

Sample Latino History Paper

Ruben Rodriguez: Sharing the Simple Joy of Writing

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The American Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, wrote: “We cannot write well or truly but what we write with gusto. The body, the senses, must conspire with the mind.

Expression is the act of the whole man, that our speech may be vascular” (qtd. in Miller).

Whether it is produced by the scratch of a pencil on a pad of paper or the clicking of computer keys, whole-hearted writing, such as that which Thoreau describes, is the kind valued by Ruben Rodriguez, state contest director for UIL Ready Writing, educator, AP English Language consultant, advocate of writing for the simple joy of writing, and particular fan of Thoreau. Just as Thoreau was called to observe and record his observations of nature at Walden Pond, Ruben Rodriguez has found his calling in education, demonstrating to students and other educators through the unifying qualities of language that human beings are much more alike than different.

Ruben Rodriguez was raised in the small town of Alpine in far West Texas. From birth, he had to learn to grow in a challenging environment. His family was large and poor, and his parents were separated. Despite these difficult circumstances, however, Rodriguez recalls that these factors brought him and his siblings together, forcing them “to depend on family for pretty much everything, [a fact] which continues to this day to make me value family above all other aspects of life” (E-mail). The separation of his parents actually helped his sisters develop into strong women, especially his oldest sister, Consuelo, who became the “matriarch” of his family (E-mail). Consuelo helped raise Rodriguez and guided him through high school, preparing him for the day when he would leave home and pursue a higher education at Sul Ross State University.

Rodriguez chose to attend Sul Ross “as a result of not having the means or the knowledge to attend a university in another city,” but he does not regret the time he spent there. As an

English major exploring the different origins and periods of literature, Rodriguez fell in love with the American Transcendentalists. Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman are among his favorite writers to this day “because they’re creative writers, but they also write essays” (Interview). In 1983, he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English with a focus on American literature. As a college student, he decided to make his career in education because Rodriguez saw how he could integrate his “Mexican-American language and culture with American literature” (E-mail). He began to notice that “words and languages are much more similar than they are different. Ultimately, languages—whether spoken or written—bring awareness, culture, knowledge, opportunity to all of us in spite of our backgrounds. Words—languages—unify us” (E-mail).

Shortly after his graduation, Rodriguez began work as an English teacher in Fort Stockton ISD, a school district neighboring the one he had attended. This teaching job was a catalyst for his career, igniting a flame for education in his heart that would only grow, and his career would soon reflect it. In 1985, Rodriguez decided to move four and a half hours southeast of Fort Stockton to teach English in New Braunfels ISD, where “more lucrative teaching opportunities were offered” (E-mail). Moving there introduced him to the Austin/Round Rock area, where he would later be spending much of his time. Although Rodriguez loved teaching regular high school English courses, he explained, “I was motivated to do post-graduate work as a result of knowing that in education, usually—certainly in my case—a graduate degree was vital for more professional opportunities as well as more success in my area” (E-mail). So in 1987, he returned to Sul Ross State University, where he earned a Master’s degree in American literature, focusing on American Transcendentalism.

His new degree took him to Tarleton State University, where he was hired to teach courses in Literature, Composition, and Rhetoric. Teaching these courses enabled him to delve into literature, helping students pull every lesson they could possibly learn out of dense texts reflecting a variety of genres and authors. In particular, Rodriguez enjoyed working individually with students on their writing. He believes that “Writing connects us to life, and the opportunity to share one’s views is one that should never be taken for granted” (E-mail). After a decade of the rich experience of teaching at the university level, he returned to his roots of teaching high school students when he moved to Round Rock in 2000.

Working at Round Rock ISD was a turning point in Rodriguez’s career, as he began to teach AP English Language courses. In 2001, Rodriguez’s second year at Round Rock, he met Karen Werkenthin, who had just retired from full-time teaching, but who continued to work part time. Werkenthin had thirteen years of experience as an AP English Language Exam Reader, and she was also the state director for UIL Ready Writing. Werkenthin recalls, “Ruben and I almost immediately became great friends and teaching buddies. We worked hard together on teaching the AP Language course that year and for years after that, creating and tweaking a syllabus and daily activities that would lead to our students' success on the exam.” In working alongside him in the classroom, she also observed that “He established what I call a "low threat/high challenge" classroom. His students knew that he cared about each of them personally and would help and support them when needed.” With Werkenthin’s guidance, Rodriguez was able to make new strides in his career, beginning as a Reader for the AP English Language Exam in 2003 and becoming a Table Leader in 2004. In the same year, Werkenthin made a decision that would change the course of Rodriguez’s career: she decided to retire from directing Ready Writing.

Werkenthin realized while presenting at the UIL Student Activities Conference in the fall of 2004 that she had “grown weary of saying the same thing over and over. The contest hasn't changed much in the nearly 100 years it's existed, and I just felt like I had nothing left to contribute” (Werkenthin). So, in the spring of 2005, when Werkenthin announced her retirement, she recommended “someone I thought would do a great job taking my place—Ruben Rodriguez. The UIL folks thought so, too, and Ruben ‘shadowed’ me the rest of the year as I submitted topics for each level of competition, from practice to district to regional to state meets. Then he came to observe the State Meet in 2005. He took over that fall and has been busy with it ever since” (Werkenthin).

As the contest director, Rodriguez provides students competing in Ready Writing with two insightful quotations as prompts, or “springboards for thought,” for an expository essay that competitors have two hours to write (“Ready Writing”). In his position as state coordinator, Rodriguez does all that he can to engage students with the prompts that he chooses. To do this, he finds timely observations that connect to timeless issues such as social justice, technology, and education. Every year twelve to thirteen thousand students across the state are encouraged to think and write based on the prompts that Rodriguez provides. He enjoys seeing the diversity of these thousands of students; he loves that students of all different backgrounds and interests can come together to celebrate their love of writing. A former Ready Writing state champion, now a student at Yale University, commented on the effect Rodriguez had on her life: “I didn’t always win every competition, but I knew I could count on Mr. Rodriguez’s encouragement and impartiality. He led a contest that I was proud to be a part of, and his impact on Ready Writing students cannot be put into words” (Burleson). This contest is so much more than the mere writing of expository essays. It allows students to explore and familiarize themselves with formal

writing in a creative way and encourages them to learn all they can about the world around them. While Ready Writing itself is a celebration of the simple joy of writing, Rodriguez recalls that his favorite memory from directing the contest is “seeing the joy that the winners of the state meet get when they find out they won” (Interview).

For seven years, Rodriguez taught high schoolers in addition to working for the UIL. In 2012, though, he began to crave something more, something deeper in his career as an educator, so Rodriguez drew on his experience and expertise in the AP classroom and his desire to reach as many students as possible and he decided to teach teachers. Rodriguez believed that by going straight to the source of education, he could help more students succeed in AP classes and in life.

Through a program called Laying the Foundation, sponsored by the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI), Rodriguez began consulting with new AP teachers about the best way to teach the AP English Language course. Rodriguez fell in love with this approach to making an impact on education because he “was able to actually see that the LTF lessons brought about positive change in the teachers I trained, and more importantly, in how effective the lessons were in the classroom” (“Ruben Rodriguez”). Rodriguez found that training teachers to find new ways to engage with their students and help them learn lifelong lessons left him energized and excited to help as many students as he could (“Ruben Rodriguez”). His far-reaching impact was made possible by NMSI as they sent him to train educators and hold student preparation sessions all over the country, specifically in Arkansas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Texas, Alabama, and Connecticut.

Three years after he began working at NMSI, in 2015, Rodriguez made some further changes within his work life. It began when he moved from consulting solely through NMSI/LTF to consulting mostly independently. In becoming an independent consultant for the

majority of his work, Rodriguez has found a freedom in the lessons that he teaches to other educators. He still does some work through NMSI and has begun to do some work for the College Board, but “95 to 98 percent” is done on his own (Interview). Additionally, Rodriguez again felt the pull of classroom teaching upon his heart, so he began to teach English composition, research, and integrated reading and writing (a course aimed at helping students who struggle in English) classes as an adjunct professor at Austin Community College, where he continues to teach today.

Looking back on his career, Rodriguez reflected that “like most other young professionals and early in my teaching career, I moved somewhat frequently . . . because I had a young family, [and] any financial gains were a priority, but always I wanted to explore new cities, working with diverse student populations” (E-mail). Unity in diversity has been a key theme throughout Rodriguez’s life, especially considering his Latino heritage. Rodriguez is incredibly proud of his heritage but admits that he has “had to ‘prove’ myself to others as a result of my ethnicity, but for the most part, being Hispanic has made me a better person and parent—one who appreciates and thrives in my ‘differences’” (E-mail). Rodriguez continued, “I believe it is my job, always, to continue to share with others who I am as a proud Latino . . . I continue to see my ethnicity and both the struggles and the rewards it brought me and how it contributed to me being a better and more well-rounded human being. As a proud Mexican-American male, I believe it is my responsibility to “pass it forward” and share my knowledge and my spirit with others, especially young Mexican American students I have the opportunity to work with” (E-mail). His daughter, Brittney Rodriguez, recalled that “the greatest life lesson my father has impressed upon me is the importance of maintaining connectedness and pride in my roots and heritage.” She went on to explain that her father had “always gone to great lengths to give me the

very best possible education, exposure to the arts, a taste for culture, and a love of travel after coming from a very humble beginning, himself. The lesson that's always been pervasive . . . is to pay homage to my genetic predecessors who worked and scrounged and often sacrificed to ensure that one day their legacies would have equal access and fair opportunities.”

For thirty-six years and counting, Ruben Rodriguez has worked in education all across the state and country, making an impact on the lives of thousands upon thousands of students, both directly and indirectly. These include students whom he has personally taught, students who have attended his student preparation sessions for the AP test, Ready Writing competitors, and the students of the teachers whom he has trained. There is simply no way to put a number on the amount of lives that have been affected by his work in education. By integrating his Latino culture into his teaching style in an effort to help students comprehend the unity that language brings us, Rodriguez has managed to intertwine many of the students he has taught or directed into the rich community of those who love to write. He has a passion, or as Thoreau put it, a “gusto” for writing that is contagious, compelling students to write with gusto, too. Because of the influence of Ruben Rodriguez, many students have found themselves finding joy in writing, from pre-writing with a pencil, to the simultaneous clattering of seventy or so keyboards at the Ready Writing State Contest, to the almost palpable concentration of thought in a classroom during a timed writing. This evidence of whole-hearted writing is perhaps the ultimate tribute to Rodriguez’s life’s calling.

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