English 130: American Stories: Multicultural Autobiography and Memoir
SLO Assessment
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Background
English 130: Multicultural Autobiography and Memoir is a literature elective course that was developed with several goals.

For one, this course meets U.C. Berkeley’s American Cultures requirement. This allows students who intend to transfer to U.C. Berkeley to fulfill an important undergraduate requirement before transferring. In fact, it is the first (and remains the only) course at Ohlone to fulfill this U.C. Berkeley requirement. Second, the course satisfies Ohlone College’s Cultural Diversity requirement. Moreover, the class is an alternative to English 135: Multicultural Literature, a course that often struggled to fill. Finally, to make the class accessible to as many students as possible, it is offered online. In sum, the class is designed to expose students to multicultural literature, to serve as a literature elective, and to fulfill important college and transfer requirements.

English 130 was first offered in Fall of 2004 and has been offered every year since (except for 2009-2010 when I was on sabbatical leave). The course always fills, often has a waiting list, and has a retention rate of about 66% (in other words, beginning with 30 students, approximately 20 students will remain by the final exam). The class is taught fully online. To date, the class has only been taught by me, Alison Kuehner.

Student Learning Outcomes
The student will:
1. Analyze selected examples of autobiographies and memoirs written by Native American, African American, Asian American, and Latino writers.
2. Examine the similarities and differences of the authors’ experiences within their own culture and in relation to other cultures in the United States.
3. Recognize the literary forms of autobiography and memoir, and identify how these are influenced by other literary traditions.
4. Analyze how each ethnic group Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos has influenced and contributed to the culture of the United States.

Assessment Strategy
Since the class fulfills two important cultural diversity requirements (U.C. Berkeley’s and Ohlone College’s), I wanted to examine how well students understood the degree to which culture influenced the authors’ lives. Therefore, I focused on assessing the second SLO for the course: Examine the similarities and differences of the authors’ experiences within their own culture and in relation to other cultures in the United States.

I decided to look at students’ midterm and final exam essays and assess to what degree students examined the authors’ life experiences in relation to culture. In addition to grading the exams, I completed a grid to assess the extent to which culture was a theme in the essay (see Midterm Essay Analysis and Final Exam Analysis). Before the midterm essay, students read three autobiographies. The midterm essay requires students to
compare or contrast at least two of the authors’ experiences in regards to a specific theme, such as the influence of family, religion, education, or culture on the authors’ lives, or to explain to what degree the authors feel marginalized from or are willing to assimilate into American culture. After the midterm and before the final, students read three different autobiographies. On the final exam, students are asked to compare or contrast the authors’ lives (or to write about themselves in relation to the authors) around a particular theme.

**Midterm Essay Analysis**
To what degree does the student’s midterm essay examine the authors’ similarities and differences in relation to culture?

- 5- Consistently addresses throughout essay (ie: thesis, body paragraphs, conclusion)
- 4- Addresses in many parts of the essay (ie: multiple paragraphs)
- 3- Addresses in at least one major section of the essay (ie: one body paragraph)
- 2- Addresses in passing (ie: mentions in intro. or conclusion)
- 1- Does not address

|   | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | TOT |
| 5 | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |   | X |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 4 |
| 4 |   |   |   |   | X | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 2 |
| 3 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | X | X | X | X | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | X | X |   |   | 7 |
| 2 |   | X |   |   |   |   | X | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |   | 4 |
| 1 |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | X |   | X |   |   |   |   |   | 3 |

**Final Exam Analysis**
To what degree does the student’s final exam essay examine the authors’ similarities and differences in relation to culture?

- 5- Consistently addresses throughout essay (ie: thesis, body paragraphs, conclusion)
- 4- Addresses in many parts of the essay (ie: multiple paragraphs)
- 3- Addresses in at least one major section of the essay (ie: one body paragraph)
- 2- Addresses in passing (ie: mentions in intro. or conclusion)
- 1- Does not address

|   | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | TOT |
| 5 |   | X |   |   |   |   | X |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 3 |
| 4 |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |   | X | X | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | X |   |   |   | 4 |
| 3 |   | X | X |   | X | X |   |   |   |   | X | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 5 |
| 2 | X |   |   | X | X | X |   |   | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 5 |
| 1 |   |   | X | X |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 2 |
To illustrate to what extent students wrote about the influence of culture in the authors’ lives, I have included a sample thesis statement from essays that received various scores.

**Thesis from a 1 essay:**
Although Jade Snow Wong and Frederick Douglass came from entirely different worlds, education was the key factor in the empowerment of their futures.

**Thesis from a 3 essay:**
In particular, family is an important social factor that affects both Geronimo and Jade Snow Wong, and it gave them the strength to overcome their struggles to assimilate into the American culture.

**Thesis from a 5 essay:**
Frederick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Geronimo in *Geronimo His Own Story*, and Jade Snow Wong in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* all struggle with their identity as they describe their initial alienation from a foreign culture, the rejection they face by the discriminatory attitudes of some people they come across, and how they eventually come to terms with their place in the society by trying to assimilate into the melting pot of American culture.

**Findings**
A majority of students on both the midterm (65%) and final exam essays (63%) addressed the issue of culture in a substantial portion of their essays. Only two students (LA and PF) did not write substantially about culture on either the midterm or on the final exam essay. In other words, only 10% of students did not focus on culture on both exams, meaning the large majority (90%) wrote significantly about culture on either the midterm or final exam essay.

I can conclude that most students in the class understand how culture impacts the authors’ lives.

**Revisions to the Course**
One thing I realized is that I need a clearer definition of culture. As I was reading students’ midterms and finals, trying to complete the grid, I found myself wondering what exactly are artifacts and evidence of culture. Culture can be defined as “the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.” But what happens when the experience of an individual is mixed with the influence of culture? For instance, one of the authors (Jade Snow Wong) noted in her memoir that it’s hard to distinguish between what is peculiar to the Wong family and what is particular to Chinese culture. Moreover, the distinction between cultures is clearer in the beginning of the semester when students read autobiographies of authors who come from separate or marginalized groups: Native Americans (in the case of Geronimo), black slaves (Frederick Douglass), and immigrant Chinese (Jade Snow Wong). In contrast, it’s harder to tease out the influence of culture on a person of mixed race (we read Obama’s autobiography) or to separate culture from family dysfunction (as in the case of Anne Moody’s black sharecropper family). Finally, separating culture from race or ethnicity is an added complication.

I also realized I need to revise SLO’s for the course. For instance, we examine the literature for themes that connect the writers: the impact of family, religion, or education
on the self; the role of self-examination through writing; or what it means to be human or to be a good person. Although we may celebrate cultural diversity, one student eloquently pointed out how both she and Obama were trying to “find a place of belonging free of the expectations of culture and society.” She writes in the conclusion of her final exam:

It was those moments of complete racial, cultural anonymity I found peace . . . So now I see a Samoan kid trying to understand life, but I mostly see a person trying to find my way like so many others and it gives me an anonymous feeling, but one of warmth and happiness, too. Because while race and culture may isolate you, stereotype you, degrade you, love you, smother you even the struggle of just being a human being is universal. . . I can’t wait for a time when people are judged just as people and there will be no need for empowering race-oriented awards, or ambitious gender-focused groups, because maybe we’ll get to a place where all of those things matter so much less and just being judged on your character as a person will mean so much more.

This student received a 5 for writing about culture, but she expresses the desire not to be defined by culture—an interesting paradox.

I also need to change the course SLO’s to focus on how students write about literature. For instance, it is crucial in this literature course (as in many humanities courses) to use textual evidence to support an interpretation. Students must provide specific examples and references to the books--something that I stress in the weekly discussions and that makes a big difference in students’ grades on midterm and final essay exams—in order to write a convincing analysis.

Moreover, we don’t focus much on SLO 3: Recognize the literary forms of autobiography and memoir, and identify how these are influenced by other literary traditions. Rather, I stress how autobiography and memoirs have a thesis and purpose, and how authors select and arrange the details of their lives to fulfill that purpose. We notice how writers have different rhetorical strategies, but these literary devices are often born out of their personal experiences (in the case of Rodriguez with his analytical, English major background) or derived from their cultural background (which explains why Geronimo begins his story with a creation myth or why Wong writes in the third person).

I plan to revise the course SLO’s and make these clearer to students in the beginning of the class (especially the definition of culture and the distinction between race and culture). I would like to design video lectures to explain each author’s thesis, purpose, and how the author’s writing style supports his or her purpose. And finally, to emphasize the importance of textual evidence, I will create more explicit weekly writing tips and instructions for online discussion posts.

**Revised Student Learning Outcomes**

The student will:

1. Analyze, *as well as compare and contrast*, selected examples of autobiographies and memoirs written by Native American, African American, Asian American, and Latino writers.

2. Examine the similarities and differences of the authors’ experiences within their own culture and in relation to other cultures or other people’s experiences in the United
States.

3. Recognize the literary forms of autobiography and memoir, and identify how these are influenced by other literary traditions. Be able to distinguish an author’s thesis and purpose, and how the author selects and arranges the details of his or her life to fulfill that purpose.

4. Analyze how each ethnic group Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos has influenced and contributed to the culture of the United States. Demonstrate the ability to analyze the literature by using textual evidence to support an interpretation.