

LaGuardia Community College is part of the City of New York or CUNY system, located in Western Queens, with about 12,000 credit and 28,000 non-credit students enrolled. Interestingly, this student body comes from 156 countries and boasts 110 languages. I am an adjunct at the College, which is an important distinction, because I teach in the evenings. This brings me into contact with the extended day students, as they are known, who are most often older, more likely to work full-time, and more likely to also have their own family responsibilities. In short, these teaching parameters are anything but what graduate school prepared us for. By that, I mean that very few of the faculty have had formal ESL training, and most of us have had to completely re-think course content in light of our students' limited English skills. Ultimately, we all want our college students to be able to read and comprehend material in their content areas. Today I want to address issues of linguistic competence and vocabulary acquisition, and how my folklore training has helped me overcome some of my deficiencies. I will also use the academic shorthand—L1 for students whose first language is English, and L2 for those for whom English is their second language.

As a long-time high school teacher and then professor of Communication Skills, and as an active urban folklorist, I have a vested interest in the concept of narrative, and in the **work of stories** in particular. I have found that using folkloric materials to enhance college and high school curricula tremendously improves the students' appreciation and grasp of narrative construction. Commonplaces, formulaic openings and closings, magic gifts or magical intervention, motifs and tale-types, and threefold repetition are just a few of the folkloric devices we utilize to construct or deconstruct tales, whether literary or traditional. I would argue that active use of these conventions for non-native English speakers is as or more important than teaching students business or technological writing. The ability to present these materials as personal web pages or in a BlackBoard format has brought these course offerings into another dimension, hence our theme, **media in transition**.

Over the last three years the College has embarked on an ambitious program of faculty training which has given me the skills in the digital online environment to employ methods that would not have been as successful in a "chalk & talk"-type setting, specifically Macromedia Dreamweaver MX to construct web pages, the LaGuardia ePortfolio project and BlackBoard. The course I will use as an example was titled Vocabulary Enhancement, defined in the course catalogue "to introduce students to the methods of expanding their vocabularies. The development of modern English is studied to explain the state of current vocabulary. Special consideration is given to introducing the students to the vocabulary essential to their major area of study" (LaGCC 2005: 62). I had taught this course the previous semester and found that the students had a very difficult time with the rigor of twenty-five to thirty new vocabulary words each week with all the attendant new usage and grammar that accompanied those words. The problem is that most textbooks assume a much greater understanding of English grammar and vocabulary than the LaGuardia students had. My goal, then, became very clear: the "standard" vocabulary books were not helping me accomplish the goals of the class.

So, I fundamentally re-structured my approach to the class to design and test a course as a website, drawing the entirety of the vocabulary from the readings. That is to say, I proposed a Vocabulary Enhancement class without a textbook. The website was first shown in a departmental meeting for peer feedback, tweaked, and then uploaded wholesale into BlackBoard.

The reason I did that was to utilize all the goodies from a content management platform such as BlackBoard that includes group announcement and email capability, online grading, digital dropboxes, and asynchronous Discussion Boards. BlackBoard is also the host for the College's ePortfolio Project.

The specific course content was almost entirely based on using nonsense as a means of better making sense of everyday speech, using proverbs, fairy tales, figurative language, illustrations, and audio as illustrative examples. The syllabus required students to read *The Phantom Tollbooth* (PT) and *Alice in Wonderland* (AIW), as well as several variants of folktales or readings in verse. All of the Lewis Carroll material—*AIW*, *Through the Looking Glass*, “The Hunting of the Snark,” and “Jabberwocky,”—was also available as audiobooks that could simultaneously be read and listened to as course material directly from BlackBoard 6. There were also small group exercises which asked some students to read Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*.

Now “researchers have found that, although L2 students can develop peer-appropriate conversational skills in about two years, developing academic proficiency in English can take much longer, in fact as long as five to seven years to perform as well academically as their L1 peers” (Drucker 2003: 23). The idea of teaching vocabulary skills by using contextual clues from literary texts is not new or revolutionary (Allor and McCathren 2003; Cook 1994; Dixon-Krauss 2001; Speaker et. al. 2004). But “we should not expect single contextual exposures to adequately familiarize students with word meanings” (Baldwin & Schatz 1985 in Blachowicz and Fisher 2004: 68). In fact, a recent study by Zahar, Cobb & Spada reports that a range of six to twenty times, depending on the reader's initial fluency, should be the minimum number of exposures a student has to have to a word in context before that word is firmly set in memory (Zahar, Cobb & Spada 2001). More importantly, according to Dixon-Krauss, “we need to clarify the intended *purposes* for vocabulary learning and then employ instructional *strategies* that match the intended purpose” [author's italics] (Dixon-Krauss 2001: 310).

Andrew D. Cohen has written extensively on language learning strategies. One problem he delineates is that neither terminology nor criteria are consistent in classifying these strategies. Further, we must learn to differentiate between those strategies used for *memorization* for learning vocabulary or grammatical structures, and those strategies employed for *using* the language, i.e., that the intended message was conveyed (Cohen 1996). In another study, he lists as many as fifteen strategies necessary for an L2 learner to simply look up reading vocabulary in a language dictionary of her/his own language (L1) (Cohen 2004: 17). Finally, much of the research on short-term memory also says that L2 readers are impaired by their need to constantly refer to the dictionary, because in the space of time they need to look up a word their short-term memory has already been compromised.

So the strategies I adopted to overcome some of these obstacles were many and varied. Pre-viewing reading assignments and introducing characters before the fact worked like a charm. There could be a definite cognitive disconnect for an L2 reader to begin a story in which a young girl sees a rabbit with a pocketwatch talking to himself, so she follows the rabbit only to find herself falling down a rabbit hole, alternately shrinking and growing in size until she is carried on a sea of her own tears onto an island where there is a caucus race being led by a dodo bird. And so on. Of course, it was this very absurdity that I wanted to have as the principal course content. The *unreality* of Alice's situation, or Milo's many predicaments in *The Phantom Tollbooth*, was where my lessons began and ended. This was my segue to things folkloric, and was a jumping off point for proverbs, jokes, anecdotes, double entendres, folk speech, tale types,

as well as an invitation for the students to proffer their own examples of absurdities or difficulties they had encountered when trying to make themselves understood in English.

Due to the generosity of the Gutenberg Project and other repositories, there is a huge corpus of material available online, and for *Alice in Wonderland*, it includes the original Tenniel illustrations. In addition, I found free online audio files to attach to the pages. “Listening and reading are closely connected. At its most basic level, reading is the phonological decoding of written text, and written text is the representation of sounds heard when language is spoken” (Drucker 24). Many of the students’ initial difficulties in reading and comprehension were immediately cleared up when they came to the lab to simultaneously read and listen to the text. I found this especially helpful for students whose native language is written in a different script, or who do not read from left to right and top to bottom. Reading and listening improves fluency (Rasinsky 1990). Furthermore, students had already been exposed to the vocabulary words in advance, all drawn from the texts, and had seen these words in a very different context. They were required to look each word up and I went over the etymological derivation and often provided cognate words. Then, they used the words in sentences or undertook drills that required them to match or fill in the blanks with the words in context. In an effort to overcome the short-term memory deterioration caused by constantly stopping to look up words in the dictionary, I have recently gone back into the texts to insert a tool that provides a pop-up definition as the cursor scrolls over the word. This means that the definition is in the same place as the word in question, *and*, the student then has a choice whether to utilize the look-up function, or to bypass the pop-up and continue reading without a pause.

The purpose of these exercises is to build up recognition vocabulary, which their L1 counterparts will have automatically achieved by years in the American academic system. My goal is to help the L2 students get “up to speed” with reading rate and comprehension so they can begin reading in their content area without beginning at a skills deficit. What I have consistently found is that the drills are effective for the short term, but L2 students have difficulty applying the information they have memorized. One way to overcome this shortcoming is to use multiple forms of narrative material. Folktales, for example, have many variants from many different language and culture groups. Our students often recognize tales from their own culture and share them with the other students. Because of the incredible diversity in our classrooms, I actively use that diversity as a means of sharing cultural information to enhance self-esteem and to inform other students about cultures with which they have little familiarity. In other words, “using a culturally relevant teaching approach means that the students’ second languages can be viewed as an additive to the classroom environment, rather than as a deficit which needs to be remedied” (Drucker 28). To this end, I regularly encourage students to write in their first language initially, just to get their ideas down on paper, and then apply—not translate—those ideas into the exercise of the moment. They then undertake a new initiative with verve instead of tentatively approaching the keyboard and staring at a blank computer screen.

This is where I emphasize that the need to be comfortable with everyday usage of English is as important as the need to master the vocabulary of their chosen discipline. My argument is that the mastery of everyday discourse will only enhance their rate and success of academic discourse, especially as they are constantly working on the many forms of narrative in low-stakes assignments such as quizzes, small-group discussion, or discussion boards. Over the course of several semesters, students also improve their online competencies in small increments—from simple searches to full-blown research. Online skills such as mastery of search engines, utilization of indexes, discerning valuable versus invaluable online sources and similar endeavors

are only recently being recognized as a necessary competency for all students entering college. Later, when they are required to embrace major research papers or group projects for their major courses, they have a certain comfort zone coming into these high stakes assignments.

Finally, we know the forms of narratives in folklore are also very fluid. Often a legend also has a form in a ballad and in a myth, or is a motif in a tale. Using examples from folklore it is easy to segue from an oral form of a folktale to a written form such as the Brothers' Grimm, to a literary version such as Hans Christian Andersen, to a Disney version on tape or DVD to an electronic game. The liquidity of these generic boundaries lends itself to class discussions on formal versus informal modes of narrative, which in turn leads to discussion of personal experience narratives, reported speech, and other conversational modes which are integral to our students' fluency. All of these strands, in turn, are centered around the concept of the many forms of story.

[GO TO HANDOUTS] With the remaining time I would like to go over the handout. The first page is the prompts used for the discussion board, and the following pages are the small group exercises.

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