, 2023, p. 338). Engaging with Villavicencio’s (2021) book as a model, then, encouraged critical reflexivity for this student and led to potentially “empowering forms of critical agency” (Giroux, 2011, p. 154) in and through their writing.

Students also reported that their conceptions of writing’s purposes changed as a result of engaging with Villavicencio’s (2021) social-justice-themed text. One student stated:

I learned more about the ‘so what?’ behind my writing, and leaving behind that old way of high school writing. Our assignments are supposed to show that we took away something important and how we can apply it in our own work, and I thought this was a very valuable tool to have. I also learned more about backing up my articles and my references more than just a small explanation and really diving into it so that I understand it fuller.

Questioning the writing norms they had learned in high school, this student was able to see possibilities beyond the typical “thesis-driven essays in standardized English within the norms of Western discourse and logic” (Kynard, 2018, p. 131) that scholars have critiqued for limiting forms of expression. This student emphasised the importance of their participation in the conversation circulating around an issue and began to see that the purpose of writing could be a much deeper engagement with sources and ideas. Instead of merely summarising experts, this student learned to thoroughly engage with sources in order to better understand them and form their own ideas. Based on the fact that they dove into the sources and realised the importance of expressing their own perspective on the issue, we can extrapolate that the student effectively learned how to enter into conversation with the sources (Ossa-Parra, 2022-2023, p. 45). This student’s comment and others like it provide evidence that the instructors’ use of Villavicencio’s (2021) text helped to provide students with tools that led them to construct their own voice through authentic, in-depth engagement with sources. While the student did not directly use the word “voice,” their comment indicates that they had indeed learned to engage in the voice construction process as it asks writers to position “themselves and their readers in relation to the ideas presented in the text” (Ossa-Parra, 2022 - 2023, p. 50) in order to strategically enter the conversation (p. 50). So, the purpose of writing became less about summarising others and more about *engaging* with others. Through the inclusion of Villavicencio’s (2021) text, the instructors showed students how to claim their space in the conversations circulating in their communities—an important feature of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011, p. 154).

Students also began to see the value in multiple ways of knowledge-making. For instance, one student wrote the following in response to the survey question about what they had learned about writing from engaging with Villavicencio’s (2021) text: “I learned how to better write a subjective narrative from Villavicencio’s model. I learned how to use personal experience to enrich ethos, when usually objectivity is seen as the most reliable”. Likewise, another student wrote: “I also have learned that it is okay to express emotions in writings, especially anger”. Combined, these two comments reveal that some students learned to question the supposed “common sense” privileging of objectivity over other forms of knowing, much in the way Giroux (2011) argues is of central importance to critical pedagogy (p. 155). While both students acknowledged the importance of audiences’ engagements with their text, they also realised that an objectivist approach to audience was not necessarily the only (or, perhaps, best) way to approach writing. These students learned to value affective forms of knowledge-making in a way that positioned ethos as more than just a rhetorical device and drew on McGee’s (2023) sense of voice as a much deeper element. For these students, ethos construction became a point of self-expression and an act of agency. Villavicencio’s (2021) own genre-bending in her text in which she uses her voice as a political tool to help enact her agenda served as an example for these students in their questioning of dominant privileging of objectivity in writing. Her work illustrated how they could align their own writing choices “with our much larger fight for freedom and equality” (McGee, 2023, p. 337).

Finally, students' survey responses suggested that they re-examined their assumptions about the purposes of writing. In a survey response, another student wrote: "I learned about how to introduce other people's lives and I learned how to discuss a real-life problem of society". For this student, Villavicencio's text helped them see a direct connection between what is going on in the world and what they were learning in class. "Bridging the gap between learning and everyday life" is a hallmark of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011, p. 72). This student's comment highlights how learning about social inequities directly shaped their perception of what writing can accomplish; instead of being just an academic exercise, writing became a way to "discuss a real-life problem of society". We can extrapolate from this quote that the student began to see a connection between what they were learning in the classroom and what was happening in other areas of their lives. They began to see the power of writing in working toward change.

Interestingly enough, none of the students responded to the survey in a way that suggested they were resistant to the inclusion of a social-justice-themed text into their writing course. In fact, all student responses to the survey reflected a positive attitude toward Villavicencio's text and their learning from it. However, when asked if they would continue to pay attention to the plight of undocumented Americans, approximately only half of the students wrote that they planned to, while the other half frequently wrote that since it was not an issue that directly affected them, they would not continue to seek it out. It is interesting to note that while they generally felt that the inclusion of the text had positively shaped their approach to writing and had opened their eyes to a social justice issue they had not necessarily been aware of prior to the class, half of them were not impacted enough to want to keep reading about and perhaps working toward change in regards to the issue of undocumented Americans.

While not every student had the same experience with the inclusion of the social-justice-themed text, the students' responses to my survey paint an insightful picture of what the instructors achieved through their pedagogical strategies. The survey responses suggested that the inclusion of social-justice-themed texts directly shaped what these students learned about writing, which was, after all, the main subject of the course. These students questioned standards that they had learned in high school, developed a critical reflexivity about writing genres, and began to examine the power dynamics operating in them. Further, they expanded their conceptions of the purposes of writing, leading them to question their previous assumptions about what counted as valuable knowledge. These students discovered that their own perspectives mattered in writing, and they learned how to put themselves in dialogue with the texts through which they were working. All of these experiences helped students to better understand the larger relevance of what they were learning about writing, to connect what they were learning in the course to their lives outside the classroom.

Implications and conclusions

My study reveals the multiple benefits of including social-justice-themed texts into writing courses. While I analysed a small group of instructors teaching one type of writing course, the findings suggest that other types of writing courses in other countries could benefit from the inclusion of such texts into their curriculum. Using critical pedagogy principles to engage with Villavicencio's (2021) work, the instructors in my study helped students to discern the connections between the course material and the world outside the classroom, which Giroux and others argue is an important goal for educational institutions. Villavicencio's text helped instructors clarify and illustrate the importance of the somewhat abstract concept of voice to students by showing the roles it played in an author's critique of current cultural conditions. Through carefully analysing Villavicencio's (2021) development of voice and using that analysis as a guide for their own writing, students began to better understand the social relevance of what they were learning. Including social-justice-themed texts can be helpful in other college-level courses because they help to ground the course material in larger social relevance.

The instructors' critical use of Villavicencio's text also helped students learn that personal expression is an important part of broader critiques of systemic power dynamics. The instructors' assignments emphasised for students that the construction of their own voices and their sharing of their own perspectives mattered in the larger world. Further, students learned how to position their own expressions of identity and perspectives in relation to others', thus learning how to effectively engage with others in difficult discussions about inequalities in their communities. Overall, they learned that their writing mattered beyond just the classroom setting. Other courses could benefit in similar ways, if they directly taught students how to critically position themselves in relation to the social issues impacting their communities.

Incorporating a social-justice-themed into their courses also allowed the instructors to teach writing as a complex, knowledge-making practice in which power dynamics play an important part. The tenets of critical pedagogy employed by the instructors allowed them to teach students how to approach writing differently – to question the norms and conventions of writing that they had been taught previously. Villavicencio's (2001) text helped students to engage in critical reflexivity - an important hallmark of critical pedagogy. They learned to analyse the ways systemic power operates at the level of text and influences what can be said and how it can be presented. Analysis of Villavicencio's (2001) textual strategies opened up discussions of what counts as valid knowledge and knowledge-making practices in writing. The text illustrated ways to challenge the dominant conventions of writing in order to critique and work to change the systemic issues affecting our cultures today. Thus, the use of a social-justice-themed text helped students to see that they could use what they were learning in class to work toward social change.

Overall, then, emphasising a critical analysis and use of voice allowed the instructors to not only teach important aspects about writing but also to illustrate how the use of those aspects in their own writing can have a powerful impact on important issues circulating within their communities. These findings suggest that instructors and their students in other kinds of

courses – including different kinds of writing courses – can benefit from adapting such critical pedagogy principles in their own teaching.

Notes

[1] In the United States, Research 1 (or R1) universities are those categorised as having the highest level of research activity as defined by the Carnegie Classification of Institutes of Higher Education, signifying a strong commitment to research and scholarly activity.

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