

CONFORMING TO RESISTANCE:
REJECTING THE STATUS QUO

SHARON HOUCK

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Karen C. Gindoff

Karen C. Gindoff, Ph.D.

Director

MA Committee

Ken Smith

Ken Smith, Ph.D.

Sharon Houck

July 25, 2007

James E. Blodgett

James E. Blodgett, Ph.D.

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
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Indiana University

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This paper is dedicated to those who have encouraged me to resist my own status quo—my parents, my husband, and my friends and colleagues.

Language is social, and writing is collaborative. I wish to thank Ken Smith and Jan Blodgett for their assistance in preparing this paper. I would also like to thank Karen Gindale for her invaluable support as an instructor, advisor, director of this project, and friend.

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which is the primary discourse of power. It is, of course, of those individuals who see it. My dilemma is how to help students become members of a discourse community that has deemed their language or dialect "ungrammatical" or even "unintelligible." Many have been made to feel as if they are outsiders, individual people who are trying to reach a private party. The instructor's task is to help students learn to be able to understand that dialect in Standard English is a necessary prerequisite to competing for well-paying jobs and top positions in whatever field they have chosen to pursue. How many of these students have had negative past experiences with written English, especially those positions in other areas practical strategies for helping these girls compete in the new sphere of academic discourse without losing a sense of pride in their language and discouraged their home languages. Many of these students are rightfully indignant and ready to fight back in whatever way they can.

The late 1960s and early 1970s brought about a major change in the focus of cooperation education in the United States. In conjunction with the civil rights movement, students were beginning to demand what they considered their rights— including the right to use their home dialects (vernacular dialects) in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Since January of 1994, I have served as an adjunct English instructor at Ivy Tech Community College in South Bend, Indiana. During that time I have taught reading and writing at both beginning and intermediate remedial levels. Many of the students I see have already been disenfranchised or marginalized, intentionally or otherwise, by an education system that expects students to develop fluency in an academic discourse which is the primary discourse of precious few, if any, of those individuals who use it. My dilemma is how to help students become members of a discourse community that has deemed their language or dialect “ungrammatical” or even incomprehensible. Many have been made to feel as if they are outsiders, uninvited guests who are trying to crash a private party. The inescapable fact is these students need to be made to understand that fluency in Standard English is a necessary prerequisite to competing for well paying jobs and top positions in whatever field they have chosen to pursue. Since many of these students have had negative past experiences with written English, resistance theory promises to offer some practical strategies for helping them gain competence in the conventions of academic discourse while taking a stand against a system that has disparaged their home languages. Many of these students are rightfully indignant and ready to fight back in whatever way they can.

The late 1960s and early 1970s brought about a major change in the focus of composition education in the United States. In conjunction with the civil rights movement, students were beginning to demand what they considered their rights—including the right to use their home dialects (primary discourses) in the classroom.

In 1972, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) passed a resolution on 'students' rights to their own patterns and varieties of language.' Based on that resolution, CCCC created a position statement entitled 'Students' Right to Their Own Language,' which was adopted at the CCCC Annual Convention in April 1974. ("Resolution on Affirming")

One result of the change the resolution precipitated has been the development of resistance theory in composition, which examines the way students respond or react to the required conventions of academic discourse. James Paul Gee defines discourses as "ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (526). Because this definition of discourse incorporates so many aspects of a person's life, many students perceive conforming to the conventions of academic discourse as tantamount to taking on a whole new identity. Some students are willing (or eager) to change their identity. But for many students, this is an unacceptable possibility, so they refuse to accept the conventions of the discourse.

Henry Giroux suggests three categories to describe student response to the demands of the conventions associated with an academic discourse community: accommodation, opposition, and resistance. In an article titled "Accommodation, Resistance and the Politics of Student Writing," Geoffrey Chase examines Giroux's categories of student response and the impact each type of response has on the student's growth as a critical thinker. "Accommodation is the process by which students learn to accept conventions without necessarily questioning how those conventions privilege

some forms of knowledge at the expense of others” (Chase 14). Students whose primary concern is to get an acceptable grade may choose accommodation. They accept, or at least appear to accept, the conventions of the discourse without question. Such students prefer what Paulo Freire termed “the banking concept” of education, in which teachers are perceived as all-knowing benefactors who bestow knowledge on their students as if it were a gift. These are the students whose response to instructor comments concerning development, organization, and critical thinking is often, “Just tell me what you want me to say.” They learn to copy the forms and conventions of academic discourse, but because they do not question why some forms are (or should be) more acceptable than others, they do not fully participate in that discourse. For these students, composition means little more than learning the rules of grammar and mechanics; they never consider how learning to write might help them learn to become critical thinkers, nor why members of academic discourse communities have come to view the conventions of Standard English as more effective ways of communicating ideas. These students have “perceived that there [is] a ‘right’ way of writing, or, that there [are] certain conventions [they need] to follow, and that what [they have] to say [is] less important than how [they choose] to say it” (Chase 16). If their compositions do not contain mechanical errors such as those of spelling, syntax, parallelism, or punctuation errors, they feel entitled to an “A,” whether or not the composition has a clear focus and makes a strong argument. Many of these students could be likened to the character of the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, believing that being awarded a diploma will magically endow them with the ability to think. In reality, this is not the case. These students often are unwilling to accept responsibility for their own education. Rather than take the necessary actions that will

help them become critical thinkers who interrogate texts, evaluate arguments, make their own decisions, and accept the consequences of their actions, these individuals are satisfied to merely complain that the system is unfair and they have been victimized.

In order to overcome this sense of victimization, students need to develop skills in both critical thinking and in employing the correct language use and forms for compositions in order to not only obtain their desired career goals, but also to participate fully as franchised citizens of their society. Refusing to learn fully how word choice, connotation, logic, and appeals to emotion can be used to persuade readers of the merits of a particular argument often means that the students do not learn to critically evaluate arguments and discern hidden biases that result in some groups' being denied the same privileges that other groups enjoy.

Those who oppose or resist the values of the discourse community risk being denied access to the cultural capital needed for a comfortable lifestyle. However, many students cannot connect their responses to the consequences. Therefore, it is the mandate of teachers and others who belong to the academic discourse community to encourage students to resist the status quo, and examine not only the conventions of the discourse and how they function, but also the values connected with those conventions. It is not enough that students be taught that they have been oppressed in some way; in order to become truly empowered, they must learn how to use the conventions of the discourse to express that oppression and insist upon changes.

Opposition and resistance are similar, in that they both entail a refusal to passively accept the conventions of academic discourse. However, that is where the similarity ends.

Opposition is a category that refers to student behavior which runs against the grain and which interrupts what we usually think of as the normal progression of learning. In the case of discourse conventions, opposition refers to instances in which students fail for one reason or another to learn the patterns and conventions of a particular discourse community and fail to engage in behavior that would enable them to learn those conventions.

(Chase 14-15)

Opposition produces no positive alternative action; students may learn the “right forms” and are willing to conform to them in order to meet what they see as arbitrary requirements, but they also find some way to express their opposition to those forms.

Chase writes about Kris, a college senior who

both accepted and rejected the standards of ‘scientific’ writing that she was asked to do. She wrote as she was directed, but she also stole time away from her project so that she could write pieces that renewed her energy. By engaging in this rather schizophrenic activity . . . she found a way to *oppose* the constraints placed upon her, and to maintain a sense of who she was. (20)

Kris overcame a sense of oppression by writing something other than what she was expected to write; however, her actions did not lead to her emancipation as a critical thinker.

In contrast, resistance “redefines the causes and meaning of oppositional behavior by arguing that it has little to do with the logic of deviance, individual pathology, learned helplessness (and, of course, genetic explanations), and a great deal to do, though not

exhaustively, with the logic of moral and political indignation” (Giroux 107, qtd. in Chase 15). Resisters are not content simply to point out that the system is oppressive, or engage in secret writing that may help them maintain a sense of identity but does nothing to change the educational system; rather, they take contradictory action and accept the consequences of their actions. Instead of valuing the form over the substance of what is learned, resistant students work to change the accepted values of the discourse community. Chase discusses Karen, a self-described creative writer who wanted to write about academic history. When the faculty member

who was to serve as the discussant for [Karen’s] project told her “that creative writers could not write history because they did not have enough distance from their subjects,” Karen’s attitude was that historians are, mistakenly, more interested in form than in content, and she decided to focus on content instead, thus resisting the constraints imposed by her primary audience. (19)

Resisters are students and instructors who have realized that while form can help to make content more effective, it is not the primary focus of composition.

RESISTING A “RIGHT VERSUS WRONG” PARADIGM

In *Authority in Language*, James Milroy and Leslie Milroy discuss the prescriptive and arbitrary nature of Standard English as well as the way linguists have investigated reasons why people resist using Standard English even while they agree that it is the “correct” form. Milroy and Milroy identify

two kinds of mechanism that tend to encourage stability in the use of a language or dialect. Both may apply at any level of society, but one or

other may be dominant at some levels. The first mechanism is *covert* and *informal* pressure for language maintenance, which is exerted by members of one's peer group or social group. The second is *overt* and *institutional* enforcement of norms through public channels such as the educational and broadcasting systems. (49)

Traditionally, English teachers in public schools insisted on students using Standard English, the only "proper" way to speak and write. However, many students resist the notion that some ways of communicating are better than others. Michael Blitz cites Keith Gilyard and Elaine Richardson, who call the 1974 resolution "Students' Right to Their Own Language" "one of our most important statements related to concerns of grammar." Based on their work, Blitz argues that composition instructors need to resist their inclination to "correct" African American Vernacular English, and recognize that "composition courses that foreground African American rhetorical traditions encourage African American students (perhaps all students) to recognize the importance of 'strong, critical Black voices in dialogue with each other and the larger community, resulting—potentially at least—in better political possibilities'" (208). Language is always political, since the conventions of any discourse community are established by those in power positions. Encouraging all students to participate in a dialogue with the rest of society will result in individuals who are open to multiple perspectives, rather than passively accepting of viewpoint and values of the dominant group.

As students enter higher levels of academic study, whether secondary or post-secondary, they often find themselves needing to communicate in a discourse different from the one used in their primary relationships. Students who have been able to

communicate effectively with parents and peers may find themselves unable to negotiate the academic discourse that is used by scholars, businesspeople, and other professionals.

Education has traditionally been one of the major avenues by which the dominant group in any culture reproduces its values in succeeding generations of that culture's population. Because the dominant culture wields the power in the society, it prescribes the language, behaviors, attitudes, and values that are deemed "acceptable" within that culture. The language of the educated then becomes the standard of correctness; to be educated has always entailed what was considered "proper speech," and subsequently, skill in written communication. Over the past few centuries many theories have been developed concerning effective methods of education and the ways in which the culture's values are reproduced in students, especially through the study of literature and composition. To date, none has adequately addressed the issue of how to motivate students to gain fluency in Standard English.

Communication is integral to participation in the worlds in which we all live. While the majority of people's speech is unplanned and uses nonstandard dialects, they are able to communicate effectively with one another. One reason this is so is the dynamic nature of language; people coin new words, borrow from other languages, use gestures, and repair misunderstood dialogue. When individuals do not understand one another, they continue to question, re-state, and negotiate with one another until they are able to agree upon meaning. This negotiation results in conventions (such as syntax) that speakers use in dialogue with others. In contrast, written communication allows for little negotiation and, therefore, requires a preciseness resulting from conformity to additional conventions previously agreed upon, including some which may not be required in

spoken communication (such as spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing). English composition classes have been designated as the forum where students learn many of these conventions.

However, not all students accept the conventions and values associated with academic discourse. Chase contends that “discourse communities are organized around the production and legitimation of particular forms of knowledge and social practices at the expense of others, and they are not ideologically innocent” (13). Because the conventions of any discourse include values, it is imperative that as instructors we “know how those conventions operate on a larger, theoretical level, and the implications of those conventions for our students” (13). In both society and education, whether it is acknowledged or not, individuals are discriminated against on the basis of their use of language. This has resulted in a number of teachers and students resisting the conventions of the academic discourse community in order to bring attention to that discrimination and possibly end it.

RESISTANCE AND EMANCIPATION

Concerning resistance, Giroux contends that

central to analyzing any act of resistance would be a concern with uncovering the degree to which it speaks to a form of refusal that highlights, either implicitly or explicitly, the need to struggle against the social nexus of domination and submission. In other words, resistance must have a revealing function, one that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle

individuals to communicate more precisely with one another, how using those conventions might help to avert misunderstandings and conflicts, then the students may be more receptive to the idea there are some situations in which Standard English is more useful than non-standard dialects.

Students also become more autonomous and empowered when they learn to examine texts with a critical eye, looking beyond the expected and “normal” to see the values and beliefs that may be hidden within the conventions of the discourse. Sexist terminology, for example, goes beyond just words and implies that men are stronger and more capable than women, who are expected to passively submit to the expectations of others, including their husbands, families, or society at large. Teachers must insist that passive acceptance of such values is an unacceptable response because it reduces the rights of one group of society.

While encouraging students to become critical thinkers several problems arise, especially for individuals who realize that “to get a well-paying job it is expected that one will be able to use [a] formal register” (Payne, DeVol, and Smith 32). Many of these individuals enroll in technical schools or community colleges trying to escape impoverished backgrounds and lifestyles. They are expected to assimilate to the dominant culture and adopt the use of standard language, but they have had little if any opportunity to use the standard forms. Difficulties are compounded when these individuals encounter assessments or tests—SAT, ACT, or others—that use the formal register exclusively. Thus, for these individuals, language deficits and poverty are inextricably joined. They enroll in classes to try to escape the oppression of poverty, but often seem to have to face the oppression of having their identity erased or temporarily

altered. In order to improve the situation of these individuals and, by extension, the larger society, teachers need to make clear the need for all individuals to achieve fluency in multiple discourses. Individuals who have mastered academic discourse in addition to others are able to choose which one would be more advantageous to their purposes in any given situation.

APPROPRIATENESS/EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT DISCOURSES

Barbara Mellix provides an excellent example of how it is possible for individuals who have become fluent in academic discourse to recognize different situations in which various discourses are not only more appropriate than others, but also more effective in accomplishing a specific purpose. "From Outside, In" relates some of Mellix's experiences with language both as a Black child growing up in the South and as a professional adult. While working on the essay on one occasion, Mellix's ten-year-old daughter kept bothering her. When the child pulled up a chair and watched her, Mellix says, "I lost my patience. 'Looka here, Allie' I said, 'You too old for this kinda carryin' on. I done told you this is important. You wronger than dirt to be in here haggin' on me like this and you know it. Now git on outta here and leave me off before I put my foot all the way down'" (385). Mellix further explains, "My daughter understood that this way of speaking was appropriate in that context. . . . that it was almost inevitable; when I get angry at home, I speak some of my finest, most cherished black English. . . . in other environments, she would have been shocked and probably worried that I had taken leave of my sense of propriety" (385-86). Both Mellix and her ten-year-old daughter understood that different discourses are appropriate in various situations.

Mellix relates that as children, while her parents did not “set aside time to drill us in Standard English,” she and her siblings nevertheless “grew up speaking what [she] considered to be two distinctly different languages—black English and Standard English—and in the process of acquiring these languages, [she] developed an understanding of when, where, and how to use them” (386). She relates that in the grade school she attended, “where there were no whites, my teachers taught Standard English, but used black English to do it.” Before it was given a formal name, these teachers were practicing resistance. Their use of the familiar black English to teach Standard English demonstrated to the students that their own language was a valid means of communication, but not as effective as Standard English in some situations.

By the time she entered second grade, Mellix “knew the implied rules that accompanied all writing assignments. . . . I was not to write in the way we spoke to one another” (388). In high school, many students prepared to graduate and move to large cities in the North where they would look for jobs.

Our English teacher constantly corrected our grammar: “Not ‘ain’t,’ but ‘isn’t.’” We seldom wrote papers, and even those few were usually plot summaries of short stories. When our teacher returned the papers, she usually lectured on the importance of using Standard English: “I *am*; you *are*; he, she, or it *is*,” she would say, writing on the chalkboard as she spoke. “How you gon git a job talking about ‘I is’ or ‘I isn’t’ or ‘I ain’t’?” (389)

These teachers did not insist that the students abandon their use of black English, but rather gave the students practical reasons why it was imperative to learn Standard

English; and they implied that the consequences of “resisting” Standard English would be the loss of job opportunities.

Mellix also illustrates different ways in which her father’s stories and her mother’s teasing behaviors taught her about “Standard English and the relationship between language and power” (387). After graduating high school, she lived in Pittsburgh with an aunt and uncle who would “switch from black English to Standard English to a mixture of the two, according to where they were or who they were with. . . . In time, [she] learned to speak Standard English with ease and to switch smoothly from black to standard or a mixture and back again” (389). Clearly, this would not have been possible if her parents and teachers had not insisted she learn to use the conventions of Standard English. Learning the conventions of Standard English afforded Mellix the opportunity to pursue the well-paying job her teachers had admonished her she would not get if she insisted upon always using the black English that was so much a part of her home life.

Subsequently, while working at a job with a health insurance company, Mellix copied the phrasing and style of form letters and letters written by co-workers, learning to conform to the conventions of such writing, but not employing much thought in what she wrote. Once again she was learning the conventions of a particular discourse by rote—copying the forms without understanding why one way was preferred to others. Regardless, she took pride in her “ability to hold a job writing business letters” (390). She continued to practice using Standard English as she worked, married, and had children. Her new environment “required that [she] speak Standard English much of the time, and slowly, imperceptibly, [she] had ceased seeing a sharp distinction between

[herself] and 'others'" (390). Although she was able to easily use Standard English to express information about others and work, and knew it was the language that was expected in an academic setting, she found it inadequate to convey her identity in a personal narrative. When she enrolled in a Basic Writing course at the University of Pittsburgh, it required that she write about herself. Regarding the formal Standard English that would be expected she writes,

My concern was to use "appropriate" language, to sound as if I belonged in a college classroom. But I felt separate from the language—as if it did not and could not belong to me. I couldn't think and feel genuinely in that language, couldn't make it express what I thought and felt about being a housewife. A part of me resented, among other things, being judged by such things as the appearance of my family's laundry and toilet bowl, but in that language I could only imagine and write about a conventional housewife. (391)

Mellix seems to have chosen accommodation up until that point in her life, but had not critically examined how and to what degree the conventions of Standard English represented her values, ideas, and experiences. Of a subsequent research paper she writes that the paper consisted mostly of "a series of paraphrases and quotations spaced between carefully constructed transitions. The process and the results felt artificial, but as I would later come to realize, I was passing through a necessary stage" (393). Mellix realized that she was becoming a member of two differing discourse communities—the comfortable primary discourse community of home and family, which included her Black English, and the academic discourse community that required the Standard English she had been

taught was necessary for success in the work world. Using her home discourse at the university would have threatened her academic standing, while abandoning her Black English would have separated her from the comfort and security of home. As she continued to gain fluency in academic discourse, she “experienced [her] sense of doubleness as something menacing, a built in enemy [that] accused [her] of betrayal, of turning away from blackness” (394).

It is precisely this incongruity many students feel that causes them to resist the conventions of Standard English—the conventions of academic discourse. For many students, Standard English is incapable of expressing their thoughts, feelings and experiences as powerfully as their home discourses; they feel disenfranchised or marginalized. Many of the students I see write personal narratives that would be rendered impotent if they were “translated” into Standard English. Geneva Smitherman echoes their sentiments in “White English in Blackface, or Who Do I Be?” By writing her essay partly in black idiom, Smitherman effectively makes the point that “Black English is a dialect that obeys rigid rules of sound and structure” (294). In addition, Smitherman argues that Black English and Standard (White) English differ “in surface structure only” (297). Further confirmation of the validity of her assertion comes from Gilyard and Richardson, who conducted a two-year-long study of fifty-two African American students in basic writing classes. In “Students’ Right to Possibility: Basic Writing and African American Rhetoric,” they discuss the results of that study. Essays from students who were given instruction in the rhetorical features of black English were evaluated using a topology of black English developed by Smitherman. Fifteen features of black English were noted in the writing produced by those students. The features

included, among others, the use of evocative language, proverbs or Biblical verses, sermonic tone, conversational tone, cultural references, ethnolinguistic idioms (such as "that's on the real"), verbal inventiveness and unique nomenclature, and signifying (41-42). And yet Black English, as one of the nonstandard varieties, is devalued as "bad" language.

Verbal inventiveness, for example, would probably be marked as a usage or word choice error if evaluated on the basis of Standard English. To illustrate, in the student essays one writer referred to "deep seeded self-destruction and self-hate that has planted its poisons into the hearts and souls of our young adults. . ." (47). Although the conventional phrasing would be "deep seated," the student's wording reflected the idea of the poison being planted. This is just one instance of the ways in which the grammatical features of black English may be considered 'bad grammar' if evaluated according to grammar rules of Standard English. Rather than being "bad," Black English is more about relationships; it is listener-oriented rather than message-oriented. "As one linguist has suggested, the proper question is not what do words mean, but what do the users of the words mean?" (Smitherman 299). Primary discourses always represent a means of reproducing the culture of the community; they are neither inherently good or bad, but only means of constructing identity.

IDENTITY, RESPECT, AND RELATIONSHIPS

In the past, students often felt as if they were required to choose between their primary discourse and the dominant discourse. Since fluency in the dominant discourse is often tied to power and access to goods, the choice has not been not an easy one to make. In "The Achievement of Desire," Richard Rodriguez discusses how his

acquisition of the dominant discourse alienated him from his family and native culture. He states he was like Hoggart's scholarship boy who is "haunted by the knowledge that one *chooses* to become a student...a child who [cannot] forget that his academic success distances him from a life he loved" (655). Although he followed his mother's advice to "get all the education you can, with an education you can do anything," he further describes how each level of education caused him to become more removed from his family and culture (659). As he began to become more fluent in the Standard English spoken by his teachers, he also became more embarrassed by his family and their non-standard dialect. He admits, "A primary reason for my success in the classroom was that I couldn't forget that schooling was changing me and separating me from the life I enjoyed before becoming a student" (654).

In contrast, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" relates Gloria Anzaldúa's resistance to assimilation to the dominant American culture and language. While having work done at the dentist's office, Anzaldúa kept pushing out the wads of cotton with her tongue. After a while, the dentist became angry and said, "We're going to have to do something about that tongue . . . I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn" (75). Anzaldúa uses that incident as a metaphor for her resistance to giving up her native tongue. In response to the remarks she asks the question, "How do you tame a wild tongue?" (75). Her mother and teachers tried to tame her tongue by insisting she use English. "At Pan American University, [she], and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of [their] accents" (76). In conclusion, Anzaldúa asserts: "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (76). Unlike Rodriguez, Anzaldúa resisted adopting an academic discourse that she believed devalued the

language and culture of her primary discourse and would essentially rob her of her identity.

However, Mellix illustrates that one doesn't have to surrender use of one discourse in order to gain fluency in others. She writes "[W]hen I came face to face with the demands of academic writing, I grew increasingly self-conscious, constantly aware of my status as a black and a speaker of one of the many black English vernaculars—a traditional outsider" (394-95). Like Mellix, many students experience a "sense of doubleness" which pits their "desire to prosper" against their sense of what they will lose and cannot regain: "a safe way of being, a state of powerlessness which exempted [them] from responsibility for who [they are] and might be" (395). While many individuals hope to escape poverty through becoming educated and understand that becoming fluent in academic discourse is a requirement for academic success, these students may claim they are powerless to gain that fluency. Students, especially those in remedial English courses, have throughout their academic careers been made acutely aware of their status as outsiders—bludgeoned with the rules of grammar and Standard English. Their attempts at expressing their ideas and experiences in writing are often covered with red marks; the result is they feel incompetent to produce anything that adheres to the rules of rhetoric and convention. Traditionally, the texts that are part of the literary canon have not included works by members of their discourse communities—these individuals have been effectively silenced by those who hold power. Little wonder that these students oppose or resist the conventions of academic discourse. Rather than assuming responsibility for developing their own identity and voice, many of these individuals remain silent,

preferring powerlessness to the struggle required in order to gain power. Illustrating how important a sense of pride in one's language can be, Anzaldúa writes,

[I]f you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. . . I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. . . I will overcome the tradition of silence. (81)

Individuals who perceive they have been disrespected will have difficulty applying themselves to the task of becoming fluent in Standard English. Resistance theorists suggest that composition teachers who wish to encourage students to resist the values of the dominant culture need to find ways to help students take pride in their own languages; when students' languages are honored and the conventions used are recognized as following rules, students may more quickly feel like competent communicators. Then instructors can point out the parallels or counterpoints in Standard English, emphasizing how each discourse is effective in accomplishing specific goals. When students see themselves as competent in their own discourse, it will be more difficult for them to refuse responsibility for their own success or failure in achieving fluency in academic discourse. Students who understand and respect the conventions of their own discourse may also be more willing to invest the time and effort needed to develop a strong voice in Standard English as well. In order to accomplish that goal, instructors must become acutely aware of the complicit social issues.

For many speakers of nonstandard dialects, poverty is also a huge factor in their lives. In *Bridges Out of Poverty: Strategies for Professionals and Communities*, Ruby

Payne, Philip DeVol, and Terie Dreussi Smith state, "To better understand poverty, one must understand three aspects of language: registers of language, discourse patterns, and story structure" (31). It is these differences in register, discourse patterns, and story structure that make students feel as if they cannot express their ideas in Standard English.

One of the conventions of western academic discourse is that the responsibility for insuring the text is clearly understood lies with the writer, rather than the reader. This difference in where the weight of making meaning lies represents a huge difference in the conventions of Standard English as opposed to other discourses. It requires that all writers using Standard English consider not only how their own background and experience inform their writing, but also what impact the background and experience of their intended audience will have on the way the meaning is perceived. This is one area where the conventions of standard discourse can help to ensure clarity. Those who are fluent in Standard English know that one convention is that the writer must not assume the reader has any familiarity with the topic at hand; context and connections must be provided since no face-to-face negotiation will be possible.

Entering college students find themselves trying to fit into a community where the expectations are often unclear but must nevertheless be satisfied. They are also expected to write for an audience—the academic discourse community—with whom they may not be familiar. Their previous experiences with academic discourse and writing have often been minimal, or perceived as little more than busywork, without real purpose or value. For these individuals, entering a college composition class is tantamount to traveling to a foreign country—both the language and the customs of the discourse community are

foreign. For many college students the language remains foreign even into graduate studies.

In "Being an Ally," Helen Fox discusses some of the underlying social issues which impact student writing, including cultural expectations about the roles of the writer and the audience. Fox relates that she has been made responsible for a program to assist "graduate students who have trouble with writing" (57). The program grew out of an incident in which an African American student was in danger of failing out of her doctoral studies because her writing skills were lacking. Her professors had commented that her papers lacked focus, and questioned whether she had understood the reading; "Maybe she wasn't up to graduate level work" (57). The student was understandably upset, and also angry. She had worked in the corporate arena for years, where writing had been part of her job. "No one *there* suggested she didn't know how to write" (57). Fox asserts that the student had writing skills that were adequate for communicating with her audience in the corporate world, but because she did not know how to transfer those skills into the academic setting, she felt marginalized and disrespected. Fox further explains that many students feel as if they are expected to meet intellectual demands for which they have do not have specific guidelines, nor have they been given sufficient opportunities to develop and practice the skills required (57-58).

Many students enter college believing they have the language skills needed to communicate with others. I have had numerous students whose grades in high school English classes were above average, and yet they were not able to use academic discourse. Their writing up until that point had been completed with a very specific audience in mind—the teacher. The result was that these students assumed the reader

would make the necessary connections without being given explicit information.

However, in order to be successful in their courses, both entering college students and graduate students must

learn the language and values of the academy, its styles and structures, its vocabularies and uses of voice, its relationships with authorities, its attitudes toward evidence, its beliefs about what is worthy of being discussed and what is not . . . What passes for “good academic writing” is socially and culturally constructed by scholars who are both narrow in their vision and exclusionary about their club. And the terms of membership in this club are, of course, those of acculturation; to join, one must discard perfectly reasonable ways of thinking and communicating, and, in the process learn to disparage those ways, and pity those who cling to them. (58)

This may require a difficult choice; the “words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities” (Gee 526) that are inherent in the dominant discourse may very well be at odds with the values students have adopted as part of their primary discourse. For example, students may have come to view their circumstances in a fatalistic way—“what will be, will be” no matter what choices or actions the students take. The discourse of the dominant culture, however, includes the belief that each individual is largely responsible for his or her own destiny. While it is empowering, the idea of personal accountability can also be very frightening to persons who have grown up believing they are powerless to help themselves. Each student may be required to make the difficult decision to

temporarily suspend the values and conventions of their primary discourse in order to gain fluency in the unfamiliar discourse of the academic and professional world.

Some students choose to reject academic discourse in order to avoid feeling as if they have abandoned the familial and social networks that have provided them with a stable support system. Individuals who have made the choice to become college students aspire to higher levels of status in their careers and personal lives, which will require fluency in the Standard English that is the discourse of professionals, yet they may wonder if what they gain will surpass what they will lose in terms of solidarity with their peers and a sense of identity with the culture of their primary discourse. These students may need to be assured by their teachers and fellow students that their primary discourse is no less worthy than academic discourse, but it is not appropriate for the formal writing required in the academic discourse community. Gaining fluency in academic discourse will also allow them access to the benefits it provides—professional status and the possibility of changing the prevalent values of the dominant culture, such as decision-making power concerning what subjects will be taught, which texts are worthwhile, and what aspects of other cultures will be assimilated.

Nevertheless, students and others who may know that Standard English will facilitate access to desired jobs and social contacts often choose not to use Standard English. Milroy and Milroy argue that in situations where a person begins to use a different kind of speech from that common in his social network,

he must...weigh up the potential benefits and disadvantages of this behavior. To the extent that he values the moral, emotional, and practical support of his network peers, he will opt for their familiar speech-patterns.

To the extent that he chooses the standardised or high-prestige form of the language, he is opting for *status* rather than solidarity. (50)

Their research in Belfast indicated that individuals in working-class groups rarely preferred status to solidarity. For educators, the implication is that membership in a social network is sometimes more important to students than the potential for status or the economic advancement that comes with fluency in Standard English and the discourse of educated individuals. Payne, DeVol, and Smith discuss some of the hidden rules of various classes of people. They explain that one reason people living in generational poverty do not choose status over solidarity is that they view people as their most valuable and reliable possessions. The driving forces in their lives are “survival, relationships, and entertainment” (44). As students begin to acquire the academic discourse, they are encouraged to examine critically the set view of life and “work self-consciously, critically against not only the ‘common’ code but [their] own” (521). The codes include the students’ culture and world views—their ways of seeing and interacting with the world around them. In *Bridges Out of Poverty*, Payne, DeVol, and Smith discuss some of the different “hidden rules” of various social classes and how they affect the ways in which individuals respond to that world. For the middle class, language uses a “formal register. Language is about negotiation. Education [is] crucial for climbing the success ladder and making money” (44). In contrast, for those in lower social classes, the focus is on surviving from day to day. Their use of language involves a “casual register. Language is about survival. Education [is] valued and revered as an abstract but not as reality” (44). These individuals have not yet developed the ability to critically analyze the causal relationship between learning to adhere to the conventions of academic discourse

and access to cultural capital—including jobs, money, material goods, and status. They tend to view the “rules” of academic discourse as a kind of gate intended to keep them out of the discourse community. They may feel oppressed because they feel they are being “forced” to abandon their home culture. These students often choose to oppose, and sometimes resist, using the conventions associated with academic discourse. Some of my students have chosen to leave school rather than learn the conventions of Standard English. Although they claim to understand the cost of such resistance, I cannot help wonder if they have fully considered the consequences of such an action.

But lower class individuals are not the only ones who actively resist using Standard English. Milroy and Milroy cite two studies of communities where Standard English is resisted by educated, middle and upper class individuals. “In Singapore, a very distinctive *non-British*” variety of English is emerging as Singaporean English that is being used by “radio announcers, university staff, and business executives” (89). Clearly, these are not low status individuals who don’t know British English. Although Standard British English is regarded as “in a sense superior and the ‘ideal’ form of English,” it is not widely used because the Singaporeans “want to sound like Singaporeans, not like Englishmen” (92). Their sense of identity is closely tied to their use of the Singaporean dialect.

On Martha’s Vineyard, researcher William Labov “noted that amongst the younger speakers a movement seemed to be taking place *away from* the pronunciations associated with the standard New England social norm, and *towards* a pronunciation associated with conservative and characteristically Vineyard speakers” (qtd. in Milroy and Milroy 93). Here again, as in Singapore, the individuals using this non-standard

form included young college-educated men. These speakers “actively sought to identify themselves as Vineyarders, rejected the values of the mainland, and resented the encroachment of wealthy summer visitors on the traditional island way of life” (Milroy and Milroy 93). Resistance theory acknowledges that rejecting the value system of the dominant group often also means rejecting the discourse associated with that group. The supposition that individuals do not use the dominant discourse because they don’t know how to use it is often erroneous.

The implication for English teachers is that students often have a higher regard for a sense of solidarity with their social networks than for the possibility of higher social status or the opportunity for economic advancement. Instructors may labor under the assumption that college students especially may overtly agree that Standard English is the “correct” form since they have voluntarily decided to pursue higher education; nevertheless, if these students come from an impoverished background, they may continue using non-standard varieties because of a desire to maintain their identity as part of a social network. These individuals may have difficulty understanding that gaining fluency in Standard English does not exclude them from using a non-standard variety in less formal situations. Students may also perceive an instructor’s focus on what may be viewed as deficits in their language abilities as “disrespectful.” For all students, a positive relationship with their instructors is one key in learning the conventions of academic discourse. Mellix’s experiences with teachers who used black English to teach Standard English illustrate the value of relationship. The teachers were not correcting the black English because it was “bad,” but because Standard English was going to be a better tool for gaining employment.

Writing of her own experiences as an educator, Mellix states,

Now that I know that to seek knowledge, freedom, and autonomy means always to be in the concentrated process of becoming. . . I sometimes get tired. And I ask myself why I keep on participating in this highbrow form of violence, this slamming against perplexity. (394)

As a youngster surrounded by others like herself, Mellix found the sense of community made it “safe” to learn the “foreign” discourse. Her teacher used the same comfortable home discourse as Mellix, yet made it imminently clear to the students that it was in their best interest to learn the standard discourse used by the “others.” Students who feel their teacher is a colleague rather than an adversary are more apt to ask questions and develop the persistence required to continue to become fluent in academic discourse. The teacher can encourage the students to resist the idea that writing well is something they will never be able to do, and can point out areas where the student may already have skills—such as the use of specific detail, or the ability to compose a compelling narrative. Receiving positive comments from an instructor the student has come to respect will build confidence in the student, and encourage him or her to resist the idea that ideas are only worthwhile if written in academic discourse.

For instructors, this might mean offering alternative ways of saying things rather than insisting students use specific words or phrases. Payne, DeVol, and Smith identify problems that tend to arise when individuals feel as if they are being given orders rather than being offered alternatives.

First, the persons carrying out the order may not feel accountable for the outcome. They don't perceive the behavior as their own; it hasn't risen out

of their thinking, intentions, desires, or motivation, so why should they carry it out? Second, orders and demands are not respectful and, as we know, respect is a cornerstone of relationships, and *relationships constitute the cornerstone of change*. (106; emphasis mine)

Giving students choices will help to establish a collaborative relationship between teacher and student which can further facilitate learning. For many students, attending college is a huge change from what they have known previously. Students tend to feel more respected if they feel what they have written is not perceived as “bad.” The implication for teachers is that as they present academic discourse as a choice the student can make, they also need to try and suggest some alternative words or phrases, rather than rewriting things for students or “putting words in their mouths.”

If students resist the discourse itself or us as instructors, we may not be able to convince them that they should make Standard English one of their available discourses. Because many students come to college either unprepared or under-prepared to use Standard English, we need to model the conventions in addition to directly teaching them. In some cases, individuals may realize that there are both economic and social benefits to developing fluency in the dominant discourse. For example, people who are fluent in Standard English may be more likely to become involved in social programs such as political action groups or consumer advocacy groups. A minister friend knows that she is not fluent in Standard English, but understands that becoming fluent will give her more confidence when addressing the congregation or a group of other professionals in the community. In addition, some individuals may want to gain fluency, but claim they can't or don't know how to do so.

discourse than they may have imagined. Teachers may also introduce individuals to texts they might have special interest in.

Nevertheless, teachers must be careful that they do not begin to view themselves as the liberators of their students. In order for students to truly develop their own autonomy, they must see themselves as thinking individuals who are worthy of the respect they are given. Teachers must find a way to develop and maintain a balance between encouraging the students' sense of self-worth and helping them develop fluency in the dominant discourse. Students must never be encouraged to resist the dominant value system for the sake of resistance alone, because students who develop resistance as their primary means of dealing with life may come to resist all authority figures, including the instructor, which may result in the student losing opportunities for economic or social advancement.

Can teachers ethically encourage students to resist social forces such as class prejudice and attitudes concerning who is worthy of positions of power, knowing that those students may be denied access to the dominant culture because of their resistance? Instructors must insist that students learn the conventions of the dominant discourse, since individuals cannot truly resist what they do not fully understand. In order to be good citizens of any society, individuals must be capable of critically analyzing texts and identifying the interests of each party involved; for resistance to be a conscious choice, the individual must be capable of both assimilating to and resisting the dominant discourse. The essence of emancipation is that individuals should have the ability to make choices that affect their personal, social, and professional lives. Emancipated individuals do not limit their options out of hand, but make choices after critically considering both

the benefits and the disadvantages of whatever choice they make. Teachers who wish to resist the idea that composition is only a means to an end—being prepared to do college level work in other disciplines—need to find ways in which to give students a sense of the public meaning or worth of their skills. If the students, in conjunction with their teachers, do not challenge the dehumanizing social forces, the students may face a difficult choice—lose access to the dominant discourse and the goods and services that accompany it, or lose their sense of identity and individuality.

Resistance is manifested in various ways, and in “Whole Lotta Resistin’ Goin’ On,” Michael Blitz states that it has become such a part of composition studies “that it’s now difficult for [him] to take the resistance out of composition” (201). In this article, Blitz responds to two books dealing with resistance—*Opening Spaces: Critical Pedagogy and Resistance theory in Composition* by Joe Marshall Hardin and *Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies* by Andrea Greenbaum. Blitz contends that “both volumes ‘wrestle visibly with the idea of resistance—even with the term itself—in ways that can enrich our thinking and teaching about composition’” (200). Although there are multiple views of the way in which resistance is manifested, Blitz prefers the view offered by Ellen Strenski, who “proposes an analogy between electronic circuitry and the flow of curricular decisions within the university” (qtd. in Blitz 201).

In Strenski’s model, too little resistance causes the mechanism to overheat and possibly self-destruct. Conversely, “too much resistance impedes the mechanism’s ability to function efficiently if at all” (96). This underscores the difficulty English faculty face in trying to maintain a delicate balance between encouraging and supporting student resistance to the conventions and forms required for academic writing and

requiring that students achieve mastery of when and how to use those conventions so they may fully participate in the culture. Strenski's article illustrates the need for power to be redistributed in order to avoid putting all participants (institution, faculty, and students) in danger of "collective peril" (90). Students can dissipate some of the power the institution and the instructors hold over them by resisting the unquestioning acceptance of the conventions of a discourse that would seem to devalue both their experiences and their primary discourse.

One of the major questions facing instructors of composition has been how to convince students that the ability to communicate effectively translates into power. In recent decades many instructors have tried to incorporate resistance theory into classroom instruction and practices as a means of encouraging students in their acquisition of the academic discourse. Students may be given the opportunity to argue that their culture and experience are not being represented in the literature commonly considered worthy of study in a college course. Resistance may involve prompting students to consider some historical event from a different perspective, for example, or allowing students to share an essay written in response to a piece by a favorite minority author. These students, like Mellix, may feel that academic discourse isn't capable of expressing their experiences; only their home discourse seems adequate to express their thoughts and feelings.

According to Alan France, in composition resistance "most commonly refers to a general opposition to authority, a student's opposition to pedagogical authority, and, especially, a writer's opposition to discursive conventions" (qtd in Blitz 201). While students cannot ethically be encouraged to refuse to learn the conventions of academic discourse, instructors can pose questions which prompt the students into thinking

critically about how or if the texts they encounter reflect their experiences and values—and why certain conventions have become and remain a part of academic discourse. The goal of such resistance is to help the students arrive at a position where they have confidence in their own ability to think critically and evaluate when using academic discourse is advantageous. In particular, Hardin defines the teacher's role as facilitating or encouraging

critical activity that promotes resistance to the unconscious reification of ideological values as they are encountered in text, and as rhetorical production that is informed by a conscious understanding of the links between language and ideology, between rhetorical production and the inscription of values, and between linguistic and textual representation and power. (5)

It is imperative for students to know not only how to correctly punctuate a sentence, spell words, and use the correct syntax, but also understand how connotation, logic, appeals to emotion, and integrity in representing the ideas of others can have an impact on the effectiveness of their own writing. If these students have learned how to use academic discourse and yet make the choice to resist using that discourse in spite of the possibility it may have a negative result, then they have taken a step towards becoming truly emancipated. The goal is not student resistance per se, but that students begin to practice critical thinking and writing skills.

My students have sometimes expressed frustration over trying to put some idea into Standard English. While the standard form was correct and followed the conventions of academic discourse, some of the power inherent in the idea had been "lost

in translation,” and the student resisted making the changes. These students should be given the opportunity to write in the non-standard discourse. This is basically what Gilyard and Richardson advocate in their article—that students have the right not only to their own language, but to *possibilities* of expressing their thoughts and experiences in discourses that are better suited to their purpose. Student narratives, for example, that relate life on the street lose much of their inherent power to communicate that experience if they are forced into the mold of Standard English. These are situations where students and teachers alike can and should resist the idea that only Standard English is capable of effectively communicating ideas.

However, instructors must also often resist pressure from students and colleagues (and sometimes the administration) to relax the standards for students who aren't planning to immediately continue their education. I have had students who argued that they did not need to develop fluency in academic discourse because they only wanted to become a heating and air technician, a chef, a welder, or some other sort of “nonacademic.” Instructors need to resist the notion that students who do not plan to earn degrees in liberal arts or science receive little benefit from learning the conventions of academic discourse. Learning to clearly and concisely represent ideas is a critical thinking skill that provides benefits not only to college students who must write in the classroom, but also to individuals who come into contact with other people during the day-to-day running of a home. It allows individuals to gain access to new ideas and thereby become better citizens and make better political choices because they are informed. Critical thinking asks each of us to challenge not only who we are and what we believe, but also why we believe it.

In a recent class of remedial writing students, one individual wrote about applying for a promotion at the factory where she had formerly worked. As part of the application process she was asked to write an essay enumerating the reasons why she was the right person for the job. The student believed she had the skills needed to perform the duties of the position effectively, but her supervisor informed her that she had not been given the promotion. When she asked the reason, she was told her essay indicated a lack of communication skills that would be required of someone in a customer service position. As a result of this and other negative experiences with Standard English, this individual had come to believe she could never learn to write an effective essay. I encouraged her to resist that attitude, however, and made some suggestions on organization, development, and alternate wording which helped her develop confidence.

She recently thanked me for helping her realize that she was capable of learning to write well, although the credit should rightly be hers. Because of volatile situations in the workplace, increased numbers of non-traditional students are enrolling in community colleges such as the one where I teach—including students who had no plans of continuing their education but were displaced when their manufacturing jobs were eliminated or outsourced. After being self-supporting for most of their lives, many of these students have been unable to secure jobs which paid an adequate wage. They often question their ability to do college work, and prior experiences with English classes have caused them to feel uncomfortable trying to express themselves in writing using Standard English. Nevertheless, most understand that in order to secure and keep a job that will pay a wage sufficient to cover their needs, they will need to know how to use Standard English.

RESISTANCE OR ACCOMMODATION?

I looked into resistance theory with great expectations about its ability to help students realize that they have a voice and a vote with which they can influence the values and norms of our society. To a large degree, I have been disappointed by the lack of specific suggestions available concerning how to incorporate resistance theory into classroom practice. Resistance is a tremendous undertaking, and, as Blitz, who co-edited the 1991 text *Composition and Resistance*, admits, "I am less confident now, ten years later, that either students or their teachers are particularly well positioned to take up the challenge of putting up resistance to institutional, political, ideological, and/or social forces that work to dehumanize individuals and communities" (202) Resistance in composition is problematic by its nature. John Trimbur cites Giroux's representation of resistance as "an 'analytical construct and mode of inquiry' carried out in order to identify the radical potentialities in specific situations and behaviors for emancipation, critical consciousness, and transformative collective action" (4). One form of resistance I often see among students is what Trimbur calls

Resistance to texts . . . [which] ranges from encounters with unfamiliar (and perhaps intimidating) texts and genres that students mark as "boring" to rejection of academic controversy as "pointless and hairsplitting" to a reluctance to question the printed word as an authoritative source ("if it's written down, it must be true"). (6)

For instructors, it is often difficult to get students to acknowledge that not everything that is in print is true or valuable in making judgments about the way the world is, or ought to be. Trimbur describes writing teachers as individuals who envision themselves as

“perpetually balancing their role as gatekeepers against a profound desire to be allies and advocates of student aspirations” (8). This is my dilemma—how to balance my desire to help students reach their goals with the need to help them understand that the process of struggling is as important to their education and the construction of their identity as attaining the degrees and other material rewards. As Trimbur argues,

The task for radical teachers is to help students understand the sources of resistance and opposition in the tragic disorder and suffering of class society, as well as the consequences of refusal, withdrawal, and counter-identities. Most of all, it is not a matter of calling on alienated students to believe in the system—even the radical teacher’s version of it—but of helping them manage a tragic sense of the social order that refuses to accept either its claims or their own alienation. (14)

There are dangers and risks involved that need to be taken into account. My biggest challenge as a professional is to find ways to resist on the one hand the apathy that many students have toward academic interrogation of the texts, values, and behaviors that reproduce the culture, and on the other, the jaded attitude that denies the influence a teacher can have on students or the society. For both instructors and students, the major issue is what difference it makes to an individual or society whether or not an individual learns the conventions of Standard English.

I suggest the answer lies in relationship. Teaching students how to use Standard English allows them to gain membership in the dominant discourse community, and that is the traditional locus of power in any society. Teachers who develop collegial relationships with students are able to ask students, “Why do you think something is so?”

without threatening or causing the student to feel demeaned. When students learn that questioning everything offers them the power to remake their identities, and further to influence society as a whole, they can more effectively identify and resist those ideas and values that are oppressive, not only to themselves, but also to others within that society. Since relationships are the basis for societies and cultures, it is important that we each continue to develop and nurture those relationships. Being in relationship with others who don't see things the way we do gives us opportunity for exchange of ideas. Language itself is shared—syntax, vocabulary, and idioms have all been negotiated by previous members of any discourse community, and learning the conventions of academic discourse enables students to effectively share their unique perspectives with others. Exposure to multiple perspectives and values is an effective way to ensure that individuals continue to evaluate and critique the culture to which they belong.

Hardin asserts,

Teaching resistance requires only two specific outcomes: one, that students learn to resist the uncritical acceptance of cultural representations and institutional practices by interrogating rhetoric to uncover its motives and values; and two, that students learn to produce text that uses rhetoric and convention to give voice to their own values and positions. . . . Teaching resistance is an activity that respects and empowers students if it discloses the interestedness of all parties and if it encourages students to hold, accept or resist the values inscribed in language according to their own cultural, ethical, or moral perceptions. (7)

Helping students “learn to resist uncritical acceptance of cultural representations” often seems easier than helping them to use the rhetoric and conventions of Standard English in order to develop their own voices in expressing their values and positions. However, resistance is both a dangerous undertaking and hard work. At stake is the students’ sense of self—of being (or becoming) a confident, competent member of an academic discourse community, or any community. Failure to resist could mean loss of one’s sense of identity within the culture, but resistance could result in a loss of the cultural capital—the goods, services, income, prestige, and status—that makes life more than just day-to-day survival. One unfortunate result of this dichotomy is that some students accommodate themselves to the conventional forms of academic writing out of fear that they will be kept from gaining access to the lifestyle they desire. While these individuals may produce text that is nearly perfect mechanically, it rarely if ever seriously interrogates any issues.

How can instructors balance the need to facilitate student acquisition of the conventions of Standard English with the desire to encourage students to express their own ideas and values? Hardin suggests that “by revealing that academic, disciplinary, and cultural discourses are available and open spaces and by supporting the hybridization and rearticulation of their rhetoric and conventions, critical teachers can find a way to empower and encourage student authority” (9). Nevertheless, it is not always easy to convince students of the openness of the academic discourse, especially when the students’ writing seems to be of no value other than providing an opportunity for the instructor to ‘nit-pick’ the grammar errors the student may have made. Some instructors and students are looking for the ideal pedagogy that will magically liberate the students.

However, both instructors and students need to accept the fact that the students must learn to liberate themselves by learning to examine and critically evaluate the ideas and values inherent in any academic (or non-academic) text. Resistance requires questioning; we must continue to ask “why” and “how” concerning every aspect of our lives while developing and using our own unique voices to speak out or write about injustices and inequalities in our culture.

Throughout the history of any society, an important consideration has always been, “Who can speak for the oppressed?” During the years when blacks were oppressed and kept enslaved, it was the voices of those who themselves had been oppressed that were strongest in arguing for abolition. One of the most effective speakers and writers of the anti-slavery movement was Frederick Douglass, who learned at a young age that literacy was the key to breaking the chains of oppression. A major factor in Douglass’s effectiveness as an anti-slavery proponent was his ability to write eloquently using the conventions of Standard English. Douglass knew that in order to change oppressive social conditions one must either revolt or change the thinking of those who wielded the power. Revolt had been unsuccessful for small bands of enslaved blacks, but writing could reach the population with power—the white citizens. Because his writing conformed to the conventions of the discourse of the educated white males, Douglass was taken seriously as a spokesperson for both the blacks still in slavery and the abolitionists who were working to end their oppression. Douglass’s success as a writer and speaker can serve as an example to students that conforming to the conventions of academic discourse can be an effective strategy for one who wishes to speak for the oppressed.

Hardin contends, “[T]he role of classroom writing instruction in the current “culture crisis” should be threefold: to further politicize the teaching of academic rhetoric, canon, genres, conventions, and methods; to make those forms and conventions available sites for student articulation; and to make the critical position of author a realistic possibility for students” (12). This is the crux of resistance; we must not allow students to refuse to learn the skills needed to “write and read with the standard conventions”; rather we need to help them understand how those conventions can allow them to participate in the discourse, and work to change the values of a given discourse from within the discourse community.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

What are some ways that instructors can encourage and enable their students in their struggle to gain such a voice? Gilyard and Richardson, Smitherman, Mellix, and others suggest that one important aspect of any composition course is the inclusion of multiple discourses—resisting the assumption that there is only one “right” way to speak and write. They offer ideas concerning ways in which alternative discourses can be welcomed into the classroom, “honored” by the discourse community, and studied as effective methods of communication. Gilyard and Richardson suggest that all students be taught the features of Black English Vernacular, with attention paid to the writing of strong black voices, identifying the effective features of their writing, and then attempting to emulate that writer’s style, in much the same way that creative writing students are asked to emulate the style of novelists or poets.

In “Should We Invite Students to Write in Home Languages? Complicating the Yes/No Debate,” various English faculty members discuss the use of non-standard

dialects in composition classes. They consider several variables that must be addressed in deciding whether or not to have students write in home languages and then re-write in Standard English. While some students would benefit from having their home language respected and honored by inviting students to use it for writing, others have been made to feel their language is unworthy of being used for something other than casual speech. They point out that many students choose not to write in their home languages for several reasons, including the desire to get “practice in producing or generating standardized English . . . In addition, sadly, a few won’t want to use their home dialect because they have been taught to disapprove of it as a second-rate or broken language (just as Jesse Jackson called Ebonics “trash talk”) (Bean et al.). It is important that, rather than conveying the notion (through overt comment or implication) that students’ primary or home languages are inadequate or suffering from some deficit in their ability to communicate clearly with others, instructors find some way in which to ascribe honor and value to those discourses. The student whose sentence structure skills are less than stellar may, nonetheless, have highly developed skills in story-telling or engaging an audience. Such aspects of their home discourses may become points where students and teachers can find common elements—places that Mary Louise Pratt calls “contact zones . . . where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (607). At these junctures, teachers can recognize students’ strengths in their own discourses while trying to facilitate students’ acquisition of the conventions of Standard English.

David Bartholomae states that students who have not gained control of the specialized vocabulary of academia often use “commonplaces” to help them communicate their ideas. “Commonplaces are the ‘controlling ideas’ of our composition

textbooks, textbooks that not only insist upon a set form for expository writing but a set view of public life” (514). Students are taught that in order to “speak with authority” they must learn “to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom” (521). However, reliance on commonplaces to express ideas may encourage students to resist developing skill in choosing and relating the specific details and examples that will make their writing more reflective of their individual experiences.

However, as stated earlier, Blitz believes that resistance has become so pervasive among both students and faculty that resistance itself represents conformity to new norms, and assimilation to the traditional norms is the new form of resistance. However, the pervasiveness of working against (resisting) the older common code does not negate the need for students to be able to manipulate the dominant discourse. John Trimbur warns that

there are dangers and risks involved that need to be taken into account.

And one of these, it’s important to note, may well be the writing teacher’s own fondness for nonconformists, rebels, bad boys and girls, beautiful losers. The danger . . . is not so much that of finding victory in defeat—that is simply part of drawing out the lessons of revolutionary struggles—but of finding victory *only* in defeat (13).

Students need to understand that the dominant discourse involves being able to use Standard English, both in spoken and written forms, when communicating with others in the society. When they become fluent in the standard forms, they will have the ability to choose which discourse will best serve them in different situations. As an instructor, I try to provide my students with reasons why gaining fluency in Standard

English is crucial. One of the analogies I give them is that they have different styles of clothing in their closets, and while the blue jeans and tee-shirts may be the most useful and most comfortable in many situations, most would probably not wear blue jeans to the prom; that situation calls for more formal dress. Conversely, formal wear would not be practical in most situations they face on a day-to-day basis. The crucial issue is not which is better, but that individuals have access to both so they have the opportunity to choose which is most useful in any given circumstance. The same argument holds true for discourses. Resistance is not an “all-or-nothing” proposition—students may choose to accept some aspects of the dominant discourse and its value system while rejecting or resisting other values associated with that discourse. Nevertheless, in order to be prepared to function in various positions, they must develop competence in Standard English while sustaining their primary discourses as viable alternatives.

While both Rodriguez and Anzaldúa felt they were being forced to choose between standard and primary discourses, Mellix’s experiences clearly illustrate that one does not need to abandon one discourse in order to gain the use of another. Chomsky has suggested that in a community of ideal speaker-hearers,

No normal person and no normal community is limited in repertoire to a single variety or code, to an unchanging monotony which would preclude the possibility of indicating respect, insolence, mock seriousness, role distance, etc., by switching from one variety to another. (qtd. in Milroy and Milroy 100)

Individuals who are able to code switch have more flexibility to express themselves in a variety of ways. Academic discourse allows individuals to demonstrate respect for others,

but makes it difficult to show insolence or facetiousness without risking being misunderstood, while most vernaculars allow for mock seriousness, but are limited in their ability to convey a high degree of respect.

Students who develop fluency in multiple discourses are not only competent, but they are also empowered to use the various discourses to achieve their goals—both personal and academic. Resistance theory seeks to provide the individual with access to the goods and services available through literacy without having to accept the underlying value system that requires the assimilation or marginalization of those individuals. In resistance teaching, the role of the teacher is to encourage and enable the students to gain authority through the critical examination of the value systems connected with a given discourse. Such examination can only be a good thing; those values that students do choose to accept are accepted out of genuine belief in their merit. Ideas and values accepted without question for whatever reason are worthless when an individual faces the inevitable crises of life.

Instructors who see students only for a semester or two may find it difficult to establish a relationship with them. One possible strategy for developing a collegial relationship rather than an adversarial one is for instructors to provide the students with some personal information about their own literacy acquisition and education. In the classes I teach at a community college, I am able to connect not only with the students who are attending college immediately after high school, but also with the older, non-traditional student. Having left college after my junior year, I did not return to finish until just before my fortieth birthday. At that time I had a family to care for, a full-time job to maintain, and classes to attend, so I know what it is like to try and juggle the

responsibilities of home, school, and paying work. My experience also demonstrates that each individual must gain fluency through the learning process—it isn't awarded by a fairy godmother at the wave of a wand. For many students, the knowledge that I have "walked in their shoes" has been the catalyst that brings them to my office to discuss their own struggles with me. Students who have developed a connection with me have tended to be more involved and, as a result, more successful in their studies.

If students view the instructor as someone who is truly on their side, it may provide them with the incentive needed to help them persist in their studies. When the connection is made, the result is a strong bond. A Ukrainian colleague once told me that the reason she and her granddaughter were so close was that they had a common "enemy"—the child's mother. When students view instructors as their allies in resisting the social and economic conditions which hinder their success, they are more likely to develop the habits of asking questions and seeking help when needed.

Resistance is not the "wonder drug" of college composition. While writing teachers may wish to encourage those students for whom resistance provides the sense of empowerment needed to continue learning the conventions of academic discourse, they must also keep in mind that much is at stake. Students who do not learn how to navigate within the conventions of academic discourse have little hope of changing the beliefs, attitudes and values of the dominant culture. A more reasonable and pragmatic approach, it seems to me, is to encourage resistant students to learn the conventions so that they can become "voting members" of the discourse—attempting to make changes from within. The political focus of the last half century, which has been more on individual rights than on the rights of the collective society, has stimulated resistance. While individual

empowerment is important, there is synergy in uniting with others. Encouraging students to develop fluency in multiple discourses helps them resist the notion that one discourse is *better* than another. Allowing students the opportunity to use their skills in their primary discourse in addition to insisting that they practice using academic discourse is a practice that may benefit both student and instructor. One possibility would be including texts from writers representing many different discourses, such as Anzaldúa, Nikki Giovanni, Mellix, Smitherman, and others.

When students are given opportunities to write using their primary discourse, it demonstrates to them that their discourse is worthwhile and respected. One possible assignment might be to have students write a narrative about some experience they have had that involves a social issue. The students could use their home discourses and a less formal register in presenting their "story." Then the students could be assigned an argumentative essay building a case for or against the issue at hand. (For example, a student who was ticketed for not wearing a seat belt could write about that incident and then develop an argument against such laws as an infringement of personal liberties.)

I also allow students to use their home discourses in ungraded journals that are used to practice their skills. Students receive some credit for their efforts, no matter how awkward. Because students have often been "taught" that they have poor language skills (e.g., spelling, grammar and punctuation errors), many want specific instruction on "the right way" to say what they mean. The journals provide an opportunity for me to give them one-on-one instruction concerning conventions and vocabulary that will not "cost" them a lower grade, as it would on a major paper. By focusing on some positive aspect of their writing—for example, a strong voice or good specific support—I attempt to

engender in them a sense of their own ability to handle ideas. While suggesting alternative wording or explaining the appropriate conventions for the type of writing, I explain to students that professional writers also use “editors,” and that I am not trying to tell them *what* to say, but merely suggesting when ideas need more specific development and *how* they might express their ideas more formally.

In teaching students to write an argumentative essay, I ask them to imagine they are attorneys preparing to try a criminal court case. Nearly every student has background knowledge concerning the workings of a criminal trial, whether through personal experience or as a result of watching numerous television programs that depict court proceedings. I have found the analogy to be useful because it provides numerous points of comparison. I explain that in the same way attorneys cannot just go into court and present their clients’ pleas, neither can a writer make claims and expect readers to just take their word for it—they have to prove the claims they make.

Next, I engage students in a discussion about the process of gathering evidence—how the evidence is collected and what types of evidence would be admissible in court. I compare these procedures with the process of doing research and evaluating the information they find. Students understand the need for the attorneys on both sides of a case to provide hard evidence—fingerprints, bullets, and DNA evidence that has been gathered according to specific rules. They also understand the concepts of expert testimony and hearsay evidence. By broadening these concepts to include written texts, students develop a sense of what sorts of research material they need to find. We also discuss the need to build a strong case and the point that the more evidence they can provide to support their claims, the stronger their case will be.

Then the students are told that they must choose to present one side or the other and “build a case.” I discuss with the students different parts or stages included in a court proceeding, and then I draw parallels with argumentative essays. I explain that the introduction is similar to the opening argument, and that during the presentation of the case, each piece of evidence is presented and its connection to the case is explained. The conclusion is compared to the closing argument, in which the major evidence is highlighted before the attorney reiterates his or her claim about the defendant’s guilt.

In addition, rather than just teaching Toulmin logic as a convention of academic writing (making a claim, providing the grounds to support it, and stating the warrant), I emphasize the fact that attorneys do not just bring in the evidence and present it to the jury. Rather they provide context, make connections to the crime, and then present the evidence in support of some specific claim. While not every student writes a strong argument as a result, many do demonstrate an understanding of the conventions involved. In addition, while instilling in students the sense that they are capable of “trying” issues of import in their writing, the analogy also helps students to view the work of the academy as significant as a tool which can be used to improve their lives in the larger society.

In conclusion, by insisting that my students learn to use academic discourse, I am helping them access the means by which they can pursue their goals—whether entrance into the academic discourse community and access to the degrees and certifications that will allow them to improve their economic status, or full participation as a member of the larger society. Individuals who have achieved fluency in multiple discourses are better able to analyze cultural values and either assimilate them or resist them. Effective

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VITA

Sharon Houck received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Secondary English Education from Bethel College in May 1994. She was awarded the Master of Arts in English degree from Indiana University South Bend in August 2007. Since January 1994, Sharon has served as an adjunct writing and reading instructor in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana. In addition, she has served on the statewide outcomes assessment committee and is currently a member of the Academic Skills Portfolio Assessment Committee for the South Bend campus of Ivy Tech.

Sharon and her husband Dennis have been married for thirty-five years and have two children and three grandchildren. She enjoys cooking, singing, eating chocolate, and spoiling her grandchildren.

