

Chapter 3

Cultural Biases in Transitional Writing Courses and Their Effect on Hispanic Students in Texas

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ABSTRACT

High school students in the United States have the option of taking advanced placement (AP) courses designed to prepare them to take AP exams that will potentially give them the opportunity to receive college credits for first-year undergraduate courses. This chapter examines the cultural biases present in the AP English Language and Composition course and exam, which focus on skills and knowledges typically learned in a first-year composition course. With culturally relevant theory in mind, this work specifically draws attention to the effects of such cultural biases on Hispanic students in Texas, a state where the number of Hispanic students surpasses the number of students from any other cultural background.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of high school students across the United States take Advanced Placement (AP) exams hoping to receive a score high enough to earn college credits. Selected students with high academic potential are invited to participate in AP courses that prepare them to take these college-level exams. For many Hispanic students, success in AP exams signifies not only the possibility to be accepted into

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a top postsecondary institution but, most importantly, it means that there is a chance for them to be the first in their family to attend college. And yet only about 25% of Hispanics who take the AP English Language and Composition in Texas pass this exam albeit being the majority in this state.

From Dual Enrollment/Dual Credit¹ (DE/DC) to International Baccalaureate (IB) to Advanced Placement (AP), high schools offer different options for students who are willing to take on challenging courses that lead into potential credits for basic college courses. DC courses offer students the opportunity to earn college credits without taking a standardized test. These courses are developed in partnerships with local institution of higher education, and thus teachers must follow the syllabi of these institutions. Students earn college credits by passing the class. DC courses, however, are typically only accepted by local and regional universities. Most high-ranking universities prefer to only accept IB and AP scores based on standardized exams. IB courses follow an international curriculum while AP courses are developed around national standardized programs, and students taking IB and AP classes must take and pass an end-of-course exam in order to receive college credits. Students may challenge an AP exam at any time without taking the specific course in high school. Yet, because of the level of difficulty of these exams, schools encourage students to take the appropriate AP course before taking an AP exam.

This chapter examines the impact of culture in the AP English Language and Composition course and exam as a central factor, and not as a variable, of students' success—or failure—drawing on a culturally relevant theoretical framework that 1) repositions pluriculturalism and multilingualism as assets; 2) regards culture and language as fluid social practices; 3) promotes realistic, balanced depictions of the literature of the United States; and 4) urges sustained historiographies and knowledges by Indigenous people and people of color beyond cultural tokenism. Rather than analyzing each element individually, the chapter examines the role of culture biases at large within the present conditions in which Hispanic students engage when participating in the AP English Language and Composition (English Lang) exam, an exam that tests skills and knowledges typically learned in a first-year composition course.

DEFINING CULTURE, ETHNICITY, RACE, AND RACISM

Culture, ethnicity, race, and racism are concepts that often intersect because all three draw attention to people's differences. Nonetheless, these three concepts signify distinctive ideas. Culture envelopes the traditions, customs, and language(s) of the group(s) with which a person identifies; an ethnicity is a group that shares the same culture; race, for most academics, is a construction that highlights primarily physical

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