Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 27

Issue 1 *Past, Present, Future: Where Have We
Been and Where Are We Going?*

Article 8

2011

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Recommended Citation

Shafer, Gregory (2011) "Four Decades Ago: Learning from Mina Shaughnessy," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 27: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1831>

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Four Decades Ago: Learning from Mina Shaughnessy

Four decades ago Mina Shaughnessy wrote her now classic *Errors and Expectations*, forcing composition instructors all over the nation to rethink their approach to basic writing. Essential to Shaughnessy's premise was that students bring to class writing skills that are often incompatible with the academic model espoused by their professors. Early in her work, Shaughnessy (1977) labeled these students "strangers in academia" (p. 6) lamenting the daunting task they faced in "learning the rules and rituals of college life" while trying "to reconcile the worlds of home and school" (p. 6).

Equally important, however, was her contention that students come to the writing class with a vigorous and complete language and that most of their errors come from their inability to transform their very complex and functional home language to a discourse that is appropriate for the college paper. It was not that students didn't possess a very dynamic language but that they were often unsuccessful in fashioning it to meet the model college paper. She considered it a tragedy that schools failed to see "the intelligence of their mistakes or thought to harness that intelligence in the service of learning" (Shaughnessy, 1977, p. 13). When Johnny doesn't write with the freshness of a textbook—and when dialects of less favored people become mingled in the discourse—we become uncomfortable, failing to see that their language evinces a very vibrant literacy of its own. And yet, as Shaughnessy argues, to negate the linguistic ability of the student will only exacerbate the dilemma. "Here the teacher, confronted by what first appears to be a hopeless tangle of errors and inadequacies, must learn to see below the surface of these failures the intelligence and linguistic aptitudes of his students" (1977, p.12).

That was almost four decades ago and I often wonder what we have really learned from this seminal work in writing instruction. Do we respect the linguistic competence that students possess? Do we try to respect and build on it, or do we simply attempt to expunge it with the underlying contention that non-standard English represents a deficit and must be swept away with an assiduous wave of our red pens? As a college faculty member who is often asked to read student essays and use that essay to place a writer in a certain composition class, I have been able to see myriad examples of the literacy and perspicacity that often do not fit neatly into what college instructors consider literate prose. Embedded in the double negatives and use of habitual *be* is a discourse that resonates with voice and vigor, but most of these writers will be placed in a pre-college writing class simply because of these anomalies.

Reading placement papers has also brought me in close contact with these students' lives, their aspirations, and the reasons they are enrolling in college. In most cases, it seems clear that the basic tenets espoused by Shaughnessy—and later reinforced by Denny Taylor and Shirley Brice Heath—are conspicuously arrayed in the students' narratives, despite the lack

of Standard English. In most of the placement papers I read, there is a purpose, a vivacity, and conscience that is essential to any writer. Students misspell words and reveal dialects but rarely do they complete an essay without displaying a lively literacy that is the foundation for successful compositions.

"I never wanted nothing as much as college but family tell me over and over that it can't happen, not for me. But I have a dream and that tops anything that is offered in my dark neighborhood of drugs." This excerpt, from a student essay, is emblematic of the energy that resonates through the writing I read when placing students. While much of the prose is sprinkled with aspects

of African American English—or other dialects from the students' background—the essential component of communication that teachers hope to foster is both conspicuous and compelling. "Audiences are moved by message and style of delivery, not correct spelling,

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lack of copula deletion, or the addition of the *s*-morphemes to the third person singular present tense verbs," writes Geneva Smitherman (2001) in addressing what she refers to as a teachers' "mania for correctness" (p. 130). And yet, I wonder if colleges all over the nation place students with little cognizance or appreciation of African American English or other dialects that are employed in students' writing. And I further wonder if we should be penalizing these students for using a mode of English that is rule-governed and often appropriate for the context in which they are writing. Indeed, in crafting a piece of writing about oneself, shouldn't the language be less formal and capture the dialect of the author?

How Should We Place Students?

What then do we do when we place students in college composition classes? It is clearly an important question, because the method by which we evaluate student writing can have a profound impact on their success in college. If we choose to relegate all students who fail to display the language of the academy to remedial or developmental classes, we tacitly tell them that their language has no validity and that our view of literacy is monolithic, fixed, and oblivious to the non-standard forms of literacy that animate our culture's discourse on a daily basis. If we consider the notion that literacy is about more than fulfilling the standard aspects of the typical college paper—that it can and should transcend the familiar style and lexicon that we read in college compositions—then we broaden the

notion of literacy and work to make our writing classes multicultural and democratic. This democratization begins with how students are treated in the placement office as their essays are being read and with the recognition that there are multiple literacies for myriad social situations.

Fundamental to this notion of multiple literacies is Lynn Z. Bloom's (2006) condemnation of what she calls "respectable academic writing" (p. 74). For Bloom, too much of college composition is rife

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with conventional, polite prose that display no life or vigor but satisfies the safe textbook standard that has come to typify the writing class. "Good enough writers are advised to keep out of sight, even while taking responsibility for their own ideas," (p. 78) she argues. "The individual's human voice is generally not welcome, particularly in papers written by teams of authors, as in the hard sciences where convention dictates anonymity," she adds later (p. 79).

Essential to Errors and Expectations is the notion that basic writers come to the academic setting with a great potential to express themselves but this potential is neither respected nor included in the assignments students are given. Shaughnessy lamented the instructor's tendency to create monolithic ideas of right and wrong rather than delving into the linguistic ability that is evident in the basic writer's errors.

"For the [basic writing] (BW) student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to someone" (p. 7) writes Shaughnessy. "By the time he reaches college the BW student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes" (p. 7). For too many students that Shaughnessy studied, writing was about deficits rather than competence. It was about rooting out the home language so as to plant the seeds of academic literacy. And when writing becomes about learning a single kind of discourse—rather than the heteroglossia that Bakhtin espoused, failure is assured.

Shaughnessy's answer was that teachers must begin to see errors in a different way and allow all writers, even those who are dubbed as "basic", to be able to write and have their home language respected. Shaughnessy's (1977) conclusion is written almost as an admonition to the teacher and is a solemn call to transcend the prescriptive, teacher-centered approach that often dominates our teaching of developmental writing, permitting writers to grow as language users while retaining some of the world they brought to academia;

College both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking and talking about the world, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experiences as outsiders. (p. 292)

Central to Shaughnessy's quotation and her entire work is the question of how to most effectively teach students who do not fit the profile of the well prepared college student. Is our goal to simply "civilize" them and teach them the language of the academy or do we make the class a more inclusive exploration of the many literacies that thrive and flourish in communities all around our schools? While most of us would agree that we need to respect what Bakhtin called "heteroglossia" or the many voices that are forever part of all of our students' lives, it seems difficult to transcend or offer alternatives to the academic model of writing and correctness.

Reconsidering the Notion of Developmental Writer

The first step in designing a curriculum that respects the voices of students is in the placement process. As someone who reads hundreds of placement papers each year, I have come to recognize the incredible importance of a paradigm shift in the way we approach and evaluate difference. Student one, let's call him Sam, writes his paper about his stint in jail, uses double negatives, omits the past tense "ed" marker, and never uses paragraphs. Sam's errors are all rooted in his African American heritage and reflect an authenticity that enhances his narrative. To reduce his essay to departures from Standard English is to treat his dialect as irrelevant and negate an important part of communication.

"I use to think I couldn't go to no college because of the noise I get from other family. But I know that there is a place for me to make a difference and help my neighborhood. That's where college come in."

If our goal is simply to divide writers into those who have mastered the very predictable wording and style of the college theme—replete with Standard English and common themes about a college major—from those who are not well versed in the amenities of college essays, this excerpt is an easy placement. He should be put in pre-college level writing and be taught that paragraphs are essential, that the ed and s morphemes are integral to one's correct writing, and that double negative are always anathema to scholarly prose.

But if our goal is to foster a writing that is democratic, that expands literacies to authentic contexts and cultivates a truly creative spirit, a paradigm shift is clearly in order and must begin with the way we see dialects and language diversity and the way we handle them in the placement process.

"We don't have no business in Iraq and I get mad as a firecracker every time I hear about another brother being killed over there, being a stiff for the government who's done nothing for that man while he take his stand in his hometown."

It's hard to read and consider the excerpt above and not be moved by the sentiments, by the fresh and unabashed use of figurative language, the rhyme at the end that seems to address the writer's interest in rap music, or the double negative that personalizes the message. Indeed, if we were to consider the power of the piece—and remove it from the typical college model—it would warrant a very positive message—one that probably be considered cogent in another context. And when we consider the fact that the piece is written in African American English—and is not simply incorrect—we have additional reason to reconsider how we place students and their essays.

The Importance of Workshops

The first step, I believe in making our placements more sensitive to the complex aspects of literacy is to offer workshops on African American English and the entire notion of code-switching. Each semester during the year, I do just such a workshop for our faculty at Mott Community College. My focus is always on language variety and the need to see language as dynamic and social rather than monolithic and static. The language spoken at a local barber shop is different than that at an attorney's office. At the same time, the written prose written for a magazine with a primarily African American audience is different than that done for *Newsweek* or *Time*. If we are to be successful teaching effective language use, we should consider eliminating strict ideas of correctness and supplant them with theories of what is most effective, of code switching. Indeed, the real test of an effective communicator is not how well they mimic Standard English but how seamlessly they are able to move from one discourse to another, how adroitly they code-switch. In short, we must come to terms with the idea that literacy changes as language does and that contexts affect the way we use English.

Introducing the phenomenon of code switching is integral to this school-wide transformation and begins with a realistic look at the way language is used by all of us on a daily basis. When we introduce the notion of code switching we teach our audience about the practice of changing our form of English to fit the particular context in which we find ourselves. Code switching addresses the complex, organic, and socially vibrant aspect of language. It reminds us that Geneva Smitherman's use of African American English in her publications is both effective and acceptable despite its rarity in scholarly settings. Code switching allows Hilary Clinton to sprinkle a speech in front of African Americans with African American English and to become more endeared to her audience by doing it well. In short, code switching allows teachers to become aware of the fact that language instruction is not monolithic or static—that it changes and is forever infused with words and expressions from its changing demographics. As Asa G. Hilliard (2002) has argued the "issue must be handled in terms of total context" (p. 90).

Code switching in Workshops

One of my first steps in my workshop is to engage colleagues in code switching exercises, helping them to envision assignments for their own classes. I begin with an idea borrowed by Judith Baker, (2002) a high school English teacher who published an essay on "Trilingualism" in the book *The Skin that We Speak*. In it, Baker explains how she teaches her students that there are "at least three forms of English language that most Americans need to learn in order to lead socially fulfilling and economically viable lives at this time in history" (p. 51). She goes on to discuss how each language is equal to the other and is appropriate in certain contexts. Thus, Baker adds, "I concentrate on how different forms of English are appropriate in different contexts, instead of relying on the right/wrong dichotomy students usually face in school" (p. 52).

This is what I do in my workshops as well. Asking participants to write short pieces for various contexts and discussing

the reason why one discourse would be clearly more effective than another. We write a short note for a friend, a colleague we don't know well, and for a business associate. We do a short movie summary for a publication that is written for mostly older adults and a second for an MTV-type publication. In each, participants have fun considering the ways language changes to fit the audience and the goals while being enlightened as to the complexities of language in the real world. Further, by doing this, we come to understand the importance of building upon students already know, rather than treating them as blank slates or defective language users that need to be repaired. Indeed, as we explore the various ways English is used, we find that dialects that are often shunned in the formal academic class are more appropriate in our workshop situations.

Language Prejudice

Despite our best hopes, the fact is that many college instructors do not understand or accept the idea of language variety. Most believe that there is a right and wrong way to use English and that this notion of correctness represents an inherent goodness or civilizing factor—one that should be given to college students who fail to speak or write it. This notion of civilizing goes back to the beginning of our nation and reflects our elitist and genocidal traits when it comes to difference.

In the 1960s, this theory was articulated in the myth of verbal deprivation and was based on the work of Basil Bernstein, (1969), a British social psychologist who argued that minority children often live in restricted linguistic environments, where language was rarely articulated because social norms made elaborate language unnecessary. Specifically, Bernstein suggested that Black children often speak less and are less verbal because their culture demands obedience rather than open discussion. From this idea of a restricted and elaborate code, many argued that children of color did not speak English at all but simply reflect language and cultural deprivation. Today we continue to attempt to refute this theory and change the way we teach language variety. "Linguists are in an excellent position to demonstrate the fallacies of the verbal deprivation theory," argues William Labov (2002, p. 151). "All linguists agree that nonstandard dialects are highly structured systems" (p. 151). Thus, Labov concludes, "our job as linguists is to remedy this ignorance" (p. 151).

Most of my colleagues see Standard English as not only the key to success for their minority students but also a better, cleaner, less cluttered language. It reflects the fundamental ignorance that Labov lamented and that can undermine democratic learning. Indeed, as Otto Santa Ana (2004) argues, "each day, many millions of Americans are denied their right to speak their own words. Remarkably, civil rights advocates still do not roundly condemn this silencing" (p. 1).

The linguist Walt Wolfram (1999) has written specifically about language ignorance and the intolerance that underlies it. In particular, he comments on his attempt to introduce the

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legitimacy of African American English in workshops he does with English teachers and the visceral contempt that he senses from those who attend his sessions. For Wolfram, this is a revealing sign of how little we have progressed in terms of envisioning AAE as a valid discourse for school and society and offers a disquieting window into the classroom English class. Despite numerous attempts to explain that all dialects are rule-governed and valid, he finds even language teachers to be "hostile" to the notion that Ebonics be considered a part of the English class. He concludes by suggesting that "language diversity is one of the most fundamental dimensions of human behavior still entrenched in such pervasive mythology, yet there are few systematic and programmatic movements directed toward educating the American public about the facts of dialect diversity" (p. 58).

Clearly, it is critical that we begin to address the legitimacy of language diversity and the notion that academic classrooms are essentially places to eradicate linguistic difference. Clearly it is time to embrace the idea that language class is about more than inculcation of a single standard.

The Class

Beginning a class on discourse variety or non-standard dialects is as easy as it is fascinating and adds an incredibly interesting component to the understanding that language is social. Further, it adds to the understanding one engenders in faculty workshops, where teachers are introduced to the idea that language must be perceived in a broader light.

The first step is to provide students with a brief primer on language variety and the idea of speech communities. I often discuss language differences in various regions of the nation and then augment that with an exploration of social dialects and their place in the culture. African Americans speak differently than many whites and students from the suburbs often speak differently from those in the city. Our first class on this topic begins with a short introduction to the idea of speech communities and the significance of this to the person's life and identity. What about children and their enchanting proclivity to copy expressions learned from their parents? This is their first community and the language they learn establishes not only their ability to communicate but their entire identity. My students' first assignment is to go home and list the many unique characteristics of their home language. How does it differ from people in other parts of town or social or ethnic groups? Why? How important would it be for this dialect to be embraced in the school and what is the effect of having it "corrected" when participating in an English class and wanting to succeed while maintain a personal identity?

Students return to class with an incredible array of examples as well as a great deal of pride and empowerment. Talking about language difference permits them to discuss something they know, so they find themselves teaching the class about an area of their life and the community from which it is shared. "In my neighborhood," Davidian started, "you use double negatives and in certain circumstances a lot more curse words. Some of it is part of the African American culture and part of it depends on the situation."

Sarah came to class with several reflections on how she and her other white friends use African American phrases while in

social situations and how often she fails to realize how pervasive these words are. She mentioned words like "bling," "peeps," and "my bad," as words and expressions that have come to be accepted as mainstream English among her friends. "It's interesting how this language slipped into our way of speaking," she added.

And so, we begin to appreciate language diversity and the social, malleable character of language. We come to respect language difference and understand its origins, because, as Gloria Anzaldua (1987) lamented, "If you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity. I am my language" (p.107).

Clearly, it is essential that students come to appreciate the intense cultural importance of language to individuals and the need to respect and understand others' ways with words. Indeed, Shirley Brice Heath concluded *Ways with Words* with the caveat that it was imperative for the school to accept the language differences of Trackton and Roadville if either community was

to ever feel accepted and have a chance for meaningful literacy. "Unless the boundaries between classrooms and community can be broken down and the flow of cultural patterns between them encouraged," wrote Heath and Labov (2004) argues that a teacher's attitude toward a student's speech is the most powerful single factor" in determining a teacher's expectations for that student (p.49).

Whether we see students as medical illnesses that need to be cured—as Mike Rose (1989) discusses in *Lives on the Boundary*—or as a vibrant expression of their linguistic mosaic is entirely contingent upon our willingness to transcend the assignments that ask for a single way of writing and seeing correctness. Much of our success as democratic instructors lies in the balance.

I follow my discussion of speech communities with a look at *Do You Speak American?* the PBS film that travels around the country looking at the diversity and attitudes of Americans. The host, Robert McNeil, crosses the map, moving from a discussion with New Englanders and their regional dialect to New York and the attitudes various people have on what is Standard English. As he moves to the West, McNeil examines the speech of African Americans and the attitudes held by many who see Ebonics as a sloppy alternative to real English. He looks at the development of Chicano-English and the way teenagers in Southern California adopt certain characteristics of various dialects to create their own identity and social niche.

In short, the film helps bolster the notion that there are many ways to use English and that dialect difference is not a limitation but an added strength that should be exulted, celebrated,

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and studied. "You couldn't make it very far in my neighborhood if you simply talked like an educated white man," said Maria, a Hispanic American. "You wouldn't be trusted."

Final Assignments

Our final essays revolve around a particular setting or speech act. In doing this, we show students that language is as diverse as the people with whom we come in contact. Colleen chose to write a paper on the language she uses while speaking with her parents and later with her friends, and finally with her boyfriend. In each context, she noticed a distinctly different discourse that reflected power relations.

With my parents I am often kind of short and sarcastic because I am always trying to win some privilege from them. My friends bring out a very free and open language, and my boyfriend and I often speak as if I was his mother. I was surprised to see that.

A second essay distinguished between the African American English spoken at home among older parents and family members and the language spoken with friends and peers. James wrote in detail about the dramatically different use of AAE when he spoke with his friends and suggested that it is a cultural norm among his friends as well. "When I'm home, I don't use four-letter words or slang. When I'm with my friends, it's a totally different scene," he wrote.

Teaching both students and teachers about language diversity is essential if we are to change our racist attitudes about language diversity and improve our pedagogy. This is a critical topic that has long been stymied by our collective intransigence to accept dialects as equal and expand the idea of academic discourse. Much is at stake. Indeed as Wolfram (1999) concludes in his essay, "It should be clear from this discussion that change will not simply take place without intervention. There is a need for proactive involvement on many levels, ranging from broad-based government policy to individual practice" (p. 19). Mina Shaughnessy, whose words began this essay, agrees with Wolfram and the notion that it is educators who must learn about the incredible linguistic acumen that students bring to class and make our assignments more malleable, so that the academy does not become an exclusive place. "We must hope that our enterprising students will somehow weather our deficiencies and transcend our yet cautious expectations of what can accomplish in college." (p. 294) because our students have "their own worlds to grow up in and they arrive on campuses as young adults, with opinions and languages and plans already in their minds" (p. 292).

It is upon this we build.

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