

SUSAN NAOMI BERNSTEIN, Ed.. (2004). *Teaching developmental reading: Background readings*. (Second Edition). Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's. xv, 464.

The present volume consists of a collection of important contributions to the field of developmental writing, some of recent authorship and some that have appeared over the last three decades. While at first glance, it may seem unusual for a publication dedicated to topics in language and linguistics to offer a review of a collection of articles on pedagogical issues in developmental writing, on closer consideration many of these problems in fact hinge on fundamental linguistic principles, about which most teachers in the field are uninformed.

This review focuses on linguistic concepts that apply to questions raised in these essays. Space does not permit discussion of all the articles that appear; emphasis will be placed on those whose topics can be illuminated by applied linguistics. Central to these are the close relationships between language and cognition on the one hand and language and cultural expression on the other, numerous phenomena associated with social and regional variation, problems associated with dialect and style shifting, social and cognitive problems associated with language and dialect acquisition, and the relation of writing to language.

In her seminal (1972) article, "Teaching Language in Open Admissions" (14 – 28), Adrienne Rich observes that "students learn to write by discovering the validity and variety of their own experience (19)." Certainly it is an important principle that, as developmental writing students engage their own experience and find meaning in it, and struggle to find words and make sentences to communicate that meaning to an audience they can envision, they discover the means, as Aristotle put it, of persuasion (*The Art of Rhetoric*).

In the experience Rich describes, though, doubtless influenced by the politically charged tenor of the sixties and seventies, "experience" was understood not to constitute the elements of

the individual student's personal biography, but the collective experience of the student's ethnic identity. This is a grave error. Under this approach, meaning is prescribed, found in the works of writers selected to represent that experience in the literary canon and interpreted according to the established criticism. Students fed this diet and asked to write from its menu are denied the rewards of the struggle to forge their own meaning and find language to convey it.

I imagine that every student of language would agree with Rich when she says, "I think of myself ... as someone for whom language has implied freedom" (24). Compositionists, who aid developing writers in the enterprise of finding meaning and communicating using written language, are faced with the current compass of the writers' language performance. What is needed are approaches to helping students widen the scope of their linguistic resources while engaging their cognitive powers in the process of responding to the world and experience, and making meaning from it linguistically, for it is this process that makes possible the realization of that freedom.

Ann E. Green, in "My Uncle's Guns" (50 – 59), a story in which she assumes the fictional voice of a student at her rural, Western Pennsylvania community college, focuses on class differences between basic writing instructors and their students. Students of the sociology of language will recognize serious issues involving social attitudes toward language and grammar, status-marking and stigmatizing language features, linguistically indexed solidarity and discrimination, and the wide spectrum of linguistic phenomena involved in the power relationships between the teacher and the taught. Green adopts the metacognitive voice of her fictional student to express some of these:

You're not from around here, and I can see you don't like us sometimes when we go outside on break from class and smoke and talk too loud about how we hate our jobs.

You look at us and think that we don't know anything. You think that teaching us how to write can't help us cause we're not going to change our lives by reading some essays (52)

The good dental is an important detail, and you probably don't know that. If you're on welfare, you get dental ... but if you work loading potato chips on tractor trailers you don't get dental ... (53)

It's like that Head Start teacher believes Mary's teeth are bad because she doesn't brush them, not because her Mom raised her on potato chips and soda ... (53)

Numerous studies (e.g., Fasold, 1968; Trudgill, 1974; Wolfram and Fasold, 1974) have shown that the social groups most sensitive to social-status-marking language features are females of the upper working and lower middle classes, and abundant observation reveals that these groups supply members of the teaching profession in the greatest numbers, who, like the Head Start teacher, are habitually careful to brush their teeth regularly and to speak and write "correctly" in socially sensitive situations. Accordingly, built into the equation in the developmental writing classroom are status sensitive, prescriptively based, reflexive attitudes toward language and language performance that effectively undermine whatever methodologies are applied. An example of this in action: a veteran female instructor, in a recent conference among instructors at a nearby community college, blurted out: "But how do you get them to do it?" The identity and character of the "*them*" in question is clearly marked, linguistically and

socially, as *willfully noncompliant*, as *deficient*. Analogies to early missionaries, proselytizing among salvages and frustrated by their obduracy, flicker in the imagination.

In “Connecting Reading and Writing: College Learners’ Metacognitive Awareness” (79 – 92), Amelia E. El-Hindi emphasizes the importance of reading in the writing curriculum, “college learning demands sophistication in gaining information from text and being able to communicate through writing” (90). These “advanced literacy skills” (80), E-H argues, constitute “interconnected, recursive processes” used to “actively create meaning through text” (81). It is a common experience among teachers of freshman that each new crop of college students contains too many who lack development in these skills. Knowledge of how written language is processed, and how writing is acquired, is essential to teach them effectively.

Iлона Leki, in “Reciprocal Themes in ESL Reading and Writing” (93 – 113), notes, “until recently little in the L2 [second language] research literature has addressed reading and writing together.” L makes the argument that “reading builds knowledge of various kinds to use in writing” and vice versa (94). Thus, as she indicates, biology professors are not trained in special courses to write the kind of articles that biology professors write; they acquire this knowledge by reading articles that biology professors write (94). The applicable concept here, recognizable to students of language and linguistics, is that of a *speech community*, based on the principle that language and its conventions are culturally transmitted phenomena, whose purpose is communication (see Hockett, 1960).

L points out that the dominant methodology emphasizes reading comprehension measured by “correct responses to comprehension questions” (100), these based upon canonical literary interpretation. The primary presupposition of this approach is that meaning resides in the text (104), a view which ignores the reader as a contributor to meaning. Meanwhile, much of

what passes for language instruction involves manipulating language, to practice grammar or discourse formulae (101, 103).

The result of this approach is not real writing, i.e., using written language to convey information within a community. This discussion can be illuminated by evoking the principle taught by Charles S. Peirce, who recognized in language and other symbolic systems not only signs and their objects, but a third relation, that of the “interpretant”, who, in exercising the faculty of knowing signs, can “know something more” (Hardwick, 1977, 31 ff.). Methodologies which focus on “reading comprehension” and skill drills reduce students as “interpretants” out of the equation by precluding the possibility of students engaging text cognitively and creating meaning with it while marshalling the linguistic resources to communicate that meaning in their written language community.

Helping students acquire and gain control over the grammatical resources of the language is likewise an important element in developmental writing. Janice Neuleib and Irene Brosnahan, in “Teaching Grammar to Writers” (116-122), argue that teachers of writing should study and understand the grammar historically, citing Hartwell (1981) in outlining five theories of grammar:

1. tacit or “intrinsic knowledge of language rules and patterns”
2. the knowledge gained from a scientific analysis of grammar
3. “linguistic etiquette,” involving such items as *ain’t* and double negatives
4. school book grammar, “that is oversimplified in traditional handbooks and workbooks”
5. “stylistic grammar,” which “uses grammatical terms to teach prose style” (121)

Most teachers are unaware of these contrasting grammars and the remarkable mismatches that occur among them in their classes. N and B argue that when teachers “appreciate the relations among different grammars, they can make the description of the language accessible to

students” (121) and, by showing them “how language works” (121), help them gain control of the resource of the language.

Rei R. Noguchi’s “Teaching the Basics of a Writer’s Grammar” (123-143), presents an alternative to the seemingly obligatory but often failed practice of teaching formal grammar in the developmental writing classroom, advocating a functional approach (N calls it “operational”) to communicating grammatical concepts to students that relies on and exploits students’ tacit knowledge, that is, their “Underlying Syntactic Knowledge,” of the language (n. 4, 142).

Numerous examples of this approach are presented. Studies cited show that teaching based on these strategies is more effective and less time consuming and students “greatly preferred” the method to traditional approaches (n. 4, 142).

Teachers, of course, must have a thorough working knowledge of functional grammar to employ these strategies, and that is problematic. Nearly all composition instructors are recruited from students of literature, who generally are required to have sat through a single three unit introductory course in basic English syntax. Furthermore, in many universities, the composition program is staffed almost entirely with TAs, whose main focus is their (literature) coursework and projects. A new text based on a functional grammar method would be a valuable addition to the field.

Linda Feldmeier White’s “*From Learning Disability, Pedagogies, and Public Discourse*” (159-172), offers a fascinating discussion of Learning Disability (LD) theory and pedagogy. The dominant LD paradigm, informed by behaviorist theory, is a deficit model, supposed to be the result of processing deficiencies resulting from neurological dysfunction (162). W makes a comparison between LD and basic writers in terms of this deficit paradigm and in the kinds of remedies employed in typical developmental writing approaches (165). The LD paradigm, W

argues, excludes meaning making from its province (163). Exclusively behaviorist approaches to LD students involve “teaching fragmented skills” (167). The author reflects that these are not effective in her classroom experience, as remediation by focusing on specific deficits “only emphasizes the disability” (167).

In contrast, the author recounts numerous LD students who learned to read when they discovered “things that they wanted to know” (168). The communicative approach the author recommends involves trying to create “a classroom that offers the pleasures of academic writing ... and reading” and so offers students room to develop (168).

In “Returning Adults to the Mainstream: Toward a Curriculum for Diverse Student Writers” (198 – 219), Barbara Gleason discusses in detail the experience of several adult students in her developmental writing classroom. One astonishing story involves a 33 year old woman, a native English speaker, who, at mid-semester, was diagnosed with a learning disorder that, according to the report, contributed to “short term memory deficits and delays in language processing” (209). Consider the following samples of the student’s writing:

My first professor ... came up to me and said “your work is the last work I read out of everybody in all my classes” and I asked her why and she said “I dread reading your work — It’s really painful” — and I asked her why — she goes “your fragments your sentence structure” um she says “your writing is atrocious” and those were her exact words and it was like a dagger in my heart and in my pride and I held them back and I bit my lip and I said “ok—I’m still not dropping your class—I’m going to do my best.” (208)

In this sample, in which a recognizable folksy, oral, narrative discourse pattern, one that faithfully relates even the “ums,” is transcribed, we see nothing that distinguishes this student’s

writing from that of many who arrive at developmental classrooms and even mainstream classrooms in colleges and universities. Other samples, though, demonstrate some anomalies:

As a student at CWE I got the change (*sic*) to observe the students, professors and the receptionists. How the students and professors inter act (*sic*) with the receptionists. How the receptionists get any work done? What is there a different between between the day shift and the night shift? Do they realized that the students and Staffs depend on them for the information and services.

Wow! They must be at least 50 students here this is too much for me. Z., Mr. O, Mr. L, Mr. H, and JW working for their pay to day. So many student. Some look good and some are wearing jean and dress and suits. Some of the students have the hair done nice. I wonder what they are all here for. I can not hear to much anymore, because all the student are talking to each other and my bench is now filled with people sitting on it ...

There is a student talking to Z not so nice, but Z is smiling and been nice to her. Z is now telling student to put there name on the list and they will be call next.

Wow! She control all those students and put them in there place ... (210)

These samples provoke intriguing questions about language acquisition *vis-à-vis* LD students, although experience with developmental writers suggests it is possible that the oddities present here are artifacts of writing, spelling, and typing. Is the effect of the diagnosed learning disability limited to the processing of written text (and not linguistic competence)? According to G, this student's work, in terms of formulation of research questions, volume of text produced, division of topics into paragraphs, and other discourse devices represents "a highly significant achievement in her development as a writer" (211). And if the oddities noted above can be

attributed to writing or typing performance, it is difficult to see in these samples written language production that distinguishes this diagnosed LD student from students often seen in developmental classrooms. Much remains to be learned about the acquisition of literacy processing and about LDs and their relations to language acquisition and to literacy skills.

Glynda Hull and Mike Rose, in “‘This Wooden Shack Place’: The Logic of an Unconventional Reading” (236 – 247), employ their conversations with Robert, the son of Trinidadian and Jamaican immigrants, about his reading of Garrett Kaoru Hongo’s “And Your Soul Shall Dance,” to demonstrate that individual life experience and the logic of that experience can contribute to creating meaning from a text that differs from the “conventional” reading produced by students who have been “socialized in American literature departments” (241). Conventional patterns of instructions that “convey certain conventional reading and writing strategies”, H and R argue, pose the danger of “socializing students into a mode of interaction that will limit rather than enhance their participation in intellectual work” (245). They advocate instead a model “that places knowledge making at its center” (245). Teachers must sacrifice the security of “teacher centered instruction” and experience some “hesitancy and uncertainty,” but these are “central to knowledge making” (246).

Gloria Anzaldúa, in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” (310-310) provides interesting information and examples from various Spanish and English varieties heard in the American Southwest, but along the way gives voice to some often-heard clichés about language variety and language contact among Spanish-speaking bilinguals associated with American English and American culture. Most of this confusion and the resentment that surrounds it are resolvable by recourse to some basic principles of sociolinguistics.

All languages and varieties are of equal value as languages, i.e., as means of communication in a speech community, but not all languages and varieties in contact are of equal value socially (and economically) to their users. Likewise, when cultures come into contact, it is almost never the case that they are equal in cultural development, economics, and power, and therefore prestige. To cite three well known examples from history, the very early invention and development of writing among the Chinese gave rise to its cultural hegemony across East Asia, which has persisted until this century; the Persian Empire, with its extensive literary tradition, extended from northern India to the steppes of Russia; and the early implementation of the Western Semitic alphabet by the Greeks, further adapted for Latin by the Romans, led to the expansion and dominance of Greco-Roman culture and Christianity over Europe and later the Americas. These and countless other examples constitute human history; students of language variety and language contact understand the situation.

A says that her primary school had an English-only policy and that she was punished for using Spanish at recess. And she resents having been given extra English development instruction at college (302). The decision about the social desirability of English was made for the author, by the public school and her education community and by her family, who chose that community for their own social and economic reasons. She may not have agreed with some of the outcomes of those language policy decisions, yet it is notable that she has achieved well developed skills with written English that have allowed her to be successful academically and professionally in American culture as a result, in contrast to the many products of bilingual education who arrive utterly unprepared to survive in an American university. It is notable, too, that A has reinforced those language decisions in her adult choices as a language user. One wonders where the author's animus should be directed.

After all, these are the sort of decisions made every day in every part of the world, when cultures and speakers of diverse languages and language varieties come into contact, e.g., medical school students in the Philippines are given instruction in English, and the language of instruction in schools in Dakar, Senegal, is French. It would, though, be desirable for teachers and school administrators to be educated in these principles so that when making and applying language policy decisions, they have some sensitivity about what they are dealing with.

About the contrast cited between *nosotros*, general form of 1<sup>st</sup> person plural ‘we’, used in most varieties of Spanish and *nosotras*, feminine 1<sup>st</sup> person plural ‘we’ used in Puerto Rican and Cuban varieties, the claim is made, “We [Chicanas] are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural.” It is hard to credit a language form with the theft of anything. The general *and* masculine plural (-*os*) suffix is the outcome of a historical process of change among users of the language, from Latin and its sources through successive phases; the feminine plural (-*as*) has a much shorter history, reflecting development in the speech communities of Puerto Rico and Cuba. The use of the same form in languages that mark gender for both general and masculine is widespread, in Indo-European languages and elsewhere. The conclusion drawn from this situation by the author seems motivated only by political ideology. She forgets that *tenistas* ‘tennis players’, among many other like (grammatically feminine) nouns, refers to participants of both genders, who, to my knowledge, do not feel themselves robbed of anything. The particular linguistic developments that A complains of here are better explained by the principle of *analogy*.

A topic the writer subsumes under the heading, “Linguistic Terrorism,” involves her notion that the “Chicano [not (-a?)] Spanish” she grew up speaking is “poor Spanish.” She calls it “illegitimate, a bastard language” (305). If this notion is the product of “terrorism,” the terrorists named are “most Latinos” (303) and fellow “*chicanas*,” who “use our language

differences against each other” (305). Students educated even rudimentarily in the principles of language variety, language contact, and pidgin and creole studies recognize these entirely typical but erroneous, socially motivated notions for what they are and become liberated from them.

Anzaldúa further rails, “Language is a male discourse” (302). What do such claims signify? In the United States, females have constituted over 60% of university students for about 20 years. What form of discourse are they using? By every measure of language skills, females admitted to universities score higher than males. I suppose such outbursts might appeal to certain residual romantic impulses among those middle class academics who have surrendered their adolescent, rebellious impulses for tenured positions, mortgages, and payments on the minivan, but they contribute nothing to the discussion of how to produce better results in helping bilingual and second language/dialect students achieve literacy and writing skills so that they can attain their objectives for participating in the educational system.

Embedded, though, among these confused notions and ideological diatribes are many interesting examples of variation in phonetic and morphological forms heard in border Spanishes and loans from English heard in Southwest border areas, such as *bola* ‘ball’, *máchina de lavar* for *lavadora*, ‘washing machine’ *cookiár* ‘to cook’, *watchar* ‘to watch’, *parkiar* ‘to park’, *rapiar* ‘to rape’. The appearance of these loans is not, however, the result, as A claims, “of the pressure on Spanish speakers to adapt to English” (305), any more than *taco* and *arroyo* came into English as a result of pressure on English speakers to speak Spanish. When items cross cultural boundaries in language contact situations, their names, i.e., words, typically go with them. This principle can be observed everywhere where languages come in contact, and it is certainly the case that English has been a highly prolific recipient of loanwords and calques from virtually every language it has been in contact with. (Readers may find information about *code switching*

among bilinguals in Duran [1994], in which it is recognized “as the norm”, and Wardhaugh [2002].)

Kay Thurston’s “Mitigating Barriers to Navajo Students’ Success in English Courses” (326 – 327) provides a deeply insightful discussion of the particular pedagogical questions, linguistic and cultural, that apply to educating members of a homogenous minority population. The author describes her experience at Navajo Community College (NCC), whose mission is to prepare its Navajo students, most of whom grew up on the reservation in traditional Navajo families, to be “bicultural, so that they can function effectively in both the Western and Navajo worlds” (327). The obstacles to such an enterprise, as T documents, are legion and vast.

The first issue that merits comment is the “ambivalence toward Western education” observed in some Navajo students (334). The ideological presuppositions that underlie Western education and public schooling in the United States reflect a value on learning as a means of improving living conditions and the quality of life. While these notions spread through Western societies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they are not central in Navajo culture.

According to the author, the per capita income of \$4,106 put 56.1% of Navajos living on the reservation below the poverty level, half living in homes without water and electricity, some in traditional *hogans* (round wood and earth structures with earthen floors), many of whom cannot make it to school after heavy rains flood the dirt roads (328). The requirement to use a computer to type papers created a hardship for students who could not find \$1 to purchase a floppy drive to store their work (328). The picture drawn defeats our expectations for the basic necessities of the environment in which education may occur. Students who might continue their education must negotiate these factors, while faced with the prospect that “[s]uccess in a Western institution, too often, means leaving home and traditional ways behind” (335). A consequence of

this fact is that for these students, whether to attend and persevere in school beyond the mandatory age involves a problematic assessment.

Western educational institutions are organized in a manner inimical to Navajo cultural traditions. Strong family ties require that Navajo students experience conflict between the semester schedule and “honoring a teacher’s absence policy,” and serving the family needs and participating in the numerous community activities that tradition requires (329); as T points out, students typically choose to honor their family and community obligations at the expense of their classes. In the Western educational paradigm, with its presuppositions about the purpose and value of formal education, students in this situation are marginalized. But an institution seeking specifically to educate such students, who live their own cultural reality and whose cultural paradigm is firmly grounded in its own presuppositions, must find a way to negotiate divergent world views to achieve its aims with any consistent success. The author correctly identifies “Instructor/Faculty Ethnocentrism” as a barrier (330). We might add *institutional ethnocentrism* as well.

In the culturally homogenous environment of NCC, where 82% of adults speak Navajo and only 21% of persons five years and older speak English only (329 – 330), prescriptive attitudes toward English constitute a significant barrier. The author documents numerous diverging features of Navajo-influenced English, such as the absence of a suffix on inanimate nouns (→ *two ball*), supplying (-s) plural inappropriately (*sheeps, firewoods, mens*), and verb tense anomalies (330). These features appear systematically; they are not mere *mistakes* that students need to “clean up,” as some instructors believe (329).

Likewise discourse conventions vary between traditional Navajo discourse conventions and Western academic rhetorical styles (330-332). As T points out, acquiring a second dialect of

English, that represented by the written English favored in universities and the professions, is not the work of a semester or two (330). Successful teachers at NCC, as elsewhere, overcome their linguistic prejudices and their prescriptive attitudes and teach a curriculum that guides these students in their approach to Standard American English and its rhetorical conventions.

Yu Ren Dong, in “The Need to Understand ESL Students’ Native language” (351 – 361), argues that instruction benefits from teachers understanding the language organization and literacy skills their second language students bring to the classroom. The “ESL” category is wide and various. One element consists of international students, whose English instruction occurred in their home countries, where English is a foreign language, and who perhaps attended ESL classes in an English speaking country before passing TOEFL and enrolling in a university. Another component is made up of students whose families immigrated to English speaking countries while they were growing up. A third constituent includes students who were born in non-English speaking families but grew up in English speaking countries; these have native-like performance in their spoken English, yet their written English reflects limited development and distinct traces from their family’s native tongue. Dong’s comments are applied primarily to the first element; her observations, however, are nonetheless relevant to each type of ESL student encountered.

Dong notes that ESL students arrive in composition classes “with rich home cultural, educational, language, and literacy backgrounds” (352). The three categories named above in fact show a wide variety in educational and literacy backgrounds, depending on how much schooling (if any) they experienced in their (or their parents’) home countries. All such students, though, possess high degrees of linguistic competence in their home language. Furthermore, as human languages project the culture of the speech communities that use them, each of these three

constituents of the broader ESL spectrum is infused with the rhetorical conventions — discourse and style — that reflect the cultural organizations in which their home languages are used.

Mono-lingual, mono-cultural instructors who lack knowledge about the world's major languages are likely to view the by-products of the cultural and linguistic knowledge of their second language students that appear in their English composition as *mistakes*, which they then set out to *correct*. Dong recognizes that such students are in fact struggling “to adapt to a new discourse in the new culture” (359) and argues that “[i]nstead of treating these different ways of knowing as deficient or ignoring the impact of these ways of knowing on students’ learning to write in English,” we need to recognize them and take this knowledge into account in planning our instruction in order to make it “responsive to their needs” (359).

In “*From Classroom Instruction and Language Minority Students: On Teaching to ‘Smarter’ Readers and Writers*” (362 – 370), Linda Lonon Blanton addresses phenomena frequently seen in what has come to be called the “Generation 1.5”, students who were born in the United States or whose families immigrated when they were smaller children and who, while having grown up in a non-English language home environment, have acquired native like competence in English. B notes that while many such students enjoy a high degree of academic success and go on to attend prestigious post-secondary institutions, many others, for “reasons not always clear to us”, do not enjoy as much academic success, and find themselves in ESL or developmental classrooms, often alongside international or recent immigrant students. These the author refers to as “*language minority students*” (363).

B points out that these students pose problems in assessment and placement. They are uncomfortable when placed alongside foreign students, and they suffer “indignities” when exposed to the types of culturally oriented (and orienting) readings and instruction often

employed for such classes (364). Traditional basic/remedial writing instruction, on the other hand, is “designed for native English speakers, primarily nonmainstream dialect speakers,” which pedagogy “presumes that basic/remedial students have little need for language development” (366). Not only does this pedagogical presumption only miss the mark with “language minority students”, among dialect speakers it is highly adventurous as well.

The category of “nonmainstream dialect speakers” is populated with speakers of highly refined phonological, morphological, sentence-forming, and discourse strategy competence, much of which varies from the conventions of academic English discourse, and about which most designers of assessment instruments and instructors in basic/remedial course remain blissfully ignorant. It also should be pointed out that many of these “nonmainstream dialect speakers” likewise lack the “critical literacy” faculty, which is the main focus of the article.

The author sees in “language minority” students an absence of “critical literacy” (367): these functionally literate readers

decode texts, but seem unaware they can and should (from the academy’s perspective) bring their own perspectives to bear in creating a reading. When the last word on the last page is decoded, the reading is finished (367 – 368).

Thus, such students “reduce textual and intellectual complexity to a reductive simplicity” (368).

What B calls “critical literacy” is distinct from “literacy *skills*,” that have to do with the mechanical coding and decoding of the language into and from the orthography. She argues that in basic/remedial work designed for “language minority” students, opportunities must be created for them to interact with text (369), to develop the faculty of negotiating and creating meaning on their own.

A text of this type would not be complete without articles that focus on the problems of assessment and minority students. Kay Harlan and Sally I. Cannon, in “Failure: The Student’s or the Assessment’s?” (399 – 414), invite us to share their extended soul searching in response to their institutional assessments of the performance of an African American student they call Mica, a member of a pilot program for developmental writers at a Midwestern university. The program offers small class size, “increased contact time with faculty,” peer collaboration, and tutoring by upper division students (399). For her part, her high school career interrupted by her bearing a child during her junior year, Mica left her urban high school with a 2.7 GPA, and a score in the fourth percentile on the Nelson-Denny reading text, signifying an upper elementary grade level (399).

A selection of texts produced by Mica is produced, including the following sample:

Waking up saying good-bye to everyone “Bye Mama, Beebee, and Chris”.

Oh well I’m left here in this empty house again no one to talk to. Don’t anybody care that I’m 9-1/2 months pregnant, and my stomach is as big as a beach ball, and that I wobble like a weeble when I walk.

I remember whimpering as if I was a two years old. Mica get a whole to yourself (*sic*) stop whimpering for you eyes get puffy. Baby why don’t you come out. All my friend have had their babies. What are you waiting on to come out of there; sweetie your mama is tired of being pregnant ... ” (402).

Comments made by H and C about Mica and her writing include the following:

Mica’s paper jars and challenges, yet it handles language in complex ways. It shifts from direct to indirect discourse; from Mica as narrator, to Mica as a character thinking aloud, to Mica speaking directly to other characters or her

unborn child. But we dismiss this complexity and judge through the lens of “error.” (403)

In the end, H and C conclude that, given all their reservations, they would not pass Mica’s portfolio today (412), yet they are left with more questions than answers” (410).

The observations that follow will help. If, indeed, the authors’ institutional assessment judges “through the lens of ‘error,’” it shares a failing that has proven to be a common theme in the developmental writing classroom — prescriptive attitudes toward language and discourse form, coupled with a certain inability to help students acquire standard written grammar, and perhaps what is worse, a parochial conviction that the sorts of writing assigned in English classes bear any relation to writing in other disciplines in the academy or in the professions.

The authors’ observations about Mica’s writing are valid enough; however, an important principle is lacking in the discussion. Mica, as the authors point out, is a speaker of a Midwestern variety of Vernacular Black English, a variety imported from the American rural Southeast, who has acquired adult-like competence in the variety. Of course she “handles language in complex ways.” But this observation signifies only that, as a near-adult speaker of her variety, her language faculty is not neurologically impaired. Adult-like speakers can and do “handle language in complex ways.” But what has this to do with her college writing class?

What is missing in the article, and what understanding language variety and discourse analysis permits, is the observation that Mica has merely transcribed, following the familiar oral discourse conventions of her variety, her speech, i.e., she has written down the speech she would have produced if she were telling the story to a friend. This is not *writing*, as it is understood in the academic and business or professional context in which it is being assessed and evaluated. The first principle of assessment is that it be based on the objectives of the institution and

activity it seeks to measure. A university is in the business of scholarship and preparing adults to participate in business and the professions, activities that involve participants in a written language speech community.

Elsewhere the assertion is made that “Grammar is not neutral,” in the attitudes of developmental students (409); nor however, are scholarship committees, admissions boards, employers. It remains a social fact that assessments, incompatible though they may be with the linguistic performance and discourse strategies associated with dialects and varieties viewed as substandard, are nonetheless applicable to the objectives and mission of the institutions that employ them. The speech and writing conventions of the community a basic writer seeks to enter cannot be ignored. Or re-engineered, as those familiar with political attempts at language (re)planning can attest.

In “Negotiating Audience and Voice in the Writing Center” (416-425), Gregory Shafer illuminates fundamental, weighty questions in composition instruction, addressing some of the fixed ideas and empty formalism that characterize “the mechanical and prescribed prose that has become a staple of the five-paragraph theme” (417). Marcus, an African American student, asks, “What am I supposed to do? ... She’s not gonna let me use ‘ass’ in my paper” (417). Likewise Polly, a 25-year old, is dumbfounded by her instructor’s response to her paper detailing her experience of domestic violence: “Your form is good, but you sometimes deviate from the thesis. Remember, you’re writing a comparison/contrast paper. Don’t lose that focus. You might consider a review of fragments, too ...” (418). It is quite evident that the instructors in these cases are bound by prescriptive attitudes toward language and parochial notions of form, and the author raises the very apt question, “who is really being served in a pedagogy that elevates prescription over critical dialogue?” (422).

Certainly in the case of Polly, the great Scots scholar Hugh Blair (1783) provides excellent counsel: “Good composition admits of being carried on under many different forms.” If the goal of the course is gaining in the faculty of negotiating and creating meaning, and conveying that meaning clearly to a defined audience, the external imposition of form serves not as a tool but a barrier. S quite correctly castigates such instructors, who are “more interested in maintaining their authority than in self-actualization” (421).

S emphasizes “self-actualization, expression, or fulfillment” (419). Certainly these are worthy attainments, but they are not the ultimate goal of languages and their varieties, which are systems of communication that serve the ends of the community that uses them. The author laments that academic discourse “serves [students] in few ways beyond the context in which they use it” (419). This complaint, though, misses a vital point: What is the function of any language variety or style, other than to serve members of the community, precisely in the context in which they use it”?

What is writing in college and in business and the professions for? What is writing instruction for? Language is, after all, a symbolic system; it works, in communicating meaning, precisely because its elements are conventional among users. Written language, in its various contexts, is a specialized and standardized system which has developed heuristically over a very long period to serve the needs of its users.

Thus, hand-wringing over such questions as “why it was ‘inappropriate’ for Marcus to use ‘gonna’ or a double negative” (421) and “what is essential in terms of diction, organization, and style” (423) reflect more confusion than illumination. The first item conflates the relation of orthographic “gonna” with the pronunciation of *going to* in Marcus’s dialect. But this is an error. That quasi-phonetic, nonstandard orthographic representation is not the special province of

Marcus's or anyone else's dialect; it is universally found in ESL texts, said to represent typical pronunciation. The problem is that orthographies have a conventional relation to the language; an orthography, according to Coulmas, "is a normative device" (1989, 47), and spelling is "regarded as a social shibboleth" in literate societies (Coulmas, 1989, 257). This descriptive principle cannot be overcome by appeals to "self-actualization" and "expression" in academic or professional contexts. And the double negative, although a timeless feature of English grammar and discourse, has been so stigmatized since the time of the Latin lionizers of the eighteenth century that it is simply unthinkable in professional nonfiction. The elements of the author's questions resolve on defining the speech community in which the writer is participating and understanding its conventions, for as Blair (1783) wrote, "The standard for Purity and Propriety is the practice of the best writers and speakers in the country."

But are no options available except "the narrow parameters of what has come to be called safe 'academic discourse'" (418) and using "'ass' in my paper"? Clearly writers do not gain in the faculty of "critical literacy" when they are subject to the prescriptively based strategy of error focus and error correction. Nor do they improve when they continue to employ what Bernstein calls a "restricted" code, "where meaning is implicit and crudely differentiated" (1971, 47 et al.). Writers at all levels (and in this sense, all writers are "developmental") improve in their faculty when they labor to explore and utilize the resources of the language to select words and to render, as Blair puts it, "the meaning of each word, and the relation of all the words to one another, most clear and intelligible." In this way writers gain power in finding and expressing their own voices as they gain control over the systems of their language to communicate meaning to their audience.

Finally, Anne DiPardo takes another look at minority students in “‘Whispers of Coming and Going’: Lessons from Fannie” (427 – 443), as she recounts the experiences of Fannie, the sole Navajo student at a West Coast university. Important questions of “multiple identities, moving between public and private selves, living in a present shadowed by the past, encountering periods in which time and circumstances converge to realign or even restructure our images of who we are” that are part of the “social and linguistic challenges which inform their struggles with writing” (427) are explored. These important questions are applied throughout to “linguistic minority students” (442), as if they were the special province of the “non-Anglo student” (427).

This distinction, however popular and common place it may seem, is as destructive as it is ill conceived. A world view and resulting pedagogy that divides students into Anglos and non-Anglos fails to make many important social and linguistic distinctions, all of which pertain to questions of identity, self image, and the struggles involved in the acquisition of writing in the university, business, and the professions. For example, African students, educated at home in European organized schools, generally adjust readily to university writing as they acquire English, although cultural adjustments to studying and working on their own remain difficult; working class British and American speakers of nonstandard varieties, however, must acquire a second dialect of English, and writing competence in it, in a process every bit as daunting and alien to their experience as that experienced by Fannie in the present article. In the case of working class “Anglo” students, this process is largely hidden from view, as they *look like* majority students, they *seem* local, and their speech bears a recognizable *domestic* accent.

Under the deficit model informed by prescriptive attitudes and social class distinctions, such students are simply marginalized. The written language product of these phenomena are

viewed through the “lens of error,” and the students’ very real struggles readily ignored. This recognition is especially important in today’s political climate with its preference for first generation college students. The emphasis of this article, the need “to reach further than ever if we’re to do our jobs well ... to monitor [our] ethnocentric biases and faulty assumptions” (442), applies equally to *all* students who enter our classrooms to pursue the enterprise of gaining control over written English in the university.

Composition instruction in English departments in general focuses more on what teachers regard as rhetorical concerns than on language development. This is a curious state of affairs, for, as Blair pointed out, “Language is the foundation of the whole power of eloquence.” Rhetors in the Greek tradition have since the time of Gorgias commented on the power of effective language use (see Sprague, 1972). Aristotle himself taught, “under the head of Thought come all the effects to be produced by language” (*The Poetics*). Over the same period of time, the authors of the great Chinese classics placed great emphasis on language and style, an emphasis found in every literary tradition. Yet while linguistics and the science of language have developed, instructors in rhetoric and composition have become disconnected from its principles, and basic concepts that could shine clear light on the way instead remain unknown or ignored, disregarded.

The generation entering colleges and universities today needs help, guided by these principles, more than ever. These students can be better served — and education can truly become democratized — when instructors understand the important fundamental principles of language science and discover how they interact with the development of “critical literacy” that underlie the enterprise.

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