BEYOND GRAMMAR: BUILDING LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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Our students live in a rich world of language where, consciously or not, they must pay attention to subtle differences in form and style, drawing on a wide repertoire of linguistic resources.

But in the English curriculum, we rarely place students' own experience of language at the center of their study of the language arts curriculum at any level, K-16. If required to, we may include some formal grammar instruction alongside or imbedded in our writing instruction. But attention to students' language is most often associated with the idea that something needs improvement or correction, and that this area of study can be left behind once the "correct" forms have been safely mastered.

In our teaching, we've been exploring, instead, ways of inviting students into an ongoing inquiry into language as a central aspect of their work in writing. We want to engage students' interest in the worlds of language that they move in as speakers and writers, to replace their notion of grammar as rules for avoiding error with a focus on the linguistic resources available to them as language users. We want to offer our students alternative ways of conceptualizing language from the perspective of speakers and writers in real social contexts. We want them to appreciate the rich competence as language users that they (and their classmates from different language communities) bring to each new setting, social or academic, that they enter. And we want them to expand that competence as writers in school settings.

Our students are college freshmen (at a two-year technical institute and at an urban public university) who represent a variety of educational backgrounds and aspirations. They are also linguistically diverse: some are native speakers of English, others are learning English as a second or third or fourth language or are learning standardized English as a second dialect. Outside of the classroom, many speak mainstream English, and many others (whether English is their first or second language) share a common urban slang that has its roots in Ebonics.

We've been developing a writing curriculum that focuses on language as discourse and on our students' experiences as participants in different discourse communities—in communities where people share not only common interests, beliefs, values, but ways of talking, and writing, about these things. That is, we focus on the ways in which people actually use language, adapting its resources to the particular settings in which they participate, and we invite our students to discover just what goes on in the settings that most interest them, giving them some useful tools of ethnographic research and of discourse analysis to guide their inquiry. We also help them to shape their writing in academic genres and styles even as they explore the genres and styles of their various worlds. In this curriculum, students write memoirs exploring their past experiences in discourse communities. They carry out ethnographic studies of their most familiar, informal worlds, among friends, family, teammates, or in workplaces, churches, and gyms. They then focus in similar ways on the more formal educational worlds of the courses they are taking and the disciplines they are studying—on academic discourse communities. The larger curriculum, represented in a new text, *Exploring Literacy*, presents both language and literacy as situated in the ongoing practices of communities.

In this curriculum, students also explore the relationship between language and social identity, discovering that different languages, dialects, and styles are appropriate to the different settings they inhabit. Here's how one writer described the understandings she gained:

I found that as a writer I have several different personalities. Being a part of several discourse communities (Home—African-American, urban setting; School—psychology major; Work—Mission Hill Summer Program) has given me the ability to see things from different perspectives. When you are a part of different discourse communities, which most people are, you learn a lot about yourself and your life. I found that I could write in different ways for different settings. And when I listened to and read the transcription from a conversation I saw how versatile I was. (Kristen)

Why do we put such study and such understandings at the center of our teaching of writing? To answer that question, we'd like to describe some of the theoretical underpinnings of this work, and look more closely at what our students have discovered about the relationship of language and style to setting as they've carried out some specific guided inquiries.

Priorities for a Language-focused Writing Curriculum

In order for students like Kristen to discover and appreciate the nature of their own versatility as language users and to see how such versatility allows them to use language appropriately for different contexts, we've found that the traditional relationship between language study and writing needs to be altered in several ways:

Placing the primary emphasis on language as discourse—on extended stretches of language as used in actual contexts, rather than on idealized grammatical structures removed from real language use. For us as teachers of writing, this was partly a pragmatic concern. We knew that there was much evidence over many studies—for example, those drawn together by Patrick Hartwell—that explicit instruction in grammar outside of contexts of actual use had little

or no effect on students' sustained production of the desired grammatical forms in their writing, partly because it confused what Hartwell referred to as "linguistic etiquette" with our intuitive knowledge of the structures of the language we speak. When teachers taught those assumptions about the linguistic etiquette of school settings as if they were fixed rules of the grammar of the language, students most often emerged with the picture of their own linguistic resources as limited in their application to school purposes. But linguistic etiquette varies with setting. Our students record and study real conversations that take place in different settings, analyzing closely the ways in which language is used in them and discovering the ways in which grammatical resources are adapted to different styles and contexts, including academic ones.

Considering the ways in which language functions as people use it. Functional theories of language focus on the idea that people use language to carry out some of the fundamental purposes of human interactions and that the grammatical resources available to us have arisen in relationship to those uses and purposes. The linguist M.A.K. Halliday points to three functions that we are always carrying out simultaneously as we communicate in any context: an *ideational* function of naming the world and making statements and propositions about it, an *interpersonal* function of maintaining a connection to whomever we're writing or talking to as we make those statements, and a *textual* function of paying attention to how we're writing or saying these things—to creating an evolving text that's appropriate for the purposes and the setting. In the *Exploring Literacy* curriculum, we rename these respectively in terms of

- *what* is talked about and the shared knowledge that has to be drawn on or created in any exchange, spoken or written;

- *why* it's talked about and the shared purposes that have to be negotiated and renegotiated continuously within any exchange; and
- *how* it's talked about—the expectations for styles, genres and patterns of interaction that likewise have to be shared or negotiated.

Our students study the *what, why,* and *how* of the conversations they record, of the memoirs and studies they read, and of those that they write, always looking at how these functions are shaped by context. Through such study they gain a sense of how they adapt the grammatical resources of language to their own contexts and purposes.

Focusing on what people share along with their language. The linguist Jim Gee uses the term Discourse (with a capital D) to capture the idea that people who share a discourse—who share specific ways of naming and talking about the world—also share interests, beliefs, values, and ways of seeing and understanding what they talk about, and these ways are deeply rooted in their social identities and their sense of belonging to particular communities. Our students look for the shared beliefs and values that underlie the conversations that take place in the settings they study. Gee also points to the distinction between primary Discourses, those of home and family, and the secondary Discourses that people acquire as they move out into the world. In our urban setting, there is a rich cross-fertilization of discourses, and students discover, for example, that what might be a primary discourse for some—African-American Vernacular English/ Ebonics or Spanglish—becomes part of a secondary discourse for others—a shared urban "slang."

Exploring how language works within communities. Shirley Brice Heath shows how people's ways of using language—their "ways with words"—are an integral part of what it means to be an insider to a community. Her ethnographic study of the ongoing life in two rural communities showed how imbedded specific

features of language, style and genre were in all other aspects of the lives of those communities. We use selections from her study as a model for the much shorter studies our students carry out, as they look for the relationship between their own communities' ways with words and their ways of being in the world.

Focusing on what people are able to do with language as insiders to a setting—on their discourse competence. In *The Discovery of Competence*, Kutz, Groden and Zamel explored their work with diverse student writers, focusing on the discourse competence of insiders in familiar settings and the discourse competence of those who successfully move between settings. Drawing on that work, we guide students to observe and analyze aspects of their own discourse competence as speakers and writers in different settings, paying particular attention to the following elements:

- sensitivity to context;
- attention to shared knowledge, purposes and ways within a discourse community;
- a sense of the different expectations of different discourse communities;
- flexible understanding of appropriate language and style; and
- willingness to take risks and try out different ways of saying something, in speaking or in writing.

Through their studies, our students discover more about their own competence and the specific ways in which they draw on it as they move through different settings.

Recognizing that writers from all backgrounds need a place of safety where they can negotiate their own movement among multiple languages, dialects, and discourses. Peter Elbow, in "Inviting the Mother Tongue," proposes that such safety should be a fundamental goal of the writing classroom—that students can't write well unless

they feel safe with the language they bring as well as the forms they're working to acquire. He echoes Gee's notion of primary and secondary discourses, making the point that *"Standard Written English is no one's mother tongue"* (326), and he argues that we need to show students that we respect all of their mother tongues as linguistically sophisticated, that we see their users as smart, that we're willing to invite those mother tongues into our classrooms, and that we'll help other students in the classroom to gain equal respect for all mother tongues.   It's exactly these conditions that the *Exploring Literacy* curriculum tries to create.

Exploring Language in the Writing Curriculum

Rather than asking students to leave the rest of their experience of language at the classroom door, we ask them to bring it in, recalling it in memoirs, reconstructing it in classroom storytelling, tape-recording actual conversations that take place in their familiar discourse communities. As our students do so, they analyze what they've found, looking in detail at the features of language and style they find in one context, comparing them to those they produce in classroom contexts, and comparing the different discourse communities they and their classmates are studying. In the process, they gain insight into the elements of their own discourse competence as insiders in any setting, and the strategies they can draw on in moving from outsider to insider in new settings. At the same time, they gain a rich understanding of the fundamentally equivalent discourse competence that is demonstrated by all language-users, from all communities. In other words, they come to understand something that linguists know: among languages and dialects and styles, there is no inherent better or worse, good or bad, right or wrong; rather there is a better or worse fit with the particular setting, and what's right in one context will be wrong in another because it doesn't fit. (Saying "He and I will be going downtown" will ring as false among a particular group of friends as "Me and him be goin downtown" sounds wrong in most classrooms.) And, we hope, they come to a rich appreciation of each others' linguistic

resources, of the linguistic diversity that all bring to the classroom.

Here is what students have had to say about their own discoveries about discourse and context after transcribing conversations they recorded, translating when those conversations took place in another language, and analyzing their transcripts. (The prompts for this activity are included in Appendix A.) Their discoveries represent several fundamental understandings about how the resources of language are shaped by the communities that use them:

That discourse communities develop not only shared knowledge and interests but characteristic and distinctive ways of talking about those interests

> Guys, we truly are a different breed. From the way we talk to what we talk about, we really do have our own style. If you are a guy you probably don't even notice it, but it's true, when we are with our friends we talk about stuff that we wouldn't talk to others about, we talk about "guy stuff." I recorded a typical conversation between myself and a few of my friends, and I found that the stuff we talk about tends to be more male-oriented. For example, we go into cars and parties at great length. Now women may talk about these things too; however, they probably don't talk about them in the same way. (Jonathon)

That insiders to any setting have shared knowledge that's represented in the use of particular words / insider terms

> Our discourse community as skateboarders is definitely an insider's world. Just knowing what a skateboard is would not really be able to help you much on being an insider on our speech and our actions. . .[For example,] to understand this conversation you would need to know what Donny is; Donny is the name skaters have given to a certain long ledge on Beacon Street in Boston. The reason we call it Donny is because the first person to do something down it was a kid

named Donny Barley. Hence Donny Ledge. By giving it this name, we have made it much easier to talk about it instead of saying, "The ledge on Beacon Street that goes along the twelve stairs about three feet high. This is too time-consuming so we say "Donny." (Matt)

That discourse communities have typical speech acts—typical ways of using language to accomplish their purposes and intentions—that fit the needs of the community

There are many speech acts used in my discourse community [at the car repair shop]. One common speech act is "forcing." The purpose of forcing is to ease the frustration of a certain job. For example, a Chrysler Cab Forward car may need a new cooling tube system. When the part does not "cooperate" during installation, Ray or whoever is performing the repair may mutter somewhat of a profane command at the piece itself [to force it]. Forcing is most common when seemingly simple jobs become frustrating. When a repair becomes frustrating, it is not uncommon for whoever is performing it to be annoyed at the situation. He may want to show that he is frustrated with what he is doing by saying "C'mon you piece of @#$%" Forcing is a means of relieving stress induced by that certain job. (Chris)

That discourse communities develop a distinctive style, that may include elements not appropriate in other settings

Teenagers in Mexico use swear words to find acceptance. Partnered with slang, it's a way in which we all communicate. Of course, the degrees of swearing change depending on how well one knows another and there are certain rules that seem to automatically be followed. First of all, one does not swear in the presence of parents or children. To a Mexican, politeness is incredibly important, and one cannot just go around swearing to everyone. Even though teenagers in Mexico City might seem very rude, it is

very rare to have them swear in the presence of grownups. We acknowledge their higher standing and give them the respect they deserve. Children are respected because of their innocence. How much one swears and which specific curse words depend on your relationship to the other people. Whether you're older? Does the person you're talking to find swearing offensive or weak? How well do you know them? What is the setting? Is the group sex-segregated? Also be careful what and how much you say. The kids inexperienced in swearing stand out by using words they don't understand, by saying too many of them, and by being particularly vulgar. (Deni)

That in discourse communities where participants are multilingual, that style is likely to blend several languages

Arguing about the facts of life and our daily encounters is the most common form of communication found in my discourse community. We speak using a mixture of English, Swahili, and some other mother tongue phrases. This is a type of slang we call 'sheng'. For example, "wacha kuni letea bullshit juu ya zangu." The first three words in that sentence are in Swahili, the rest are a mix of English and mother tongue words. The sentence itself says, "Stop giving me bullshit about my money." If we have someone who doesn't speak the language we speak (i.e. an outsider) we refrain from talking and let him/her get the benefit of us adjusting. (Michael)

In another segment of the curriculum, we ask students to observe and analyze the shifts they make between informal conversations and more formal writing (see prompts in Appendix B). From recording stories they tell to a small group of friends or classmates, for example, and then comparing them to those they write for a class collection, they make the following sorts of discoveries.

That writing, as well as speaking, involves certain assumed, conventional, insider understandings

> During this assignment of spoken versus written storytelling, I became more aware of things everyone does unconsciously every day: the shifting in style with accordance with certain purposes, ways and common knowledge that are part of everyone's intrinsic discourse competence. . . . In the written version, I have a title, two paragraphs, and distinct punctuation, because from my experience in other writing communities, I have gotten used to these writing conventions. . . . The written version assumed all those standards because they are accepted for the purpose of a writing assignment and are part of the common knowledge of how to complete such an assignment. . . .(Dina)

That their own discourse competence is demonstrated in their ability to adjust their own style for different purposes and audiences

> In the spoken version of my story, I catered more to my audience, which was my fellow classmates. In the written version, the catering was focused on my professor. . . . I tend to shift style, tone, and pay particular attention to word selection when shifting from spoken to written language.
>
> The two styles that I used to tell my story were strikingly different. This is clearly seen in the introductory sentences; the first quote is from the spoken version and the second quote is from the written version: "Aright yawl, here I go: this is the story of a loss—a loss of a best friend. This is my story that begins when I was living in Haiti. . . ." In comparison to "Oh the tragedies of childhood—the pains, the trials and tribulations, the horrors! As I recall this incident that happened so very long ago, the pain still lingers like stray clouds after a bitter storm."

In the written version I wanted to set up a mental image and a somber feeling. The reason I think that I did not go into detail in the spoken one to create a sad feeling with words is because my tone of voice and the pauses in the way I delivered each word supplied the feeling I was trying to convey. . . .

My classmates commented that. . .it was written in a mock-serious way. They said the language was richer and even though it was more formal, it still held somewhat of a personal sensation to it because of the richness in language. (James)

Through such discoveries, students begin to perceive that the language of the world around them can be an interesting object of study, and that the implicit understandings they've gained about how to adapt to the style of any community can help them as writers in new, academic settings.

What We've Learned from Our Students

The students whose observations are represented above bring different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to our classrooms. Our classrooms too are in different settings, with different orientations toward the academic world. In listening to all of our students as they bring their worlds into the classroom and in reading their analyses as they make sense of the data they share, we've come to understand, in a richer way, the nature of their discourse competence and how to create classroom environments that encourage them to draw on it. Whether students are moving between home communities and the discourse communities of the academic disciplines they will study or into vocationally-oriented studies and future workplace communities in fields like automotive repair, by naming their insider ways with language in familiar settings, we've learned how to help them be more attuned to those ways, and to the competence they bring, when they approach new settings as outsiders.

At the same time we've come to several larger beliefs that will underscore our future work as teachers of writing:

- To begin to shape a society that appreciates the diversity of its members' linguistic resources, we have to invite all of our students, from all backgrounds, into the same conversation about the rich comparability of those resources.
- The best way to frame that conversation is by focusing on discourse—on the primary discourse that all of us bring from our homes, families, first communities and the secondary discourses that we acquire as we move out into other settings. This focus places all students, no matter what their first language or dialect, in an equal position in our classroom inquiry.
- People acquire new discourses by being full participants in the settings that use those discourses, and few people engage comfortably in a setting when they don't feel comfortable and confident about what they bring and what they can offer. Engaging students in academic inquiry where they are the ones with the expert knowledge about what they are studying can increase their level of comfort in writing in standardized English.
- Gaining a sense of their discourse competence, in any language or dialect and in any sort of conversation, whether spoken or written, can give writers some of the confidence (and strategies) they need to participate in the new written conversations of academic settings.

Increasingly, our students share these understandings. James, a student from a Haitian immigrant family, recalled his own struggles to learn English on the streets and in a bilingual classroom in the memoir he wrote early in the semester:

The progress was one of trial and error. There was a lot of listening to different conversations and practicing what was heard with different groups. "Hey dawg, you saw the Monday Night Raw last night, yo that was mad fatt. I'm telling you Hogan can't be seen and ain't no one got nothin on him."

We've seen his comments above about the contrast between his storytelling style when speaking to his classmates and his written style when his teacher was included in the audience. At the end of the semester, after studying interactions between males and females from different cultural groups as they came together in the school cafeteria and following that with a more focused study on cultural differences in flirting, he reflected on what he had learned from this sort of work.

As I learned that being an insider relied on more things than terminologies and lexicon, I received a better appreciation for culture and the differences in groups and individuals. A person's ways with words carried a message that contains years of history, beliefs, values, and shared ways, and all those should be approached with ignorance and respect rather than an "I know it" attitude. . . .The study of discourse community was beneficial on a personal front as I aspire to be a better writer and an academic and social front as I seek to better communicate with people in different settings.

The appreciation that James has gained is one that we would wish for all of our students, and for their teachers.

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APPENDIX A: PROMPTS FOR TAPING AND ANALYZING CONVERSATIONS IN DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

RESEARCH STRATEGY: COLLECTING CONVERSATIONAL DATA

Begin by collecting one example of an ordinary conversation that occurs in your discourse community. Although it's possible to collect conversational data by taking careful notes on a conversation—recording who spoke and what they said as accurately as possible, it is difficult to do this effectively when you're also a participant in the conversation. It's better then, for the purposes of this study, to tape record a conversation.

You'll want to ask the participants for permission to record the conversation. (It's unethical to record someone's words and to play them or transcribe them for others to hear or read without permission.) Most people don't mind participating if they know you're looking at the way that conversations are structured as part of a school research project and that they don't have to be identified by name if they don't want to be. While verbal permission is sufficient for an informal project, your class

may decide to use a common written permission form. A typical format would be: I understand that [name] has recorded a conversation in which I was a participant for a research project for [course], and I give him/her permission to use that recording and a transcript of it for that project. Signed, _____.

Choose a time when everyone will be gathered around, and record the actual conversation. Most participants generally forget that the tape recorder is on after they get five or ten minutes into the conversation. Only rarely has a student researcher had to turn to a different group or found that group members talked in ways that were too strained and uncomfortable to be representative of their ordinary conversations.

Tape record at least 30 minutes of the conversation. Then transcribe a short segment (about 3-5 minutes), one that contains lively exchanges between two or more participants and that seems typical of the sorts of interaction that takes place in this setting. In transcribing, try to get down the actual words as they were spoken, including repetitions and pauses and interruptions.

RESEARCH MEMO: ANALYZING A CONVERSATION

Begin by glossing your transcript of the conversation, looking at what is said, why, and how, marking key words and phrases and making notes in the margins.

Start with *what* the participants in this conversation talk about, marking and making notes in the right-hand margin about the elements of *what, why*, and *how* that we looked at for a sample conversation.

Add notes for anything else you observed that you think might be significant in understanding this conversation in this discourse community. Are there places where what is said and how it's said seems especially typical or characteristic of the participants in this community, of the things they care about, and of the ways they interact? What does your gloss show you that fits with the initial lists you've made of the typical words, objects, and activities of this community and of the typical ways in which they talk? How does this add to the picture you have been developing of this discourse community—of what's shared and what's valued there, of why the participants typically come together and have conversations like this, and of the roles they play there?

As you write up your analysis of this conversation in a journal response or exploratory essay, you'll want to give your readers a sense of what your discourse community is like by showing them what can be seen in one conversation. In other words, the conversation serves as an example that points to important aspects of life in this discourse community.

Begin by giving a general introduction to this segment of a conversation—to this "episode" in the life of the community, including the important background information that outsiders would have to know to make sense of this situation.

Then write up your analysis. You will want to talk your readers through the conversation represented in your transcript, telling them

- what this exchange contributes to the larger, ongoing concerns and purposes of this discourse community; and
- exactly how the details of *what*, *why*, and *how* work in making that contribution.

You want to help your readers see what you've seen in the transcription as characteristic of conversations in your community.

Your goal here is to produce as rich and detailed an analysis as possible and then to say what you have learned from it, what it leads you to see about this conversation and about your discourse community. This analysis will eventually be incorporated into your larger study of your discourse community.

APPENDIX B: PROMPTS FOR TAPING AND ANALYZING SPOKEN AND WRITTEN STORIES

OBSERVATION ACCOUNT, PART 1

To look at your own discourse competence in the ways in which we'll look at Dana's, you'll want first to tape-record a story of a moment in your experience as you tell it to classmates or to a friend or family member outside of the class. It's important to have a real audience for your story, because you'll want to be able to see the ways in which you respond to an actual listener. As you decide what to tell, think about what you might want to write about in your own memoir. Are there stories that you've told before? If so, how might one of those stories capture something typical about the ways of thinking and talking that characterize one of your discourse communities? Or you might want to use this moment to tell something that you haven't told before, to explore the possibilities of recapturing a moment in your past language and literacy experiences that you want to think some more about. The story you choose at this point does not have to be included in your memoir; telling one story may give you ideas for others that you'll want to write about in the end.

Telling stories in the classroom can also serve a number of other purposes: it can give you a chance to get to know more other members of your class or of your writing group; it can give you a sense of the audience you'll be writing for and of what you do to capture their interest; and it can allow you to explore and reflect on common themes in your different experiences.

When you've finished telling and recording your story, transcribe it, trying to capture your actual telling as accurately as possible, including pauses and hesitations. You may want to use a sequence of three dots (. . .) instead of conventional punctuation to show pauses, using the example of Dana's transcription.

Next, create a written version of your story. If you were now contributing that story to a class collection, how would you write it? Decide how you'll begin, what you'll include, how you'll end, if your purpose is to recreate the same basic story in writing for the same audience.

OBSERVATION ACCOUNT, PART 2

To analyze your spoken story, look to see (and gloss) *what* you talked about—the events you told, the words you used, the details you included, the shared knowledge you created for your listeners. Look also at *how* you talked about these things, at where you began and ended, at where you stepped into the events and where you stepped back and commented about them. Working from your gloss, try to determine *why* you talked about these things in these ways. What guided your moment-to-moment choices as the teller of this story? Are there ways in which the particular situation—telling this story in the classroom, following on the stories told by others—affected your choices?

In listening to your tape, were there parts you particularly liked? Things you might say differently if you were to tell the story again? What do you think was most effective about your telling of this story?

In your account of this inquiry, move through your story, describing what you've seen about what you were saying and why and how at each moment, and considering what that shows about your discourse competence—about the understandings you brought to bear on telling this story in this context.

OBSERVATION ACCOUNT, PART 3

To look at differences in the two versions of your story, begin by glossing the written version, looking particularly for changes you made from your oral telling. You'll want to indicate

- what words, events, or ideas appear only in one version,
- what things appear in both, and
- what appears but is reshaped or altered in the second version.

After glossing what appears in these two versions of your stories, see what you can tell about the purposes and assumptions that were implicit in your decisions as a writer, and the ways in which these purposes and assumptions affected the choices you made about how you told your story in the written version.

What examples can you find of the ways in which you

- adjusted to the contexts for which you were speaking and writing;
- paid attention to shared knowledge, purposes, and ways;
- drew on your sense of the classroom discourse community;
- made choices in language and style that were appropriate to what you were trying to accomplish, at a particular moment, in your telling or writing your stories; and
- took risks and tried out different ways of saying something?

In your account of this work, write about the choices you've made in each version of your story and what they show about your discourse competence as speaker and writer.