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Bernadette Gongora

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METHODS

False Consciousness and Developmental Writing

BERNADETTE GONGORA

“Schools serve mainly as agencies of social reproduction which manufacture docile and obedient workers for the state; knowledge acquired in the classroom is generally considered to be part of the fabric of false consciousness and teachers appear trapped in a no-win situation” (Giroux, 2006, p. 160).

This essay is concerned with the reproduction of a college underclass, the continued presence of false consciousness, and the disquietingly reductive pedagogy that continues to haunt developmental composition. While most programs I have studied seem determined to serve beginning writers and assist them in achieving academic success, many do little more than remind these writers that they are different and have less control over the writing they do. In too many cases, they must be prepared to “invent the university,” achieve academic literacy, or simply “catch up”—requiring more skills, more directed instruction, and more of what Freire called “banking.”

Five decades ago, Mina Shaughnessy identified this dilemma, making a rather simple and impassioned plea that basic writers be given the same dignity and freedom accorded to the rest of the composition world. In *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*, she discussed the alienation developmental writers experience, the sense of being “strangers in academia,” and the failure of teachers to see them as writers. She delved into the messy and very idiosyncratic aspects of composition and reminded readers that writing is always about finding both meaning and personal voice. Her plea, in the end, was more about liberating basic writers, so they could engage in a practice that allowed them to write rather than imitate the script of the advanced writer.

The Status of Developmental Composition

Today, as I look at the developmental programs at my own school and in the community college just thirty minutes away, I see developmental writers subjected to much of the same punitive and regressive practices that inspired Shaughnessy to write in 1977. For instance, in an attempt to help developmental writers achieve “academic literacy” our division has resorted to high pressure, punitive writing tests—ones that not only determine a writer’s ability to move forward to the college level writing class but that also require other teachers besides the classroom instructor to determine if the writing artifact is “passing.” And while this is being challenged by forward thinking teachers as this article is being written, it speaks volumes to the state of developmental writing and the false consciousness that permeates much of its pedagogy.

Too often, even in 2016, teachers are not trusted to teach developmental writing without a test, because somehow these students are “special.” In the same way, developmental students are treated differently through required exams, reinforcing their perception as “strangers in academia.” In my department, teachers have quit teaching developmental composition because they were mandated to give tests, grade prescribed portfolios and spend weeks on preparing for the final test that is also required. We found it incredulous that other students did not have to tolerate such regimens and wondered why developmental students—who are often minorities—are subjected to such prescriptions for success. To be specific, my department requires that all developmental writers take and pass an exam—one that results in weeks of teaching to the test. More unfortunate, however, is the two standardized tests that they take for placement. One is a reading test and the second a basic grammar exam. Neither have any writing and show the lack of regard our department has for basic writing and the entire notion of a writing process.

False Consciousness

The phrase false consciousness was used by Marx to describe how subjugated people could be manipulated to believe and practice the ideology of the oppressors above them. False consciousness exists when the poverty stricken are convinced that their plight is a result of their own indolence and incompetence rather than the tax breaks and ensconced privilege given to the wealthy. It is practiced when media fosters a cultural belief that women must dress and act a certain way to be accepted, relegating them to objectified images of sexuality. False consciousness is evident when students are taught to exult and honor cultural icons, such as George Washington, who actually enslaved people of their own race.

It is also evident in the developmental writing class when teachers and pupils reproduce a pedagogy that treats developmental students—often populated by minority writers—as different and in need of special, often regressive policies. In the developmental writing class, false consciousness is evinced in the counterproductive approaches to writing that intentionally or inadvertently result in the dissolution of the student's culture. African Americans and other students who fail to speak in the language of the academy learn early in their scholastic lives that their ways with words are a source of shame and must be replaced with "Proper English." False consciousness is conspicuous in writing practices that treat academic writing—the language of the upper class—as the exulted and final goal of the basic writer. Indeed, when we see developmental programs requiring tests and special skills that are not part of college level writing, when we continue to see developmental writers reduced to lessons that have more to do with imitating a university culture than with expression, we begin to see how a false consciousness exists and how it works to undermine both the success of the student and pedagogy of the teachers who work in these programs.

To teach developmental writing is to see false consciousness at work in the lives of African American writers, who comprise a major part of the developmental classroom. It is to see how special tests and a celebration of Standard White English affects the culture and identity of African American students, and to feel frustrated at what Elaine Richardson (2000) refers to as the "miseducation" of African Americans, who are given "a form of training designed for the uplifting of the dominant society that inadvertently works to the demise of the oppressed people in the society" (p. 196). "AAVE students," adds Richardson, "are still placed disproportionately in college-level remedial writing courses," and this is not a

result of their poor writing skills but the school's inability to accept and exult other ways with words and to appreciate the "the cultural gap" (p. 197) that exists in these classes.

In the end, too many of us who teach developmental writing see our duty as being closely aligned with Freire's banking model, where we serve our students by filling them with the cultural capital, the dominant discourse, hoping it will make them successfully competitive in a capitalistic, Anglo-driven world—hoping it will make them more like the dominant culture they have been trained to imitate in an attempt to become educated. It is an ideological act, one that unwittingly places us in the role of reproducing an unjust system. Perhaps Freire most eloquently captures the dilemma when he argues that "education never was, is not, and never can be neutral or indifferent in regard to the reproduction of the dominant ideology or the interrogation of it (1989, p. 90). Geneva Smitherman is more terse when she reminds us that "scholarly racism is subtle" (2000, p. 67). And yet, few progressive minded writing instructors see the hand of hegemony in their approaches to developmental writers.

Welcome to Bonehead English

In her 2009 book *Before Shaughnessy*, Kelly Ritter discusses the practice of relegating developmental students to special classes often dubbed "The Awkward Squad." The purpose, of course, was not to initiate a genuine experience of linguistic liberation that would foment change and personal and linguistic growth but to "normalize" the writers so that they can someday aspire to be like the privileged kids in college composition. Of course, in the process of learning how to write like their "superiors," they come to hate themselves, their dialects, their culture. They see college as punitive—an inculcation that borders on cultural eradication and conversion. From the start these students are taught to see themselves as different.

Ritter addresses this in her look at the community colleges in her area and how uniform their writing classes are. In contrast, she adds, the four regional universities have "distinctly different course sequences," (p. 17) allowing writing teachers to vary the class writing and pepper the assignments with creativity. In essence, Ritter contends that colleges serving the basic or less advanced writer—the writers who often are African American or Hispanic—do so with a special eye to specific requirements and uniform standards. Students in developmental writing are not trusted to transcend a skills curriculum and write outside of the academic expectations that are often extended to college level writers. In the process,

developmental students are socialized, made to feel inferior, not because they don't write well but because they don't write like the academic model established by white-run institutions. Ritter argues that "the largest problem facing the basic writing student—of past and present, at any institution—is how to become socially and intellectually integrated into the mainstream of his/her institution" (p. 42). Indeed, one leaves any look at developmental writing and comes to the same conclusion: they are strangers who need to be taught how to write like their betters.

This is perhaps why such students were labeled part of the "awkward squad" in the first half of the twentieth century. The clear attitude toward developmental writers was a metaphoric cleansing, a transformation, an academic surgery of sorts, so writers could be less "awkward" in their language skills. According to Ritter, the term "Awkward Squad" was being used by various universities "as early as 1912" (p. 80). The moniker, as insulting as it was, compared these new writers to soldiers who were "ill-trained" (p. 80). Being different was clearly not accepted and the term underscored the desire of the college to try to quickly change such students and make them gentleman or remove them from the college. This notion, which Raymond Williams refers to as "selective tradition," enfranchises one group while disenfranchising the other.

To appreciate how segregated these students were, Ritter reminds us that it was the practice of some universities to actually place developmental students in separate buildings on their campuses, highlighting their inferior place in the university world and establishing their disgraced status (p. 69). While Ritter never addresses the ethnicity of these students, she makes it clear that they personify a cohort of students who have historically been treated as inferior simply because they are different, because they do not fit the standard established by those who are in power.

Mike Rose's Contribution

In his book *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose argues that the legacy of linguistic conversion that typified the early

twentieth century continues today. "The curriculum in Developmental English," argues Rose, "breeds a deep social and intellectual isolation from print; it fosters attitudes and beliefs about written language that, more than anything, kept students from becoming fully literate" (1988, p. 211). Rose chronicles the approach teachers often take in developmental classes, the references to medical diseases, the use of terms like remediation, writing lab, and diagnosis. Indeed, students who came to these classes - often minority and poor - were made to believe that their language, which was driven by their culture and local use of dialect, was an indication of intrinsic problems, involving morality illness, and cultural depravity. Not only were developmental students awkward but also, according to Rose, "sick." Indeed, according to Rose "one of the nicknames for remedial sections was "sick sections" (p. 210).

What emerges from both Shaughnessy and the scholarship of developmental writing instruction before and after *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* is a clear history of cultural genocide. In the creation of the awkward squad and the medical metaphors Mike Rose enumerates, we see a pedagogy that feels contempt for linguistic change and the people who represent that change. "The lin-

guistic ideology that oppresses our children is five hundred years old, as old as the contract between Europe and the Americas," (2004, p. 3) writes Otto Santa Ana. "It was a part of the process that falsely raised the so-called superior European colonist over the so-called inferior native, the civilized over the savage, the sophisticated over the primitive" (p. 3).

Inventing Racism

Much of the problem, as evinced by Rose, Shaughnessy, Ritter, and others lies in the egalitarian but wrong-headed contention that the socialization of developmental students into the academic world should be our major goal as writing instructors. In engineering this approach, we do not "bridge the gap" or "invent the university," as much as we "magnify

Fagus Sylvatica, Jean-Pol GRANDMONT

the divide” between developmental students and the rest of the college population. Clearly, with few exceptions, they are already the most alienated people in terms of doing a college paper or appreciating scholarly protocol, but the road straight to academic literacy is fraught with loss and resentment. Henry Louise Gates talks about his transition from African American man to college student and how “narratives of ascent, whether or not we like to admit it, are also narratives of alienation, of loss” (p. 95). For Gates, being a college student means also forsaking some of his culture, his persona, his blackness. In speaking of his life at Yale, he suggests that “we were as strange to the institution in which we found ourselves as those institutions were to us” (p. 95). Indeed, what Gates is ultimately communicating is the false consciousness, the both implicit and explicit demand that people become part of the system if they are to be successful. Put simply, one cannot experience ascent without alienation and loss. In doing so, he is unwittingly part of a system that legitimizes inequality by making one’s culture, one’s blackness a casualty in the endeavor to become educated. And, of course, the false consciousness that follows perpetuates this as the valid way to create an egalitarian educational system.

This sense of ambivalence and alienation has been captured in the phenomenon of “acting white” and the burden it entails for many African Americans. According to John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham, academically successful black students feel an anxiety, a “psychic stress associated with assuming the role of the other and the loss of connection with other blacks who perceive they are acting white” (McNamara-Horvat, Lewis p. 266). Again, this is the same conflict that many of our students feel as they enter our developmental classes and submit to papers that are intended to change them rather than build upon the linguistic abilities they bring to class. In arguing against the typical “unidirectional” approach to teaching basic writing, Marcia Dickson contends that “to see the teacher’s job as an endeavor that creates more academics rather than more active thinkers is to confuse imitation with emulation” (p. 35). In the end, writes Dickson, “the teacher must become a part of the student’s internal dialogue mechanism rather than a prototype to parrot” (p. 35).

Moving Forward with Developmental Writers

It is imperative, in my opinion, that we, as developmental writing instructors, acknowledge the role we play in “legitimizing and reproducing dominant cultural capital” (Giroux 2006, p. 13). As Giroux argues, teachers “tend to legitimize

certain forms of knowledge, ways of speaking, and ways of relating to the world that capitalize on the type of familiarity and skills that only certain students have received from their family backgrounds and class relations” (p. 13). Of course, when we privilege the academic and thoroughly white dialect of the academic world—and pay little or no attention to the other ways with words brought to us by our minority students—we are participating in an act of hegemony and being less effective teachers than we could be. Certainly, academic discourse has an important place in our classes, but so do the discourses of the worlds that pulsate all around our schools, filling both media and business with colorful and dynamic language. To explore and use these alternative discourses is to contest the reproduction that is seen by Bourdieu (1979) and others. It is not to deny or reject the academic discourse that is part of professional discourses but to augment it with other valid voices and professional worlds.

It would, of course, require that we stop treating developmental English as places where we “kill the Indian and save the man,” replacing it with writing that honors the many literacies that color our cultural mosaic. This, of course, could also be part of college composition classes, but it seems especially important for students who have long been laboring under the notion that their dialect is a point of disgrace. Developmental students, and many African Americans, have been, according to Smithermann, “brainwashed about the inherent and absolute rightness of white middle class dialect and do not realize

that language can be/has been for Black people in America a tool of oppression” (p.129). It is time, I would argue, that we stop teaching in terms of deficits and supplant it with a writing plan that discusses the politics of language, the context of correctness, and the way language works in a dynamic, multicultural world Giroux refers to such critical thinking as “border crossing,” (2006, p. 50) arguing that writers become real people—rather than passive students—when they are allowed to interrogate the language they use rather than simply learning it as part of a competency program. The first step, he contends, is to challenge the inherent power in texts, to read against them, and to recognize the power and possible domination that is inherent in the texts we learn to emulate in school. Border crossing means that writers recognize the “limits built into all discourses and necessitates taking a critical view of authority” (p. 51). How many of us who teach

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developmental English can honestly say that our students ever have the chance to be “border-crossers” to “moving in and out of borders constructed around coordinates of difference and power?” (p. 51). The fact is, developmental English often smothers its students with an authoritarian love that is suppose to help them find success, while doing little more than underscoring their awkward status in the academy. “The brutal truth,” argues writer James Baldwin, “is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating Black people except as this could serve white purposes,” (p. 107).

Starting with Letters

If we learned anything from Brian Street, it is that education is always political—that it is ideological, that it serves some interests more than others. Developmental classes, I would contend, are based on the autonomous model—one that sees education as simply a neutral function of teaching universal skills and lessons, lessons that are ostensibly equally meaningful to all students, no matter their culture or values. Street, again, adamantly challenges the autonomous pedagogy and advocating for the ideological nature of writing, the constant intrusion of social values in the educational process.

Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meaning and practices, hence versions of it are always ideological, they are always rooted in an ideal world-view and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others. (p. 78).

One can see what Street means when looking critically at the dearth of attention given to alternative versions of literacy in developmental English, where many African American students already feel their language is inferior. In my career, I have taught at six community colleges and attended a seventh as an undergraduate and have never seen a developmental class invite student writers to explore multiple literacies or what Ashanti Green (2011) calls “code-meshing.” Such a practice would conflict with the goal of inculcation and learning the language of power. Lisa Delpit, a long time advocate of cultural sensitivity in the writing class, argues that developmental English must begin by acknowledging that children have the right to their own language, their own culture. We must fight cultural hegemony and fight the system by insisting that children be allowed to express themselves in their own language style (1995, p. 37).

Keith Gilyard and Elaine complement this sentiment by adding the following: Confronted with a pervasive rac-

ism, which is embedded in dominant discourses, most African Americans feel a need to reaffirm their African American selves, individually and collectively. This is often accomplished primarily through language, as is evident in the rich tradition of African American literacy” (p. 40).

Sponsors of Literacy and Letter Writing

I begin my developmental writing classes by conducting a conversation with my students about dialects, language, correctness, and the academy. We consider the way they speak with their friends and the code switching they effortlessly do while moving from parties to school functions, church services, and formal settings with parents. Each instance requires a certain kind of language and the important aspect of an English class should be the successful transition from one setting to another—to explore the universe of discourse.

I ask my students how I would fair if I spoke like an academic at a NASCAR race or during a party at one of their peers’ homes. I invite them to share their specific diction and how it helps to identify them with their specific language community. What then, I ask them, is correct English? Indeed, should we even be speaking in terms of right and wrong or should the conversation be about effective and ineffective, based on the speech act? In short, our class creates a cultural space where students can flourish as competent language users. Again, Smitherman addresses this when she argues:

What students need (and I say this for both Black and white students) is not models of correctness—they have their own anyway—but broader understanding of the intricate connection between one’s language and his cultural experience, combined with the political and social stratification of American dialects (p. 128).

Our discussion of linguistic variety and politics is followed by having students write a personal letter to a friend or loved one. In doing this, they are encouraged to write as they are really writing to a person they know, considering the special voice they employ in engaging this individual. What special phrases are used and what is their significance? How does the literacy of the letter differ from the literacy of a formal missive? Why? In answering such questions, students begin to see the social aspects of language and the incredible importance of context. Instead of reducing all writing to an autonomous approach—where language is always about right and wrong—writers are able to see that writing is as malleable as the people who use it. In the process, they see a place for

their own ways with words and come to feel empowered.

Many of my students initially feel incredible resistance to this because of the conditioning they have experienced in decades of writing classes, where their own voice, discourse, and home language were considered never to be legitimate.

Can we use bad words? Can we speak in slang? What about double negatives? These are some of the most asked questions as writers begin to tentatively ease into the idea of a class that accepts their culture. Once the cautionary worries are expunged, students are eager, effusive in their desire to compose these papers. For all, it is a real assignment—something that does not require a new persona, a new face. And the letters they write are often passionate, throbbing with the viscera of genuine emotion and feeling. Andre writes to his brother telling him to get out of the gang he's in, stressing the dead end it symbolizes and the alternatives he can offer him. His letter acknowledges the seductive world of easy money and companionship but exhorts his brother to consider joining him in college and being safe from the law and rival gangs. In such letters, there is none of the false consciousness that is part of exulting the academic discourse as the only key to success. Here students write on their own terms and take a first step in both literacy and self actualization.

This ain't old skool and it ain't a lecture. This is real life—are you hearing me, brotha? How much love is there in a life sentence? You have to know that with every crime, every deal, you role the dice with your life. What about us and the way we have your back? That should count for something.

Emerging from such letters is a literacy that is rarely celebrated in academic writing classes but that provides an avenue for minority students to feel membership in the writing class while understanding the power of the written word. Instead of eradication, the first step is celebration, as writers begin to see that literacy and composition do not have to be punitive, impersonal processes. As Polly writes in her personal letter to her grandson:

I'm thinking that you want to get out school and start your pimpin'-- you know, like your dad. That ain't about to happen—you hear me. You want the bling and the bitches and all that poisoned your dad, but. . . I lost one son to the street and the media and the man on the corner. It can't happen again.

I want to remind readers that these letters are a first step—an invitation to language and writing that will expand and eventually include academic literacy. The developmental writing class must never forget the “real world” but must also be cognizant of the self actualization that is part of literacy

growth. Developmental students must first be able to celebrate their own voice and relevance before exploring other discourses. They must see that their ways with words are different and valuable—that they have a place in the universe of discourse and that writing is not about eradication but development and growth.

Grading the Letters

Assessing and finally assigning a grade to students' letters is clearly more challenging and interesting than what is experienced in the typical essay that is written for the academy. First, because there is no monolithic paradigm for right and wrong, instructors must look at the audience being addressed and consider the efficacy and appropriateness of the language in this dynamic transaction. For most, academic language is not only irrelevant but ineffective in communicating the body and soul of the writer's message. Of course, sentences need to be clear and congruent with the discourse. Double negatives and other linguistic taboos are often seen as strengths in assigning a grade.

For instance, in Dora's letter to her deceased mother, who lived for years in the middle of a dangerous Flint neighborhood, there is much poetic and idiosyncratic language—language that would rarely be seen in an essay. “You were like chocolate cake and a picnic in deep, green grass—anywhere away from concrete and gray skies.”

“You called me ‘Blue Shoes’ cause all I wanted to do was to keep wearing those old sneakers, no matter what.”

Dora writes with a passion that reflects her love and the uniqueness of her relationship. In grading such an essay, passion and clarity become more important than emulating a prearranged plan for prescribed academic prose. While I give her credit for her well organized paragraphs and correct spelling, there is also recognition of her personal voice, the attention to detail, and the development of the relationship's special character. Interestingly, Dora writes with as much elegance as I have seen in more advanced students, and one wonders if being unfettered has caused this.

In the end, teachers must consider the writing situation, the audience, and the social situation that has spawned this transaction and grade accordingly. Often, students are engaged in a unique communication, one that demands a special language.

Business Letters

Students transition from the personal letter—replete with their own dialects and idioms—to the more formal

business letter. In terms of teaching the contextual aspects of writing and language use, it is a simple and very effective next step. Students are asked to craft a professional letter to a store, restaurant, or business, telling them about the great or inferior service they received. The focus is on being acknowledged as part of the professional, formal writing class. In doing these letters, students recognize the changing expectations and the social aspects of composition. They further recognize the various faces one wears while using the English language. Most importantly, they see English as less punitive and more political—something that demands certain levels of formality.

What is particularly rewarding about this assignment is the interest many students have in completing it. Many have real world letters they want to write and see the relevance to making the transition to a more academic or socially conservative discourse. Put simply, the business letter exposes students to the world of professional correctness that has ALWAYS been a part of their scholastic lives. After doing personal letters and engaging in discourse that veers outside of the academic realm, the business letter places different restrictions as to what a distant and unknown audience expects from them. In doing both, students are extricated from the false dichotomy that is part of the curriculum's false consciousness—where they are taught to embrace the language of the white writer and condemn their own discourse. In its place, they come to see all communication as bound to a particular discourse, a specific ideological setting and appreciate the social aspects of language correctness..

Melba wants to ask why her tennis shoes were never delivered and Ricky writes cogently about the rude treatment he and his girl friend experienced at a restaurant. Again, in each case, the two letter assignments facilitate a recognition that language changes, is social, and is never about inherent goodness. Students see the composition class as a place where they belong.

Students are graded in much the same way for the business letter as for the personal letter that came before it, needing to write a missive that captures the specific demands of the audience. This time, of course, the audience is professional and formal. The requirement is to present a persona that will radiate intelligence and standardized language. In doing this, students come to see the political or ideological character of writing. Their personal letters are not better or worse, but simply different, serving a different audience and social context.

Doing Research Papers with Developmental Students

Developmental students are forever sensitive to their alien status in the writing class, so it is important to design assignments that are relevant to their lives and that are not simply academic exercises meant to convert them. With this in mind, I have fashioned a research project that is based on letters written to a newspaper columnist. The “Dear Andy” assignment invites students to become a famous columnist for a newspaper—someone who is asked to answer difficult questions about issues varying from spousal abuse to dog training. In answering such questions, my students are reminded that they are a respected columnist, loved around the world and that their respect is similar to Oprah Winfrey's while on television. People write them not only to get their revered advice but to see how that advice is augmented with research.

In doing the Dear Andy/Andi research assignment, students are positioned as celebrities, answering the questions of admiring readers. It is a very different and empowering place—one that students can understand since they have read such columns in magazines of their own. At the same time, students are able to answer questions that emanate from their own experiences. Indeed, many students choose their own question to answer, picking a topic that is directly germane to a dilemma a friend or family member is having.

Jasmine chooses to research the following question she composed herself:

Dear Andi:

My child swung at me the other day in the grocery store, embarrassing me and prompting a desire to knock him back into the produce section. What should I do, and what am I doing wrong? Should I be spanking instead of giving time-outs? So much is written about the negative aspects of giving kids a whipping but it worked for me. Please advise.

Sincerely,

Ready to Whoop

Such letters—and the answers that follow—are written by students from a position of power and familiarity and incorporate both the formality of a research paper and the informality of a newspaper advice column. In terms of capturing the social aspects of writing—and in terms of moving beyond a false consciousness that teaches students simply to reproduce the language of the dominant class—the letters

are ideal. Indeed, the letters emanate from their own lives, and their position in writing a letter allows more informality while also demanding academic clarity and professional research. It is this democratic, inclusive kind of response that makes the assignment much more inviting for developmental students. It does not radiate from a desire to simply accomplish a series of research skills. And while many of those skills are learned, students see themselves as experts answering a question that is more personal than academic. It is a unique place for developmental students and transcends the ubiquitous false consciousness that teaches them they are inferior and need to quickly catch up.

Glenn Responds to Gay Rights

Perhaps the best example of how this works is in the letter written by Glenn, a gay student who sought to address the politics and historical persecution of his sexual orientation. In writing the question and crafting his answer, Glenn tailors a response that allows him to talk candidly about the gay rights movement and to do so in a language that is much closer to HIS voice. Throughout the paper, he sprinkles his prose with refreshingly informal expressions about being gay, about being persecuted, and the homophobia that he has had to endure throughout his life. At one point, he discusses how uncomfortable it is to be treated “worse than a bitch,” meaning that even dogs can get health insurance in some states if their owners choose to pay for it. Unfortunately, he reminds his readers, this is not the same for people of a certain sexual orientation in certain states today. In looking at Glenn’s paper, one sees a student who uses language and personal agency to transcend the false consciousness that would require him to speak in a polite and less candid language. At the same time, he does research that serves the purpose of an academic, coming to appreciate the importance of the conflation of the two.

Glenn’s final draft becomes an expansive, lyrical and very authoritative vilification of the anti-gay movement, the prejudice and the fear. He refers to himself, his life as a man who would never choose to be part of a despised group of people, and argues that civil rights are being violated. “I want all readers to step back and ask themselves why a man or woman cannot marry in a legal, non-religious ceremony and enjoy the rights that accompany that ceremony,” he writes later in his paper. Unique to the Dear Andy Paper is the empowered voice, the use of personal research, and the ability to delve into issues that are personally relevant to the student.

Push-back from Peter

As can be expected there is always resistance from students who do not like any variation from the time honored classroom writing class. Peter was one student who did not like the letters or Dear Andy paper, arguing that such papers were not effective in teaching him the rigors of academic work. For Peter, then, there is trepidation that transcending the typical writing classroom will somehow lead to inferior writing—writing that will not be accepted later in his career. In such cases, I like to invite these students to write a more traditional research paper while using the Dear Andy prompt. While students are already required to use formal MLA format and citations, they can also eschew the invitation to be more informal with their actual language. In Peter’s case, he wrote a very formal piece about the necessity of maintaining discipline in the home, using various forms of punishment. Peter’s paper remained scholarly in its style, documentation, and research. His paper argued for more “parental attention” while contending that physical punishment was not appropriate or effective. One can contrast his paper with Amare, who filled her paper on the same topic with myriad personal examples, recalling her own plight in getting pregnant as a teenager and trying to develop a plan that would teach her child both respect and affection. “I wanted my child to know I loved her and to respect me as a loving mentor and authority figure,” wrote Amare in the body of her paper. “It was essential—and this is supported by research—that a child learn discipline in a setting of love and understanding.” For both Amare and Peter, there was the opportunity to read other writers who were more or less liberated and who also produced very interesting research projects. For both writers, composition had become something that touched their lives and transcended the inculcation of a hegemonic system of exulting the discourse of the white academy.

Grading the Dear Andy/Andi Essay

Grading the Dear Andy/Andi paper isn’t as difficult as the more traditional research paper, because students tend to write with more opulence and freedom. Their prose are authentic and filled with a viscera. Still, I remind them that they must—while having much latitude in terms of the language and dialect they use—be consistent with the use of MLA standards in doing and documenting sources. At the same time, they must be aware of reputable sources and the need to sample sources from many different sites. In short, then,

the Dear Andy/Andi paper touches upon what is best about research skills while unleashing a language that is much more congruent with the spirit of the individual writer. Will these assignments help students who must prepare for punitive final exams? While one can only guess, they seem to awaken students to the politics of language and make them more versatile in their skill at considering different ways with words. In many ways, they open writers' eyes to the false consciousness that pervades the writing pedagogy, a false consciousness that has bred a hatred of their own language and culture, a false consciousness that has taught them to reproduce the standard language of the academy without any attention to other discourses.

In discussing the writing class and the developmental writer, Rebecca Powell argues that effective instruction begins with a "physical space that affirms students' identities, that provides possibilities for their lives, and that encourages them to visualize their dreams" (52). While all of these are important, I believe that the future of the developmental writing class begins with approaches and assignments that acknowledge the students' cultures, languages, and values. Being developmental students often means being aliens, people who are challenged to prove their worth by reproducing the standard curriculum and language of the white, educated academics who stand in front of them. It often demands that they embrace the false consciousness that tells them that their language is sloppy and must be expunged so they can find success by being more like the powerful. This paper argues that it is incumbent upon writing teachers to do more than prepare them to be white, literate, academics. This begins when we recognize the political aspects of writing at this level and the reproduction of a class system—one that has historically and still often treats developmental students as devoid of skill or linguistic sophistication—one that ignores their lives.

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Bernadette Gongora is a free-lance writer and adjunct instructor at Oakland Community College and Mott Community College.

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