Exploring *A Pocket Guide to Writing* through Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: Implications for Multicultural Education

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Abstract

Mainstream writing instruction risks marginalising non-dominant voices if not consciously adapted using critical multicultural frameworks. This study analyses Mary Lynn Rampolla's widely used *A Pocket Guide to Writing* in History through a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) lens, taking notes on voice, power dynamics, and participation elements. The analysis uncovered alignments like the focus on active reading and argumentation. However, tensions emerged regarding the lack of collaborative learning and critical framing of academic conventions. Findings suggest that relying solely on mainstream writing advice risks student empowerment and critical consciousness deficiencies. Writing instructors should supplement individual skill-building with critical perspectives and participatory activities. While conventional guides provide useful starting points, realising the transformative goals of critical multicultural education requires balancing mainstream approaches with conscious efforts to incorporate collaboration, student voice, and critical framing. Further research should build on this study to strengthen writing pedagogy for diversity and equity. It could involve collaborative ethnographic studies in diverse classrooms to examine real-world applications, affordances and limitations. Additionally, studies comparing findings across guides using critical frameworks like CHAT, Critical Race Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis could offer a deeper analysis of patterns and equity implications.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, cultural-historical activity theory, multicultural education, writing pedagogy

1. Introduction

Multicultural education is an emerging perspective in today's education, influenced by the cultural phenomena that emerged during the 1960s and remains influential. It aims to reform educational systems to reflect diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and social class groups.

Multicultural education addresses cultural diversity through content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure (Tamang, 2022). Multicultural education is considered a complex, multidimensional concept that is integral to modern general and professional education systems (Zamurueva, 2019). Its importance lies in its progressive approach to transforming education by criticising and responding to discriminatory policies and practices (Mazid et al., 2021).

Recent literature has discussed implementing multicultural education, emphasising cultural diversity, educational reform, and integrating multicultural insights into materials (Makrufi et al., 2021). In language teaching, alternative pedagogies have positively influenced literacy motivation within multilingual, multicultural environments (Muramoto et al., 2018). However, these do not directly address communication and writing's role in achieving multicultural education goals.

Scholars have critiqued conventional writing pedagogy as privileging dominant discourse norms (Janks, 2014), lacking participatory engagement (Bruffee, 1984), and neglecting critical cultural analysis (Ball & Lardner, 2005). Mainstream writing instruction risks marginalising non-dominant voices if not adapted using critical multicultural frameworks (Paris & Alim, 2014). This study focuses on Mary Lynn Rampolla's widely used "A Pocket Guide to Writing in History" (2012) to analyse these concerns critically.

While Rampolla's guide provides useful advice on active reading, argumentation, and clarity, it has not been systematically examined through a critical sociocultural lens. Specifically, there is little research applying frameworks like Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to analyse mainstream writing guides. CHAT views learning as mediated by participating in cultural activities (Cole, 1996) and examines contradictions as transformative opportunities.

This study aims to analyse Rampolla's guide using CHAT to uncover alignment and tensions related to voice, power, and collaboration principles. It addresses the gap in critically analysing widely used writing resources to inform adaptations for diverse classrooms. Findings will guide recommendations for supplementing conventional materials with critical, participatory methods to strengthen equitable writing pedagogy.

2. Literature Review

Multicultural education emerged from the civil rights movement to provide equitable opportunities regardless of differences (Banks, 2015). Foundational concepts include culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and critical pedagogy (Freire & Ramos, 2009).

Recent studies have examined various aspects, like including disability issues in social justice and multicultural education (Connor et al., 2008), incorporating cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in Canadian curricula (Lucin, 2021), and research trends in teaching Korean to multicultural students (Lee et al., 2020). However, implementing multicultural education faces ongoing challenges. Teacher preparation has been critiqued as inadequate for diversity (Sleeter, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2002). Curriculum materials often lack relevance or contain bias (Brown & Brown, 2010). High-stakes testing constrains approaches (Au, 2009). Moreover, research reveals persistent achievement gaps by race and class (Ladson-Billings, 2006), and disproportionate discipline practices (Gregory et al., 2010).

Other key obstacles include a lack of bilingual teachers, infrastructure limitations, negative attitudes about cultural differences (Clyton & Kundai, 2019), curriculum constraints, parental resistance (Nurbatra & Masyhud, 2022; Sotiropoulou et al., 2022), inadequate teacher preparation, and language barriers affecting collaboration (Pratama et al., 2023). Recommended best practices include diversifying content (Gay, 2018), sustaining linguistic diversity (Paris, 2012), developing community partnerships, promoting inclusion (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011), and building teacher cultural competence (Banks et al., 2005).

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) stems from Vygotsky's (1978) socially mediated learning and Leont'ev's (1981) cultural activity perspective. CHAT situates learning in sociocultural contexts and everyday practice (Cole, 1996), viewing contradictions within activities as transformational. CHAT has informed writing pedagogy, classroom interactions, and online learning research. It reveals cultural-historical assumptions underlying supposedly neutral practices.

Scholarship on writing instruction for multicultural contexts has grown, with gaps remaining. Earlier studies exposed racial bias in assessment (Fox, 1990) and the need to develop scholastic skills while respecting diverse norms (Delpit, 1988). Recent work advocates sustaining marginalised voices (Paris & Alim, 2014) and recognising diverse modes of expression (New London Group, 1996). More research is needed applying CHAT to widely used writing guides.

This study helps fill these gaps by analysing a common guide through a CHAT lens to inform adaptations for diverse classrooms, addressing a need for critical analysis of mainstream writing resources. *Teacher preparation*: Teachers may not have adequate training or knowledge in implementing multicultural education, leading to a lack of confidence and effectiveness in their teaching practices. *Parental resistance*: Parents may have xenophobic attitudes or may not support implementing multicultural education in schools, making it difficult for educators to address cultural diversity (Nurbatra & Masyhud, 2022: Sotiropoulou et al., 2022). *Language barriers*: Language differences can affect communication and collaboration among students, making it challenging to understand and respect each other's cultural backgrounds (Pratama et al., 2023).

To meet these challenges, scholars recommend best practices like diversifying instructional content (Gay, 2018), fostering culturally sustaining classrooms that value linguistic diversity (Paris, 2012), developing meaningful community partnerships, promoting inclusive school climates (Agosto & Karanxha, 2011), and ongoing teacher reflection and growth in cultural competence (Banks et al., 2005).

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) stems from the work of Vygotsky (1978) on socially mediated learning and Leont'ev (1981) on the role of cultural activities in human development. CHAT views learning and development as embedded within sociocultural contexts and everyday praxis (Cole, 1996). It sees contradictions within activities as sites for transformation. CHAT has informed educational research on writing pedagogy (Prior, 2006), classroom interactions (Roth & Lee, 2007), and online learning contexts. Using CHAT reveals the cultural-historical dimensions underlying practices often seen as neutral.

Scholarship in writing instruction for multicultural contexts has grown significantly, though gaps remain. Early studies exposed racial bias in writing assessment (Fox, 1990) and the need to respect diverse communicative norms while developing students' scholastic literacy skills (Delpit, 1988). Recent work advocates culturally sustaining pedagogies that

empower marginalised voices (Paris & Alim, 2014) and foster "multiliteracies" recognising diverse modes and forms of expression (New London Group, 1996). However, more research is needed to apply critical sociocultural frameworks like CHAT to widely used writing guides and resources.

This study addresses these gaps by analysing a common writing guide through a CHAT lens to uncover equity implications for diverse populations. Findings will inform recommendations for adapting writing instruction for critical multicultural education.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine Rampolla's A Pocket Guide to Writing in History through the lens of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The guide was selected due to its widespread use in undergraduate writing courses, providing an appropriate artefact for analysing academic writing conventions. CHAT was chosen as it provides a robust theoretical framework for identifying the cultural-historical dimensions and power implications embedded within scholastic writing practices.

The analysis focused on uncovering areas of alignment and tension between Rampolla's work and CHAT principles related to voice, power, and collaboration. The textual analysis assessed how the mainstream writing guide could be adapted to better align with critical multicultural education goals. The author read through the guide closely multiple times, taking notes on elements related to the CHAT framework. Attention was given to the overt content and underlying assumptions reflected in the text.

The study was limited to a single researcher's perspective. The author acknowledges that comparing multiple writing guides through a CHAT lens could provide additional insights. Direct observation of classroom applications could also elucidate the practical usage of such guides. Further research could involve collaborative ethnographic studies in diverse classrooms to examine real-world applications, affordances and limitations. Additionally, studies comparing findings across guides using critical frameworks like CHAT, Critical Race Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis could offer a deeper analysis of patterns and equity implications.

Despite these limitations, the targeted textual analysis provides an initial step in transforming mainstream writing resources to align with multicultural education aims. While concise, the methodology outlines a thoughtful application of CHAT to critically examine a widely used text with an eye toward pedagogical transformation. Further studies can build on these findings to strengthen writing instruction for diversity and social justice.

4. Results

The analysis revealed several key concepts, guidelines, and recommendations in Rampolla's A Pocket Guide to Writing that are highly relevant to multicultural education. For example, the guide emphasises the importance of active reading, critical thinking, evaluating sources, and considering historical context and bias. These skills are invaluable for educators and students engaging with diverse cultures and perspectives.

Active reading involves interrogating texts, asking critical questions, and connecting ideas. This aligns with a multicultural education goal of developing students' abilities to analyse information related to equity and social justice issues. Evaluating sources for credibility and bias is also crucial when examining controversial topics from diverse

standpoints. Rampolla advises readers to identify authorship, intended audience, hidden assumptions, and historical context. These guidelines provide an excellent framework for analysing sources related to multiculturalism. For instance, students could use Rampolla's criteria to critique news articles about immigration policies for bias or examine diverse memoirs for different cultural assumptions.

In addition, the guide offers practical advice on crafting arguments, organising papers, revising for content, and editing for clarity. The discussions of developing a solid thesis, using evidence, and anticipating counterarguments can aid students in articulating their perspectives on diversity. Rampolla explains how to substantiate claims with concrete examples and address opposing viewpoints respectfully. These skills are invaluable for teaching students reasoned arguments regarding complex social issues. Editing tips regarding word choice, tense, voice, and grammar will help students convey ideas clearly and accurately. While Rampolla does not explicitly discuss multiculturalism, the guide aligns well with CHAT principles of mediated learning and the co-construction of knowledge. Students are positioned as active meaning-makers rather than passive absorbers of information.

However, a few areas where the guide departs from CHAT is the lack of attention to collaborative learning and participatory pedagogies. The writing process is presented as an individual endeavour without discussing how students might collaborate or provide peer feedback on multicultural topics. Imagining a more socially-situated approach guided by CHAT could be useful. Classroom activities like peer editing on diversity essays could add meaningful social dimensions. Additionally, the cultural-historical context of the guide itself is not analysed. Examining the dominant academic discourse and Rampolla's positionality could reveal insights into power relations embedded in scholastic writing conventions. This aligns with a multicultural education emphasis on questioning knowledge construction processes.

Nevertheless, the numerous tips and examples make the guide valuable for promoting thoughtful intercultural communication. For instance, a case study could examine how an ethnic studies teacher uses concepts from Rampolla to teach persuasive writing on social justice issues. Students learn to substantiate claims using evidence, consider diverse perspectives, and edit biased language from their drafts. This demonstrates the practical application of "A Pocket Guide to Writing" for enhancing multicultural education. The guide provides helpful scaffolds for developing students' abilities to investigate topics like racism, sexism, and homophobia and articulate their viewpoints clearly and ethically. With some adaptation, Rampolla's advice could be incorporated into a collaborative, socially conscious writing pedagogy guided by CHAT.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to analyse Mary Lynn Rampolla's widely used writing guide, "A Pocket Guide to Writing in History," through a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) lens. The key research question was: What areas of alignment and tension exist between Rampolla's mainstream writing advice and CHAT principles related to student voice, power dynamics, and collaboration?

The analysis uncovered several strengths in Rampolla's guide that align with multicultural education goals, including the emphasis on active reading, evaluating

credibility, and structuring arguments. However, tensions arose regarding the lack of attention to collaborative learning and critical framing of academic conventions.

These findings resonate with recent literature highlighting the need to move beyond individual skill-building to incorporate participatory and empowering approaches when working with diverse students (Paris & Alim, 2014; Agosto & Karanxha, 2011). For instance, Lucin (2021) advocates participatory activities like student-created counterspaces, while Tamang (2022) stresses continually questioning knowledge construction processes. The present study confirms and extends such recommendations to the domain of writing instruction.

The highly individual focus of Rampolla's guide contrasts with CHAT's situated, socially mediated perspective on learning. This discrepancy suggests that solely relying on advice from mainstream writing resources risks overlooking collaborative dimensions and issues of power integral to critical multicultural education. The tensions identified illuminate the need to consciously supplement conventional guides with critical framing, peer workshops, and student voices when adapting writing pedagogies for diversity.

These findings affect writing instructors, teacher training programs, and curriculum developers. Firstly, educators should intentionally scaffold individual skills from guides like Rampolla's with inquiry-based projects analysing academic discourse conventions to reveal underlying cultural assumptions and hegemonic power relations in schools (Freire & Ramos, 2009). Secondly, teacher training should facilitate participatory workshops assisting faculty in aligning mainstream writing tools with principles of empowerment and collaboration. Finally, policymakers revising standards and assessments must consider how traditional conventions privilege certain voices while marginalising others.

However, limitations exist regarding analysing a single guide from one researcher's perspective. Future studies should incorporate student and teacher voices examining multiple texts using additional frameworks like Critical Race Theory. Collaborative classroom research is also needed to observe how educators directly adapt mainstream resources in context. Further exploration of writing conventions, systemic power relations, and transforming pedagogies through participatory praxis will strengthen multicultural education.

This critical examination of a widely used writing guide demonstrates tensions between mainstream skill-building advice and equitable, empowering writing instruction for diversity. While conventions have value, realising multicultural education's transformative aspirations requires balancing individual scaffolds with critical framing, student voice, and collaborative engagement. By judiciously adapting conventional resources, progressive educators can navigate complexities in transforming writing pedagogy for justice.

6. Conclusion

This critical examination of Rampolla's widely used writing guide through a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory lens makes several key contributions to scholarship on transforming mainstream educational resources to better align with critical multicultural education goals. The analysis addressed an essential gap in the literature by applying a critical sociocultural framework to interrogate the cultural-historical assumptions and power implications embedded within conventional writing pedagogies.

The study revealed important areas of alignment, with Rampolla's guide providing a valuable foundation of core skills, including active reading, source evaluation, argument construction, and structure that can aid students in developing abilities to investigate issues of diversity, equity, and social justice. However, tensions also emerged regarding the guide's lack of attention to collaborative learning, participatory pedagogies, critical framing of academic discourse conventions, and centring of student voices. These findings carry meaningful implications for praxis.

Specifically, writing instructors and curriculum developers aiming to enact critical multicultural education should consciously supplement and scaffold the individual skill-building advice from mainstream guides like Rampolla's with critical perspectives and inquiry-based activities tailored to their classroom context. Examples could include collaborative peer workshops analysing academic writing norms using theoretical frameworks to reveal relations of power or student-led projects leveraging writing skills to articulate perspectives on social issues relevant to their lives.

Meanwhile, teacher training and professional development initiatives should facilitate reflective workshops assisting faculty in adapting conventional textual resources to more fully integrate principles of cultural responsiveness, social consciousness, student voice, counter-narratives, collaboration, and empowerment when teaching writing across diverse contexts. Unpacking the cultural-historical assumptions embedded within institutional academic discourse practices can guide efforts to enact more equitable policies, pedagogies, assessments, and learning climates.

However, as noted previously, limitations stem from the restricted single-researcher analytical approach and lack of observational classroom applications. Further research must build on these initial findings through collaborative, ethnographic studies examining how multiple writing guides and resources are adapted and utilised in daily educational practice serving marginalised student groups. Comparing findings with additional critical frameworks would provide broader and more profound analyses of patterns and equity issues across texts. Exploring the connections between dominant academic writing conventions, mainstream textual resources, and broader systemic power relations within schools through participatory inquiries can guide transformative change.

This study highlights the balancing act of adapting conventional educational resources to align with the social justice commitments of critical multicultural education. By judiciously supplementing mainstream guides with pedagogies centred on consciousness-raising, empowerment, collaboration, and elevating subjugated voices, progressive educators can contribute toward the larger project of reimagining writing instruction, curriculum, and schooling to nurture liberation, democracy, love, and joy for all students, especially those from racially and socially minoritised communities. The work entails complexities, tensions, and ongoing critical reflexivity but remains essential.

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