Other People’s Students

Elaborated Codes and Dialect in Basic Writing

BY

JASON CORY EVANS
B.A., magna cum laude, Milligan College, 2001
M.A., University of Chicago, 2002

THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2012

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:
Gerald Graff, Chair and Advisor
Todd DeStigter
AnnMerle Feldman
Walter Benn Michaels
Vershawn Ashanti Young, University of Kentucky
To my mother, Dawne Ann Evans (1944-1994).
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my dissertation committee for their guidance and thoughtful comments. Todd DeStigter has challenged my understanding of literacy and of English teaching since my first days at UIC. AnnMerle Feldman introduced me to conversations within the field of composition studies, and she has helped me to see the limits of the writing classroom. Walter Benn Michaels has pushed me, as he has done in his lively way for so many in so many fields, to think more carefully about identity and social class. Vershawn Young offered incisive critiques of my thinking both early and late in the dissertation process, and I hope his influence on my work and teaching comes through clearly in each chapter.

Gerald Graff continues to be a generous mentor and a tough editor. I am grateful for his conversation and guidance at every level—from each sentence to the chapter structure—and at each step along the way. He gave me enough room to make my own arguments, but he always finds ways to help me say it better.

I have learned much from discussing these ideas with so many, including my family, Larry Evans, Carol Evans, Tonya Myers, Angie Brouhard, Suzanne Ruch, and Lee Ruch; my friends, especially Tim Sandoval, Garry Sparks, George Streeter, and Bill Wright; my graduate student colleagues at UIC who read and critiqued portions of my arguments, especially Kevin Carey, Brian Charest, Sarah Donovan, and Sarah Maria Rutter; and, not least, my colleagues and students at Prairie State, too many to name but very dear to me and critically important to my thinking.

“Acknowledgment” is too weak a word to name the many ways that Amanda Ruch has contributed to this project, from her sharp and timely critical eye to her passionate concern for good teaching and for good thinking about teaching. And though she does not yet employ
elaborated codes or understand the subtleties of dialect, our daughter Ann has helped put my research and writing into proper perspective.

JCE
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction: Language Difference, or the Problem That Won’t Go Away</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reviving Bernstein</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Class Futurity: A Case Study in Elaboration</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Deficit, Not Difference</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Being Correct in Any Dialect</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Code Confusion, or the Trouble with Code-Switching and Code-Meshing</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Conclusion: Elaborated Codes and Social Justice</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CITED LITERATURE</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURRICULUM VITA</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUMMARY

English teachers, especially those in the field of basic writing, have long debated how to teach writing to students whose home language differs from the perceived norm. This thesis intervenes in that stalemated debate by re-examining “elaborated codes” and by arguing for a type of correctness in writing that includes being correct according to a vernacular dialect.

Elaborated codes were first theorized by British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein in the 1960s, but American educators have by and large neglected his code theories, often on the erroneous assumption that Bernstein’s project is hostile to the working classes. I examine Bernstein’s work and some key responses to it, and I show how teaching the elaborated codes solves some of the dilemmas faced by basic writing instructors.

Basic writing teachers also struggle with how to teach basic literacy while respecting students’ home languages. I carefully analyze some key arguments about error and correctness, language difference, code-switching, and code-meshing to show that it is possible to respect students’ home languages even while encouraging better and more rigorous language use.
Chapter 1. Introduction: Language Difference, or the Problem That Won’t Go Away

Long before and ever since the Conference on College Composition and Communication issued the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” resolution in 1974, English teachers have grappled with how best to teach writing to students whose home language differs from the perceived norm. Some have argued that requiring students to learn academic English contributes to race and class oppression by imposing the abstract language of the dominant culture on the authentic selfhood of underclass students, while others have maintained that requiring academic English is beneficial in and of itself and a prerequisite for class mobility and that equating it with oppression only helps to keep those students powerless. Framed in these starkly polarized terms, as it often is, it is a tired debate, and simply recycling it sheds little new light on the classroom or the profession. Yet the frequency with which the debate continues to reappear reflects an unresolved conflict that still haunts the teaching of writing, one that many teachers—especially new ones—continue to experience in their work with students.

In some ways, our profession and the general public have benefitted from this debate. It is a good thing that writing teachers are now more aware of the pedagogical dangers and ethical consequences of “fixing” students’ home language, thanks in no small part to declarations like this one in the “Students’ Right” resolution: “The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another.” As Min-Zhan Lu, Bruce Horner, and others have repeatedly pointed out in similar versions of this argument, English teachers have helped perpetuate ignorant views of language among the public; even if today’s English educators should be more enlightened than those in the past, the wider public still continues the long legacies of wrongly treating some Black or poor persons’ language as inferior. This critique of the profession is a fair one, and better understanding of language among
the public would almost certainly help prevent arbitrary forms of discrimination based on how people talk.

In this dissertation, I argue that some progressive critiques of writing instruction, rather than supporting the work of English teachers by clarifying the aims of writing courses, leave teachers poorly equipped to promote even basic literacy among students whose home language is different from the school’s. These critiques claim that writing classrooms are places where teachers oppress their students by imposing dominant forms of discourse, and their main consequence is to make English teachers feel guilty about fulfilling their institutional obligation to help students improve their use of language. For these arguments seem to offer writing teachers only a simplistic polar opposition: either respect students’ language diversity or insult students’ dignity by invoking a mythical Standard English; either resist language conformity and help students realize their true selves or flog students into sounding like everybody else; either advance revolutionary alterity or sell out to capitalism. Any change in how students use language, some of these critics seem to imply, reveals a retrograde politics of domination and oppression.

In the face of such intimidating calls to respect students’ home language, English teachers must struggle not only with the difficult pedagogical task of helping students learn to write well, but also with a complex and seemingly irresolvable moral double bind: if our students become better writers according to the accepted college standards, we will have succeeded only in colonizing them by imposing a dominant discourse from outside.

New versions of the critique of academic writing standards continue to appear in our professional publications. For instance, in the January 2011 edition of College English, Horner, Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur lay out a “translingual” approach to language
difference. This translingual approach, they explain, “sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading and listening” (303). They contrast this translingual view of language difference with “traditional” approaches, which allegedly “take as the norm a linguistically homogeneous situation: one where writers, speakers, and readers are expected to use Standard English or Edited American English—imagined ideally as uniform—to the exclusion of other languages and language variations” (303). They complain that writing teachers who take this traditional approach aim to homogenize students’ language by reducing “interference” from supposed non-Standard language varieties, and they argue that a translingual approach offers new linguistic resources by legitimating previously forbidden linguistic habits and dialects and by encouraging instructors to read with greater “patience” and generosity. To demonstrate that their translingual approach has growing support, Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur list at the end of their piece fifty scholars who endorse the project they outline, and in a selected bibliography they name another hundred or more books and articles.

Again, their argument, like the “Students’ Right” resolution before it, says something that is very necessary. Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur are right that we must avoid common prejudices about students whose dialects deviate from American Edited English. Unfortunately, they go on to erase the distinction between deviations that “belong to” (their term) students’ home language communities and those that are the result of unequal educational opportunities (307). They offer teachers no help, that is, in distinguishing language difference that “belongs” from the deleterious effects of unequal access to quality literacy education. Their arguments can only discourage teachers from helping students improve their writing—remediating bad writing might indicate elitism or, worse, bigotry.
If we want writing classrooms to be both effective and humane, we will need better accounts of how features of language interact with identity and class differences. The translingual approach, like many other progressive approaches to language difference, attributes authenticity to features of a student’s home language but fails to make clear how teachers are to determine what belongs and is inviolable and what is the result of material inequality. It will not do to romanticize “class” as a form of identity in writing, since some aspects of class-based experience are the result of inequalities we need to fight.

To put the question another way, should we see the “non-Standard” elements of the written language of some lower-income people as we see “culture” or as we see health or basic literacy? Certain diseases, like Type 2 diabetes, are more prevalent among lower-income people, yet no one sees diabetes as a cultural right to be protected. Because of federal agricultural policies and phenomena like “food deserts,” lower-income people are less likely than the better-off to have a healthy diet, yet no one thinks that unequal access to healthy food is a good thing. Children from lower-income homes are more likely to have low reading and math scores, yet literacy and numeracy as such are generally not questioned as necessary for every citizen in a democracy. Difference in written language can be like the difference between Spanish and English, or it can be like the difference between good health care and no health care.

In short, these progressive critiques of writing instruction often define “difference” so broadly and uncritically that they do not help teachers to make appropriate interventions into their students’ writing. They also often suffer from a vague, superficial treatment of language difference. Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur, for instance, offer only two examples of deviation from the standard register: a student who writes “spills out” instead of “spells out” or “stepping stool” instead of “stepping stone.” Lu, in her oft-quoted 1994 essay on multiculturalism in the
composition classroom, discusses at length a student who writes “can able to,” an apparent second-language idiomatic mistake that resulted from combining two possible English translations of a single Chinese word. If, to recall the song lyric, language difference amounts to “you say tomay-toe, I say tomah-toe,” what is the point of taking a writing course? Surely, composition instructors have more important work to do than either enforcing a superficial uniformity of language or celebrating a trifling diversity.

Rather than focus on differences between surface elements of language, especially those elements that are mutually intelligible between varieties of English, writing faculty and writing program administrators would do well to focus on differences in semantic habits that can lead to real difficulties in inter-group communication. Fortunately, such semantic habits have been theorized already in the distinction between elaborated and restricted codes that British sociolinguist Basil Bernstein developed in his educational research that began in the 1960s. Unfortunately, Bernstein’s work has been dismissed by many American academics for the past forty or so years, frequently on the unfair charge that it assaults the dignity of the working class. In the following chapters I will try to show how re-examining Bernstein’s theories can improve the way we talk about language differences and social class.

Bernstein developed a famous distinction between fundamentally different kinds of “codes” in order to explain the gap in school performance between working- and middle-class children. Why, he asked, do working-class children perform as well as middle-class children on non-verbal measures of intelligence but fare more poorly on verbal measures of intelligence and in school more generally? Like American linguists William Labov and Shirley Brice Heath, who shaped our professional conversation on language difference and class more than any one else, Bernstein supposed that most schools and verbal measures of intelligence used communication
patterns more familiar to middle-class children, and that the distance between the languages used in the home and the school was narrower for middle-class children and wider for working-class children. But unlike Labov, who claimed that middle-class and working-class languages were equal, or even that working-class language may be superior for its pithiness and clarity, Bernstein argued that the language of middle-class children offers crucial advantages for communication between groups of people who do not share a common background.

For Bernstein, the middle class tended to use what he calls elaborated codes, while the working class tended to use restricted codes. Bernstein was careful to emphasize that both groups use both types of codes, but that different class positions and social contexts give rise to different orientations towards meaning. We use restricted codes when communicating with familiars and with those who share a common background and cultural assumptions, and we use elaborated codes to make our language less dependent on context and on shared cultural assumptions. While people of all classes enjoy facility with restricted codes, elaborated codes, by contrast, are used more frequently by the middle class. They develop among the middle class, Bernstein theorizes, because the middle class has opportunities to interact more frequently in heterogeneous groups in which a shared understanding of context cannot be taken for granted.

Bernstein conducted his research in Britain. His code theories do not perfectly describe language difference among social classes in the United States; the American middle class, for instance, is notoriously difficult to define and includes many who use restricted codes. Yet because the elaborated codes refer to language practices that are useful for communicating with diverse audiences, exactly where they came from is not as important as how they can be used. That is, while I will go on to describe Bernstein’s research in more detail, the elaborated codes’ value for writing instructors does not depend on their actually being the codes of any particular
middle class. Rather, we should teach the elaborated codes because they can help our students write more effectively in the many settings that require us to make our meanings explicit.

It should be clear by now that Bernstein’s “codes” are not the same as those we commonly refer to in discussions of “code-switching,” one of the most widespread approaches to language difference adopted by English teachers. The codes in code-switching tend to refer to surface features of language or to register, differences in ways of speaking at home and in school or the workplace. Bernstein’s analysis, by contrast, has little to do with such surface features, and his argument about the utility of elaborated codes should not be confused with the claim that Standard English is useful because it is universal. In other words, one can use elaborated codes in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and use restricted codes in American Edited English. When we focus only on surface differences in language we tend to ignore these kinds of overlap and complexity.

As a member of the writing faculty at a predominantly Black community college for ten years, I have grappled every day with how to address my students’ home languages. Progressive approaches to language difference can remind me and my students that we would do well to accept and celebrate language difference as a collective resource. Yet when it comes to written language, some differences are more worth accepting and celebrating than others. Instead of discouraging writing teachers from judging students’ language, we would serve these teachers more usefully by equipping them with a sense of which language differences matter and why, which semantic habits are likely to aid students’ communication, and how writing courses can ameliorate inequalities in the educational system. Defining language difference uncritically as a protected “right” undermines the instruction our students need in order to master communication across social divides.
Overview

Some readers may have already dismissed me as a crank who is nostalgic for some imagined past, a time when everyone supposedly bought into the idea that Standard English is the norm and everything else is inferior. I do not see myself that way—I do not long for utopic linguistically-conservative salad days, and I am pleased with the many ways that schools have become more respectful of difference. Indeed, I think schools could do a great deal more to promote cultural understanding and respect.

Yet if we hope to help our students communicate well with diverse audiences, we will need to pay careful attention to the semantic habits, or codes, that they bring into the classroom. Semantic habits form collectively as communities interact. Some speakers are accustomed to communicating with people who share a similar culture, worldview, and background, and thus their semantic codes are easily understood in their local context but may be difficult to understand without sharing so much in common. Others are used to communicating with people from different cultures, worldviews, and backgrounds, and thus their semantic codes are more easily understood beyond their local context. Students who exhibit the former codes, called restricted codes by Bernstein, do not have a cognitive deficiency in their ability to use language. Restricted codes are not what anyone would call errors or mistakes; they are regular features of a community’s language habits. Yet, as I argue in chapter two, they are a language feature that impedes a speaker’s ability to communicate with people outside her social group, and we would do well to help students overcome them and learn elaborated codes.

To illustrate further this perspective on student writing, in chapter three I discuss one of my basic writing students from Prairie State. This student preferred to code-switch and could deftly move from writing in AAVE in “informal” genres like text messages to writing passable
“Standard” English in his formal essays. Yet his essay writing tended to use restricted rather than elaborated codes. In addition to examples of his writing, I discuss his career aspirations and how being able to write in elaborated codes might support his upward economic mobility.

But teaching semantic habits like elaborated codes will not solve all of the writing problems of basic writers. Writing well involves facility with—not necessarily blind acceptance of—norms and standards, those favorite bugbears of progressive critiques of English classes. In chapters four, five, and six, I clarify the value and the limits of progressive arguments against norms and standards, and I make a constructive case about how college writing teachers should approach superficial language differences. In the case of basic writing students especially, the stakes for their futures are too high to accept approaches to language that stand in the way of an open exchange about their writing.

A few terms that have become politically embattled can help teachers better understand their work with traditionally “under-privileged” students: deficit and error. To some, “deficit” is an offensive term to describe the level of a student’s academic skills—“difference,” they seem to think, is a more benign term. I agree that, when it is applied to the culture of entire races or socioeconomic groups, the label “deficit” is offensive and wrong and that “difference” is not only less offensive but more accurate. In certain other cases, though, avoiding the term “deficit” will only distract from the issues at hand.

In chapter four, I argue that social class is one of these latter cases. Unlike features of language that serve as racial or ethnic markers, the writing of someone from an economically disadvantaged background does not necessarily reflect the way people talk in a home community. Instead of considering such a student’s divergences from standard forms as language “difference,” as many progressive approaches to writing instruction would seem to have us do, it
makes more sense to approach these divergences as “deficits” of basic literacy skills that result from subpar primary and secondary education. Doing so is no insult to students, who are often bright and quite skillful with language in diverse ways. Frankly acknowledging that some features of students’ writing are in fact symptoms of skill deficits will help writing teachers imagine a way to teach their students without feeling as if they are trampling upon some aspect of students’ dignity.

Like “deficit,” “error” has become to some an offensive way to label apparent mistakes or deviations from expectations in students’ writing. Chapter five follows this introduction of “deficit” by examining another contested term from composition studies, “error.” I argue here that, in order to help students write well, writing teachers and their students should distinguish between language patterns that reflect usage in a student’s home community and students’ idiosyncratic mistakes, or errors, as they attempt to write in either an academic or a home language. Error and its opposite, correctness, can help distinguish between such patterns and mistakes.

This is where progressive arguments against Standard English sometimes get it right: there really can be and should be room in writing classrooms for patterns besides just those of the Standard. “Code-meshing,” or blending multiple language varieties in a single text, is a way to encourage, for instance, students who speak AAVE to use it extensively to write academic papers. Coupled with the language of deficit and error, a code-meshing approach can help writing faculty respond to and encourage those aspects of students’ writing that do reflect a home language. Chapter six follows up a call by sociolinguist Suresh Canagarajah in a recent collection of essays promoting code-meshing: we need a theory to “distinguish between code-
meshing and error,” for “if we cannot distinguish between translanguaging, error, and mistakes, we have little or nothing to teach” (*Code-Meshing* 277).

We do have something to teach, although we cannot always agree on what it is or how it contributes to our larger aims for education. Some who advocate for social justice approaches to education are skeptical of literacy “skills” like elaborated codes, while others may focus on teaching students literacy skills and stop using the powerful language of social justice. The time is right to re-examine the relationships between literacy skills and teaching for social justice. I conclude by arguing that teaching students elaborated codes can be a way to promote social justice.

**A Note about Purpose and Method**

Like Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, this study is meant to be a guide for teachers of basic writing. There are currently many studies that can help basic writing teachers better understand how to approach grammar, how to motivate and orient students, how to create curriculum, and how to get students to write. There are not yet any studies that help basic writing teachers understand their work in light of the recent scholarship on code-meshing, nor any studies that apply sociolinguistics to the semantic level of basic writers’ work; Bernstein’s elaborated and restricted codes have been long neglected as a resource for understanding basic writing courses.

Bernstein’s research was based on the methods of the social sciences. He took into account students’ parental income as well as sociological features of the students’ communities and schools; he reached his sociological conclusions by matching demographic feature to
research subject. His theories were always (according to him) grounded in these kinds of empirical facts.

My own arguments are also based on interpretation of empirical facts, but in my case the hard facts are limited to examples of students’ writing. Unlike Bernstein, I do not purport to offer empirical proof that a student’s writing is related to her family’s social class; as a teacher, I do not have data on students’ family incomes or social class background, nor is it important to my argument to know a student’s total social class history (as if such a history could be charted). In fact, in general it is probably better that, apart from my interactions with students interpersonally and through their writing, I do not know where a student is coming from, for ignorance can keep me from making hurtful assumptions that get in the way of students’ learning.

As a teacher, I neither have nor want too much background information about my students. Yet by teaching basic writing in a community college, I can make some safe assumptions about my students’ present social class context: if higher education in the United States has a kind of hierarchy, and there is a top and bottom, these basic skills classes are about as close to the bottom as one can get. Students whose high schools or families have prepared them well for college writing might not even have to take freshman English/composition, yet these students—my students—all “tested into” a remedial level of writing instruction. Before they can begin their required coursework, regardless of their academic interests, they have to take a semester or more of developmental coursework. If community colleges are barely real colleges—of course I think they are real, but word on the street says they are not—then these students—my students—are fake students at a fake college. And these assumptions are safe even without looking into their families’ social class backgrounds.
Students at highly selective universities will graduate with greater chances for success in life (at least in terms of income and economic security). Whether this greater chance of success comes from their university credential or the academic prowess that gained them entry in the first place, the fact for my students remains the same: we are a long way from the halls of power. Some of my basic writing students may indeed be from underprivileged, poor, under-served, or marginalized backgrounds; some may not, may simply be a little behind on their writing skills. My college’s district includes both one of the poorest communities in Illinois and a fairly affluent suburb, and I have learned to try not to assume anything about my students—doing so can prevent my seeing a student for who she is. So while I lean heavily on Bernstein’s research, and on the connections he makes between language users’ social class and their semantic habits, I want to distinguish between two different uses I make of his theories: to clarify debates about teaching writing by arguing against making social class a basis for protecting students’ identities; and to help writing teachers articulate to themselves and their students why writing courses matter and how students write better when they use elaborated codes.

I received written permission from the students to quote from their papers in the following chapters, and I have changed names and identifying personal information. I am immensely grateful to the students quoted here and to those who have enriched my teaching and my life.
Chapter 2. Reviving Bernstein

When it comes to controversies over how to teach academic writing to groups of students that have traditionally been excluded from higher education, most attention focuses on elements of grammar, syntax, and diction, aspects of language that are commonly associated with racial or class identity. Public debates about student writing often focus on “correctness,” for instance, or how close to or far from a norm, “Standard English” or “Edited American English” or “Academic English,” a student’s writing is perceived to be and ought to be. The student who writes the following sentences would often be judged as being farther from the norm:

> When love is present in people’s lives sometimes it makes them want to brag about it, share it with others, and in some cases love can be so good to others, that they don’t want to no one else to have it. That one powerful word can really affect someone especially the way they think and on their decision making.

But a student who writes sentences like those of my own above—that is, “correctly,” without using double negatives, and with standard spelling—would be judged as being closer to the norm. The distinction here is between surface language patterns, the kinds of patterns that a listener or reader can discern readily as a difference in social dialect—lexical choices, verb forms, perhaps an idiomatic expression here or there.

The debate about surface patterns certainly can be worthwhile. The student quoted here wanted to write more correctly and she and the college administration would judge my teaching in part on my ability to help her do so. Others, though, influenced by the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” resolution or an argument similar to it, would point out the costs of the student altering her racial voice—changing “they don’t want no one else” to “they do not want
anyone else” might please some readers, but doing so reinforces what many see as the racist value of sounding “White.”

These issues are not insignificant—indeed, I return to them in chapters four, five, and six—but such language features have already been the subject of much hand-wringing and haranguing among English teachers for, well, a very long time. Indeed, Kelly Ritter’s recent study of basic writing programs at Harvard and Yale shows that the problem of inadequate “grammar, spelling, and mechanics” in student writing has been around, even at supposedly elite schools, since well before the Second World War and the more recent era of open admissions at public universities (48).

What is more, if we English teachers only think about surface elements when we encounter students who write like this, we are likely to become distracted from other ways we could help students improve their writing, for not all language patterns are social dialect patterns or are detected so readily. Our language use follows other, semantic patterns—ways of putting meanings in context, classifying information, and framing questions and responses.

We are unlikely to find these other patterns—“codes,” according to the usage of some sociolinguists—in equal use among speakers of different social classes. Sociologist and linguist Basil Bernstein theorizes that some of these semantic habits develop roughly along social class lines and are influenced by social experience; his sociological experiments, which I discuss in more detail below, show that there are predictable but not absolute differences between how working-class and middle-class children communicate, and his code theory posits that these differences arise as a result of the kinds of life experiences that a class position entails. These differences in communication have nothing to do with cognitive ability—they are not a signal of
intelligence or of the lack of it. But neither do they correspond to dialect differences—the use of “proper grammar” does not equal the use of one code or another.

And because they are less visible than the social dialect patterns English teachers are most accustomed to arguing about, differences in semantic codes can make schooling difficult and confusing for both teachers and students. This difficulty and confusion may even be most acute for students whose writing teachers take a strong progressive position on language difference. A student might think, “If how I write and talk is supposedly OK, why are you telling me to change my patterns of communication? Why, if you say you promote linguistic democracy, is my writing still not good enough for you?” Bernstein’s code theory can be an aid to writing teachers to answer those questions coherently for themselves and their students.

For most teachers know that, whatever we ought to do about the superficial features of students’ writing, there is plenty else to teach. It will not do to treat all aspects of students’ writing with equal welcome, for not all language habits contribute to successful writing in a multicultural society. Instead, making distinctions between types of patterns—between social dialects and semantic codes—will help teachers and students understand which language habits ought to be honored in the writing classroom and why, and which language habits ought to be left behind. The semantic habits in elaborated and restricted codes offer our profession an opportunity to get past the superficialities that have dominated discussions of language difference in composition and basic writing.

Bernstein’s Experiments and Theories

In the 1950s and 1960s, Bernstein set out to figure out why there were such stark and consistent differences in the performance of lower working-class and middle-class children in
school and on some standard measures of intelligence. The differences could not be explained by
genetics, for Bernstein had himself worked with children in a lower-income area of London and
knew that the children who lived there were intelligent and capable thinkers. So Bernstein and
his colleagues devised a series of experiments in which they gave children from different class
backgrounds the same cognitive tasks or asked them the same questions about a picture or
experience. Based on the results of these experiments and the way that class seemed to predict
the children’s communication habits, Bernstein developed a theory of “codes” that could begin to
explain the ways that class affected the children’s assumptions about meaning.

In one early experiment, Bernstein tracked and compared intelligence test scores from
high school boys from working- and middle-class backgrounds. He found that on non-verbal
measures of intelligence, the two groups performed more or less equally, but on verbal measures
of intelligence, the middle-class boys scored about the same as on non-verbal measures, while
the working-class boys scored lower than on non-verbal measures. Bernstein does not conclude
that there is something wrong with the working-class boys’ language or verbal intelligence, but
he does conclude that the verbal measures of intelligence on which the working-class boys
scored poorly are not accurate measures of overall verbal intelligence. Rather, these tests
measure a certain kind of verbal facility or mastery of the language games performed in
assessments: familiarity with particular kinds of abstracting language and with practices of
classifying and framing meanings that are more familiar to members of the middle class.

These middle-class practices of classifying and framing meanings became clearer in
another of Bernstein’s experiments that involved seven-year-old children from working- and
middle-class backgrounds. The researchers gave these children a set of pictures of different kinds
of food and asked them to put the pictures into groups. All the children succeeded in categorizing the pictures, yet children initially grouped the pictures differently depending on their social class:

The lower working-class children gave principles that had a direct relation to a specific local context of their lives and which took their significance from local activities and meanings, e.g. “It’s what we have for breakfast,” “It’s what Mum makes,” “I don’t like those.” These sorting principles have a direct relation to a specific material base. The middle-class children gave principles for their sorting which had an indirect relation to a specific material base: “They’re vegetables,” “They’ve got butter in them,” “They come from the sea.” The crucial difference between the two groups of children lay in the relation of the grouping principle selected to a specific material base; in one case the relation is direct and specific, and in the other the relation is more indirect and less specific. (Class v. 4, 103)

This first half of the experiment reveals one difference in how the children grouped the objects: a tendency to see and interpret the world using either one’s lived relations (in the case of the working-class children) or impersonal categories (in the case of the middle-class children). In the second half of the experiment, the researchers asked the children to sort the pictures a second time and this time to group them in a different way. On this sort, “many middle-class children (a statistically significant number)… switched their principle and produced principles similar to those produced by the lower working-class, whereas the latter continued to use the principle they had initially selected,” presumably along the lines of family experience and personal preference (103). Although Bernstein notes that by the end of the experiment “almost one third of the lower working-class children had changed their principle of classification,” the middle-class children
seemed to be ready to use two principles of grouping while the working-class children tended to resort to only one.

From this experiment, Bernstein concludes that the middle-class children had a hierarchy of grouping principles, selecting the more indirect first and then using to the more direct. He suggests that the middle-class children read the experimental situation as a specialized, school-like context that therefore calls for making certain kinds of abstract categorizations. The researchers who interacted with the children seemed to offer complete freedom in categorizing—“Group pictures in any way you like,” “Talk about them as you wish”—which the lower working-class children took at face value but which the middle-class children recognized as an opportunity to display their facility with certain kinds of meaning-making. Since the middle-class children started with the more impersonal principles of categorization, Bernstein suggests that impersonal categories belong to a “dominant code” and that the more personal ways of sorting belong to a “dominated code.” From this experiment Bernstein draws the conclusion that “[t]he difference between the children is not a difference in cognitive facility/power but a difference in recognition and realization rules used by the children to read the context, select their interactional practice, and create their texts” (104). In other words, the experiment reveals nothing about the children’s intellectual capabilities—the working-class children could understand the middle-class children’s way of grouping objects and could themselves produce those groupings if prompted—but the experiment does show how differently middle-class and lower working-class children interpret a task in an educational setting. This experiment does not show a deficit of potential in the working-class children, but it does show that a child’s class background deeply affects her patterns of communication. In this experimental setting, middle-class children eagerly show off their knowledge of impersonal principles but can also
communicate in terms of their family and personal experience, whereas working-class children are less likely to seize opportunities to make associations outside the realms of their personal experience.

Other experiments revealed a difference in how children from the lower working class and the middle class tend to evoke context in their speech. Bernstein uses the terms “context bound” and “context-dependent” to describe the orientations to meaning of working-class children and “context-independent” for those of middle-class children (Class v. 1, 194). The degree of dependence refers to the extent to which a text or utterance explicitly identifies its context. If the context is left unidentified, because the speaker or writer takes for granted that her audience will understand what she refers to and her purpose in doing so, Bernstein classifies the text or utterance as context-dependent. If the speaker or writer makes the context explicit, identifying what she refers to and for what purpose, Bernstein classifies the text or utterance as context-independent.

For example, when Bernstein and his researchers asked children who had indicated that they knew how to play “Hide and Seek” to explain the rules to a child who did not know how to play it, they found a disparity between the kinds of explanations used by the lower-income and middle-class children. They found “a tendency for lower-working-class children to explain the game very much in terms of their family/neighborhood setting, whereas there is a tendency for the middle-class children to refer much less to a local setting” (Class v. 1, 254-255). The working-class child couched her account of the rules of “Hide and Seek” in unexplained details from her experience of playing the game, and so someone without immediate first-hand knowledge of the child’s terrain and playmates would have difficulty understanding how to play. Grasping what this child meant depended on having prior knowledge of the context for the game.
By contrast, since the middle-class child’s explanation of “Hide and Seek” rules did not include as many unexplained details from the child’s personal experience, her account of the game would be easier to understand for someone who did not already know the child’s home environment. This child “makes explicit the meanings which he is realizing through language for the person he is telling the story to” (Class v.1, 195). Understanding the middle-class child’s meaning did not depend on, or is independent of, having prior knowledge of the context.

In another experiment cited by Bernstein that revealed similar differences between working-class and middle-class language habits, groups of children were shown pictures in which some boys played soccer, broke a window, and were reprimanded. Asked to tell what was happening in the pictures, the children told stories with varying degrees of explicit reference to context:

(1) Three boys are playing football and one boy kicks the ball and it goes through the window the ball breaks the window and the boys are looking at it and a man comes out and shouts at them because they’ve broken the window so they run away and then that lady looks out of her window and she tells the boys off.

(2) They’re playing football and he kicks it and it goes through there it breaks the window and they’re looking at it and he comes out and shouts at them because they’ve broken it so they run away and then she looks out and she tells them off. (Class v. 1, 194)

The first story was typical of the middle-class children and the second was typical of working-class children. Though the two accounts narrate the same actions, they do so in ways that reflect dramatically different orientations towards the context of what they describe. An audience who
had not seen the original pictures would understand the first story but not the second. Put another way, “The first child takes very little [about her audience’s familiarity with her speech’s context] for granted, whereas the second child takes a great deal for granted” (Class v. 1, 195). Bernstein concludes that the speech of middle-class children is “less bound to a given context,” whereas the speech of working class children is “severely context bound” (195).

Based on these kinds of research and concepts, Bernstein developed a theory of restricted and elaborated codes to explain the degree to which one makes context explicit, whether one uses abstract principles to communicate, and how connected one’s language is to a specific material base. Some children—mostly those from lower working-class or lower-income households—seemed to use what Bernstein came to call “restricted codes.” Restricted codes are characterized by context-dependent language; to understand these children well, it helped to know already the context of what they were talking about. Restricted codes also rely on strong connections to daily life circumstances. Children using them communicated using shared, concrete experience; their thinking seemed tied to what Bernstein called “a specific material base,” that is, their homes and communities and the people in them (Class v. 4, 103).

Other children—mostly those from middle-class households—seemed to use “elaborated codes.” Elaborated codes are characterized by context-independent language. To understand these children, it was not as necessary to know the context of what they were talking about. Because elaborated codes tend to use impersonal abstractions from daily experience, the middle-class children’s communication was less dependent on an audience’s familiarity with a specific material base.

Bernstein’s general findings about social class and semantic habits have been confirmed by other researchers. In her seminal ethnography Ways with Words, Shirley Brice Heath
discusses how in the Black and White middle-class or “mainstream” community, parents’ language practices equipped children with the ability “to view each new referent out of its context, and to approach it with decontextualized labels of identification and attribution, rather than only with contextualized responses which link it to specific dated events or situations” (352). In the Black and White working-class communities she studied, by contrast, “No one lifts labels and features out of their contexts for explication” (353). As a result, the middle-class children she observed were more likely to succeed in school, for “academic success beyond the basis of readiness depends on becoming a contextualist who can predict and maneuver [concepts] by understanding the relatedness of parts to the outcome or the identity of the whole” (352). Working-class children were frustrated by the “school’s approach to reading and learning [which] establishe[d] decontextualized skills as foundational in the hierarchy of academic skills,” and “their entry into a classroom which depend[ed] on responses based on lifting items and events out of context [was] a shock” (353). Put in Bernstein’s terms, the semantic orientation of these working-class children exhibits the context-dependence of the restricted code, in which speakers take for granted that their audience shares a common background. Meanwhile, the middle-class children’s elaborated practice of “explicating” using “decontextualized labels of identification and attribution” makes their communication more context-independent and more like the coding practices used and valued in school. While Heath does not cite Bernstein directly nor use his terminology, her findings illustrate Bernstein’s arguments about restricted and elaborated codes and the trouble that code conflicts create for working-class students.

Bernstein’s code theory, though, goes farther than an objective description of orientations to semantic coding. It also explains how life experience in social classes shapes the differences in
the way we code meanings in language—or, put even more generally, it explains how our social structures influence communication patterns.

Bernstein compares his “codes” to Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus,” a helpful comparison for readers who are familiar with Bourdieu. Bernstein calls habitus a more general concept, a “cultural grammar specialized by class position and fields of practice” (Class v. 4, 3). For Bourdieu, habitus is a flexible term that describes everything from bodily comportment (what he calls “body hexis”) to aesthetic taste (Outline 87). Habitus describes patterns of discourse but much else besides. Bernstein’s “code,” on the other hand, focuses on communication or discourse: a code “is a regulative principle, tacitly acquired, which selects and integrates relevant meanings, the form of their realization and evoking contexts” (Pedagogy 111, emphasis in original). These codes are transmitted primarily through the family (thus they are “tacitly acquired”), and they regulate or control patterns of communication which in turn affect a speaker’s ability to participate in power structures.

What causes some codes to be prevalent among some classes? Bernstein’s definition of codes points to features of language that arise from what sociolinguist Ruqaiya Hasan calls “extra-linguistic factors,” or social situations. In terms of semantic habits, if a child’s family uses restricted codes it may be because her community interacts mostly with others who share common assumptions and a common cultural background—the shared assumptions relieve language of the burden of carrying explicit references to context. When speaking with a familiar, for instance, most speakers of any class will use a restricted code—shared meanings are assumed and what is spoken gets understood because there is so much shared context. By contrast, if a child’s family uses elaborated codes with some regularity, it may be because people in her middle-class community interact often with others who do not share common assumptions or a
common cultural background. This social situation leads speakers to employ an elaborated code in which they do not take shared meanings for granted and their audience understands what they have to say because it is relatively context-independent.

According to Bernstein’s theories, working-class communities interact primarily with a relatively similar and homogeneous group that shares many assumptions and tacit understandings; these life situations lead people to use restricted codes, and in such cases language itself does some of the communication, while the shared assumptions do other parts of the communicative work. Everyone has and uses restricted codes, not just working-class people, but according to Bernstein’s research working-class people have and use them more.

The bearer of a restricted code assumes many shared meanings with an audience, while the bearer of an elaborated code is more accustomed to communication with those who do not widely share assumptions. Everyone uses elaborated codes, too, not just middle-class people, but in Bernstein’s and Heath’s findings, the middle class use them more than the working class. For Bernstein, this distribution of codes explains why middle-class children outperform working-class children on schools’ measures of assessment.

The Mischief of Codes: The Case of Commands

Besides uncovering the middle-class biases built into some common methods of assessment, Bernstein’s code theories also point to why school can feel like an alienating, confusing social setting for children from the lower working class. If a child is unfamiliar with the dominant semantic codes of the school, she may misunderstand what her teacher asks of her and thus appear less capable or less tractable than she knows herself to be in other settings.
Differences in commands vividly illustrate the trouble that can result when codes conflict and the degree to which different codes make explicit reference to context.

Regarding behavior, for instance, some children are accustomed to hearing adults issue direct commands based on positional authority: “Do this because I said so.” An adult with a different way of issuing commands asks “nicely” for such a child to comply: “Is now the best time to do this?” In the second version the form of the command is hidden, or rather it is couched in both a question and a reference to an ethical context about the appropriate time for an action. Instead of hearing the “Do this” that the adult intends, a child who is accustomed to obeying direct commands may hear a genuine question and might unknowingly give a “wrong” answer, or the child might view the question as an invitation to agree or disagree with adult’s interpretation of the ethical context. To the adult, the command is clear, but a child may not hear it, and so both adult and child will be frustrated.

To illustrate the subtle differences in how codes frame actions, Hasan offers three versions of the same command from a parent to a child about to do something dangerous:

- If you climb up that wall you may hurt yourself
- If you climb up that wall you may ruin your nice new shirt
- You climb up that wall and I’ll take a stick to you (Class v. 2, 286-287)

The first appeals to the child’s sense of self-preservation by pointing out a potential consequence of the action, and the second bids the child to consider the preservation of personal property; in both cases, the parent uses an elaborated code to control the child by way of appeal to an ethical context for the child’s action. The third command, by contrast, uses a restricted code and appeals not to some abstract ethical context but to the positional control exerted by a parent over a child. The child might obey or disobey in each instance, but the parents’ rhetorical strategies are very
different and reveal patterns of socialization that, these code theorists contend, differentially affect children’s performance in school. For a child who is used to the third kind of interaction with authority, the first two might not seem like commands at all, and so a child may be perceived as disobedient when, in fact, the real problem is miscommunication. “So?” a child might reasonably respond to the second command. “Who cares if I ruin my shirt? I’ve got more clothes at home. This looks like a fun wall to climb!”

Lisa Delpit has also explained how this kind of difference in coding directives creates problems for teachers and students. She points out that, for a child who is used to an explicit directive like “Put those scissors on that shelf,” an implicit command like “Is this where the scissors belong?” can lead to confusion and a perception of disobedience (34). The child might just respond logically, “No, it isn’t where the scissors belong” and continue playing with the scissors, oblivious to the teacher’s implicit command. It is not hard to see how both teacher and student would be frustrated by encounters like these, nor is it surprising that as a result of persistent misunderstandings of this kind an otherwise agreeable child might eventually be labeled unruly. Indeed, Delpit hypothesizes that these communication differences are one reason why so many African American boys are considered to have behavior-management issues (35).

Likewise, Heath documented the differences in directives between a working- and a middle-class community and the positive benefits that teachers experienced when they began to “express their commands to [working-class] students in as direct a way as possible”:

Directives such as “Give me your attention; look at the board.” “Choose two books.” “Use only red paint” replaced earlier hints and other indirect ways of giving orders: “Someone isn’t going to know what to do when the music starts.” “I think two books will be enough for you to read today.” “We’re going to use
only the red paint today.” Some [middle-class] teachers became accustomed to
stating their requests directly as they came to believe the [working-class] children
showed marked improvement in their responses. (283)

There are no surface differences between these types of command—going from one to another
does not involve switching from one dialect to another—yet there are critical differences in how
they position authority and expect action from a listener. In a command that uses an elaborated
code, like “Someone isn’t going to know what to do when the music starts,” the teacher mentions
the ethical context of the classroom so that the child will conform to the behaviors that make
group instruction possible; another version of the same command, also in an elaborated code,
might appeal to the same ethical context from another angle: “I don’t want to have to
repeat myself later.” In both cases, the teacher imagines that he respects the child’s dignity by
explaining to her an ethical context for her behavior. But the teacher may not realize that,
because he does not explicitly name the command, the child may not connect the invoked ethical
context to the correct behavior.

In a 1979 attack on Shaughnessy, John Rouse cites Bernstein to explain how middle-class
parents argue their children into obedience. Middle-class mothers use a form of command, Rouse
explains, that “recognizes the child’s intent explicitly and relates it to the wishes of another…
[and] encourages the child to make an independent judgment, as though there is a choice” (110).
Should the child balk or resist, “more explanation is given” until the child obeys, so that the
parent appears not to exercise direct control: “Given the situation and the explanation, the child
opts for the rule—achieves the rule, so to speak” (110, emphasis in original). The working-class
child obeys—or else—but the middle-class child relents under the force of a steady stream of
reasons for right behavior. It may be that neither child has a choice, but, because the middle-class
parent justifies her command to the child, the form of interaction makes it seem as if the child is free to decide.

Looking at surface aspects of language will not offer much help in understanding why the clash between restricted and elaborated code-orientations is alienating to students and teachers—if the problem is neither grammar nor mechanics, why do they misunderstand each other? Bernstein’s code theory, on the other hand, explains how the teacher’s and student’s good intentions can result in miscommunication. The elaborated orientation towards meaning—children should modify their actions to conform in an ethical context—collides with the restricted orientation towards meaning—children should modify their actions because an adult said to do so for reasons that the adult does not have to name explicitly.

From Bernstein’s perspective, the elaborated code offers certain advantages: “Both [working-class and middle-class] children learn that there is something they are supposed, or not supposed, to do,” yet the child who learns the elaborated code “has learned something rather more than this. The grounds of the mother’s acts have been made explicit and elaborated, whereas the grounds of the second mother’s acts are implicit: they are unspoken” (Class v.1, 195). The elaborated code gives the child “access through language to the relationships between his particular act which evoked the mother’s control, and certain general principles, reasons and consequences which serve to universalize the particular act” (195). It is not hard to see how a tendency to refer to general principles and ethical contexts aids communication outside the home or home community, where personal control (“Because I said so”) may prove ineffective.

Furthermore, children who understand commands in both elaborated and restricted codes have an advantage over children who can only hear commands if they are explicitly stated. As Heath showed, it does the middle-class teacher a lot of good to understand that direct commands
are not an abuse of authority, and it does the working-class parent a lot of good to understand that, in some of her child’s interactions outside the home, authority figures might give commands implicitly. For the child who can understand both types of commands, the advantage is clear: while some working-class children might not hear a teacher’s implicit command, no child, whether working- or middle-class, gets confused by an adult’s explicit command.

Dialect or Code? What Got Bernstein in Trouble

There are clear benefits for children who understand commands in school in both elaborated and restricted codes, but Bernstein argued that elaborated codes offer advantages in other situations dominated by middle-class forms of communication. Because his critics did not grasp important differences between codes and social dialects, they thought that he promoted language discrimination and saw him (wrongly) as a class warrior fighting against the interests of the working class.

Unlike many who had studied educational inequality and language, Bernstein was not concerned with the “distinctive formal properties” of language like inflectional word endings and vocabulary, what Hasan calls “social dialect” (Class v. 2, 258). For Bernstein, Hasan, and some other sociolinguists, the term “codes” refers to other linguistic phenomena, the “semantic properties” of language or the ways we render meanings (258). Social dialects are mutually intelligible—an AAVE speaker can mostly understand a WEV speaker and vice-versa—but, as we have seen, a user of restricted codes figures to have problems with rhetorical situations that call for elaborated codes. Those who believe in the equality of dialects seem to have trouble with Bernstein’s supposition that restricted and elaborated codes are not equally useful in all situations.
Bernstein’s critics compound the confusion when they do not differentiate between types of language habits. Because Bernstein argues that a community’s economic conditions shape its codes and that codes are not equally adequate in all situations, and because Bernstein’s critics seem to think he is talking instead about social dialect, they write him off as a regressive language bigot. They might imagine him taking the side of the teacher in this exchange between a teacher and a four-year-old quoted by Delpit:

TEACHER: Good morning, Tony, how are you?

TONY: I be’s fine.

TEACHER: Tony, I said, How are you?

TONY: (with raised voice) I be’s fine.

TEACHER: No, Tony, I said how are you?

TONY: (angrily) I done told you I be’s fine and I ain’t telling you no more! (51)

In this exchange, it is clear that the teacher understands what Tony says and that Tony understands the teacher’s question. The teacher is trying ineptly to help Tony to begin to hear the difference between “are” and “be’s” (or, as Geneva Smitherman spells it, “bees”), but Tony does not hear the difference and therefore to him it does not exist. The teacher wants Tony to learn something about verbs, but the only thing Tony is learning, it would seem, is that teachers can be baffling, odd, and hostile.

A linguist would point out that Tony and his teacher understand one another because their two dialects are mutually intelligible. Since the teacher understands what Tony means by “I be’s fine,” it follows that his clumsy questioning reveals a species of language discrimination. After all, from the teacher’s perspective, the purpose of this exchange is to modify Tony’s language habits, not to engage in conversation. For the purposes of conversation, Tony’s language is just
as adequate as the teacher’s: whether he be’s fine or he is fine, his listener seems to understand what he means.

So goes the reasoning of Bernstein’s critics, but, since his code theory does not apply to this kind of language difference, Bernstein would not deny that the teacher is being obtuse nor that this exchange reveals language discrimination. For, once again, Bernstein theorizes about codes, not social dialect or its superficial differences. For decades, linguists have widely held that social dialects are equal and interchangeable and that social dialect markers pose little threat to successful communication between users of the same language—speakers of Appalachian English can mostly understand speakers of Brooklyn English and so on. Codes, on the other hand, are neither equally useful nor interchangeable. The code that will be most useful in a particular setting is the code that corresponds to the social situation that gives rise to that code in the first place—this sounds at first like a tautology, but consider that, but for his teacher’s willful misunderstanding, Tony’s AAVE would work perfectly adequately. A restricted code, though, will not work adequately in a situation that calls for elaborated codes.

Bernstein’s critics have, by and large, responded to his code theories that since all dialects of a language are equal, only race or class prejudice could prompt anyone to propose that some language types are better or more appropriate than others. Though Bernstein denied that working-class people or their IQs were inferior, it did not follow for him that the working classes should preserve the dignity of their language by refusing to learn elaborated codes. Rather, he argued that since elaborated codes are crucial in situations where meanings should be explicit in order to be understood, working-class people could and should appropriate symbolic power by mastering those elaborated codes. But again, misunderstandings of his assumptions led to an
undeserved scorn and dismissal from some American academics, who saw his way of thinking as deterministic and condescending.

Such is the perspective of William Labov, an influential American linguist, whom noted linguist M.A.K. Halliday calls “one of the most vicious and persistent misinterpreters of Bernstein’s ideas” (89). Many Americans who know anything of Bernstein’s theories learned of him by reading Labov’s work in both the academic and popular press from the early 1970s, in which Labov cites Bernstein as a purveyor of faulty, elitist theories of language difference.

Labov’s studies from that period aimed to show the equality of social dialects, especially to defend what he called Black English Vernacular from charges that it is illogical and that its use reveals genetic inferiority. In his often-reprinted and widely-cited essay “The Logic of Non-Standard English,” a version of which ran in *The Atlantic* in 1972 under the title “Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence,” Labov dismisses theories and experiments that show differences in language use along social class lines, and he maintains that his own experiments, in which he controls the settings to factor out the power dynamics of the interview process, show that working-class or poor children use language just as well as middle-class children. Labov reports that one young Black child, Leon, was almost non-verbal when he was alone in the presence of a tall White researcher but bubbled over with language in an interview in a setting more familiar to him. Labov’s point is that Black children, indeed that Black people, are able speakers and that studies that show that Black children are “non-verbal” are deeply flawed. That point, as far as it goes, is excellent and well-taken—Labov was writing, after all, in a time when racist genetic explanations of Black scholastic underachievement still had currency.  

---

1 Bernstein quite agrees with Labov about the absurdity of labeling some children as “non-verbal”: “There is no such thing as a non-verbal child; if a child is limited to a restricted code, it means not that this child is non-verbal, but simply that the kinds of roles he has learned have created him in a particular way in which he verbally
argues that the conditions of the experiments that tested Black language influenced the results, and that conclusions of Black deficits point toward faulty experiment design and not to anything inherent in the intelligence or capacities of Black people. Indeed, Labov conflates race and class to argue that there is nothing wrong with the language of poor or Black or poor Black people.

Labov villainizes educators like Martin Deutsch and Carl Bereiter who, he alleges, consider Black children to be without language and who posit that their educational problems begin at home. He then likens these racist views of language to Bernstein’s work on restricted and elaborated codes:

The question is, By what mechanism does the color bar prevent children from learning to read? One answer is the notion of “cultural deprivation” put forward by Martin Deutsch and others: the black children are said to lack the favorable factors in their home environment which enable middle-class children to do well in school. These factors involve the development, through verbal interaction with adults, of various cognitive skills, including the ability to reason abstractly, to speak fluently, and to focus upon long-range goals…. The most extreme view which proceeds from this orientation—and one that is now being widely accepted—is that lower-class black children have no language at all. Some educational psychologists first draw from the writings of the British social psychologist Basil Bernstein the idea that “much of lower-class language consists of a kind of incidental ‘emotional accompaniment’ to action here and now.” Bernstein’s views are filtered through a strong bias against all forms of working-class behavior, so that he sees middle-class language as superior in every transforms his world. It is a whole lot of nonsense to speak of a non-verbal child, although he may be inarticulate in certain social contexts” (Class v.1, 251, emphasis in original).
respect—as “more abstract, and necessarily somewhat more flexible, detailed and subtle.”

Labov unfairly characterizes Bernstein’s research in several ways, as Bernstein himself points out again and again in specific responses to Labov in his collected volumes of essays, *Class, Codes and Control*. Regardless of whether some of Bernstein’s readers in the U.S. may have put his work to nefarious use, Bernstein himself, like Labov, had a strong interest in uncovering the ways in which schools disadvantaged children from poor families, and Bernstein promoted a nuanced understanding of differences in communication patterns that might correct what he saw as the tendency of schools to reproduce class inequalities and to keep poor people poor. Labov, too, wanted to uncover how the color bar prevents some children from doing well in school and to promote more enlightened views of language. But Labov’s solution—to treat all varieties of language as equal—clashes head on with Bernstein’s working assumption—that some code varieties are better suited to some tasks than to others.

It should be clear to anyone who has read even one of Bernstein’s essays that he had no “strong bias against all forms of working-class behavior” or a culturally-genocidal drive to remake the working class in the image of the middle class. But Bernstein did not share Labov’s apparent investment in what we would today call identity politics; Bernstein did not assume that a class’s culture or language was something to be protected as a right. Rather, he wanted to understand whether and how patterns of communication undergirded material inequalities. While he did not treat codes pathologically, as a potential cause of poverty that could be rooted out, neither did he suppose that the upper classes needed merely to become more tolerant of restricted codes.

---

2 Bernstein cites this passage from Labov as well in a postscript to his first volume of *Class, Codes and Control*. He calls it “puzzling, to say the least” and then follows by quoting several passages from his own work in which he praises restricted codes or critiques elaborated codes.
code use. He instead assumed that working-class people needed to master elaborated codes as a way to exercise power and to avoid being dominated.

Unfortunately, Labov’s views on dialect and his critique of Bernstein influenced the reception of Bernstein in the United States as well as a generation of thinking about language difference. One can see, for instance, Rosina Lippi-Green echoing Labov in her book *English with an Accent*, first published in 1997 and re-printed in a new edition in 2011. Concerned primarily with the politics of language accents in American schools and popular culture, Lippi-Green attacks the myth of a “standard English” that holds that some of us supposedly do not have accents or dialects and others do. Rather, according to Lippi-Green, *everyone* has an accent and dialect, since there is no such thing as unaccented or neutral “standard English.” As with Labov, in a certain way there is nothing to object to in Lippi-Green’s assertions, and indeed it is healthy to remember that there is no such thing as value-less, class-less, or uninflected language.

Yet even by Lippi-Green’s own account, not all languages are created equally: “Each language is suited to its community of speakers; each language changes in pace as that community and the demands of the speakers evolve” (12). Lippi-Green invokes this axiom to argue that no one language is inherently better than another; what she does not see, and what Bernstein is especially helpful for pointing out, is that her own argument implies that some languages are better suited to certain social settings and demands. I agree with Lippi-Green’s assertion that languages are suited to particular communities of speakers, and that is why, as a teacher of basic writing, I help students to learn—if only for school or other settings where one’s audience may not share common assumptions—the elaborated codes of middle-class discourse. The restricted semantic habits that students develop in their home communities are not well-suited for use in settings where people do not share cultural assumptions in common. They need
to learn these new elaborated semantic habits not in order to conform to the ways of the ruling class, but so that they can gain economic power and challenge the existing social hierarchy. Bernstein shared Labov’s interest in fighting material inequality, but he did not accept Labov’s view that all language differences among social classes were superficial and interchangeable.  

Labov, Lippi-Green, and progressive writing theorists do not share Bernstein’s view that ways of life constrain ways of communicating. Instead, their focus on social dialect distracts us from acknowledging the possibility that language habits are shaped to the purposes of specific social relations. They reason that if speakers of Black English use logic and argue well in Black English, then Black English must be adequate to all social situations and only the prejudiced can deny it. But to Bernstein, this proof of the adequacy of Black English is beside the point: his “codes” are not about Black English or White English at all. Instead, codes are about orientations toward meaning and context, about whether a text is context-dependent or context-independent.

These orientations towards meaning and dependences on context are not functionally interchangeable—either a text is context-dependent or it is context-independent (or some parts will be one and some will be another); a text that is context-dependent cannot be re-written as

---

3 In this way Bernstein’s view of language is akin to the “linguistic relativity principle” of Benjamin Lee Whorf, the hypothesis that “language influences thought” (Traugott and Pratt, 106). Linguistic relativity means that a group’s way of using language—like not having or using grammatical time markers—shapes its perception of reality. According to this hypothesis, certain expressions or ways of seeing the world cannot be translated from one language to another. If the hypothesis were completely correct, we would be truly vulnerable to being controlled through our language, as George Orwell imagines that Newspeak constrains people’s behavior in the novel Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Yet, as Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Mary Louise Pratt argue, Orwell and the linguistic relativity position “overlooks many central aspects of human language,” especially “the creative nature of language that makes the uttering of new sentences in new contexts possible and thereby opens up the possibility of new ranges of meaning” (109). This linguistic creativity—an alternate perspective on language somewhat at odds with linguistic relativity—undergirds Labov’s and Lippi-Green’s view of language and their belief that all languages are equal.

While he is closer to Whorf than to Labov on this count, Bernstein seems to be comfortable with neither linguistic relativity nor linguistic interchangeability. Whereas Whorf’s hypothesis asserts that language influences culture, Bernstein’s code theory has it the other way around: “the form of the social relation or, more generally, the social structure generates distinct linguistic forms or codes and these codes essentially transmit the culture and so constrain behaviour” (Class v.1, 122, emphasis in original). Social relations create codes, which also transmit the cultures and values of social relations. His view does not directly refute the principle of linguistic creativity, but Bernstein suggests that codes exert an inertial force with respect to changes in social relations, reinforcing class divisions and reproducing class mores.
context-independent and still remain context-dependent, in the same way that a text might be re-written in either AAVE or WEV but retain its original meaning:

Basil, he a fool when it come to social class.

Basil is deeply misled about social class.

To Labov and Lippi-Green, these sentences are mostly interchangeable except for their political value as identity markers. The first follows the AAVE repetition of the subject pronoun and “zero copula” and the second follows “Standard English” prescription (Smitherman, *Talkin 9*). If in Labov’s view the sentences are interchangeable, they are not equal in value; the form of each makes a political statement. The form of the first indicates a political freedom to flout Standard English prescriptions and the second, depending on who says it and why, indicates capitulation to hegemonic forms. And as far as this kind of language interchangeability goes, Bernstein would agree—as individual sentences, these really are semantically interchangeable, with no discernible difference in their coding orientation. Codes promise to help us hear language differently from the tired and angry patterns of the past and to try to work past fixation on superficial language difference.

**Bernstein Responds**

Bernstein expends considerable energy in print responding to his various critics, who it seems often fail to interpret his work correctly. I generally agree with Bernstein’s assessments of his misinterpreters—indeed, it appears to me as if Labov did not read Bernstein carefully or with even a minimum of generosity. But to be fair to Labov and other critics of Bernstein, Bernstein probably did not do enough in his early work to distinguish his “restricted codes” from working-class vernacular dialects; judging from his often defensive and incredulous tone when responding
to his critics, he assumed that his motives would not be questioned and that his research would not be seen as an attempt to denigrate and disenfranchise the working class.

The misunderstandings have also risen in part, I think, because of Bernstein’s willingness to revise and discard theories. From the very beginning of his published work, Bernstein carefully advances his theories as tentative work in progress based on ongoing interpretation of his empirical research. In the introduction to the first volume of *Class, Codes and Control*, for instance, he writes that his early papers “became a source of embarrassment rather like paintings which did not come off” and emphasizes that much of his early work “represent[s] only an attempt to find the problem” (1). Yet he includes the early essays anyway to give his readers a better sense of how the concepts developed. His critics frequently miss this continuing development and the intellectual breathing room Bernstein hoped to purchase with his qualifications and additional theories, which multiply (one might even say metastasize) over forty years of research. In his obituary in *The Guardian*, anthropologist Mary Douglas accurately describes how these proliferating concepts affected his prose: “Bernstein admired the ‘restricted code,’ as he called it, for its power, directness, wit, and vivid, dramatic effects. Alas, his own writing is not like this, dense with technical terms, very elaborated.”

It understandably annoyed Bernstein that his critics on the left assume his politics to be anti-working class, based mostly on fallacious inferences about restricted codes. (Indeed, Douglas calls this accusation of bias “a bizarre perversion of his attitude”). He points out that “Marx refers to the lumpenproletariat in terms which would leave no doubt of a deficit position”—a claim that the lumpenproletariat lacked something relative to another group—“yet [that] it would be ludicrous to disconnect such a description from the problematic of his fundamental analysis” (*Class* v. 4, 123). Bernstein’s fundamental analysis aims to understand
differences in children’s school performance so that we can make schools more humane places for working class children and so that working class children can appropriate for themselves the means of social control. He started his career, after the second world war, as a settlement worker and teacher in a working-class neighborhood; Halliday, who knew Bernstein personally, notes that “he had a very deep personal concern for children who faced the high probability of failure in school” (82). Bernstein’s personal descriptions of his teaching sound as progressive as Dewey’s: schools should “unsentimentally validat[e]” students’ “extra-school experience” and the contents of learning should be drawn from a child’s “experience in his family and community” (Class v. 1, 5, 192).

Even when his critics rightly recognize Bernstein’s Marxist roots, as does American educator Michael Apple in “Education, Culture, and Class Power,” misreadings and misjudgments still abound. Apple attacks Bernstein’s loose use of the term “class,” and argues that “[t]here must be a coherent theory of class relations—how they come about and change, what the lines of class divisions actually look like, how classes differ from occupational and status groups—if there is to be an accurate discussion about classes in the first place” (72). Bernstein’s retort is, basically, good luck with that; grand, articulated theories are not necessary for studies to have “importance, contemporary relevance, and intellectual excitement” (“A Response” 389). One does not need to explain the entire class system in exhaustive detail to begin to theorize how semantic habits relate to economic status.

Besides his concern about how Labov and others misinterpret his theories, Bernstein considers his own research more rigorous and scientific than Labov’s. When, for instance, Labov rebuts Bernstein’s code thesis by showing that a working-class speaker seems to argue more persuasively than a middle-class speaker, he has not, in Bernstein’s view, proven anything at all.
The working-class speaker Labov quotes, Larry, is asked a series of questions about life after death. The core of the interview shows that Larry has a playful if convoluted sense of logic and a sharp, critical wit:

JL [the interviewer]: What happens to your spirit [after you die]?
LARRY: Your spirit—soon as you die, your spirit leaves you. (And where does the spirit go?) Well, it all depends… (On what?) You know, like some people say if you’re good an’ shit, your spirit goin’ t’heaven… ‘n’ if you bad, your spirit goin’ to hell. Well, bullshit! Your spirit goin’ to hell anyway, good or bad.
JL: Why?
LARRY: Why? I’ll tell you why. ‘Cause, you see, doesn’ nobody really know that it’s a God, y’know, ‘cause, I mean I have seen black gods, pink gods, white gods, all color gods, and don’t nobody know it’s really a God. An’ when they be sayin’ if you good, you goin’ t’heaven, thas bullshit, ‘cause you ain’t goin’ to no heaven, ‘cause it ain’t no heaven for you to go to. (Language 214–215)

Labov contrasts Larry’s directness and wit with the conflicted rambling of Charles, a Black college-educated speaker in Harlem:

CR: Do you know of anything that someone can do, to have someone who has passed on visit him in a dream?
CHAS M.: Well, I even heard my parents say that there is such a thing as something in dreams, some things like that, and sometimes dreams do come true. I have personally never had a dream come true. I’ve never dreamt that somebody was dying and they actually died (Mhm), or that I was going to have ten dollars the next day and somehow I got ten dollars in my pocket. (Mhm.) I don’t
particularly believe in that, I don’t think it’s true. I do feel, though, that there is such a thing as—ah—witchcraft. I do feel that in certain cultures there is such a thing as witchcraft, or some sort of science of witchcraft; I don’t think that it’s just a matter of believing hard enough that there is such a thing as witchcraft. I do believe that there is such a thing that a person can put himself in a state of mind (Mhm), or that—er—something could be given them to intoxicate them in a certain—to a certain frame of mind—that—that could actually be considered witchcraft. (“Academic”)

Labov argues that Charles’s efforts to “avoid any misstatements or overstatements” leads to “the primary characteristic of this passage—its verbosity,” and that while many middle-class speakers would rate Charles as highly likable, his thinking appears duller and his logic more tentative than Larry’s.

Bernstein does not quibble with Labov’s point that working-class people are intelligent, but he does take issue with both the methods of Labov’s experiment and the conclusions he draws from it. The interviewer gave the speakers different questions and different levels and types of continued prompts, and in any case Labov only offers one example from each speaker. We do not know, for instance, whether the middle-class speaker could also argue in a working-class code, or whether the working-class speaker cannot (or does not want to) argue in a middle-class code. Given the experimental context Labov describes, Bernstein points out, the “upper-middle class, college-educated” speaker’s attempt is not so bad—he gets a tough question about the existence of the supernatural and the interviewer offers no further prompts, vocalizing what is transcribed as a periodic “Mhm.” (It is hard to tell whether the interviewer intended this response to reassure or undermine the speaker; as a response, “Mhm” could either say “I’m with
you; keep going” or “Geez, you’re full of it.” Given the speaker’s hesitancy, I am inclined to think he perceived it as the latter—so it is not surprising that the speaker’s logic seems tortured.) The working-class speaker, in contrast, was interrupted or prompted with further questions five times during a short exchange. As Bernstein argues, Labov does not follow a scientific experimental protocol that can demonstrate the superiority of one form of argumentation over another. Bernstein is comparatively more careful in the presentation of his research and more modest in his claims, qualifying that middle-class speakers read the experimental context differently and so deploy different codes.

Questions of method and validity divide Bernstein and Labov, but we can also trace their disagreement to fundamental differences in their views of language. Labov, who sees varieties of language as equally capable of conveying meanings (No form of language is better than any other!), has a problem with Bernstein, for whom some forms of language are better at doing some things than are others. Yet what each means by varieties or forms of language is not the same, and that is the part of the problem that will continue to nag teachers of writing.

Labov focuses, like so many who are concerned about education for linguistic-minority groups, on surface features of communication. Bernstein focuses on semantic features of communication—different codes that result from and work better in different social situations. Of the two foci, Bernstein’s has been underappreciated in discussions of college writing.

Elaborated Codes as a Way to See the College Writing Classroom

College writing instructors who want to make use of Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated codes need not subscribe fully to his larger theories of social class and codes in order to find his distinctions helpful. As I mention in the previous chapter, to teach well I neither have nor need
hard evidence about my students’ class backgrounds, and in any case an approach to teaching that began with an extended analysis of students’ demographic data would be a very slow pedagogy indeed.

Yet Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated codes offer writing instructors—or any instructor who assigns writing—a window into what kinds of communication work well in college writing. Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated codes, with their focus on the value of context-independent language, add another description of the problem of audience to the current understanding of writing pedagogy. Writing instructors commonly frame considerations of audience in terms of “tone” and “register”: what attitudes an audience will expect to feel given the topic, how complex one’s terminology should be, and what the audience knows and does not know. Bernstein’s code theory adds specificity to these considerations and, by putting language in a broader context of interactions and shared assumptions, could also help students better understand why it is crucial to include information about the situation they are writing in.

Bernstein could help me, for example, advise the student who wrote this passage in an essay comparing people depicted in the monograph *Gang Leader for a Day*. Sudhir Venkatesh is a sociologist and the author of the book; J.T. is the fictional name of the real gang leader whom Venkatesh befriends and writes about:

Venkatesh was a guy in the book gang leader for a day and he also wrote the book. He was a rogue sociologist that was doing research for his graduate program. The research that he did in the Robert Taylor community became a well known best seller book. Venkatesh’s fame was his book and his glamour was everything that followed after the publishing. He got to travel the world and see
all the different people and how they lived. This benefits a sociologist’s work that he does.

Comparing the fame and glamour between J.T. and Venkatesh is almost similar. But, only one of them can keep it going. J.T. might have the fame and glamour but, only for the wrong ways to get it. For what J.T. does, and others like him want that too and will even kill him to get it. J.T.’s work is risky and not worth your life for fame and glamour.

Venkatesh’s fame and glamour is risky too. He has to observe people that don’t know or understand what he does for his work. Venkatesh could get killed doing what he does but, he can get out when he can and do it else where. His fame and glamour can continue going where ever he goes to do his research. So although, J.T. has it now, its twice as hard and risky than Venkatesh has to do to keep the fame and glamour.

From Bernstein’s codes thesis perspective, this writer shows some orientation towards explicit meanings. The first three sentences nicely introduce a reader to one of the people he will examine. Yet in what follows, especially the unclear terms “fame and glamour,” the writer does not give much context or use elaborated codes. Instead, he relies on his readers’ having read and comprehended the book. When the writer states, for instance, that Venkatesh “has to observe people that don’t know or understand what he does for his work,” he leaves this sentence hanging. The sentence could be re-written to be more specific or followed by a specific example from the text, both of which would help the writer include more information to help his reader:

The tenants of the Robert Taylor Homes sometimes don’t seem to understand what Venkatesh is up to—they trust him with information that could get them in
trouble with the gangs or the law, such as selling goods and services without knowledge of the gang (who would demand a cut of the profit in return for “protection”) or the IRS.

My revised version presents specific information in place of vague references and makes the meanings more explicit and less dependent on context. Read for dialect, the passages are equal, but read according to the code thesis there is a vast difference. Someone without prior knowledge of Venkatesh or his monograph would be more apt to “get” the writer’s references in the second version, whereas in the first version the writer was using a restricted code that took for granted the reader’s knowledge of the common reading.

To be fair to this writer, he was writing in a class in which there really was quite a bit of shared context between the students and their audience (the other students and me); there may have seemed to him no need to clarify the context, resulting in vague passages like these. We had been discussing the problem of audience and of situating one’s work for an unfamiliar audience, but whatever strategies I had been trying seem not to have entirely succeeded for this student. I discuss the ways in which classroom teaching reinforces restricted codes in the next chapter.

As to this writer’s use of the terms “fame” and “glamour,” it appears as if he is trying to apply impersonal principles to describe and evaluate each figure; this move would seem to belong to the elaborated code. But the writer does not yet understand that his readers might not understand the application of these terms as he employs them; he might have been referring in his paper to a classroom discussion of the book, but the larger context for those concepts and how each applies to the text (and how they differ from each other) is missing from his text—the writer depends on a shared context, like a personal conversation about the nature of fame, to make those concepts meaningful.
It might seem as if the re-write makes the passage more strongly related to a specific material base by including actual examples from a reading; the students’ original version is, in a way, more generalized:

Original restricted code: He has to observe people that don’t know or understand what he does for his work.

Re-written using elaborated code: The tenants of the Robert Taylor Homes sometimes don’t seem to understand what Venkatesh is up to—they trust him with information that could get them in trouble with the gangs or the law, such as selling goods and services without knowledge of the gang (who would demand a cut of the profit in return for “protection”) or the IRS.

The restricted code’s “relation to a specific material base” refers in this instance to a specific readership or social context, the one that is implied in the passage: a classroom full of people who have just talked together about the persons and concepts depicted in the monograph. The re-write above refers to a specific material object—the common reading—but does so in a way that presents information from the material itself to ground the writer’s ideas. Context-independent language, then, by coding meanings explicitly rather than implicitly, helps the reader who has no prior knowledge of the background context.

Elaborated codes may appear simply wordier than restricted codes—this was one of Labov’s charges against middle-class language, that it was unnecessarily verbose and nebulous. Yet the student’s sentence could be wordier and still remain a restricted code:

Original restricted code: He has to observe people that don’t know or understand what he does for his work.
Re-written using restricted code: He goes out into the South Side and finds or runs into people that he can then observe, but it’s a little dangerous because these people don’t know him or what he’s up to and he doesn’t explain the possible dangers of interacting with him or why they might not want to reveal personal information to him.

Wordier, for sure, but the re-write adds no more context nor makes the meanings more explicit; it only offers more vague descriptions of Venkatesh’s actions and situation. This is not what Shaughnessy called “the flora and fauna of elaboration,” just more words that lack context (268).

When discussing audience or context-independent language with my basic writing students, I hesitate to introduce the full-blown versions of Bernstein’s theories or his terms restricted and elaborated, but his theories do inform how I talk to my students about how to make sure their writing makes sense to their readers. Like Shaughnessy, in my classes I describe the difficulty of writing as a conflict of language habits: we are so used to interacting orally that we often bring our habits of orality into our writing; in writing we do not have the luxury of a live and present interlocutor who can ask questions to clarify or probe for further explanation. Shaughnessy describes the ways that essay conventions “developed because of the distance between the writer and his audience,” and she suggests a series of imagined responses from a reader/listener to help students understand essay conventions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listener</th>
<th>Writer’s Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. I don’t quite get your meaning.</td>
<td>Restatement in different words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Prove it to me.</td>
<td>Illustration, evidence, argument.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These essay conventions—thesis, illustration, etc.—developed to prevent misunderstandings and to facilitate our reader’s comprehension of our ideas, bridging some of the distance between writer and reader. And so these conventions belong to the elaborated code.

Besides these bits of advice, I also tell my students that my own language is sometimes marked by context-dependent codes. That is, I do not claim not to use restricted codes myself from time to time—indeed, my early drafts are often filled with highly-context dependent passages that I then have to detect and expand on, or that other readers point out to me. For instance, in an early draft of an introduction to this dissertation, I had discussed Gerald Graff’s recent work on academic cluelessness and made an oblique reference to a term he coined during his MLA presidency, “courseocentrism.” I wrote: “The academy does not offer students insight into how its arguments are made, instead mystifying students with mixed messages about their own education, fragmented and fragmentary, wearing one hat in their 9 AM Chemistry class and another in Art History at 11.” When I wrote it, I thought I was being perfectly clear for any reader, but Graff wrote in the margin, “If I weren’t GG I wouldn’t understand this.” And I quickly saw that he was right: quite without realizing it, I had been writing for a narrow audience and thus limited my readership to, well, the one person who would know exactly what I meant by contrasting Chemistry and Art History.

I have even heavily revised passages in this chapter to include more context; my intended audience is educated but not highly specialized, and so I am trying to use an elaborated code that will make sense to a variety of readers, explaining jargon (like “specific material base” or “elaboration”) and including context for key concepts and characters (like Labov or Bernstein).

For teachers and those interested in composition theory, the term “elaboration” points, in a way that the traditional rhetorical term “audience” does not, both to specific rhetorical
strategies or semantic habits and to a theory of how those semantic habits function within cross-cultural communication. To be mindful of one’s audience can mean a number of things, none of them, it seems, clear enough to a basic writing student. Discussing the difference between context-dependent and -independent language or implicit and explicit meanings can both sharpen a student’s awareness of her readership and give her a lens with which to view and improve her own writing in a variety of situations.

**We Should Quit Focusing on Social Dialect and Start Thinking about Semantic Habits**

Focusing our professional attention solely on social dialect leads pretty much in one direction and results in a dead-end: if learning English in school is a matter of a battle of the grammars, and those grammars are arbitrary, racialized, and social-classed, we will continue to recycle the same positions we have argued about for the past fifty or more years. The educational insight of the 1960s left—most clearly formulated by Louis Althusser in his constantly-assigned “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” and found in some form throughout nearly every leftist critique of schooling—is that school is a repressive state apparatus that produces or reproduces class division, a reading that is confirmed again and again when one uses this lens to look at every level of literacy education: one variety of language is dominant in schools, other varieties are not welcome there, and therein is the machinery of domination.

When one considers literacy education with only social dialect in mind, Althusser’s view sounds plausible. Lippi-Green and other linguists’ assertion of mutual intelligibility renders

---

4 In his *Copia*, Erasmus offers a very specific definition of elaboration as a training tool for young rhetoricians: “a complete ‘elaboration’ contains seven parts: statement, reason, rephrasing of statement (to which one can add the reason restated), statement from the contrary, comparison, illustrative example, conclusion” (547). This exercise is not unhelpful, but such a structured format might give students the false impression that elaborated codes are limited to a regular pattern of development.
every grammar as good as every other grammar. Fine. It is racist to respond to students’ social
dialects like the teacher who refused to allow Tony to say “I be’s fine.”

But such scripts are bound to be repeated in some form, kindly or harshly, as long as the
focus is merely on grammar or diction. Restriction and elaboration introduce a more promising
way to think of codes and the project of literacy education. Unlike the grammatical dialect
differences between Tony and his teacher, restricted and elaborated codes can be mutually
unintelligible, even though to some extent everyone uses both restricted and elaborated codes.
They are more like the concept of register than like grammar, but rather than direct attention to
the surface features of language—word choice or syntax—restriction and elaboration describe an
orientation, an approach towards others, towards audience. Does the speaker assume a high
degree of familiarity, of mutual understanding, of shared background? If so, the speaker is using
a restricted code—restricted in the sense that her discourse is most intelligible within a restricted
group of people. So to say that we all use restricted codes is to say that we all communicate often
with people who share a great deal in common with us, and so we are relieved of explaining
ourselves up front.

If the speaker anticipates that her audience may not share her background, she uses
elaborated codes. Her discourse will be more intelligible within an unrestricted group of people
because it fills in the kinds of gaps in assumptions that one might find among people from
diverse ethnic, class, or educational backgrounds. We all use elaborated codes as well; those of
us who are more in the habit of communicating with people who do not share our assumptions
use elaborated codes more, while those who are more accustomed to communicating with people
who share a background use restricted codes more. It is not a question of intelligence but of
expression and a feel for the social borne out of being thrust into encounters with diversity.
The good thing is that elaborated codes can be taught, and the good news for English teachers is that teaching them need not be a matter of insulting or condescending to one’s students or of reinforcing their powerlessness. Rather, learning to use elaborated codes will allow students to gain power by explaining themselves to an ever-wider audience.
Teaching working-class students seems frequently to occasion a paralyzing cycle of fear for English teachers. The cycle begins with the anxiety surrounding education for working-class students: school seems like the only path to economic prosperity and stability, raising the stakes in every classroom encounter and assignment. As Rebecca Cox discusses in *The College Fear Factor*, community college students are “convinced that their future success hinge[s] on their obtaining a college degree” and students are often tempted to quit college just to seek relief from this intense pressure, which they can feel even in the context of an individual assignment (24).

Adding to the general anxiety, many progressive approaches to language difference instill fear by insisting that if she teaches writing well the English teacher will have succeeded in oppressing students by supplanting their home language habits. This cycle leaves the teacher unsure of what and how to teach, but with a strong sense that the stakes are high for her students no matter what she does: you’re damned if you do help them and damned if you don’t.

Bernstein and his theory of restricted and elaborated codes can help us avoid this cycle of fear by clarifying how schooling, especially English classes, can help students along a path to middle-class vocational success. And rather than condemn writing teachers’ vocation as simply teaching a dominant code that squelches a dominated code, Bernstein’s code theory points to the rhetorical power that students acquire as they develop writing skills to help them reach diverse audiences.

Writing successfully for diverse audiences depends on managing the difference between what Bernstein calls context-dependent and -independent language, which is also the difference between the restricted codes students are accustomed to using and the elaborated codes expected of them in school writing. Restricted codes comprise an orientation to meaning that is context-
dependent; restricted code users presume that their audience shares with them a common cultural background, and so texts and utterances produced in the restricted code make most sense to someone who is already familiar with the context—if the audience does not share knowledge of the context, the meaning falls apart. Those who use elaborated codes employ a relatively context-independent orientation to meaning, which means that their texts and utterances often refer to the larger rhetorical situation so that an audience who does not share a common background will understand their meanings. Though code use does not neatly follow class lines, Bernstein theorizes that the difference between restriction and elaboration—between these orientations to meaning—accounts for working-class students’ alienation in school and for poor and minority students’ weaker performance on standard learning assessments.

For basic writing teachers like me, the distinction between context-dependent and context-independent language explains one facet of what students need to learn to become successful as college communicators and succeed in middle-class occupations. At my own community college, it is not unusual to have a basic writing student who is bright and intelligent, capable of coming up with creative arguments and able to fix grammatical “problems” if called on to do so, yet whose written language habits lead him towards terseness and the assumption that his audience is already so familiar with the context for his ideas that he does not need to spell it out. His is the kind of paper that makes sense to anyone who was in class the week he was writing it, but would seem opaque to anyone who was not party to the ongoing conversation.

Here, for example, is the work of my student whom I will call Andre, a twenty-something married father of a young daughter with (at the time he was my student) another child on the way. From the first day of class, his irreverent sense of humor and sharp mind endeared him to my co-teacher and me and to his fellow students. He frequently engaged in class discussions and
showed a flair for hypothetical reasoning. He could also code-switch admirably and with special
gusto. A text message conversation between us about a homework assignment shows the kind of
play with spelling and dialect that upsets some keepers of “Standard English,” but that would
delight those who want students to express themselves freely and without regard to the usual
conventions of formality:

Andre: Look bro dis Andre I dnt kno wat u need us ta do fa da hw n wen is it
due

Jason: It’s a group edit thing in google docs, due by wedn 9 am

Andre: So how I’m gone get together wit the otha students n how do I
comment

Jason: Sign in first dude, the directions are in there

Andre: Aight

Andre (later): At first I ain’t kno how ta comment by highlighting but I just
did da otha wit da (‘s [using parentheses to indicate editing suggestions]

I might have been nervous that I was legitimizing text-speak or confusing Andre about
“standards,” except that his spelling some words like “da” for “the” or “fa” for “for” showed me
that he was having fun with—and had strong control over—the spelling conventions of the
texting genre. Plus, I had already seen the way that Andre writes in a more “serious” setting, in
class. Here, for instance, is a paragraph from his final essay, examining gender and family roles
in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*:

Not having guidance, on those ground, would hurts them as well. In many
families there are those ones who don’t follow the rules and end up in a very bad
situation. Some choose to go astray which they would think would be for their
own benifit. It could happen either other way. There are some families who really only care about how they are viewed, and nothing of their daughter’s feelings.

As for those “standard” surface elements, this paragraph gets them mostly correct, save for some “s” endings, pronoun usage (“those ones”), what might be a hypercorrect doubling of adjectives (“either other way”), and a few misspelled words. His placement of the phrase “on those ground” even shows a fairly sophisticated mastery of commas. Andre’s writing here exhibits nothing at all of the exuberant text-speak from his messaging. As I said, Andre could code-switch fairly well. But I did not praise Andre for his basic mastery of grammatical conventions in the passage above; by the time the final essay arrived it was clear that Andre had pretty good control over written symbols. (I should note that he passed both that essay and the class.)

Instead, I wrote “very gene"al” in the margin, because in the context of his essay it is not entirely clear who are “some” that could go astray or why doing so would be “for their own benifit.” Because I was part of the in-class discussions leading up to this essay, I could surmise that he might be referring to the young women and girls in a household in a particular chapter from the book, but we had been talking in class about the need to fill in background information—context—in one’s writing. Successful college writing and successful writing in other contexts, we had seemed to agree, often depends on informing one’s audience about the background situation so that a writer correctly anticipates some typical conversational questions, especially “What do you mean?” or “What makes you say that?”

That approach towards writing—preemptive contextualization—comes from my reading of Bernstein, but it does not depend on an empirical class analysis of a student’s background. I did not need to know Andre’s personal history of social class to know that he sometimes wrongly assumes that his audience understands the larger context for his thinking, nor did I need to point
out to Andre or the other students the class histories of styles of communication in order to help them understand the value of preemptive contextualization. Bernstein’s theories are based on empirical studies of the language of young children and focused on the class origins of codes, but to help Andre improve his writing, I did not need to ask him to read Bernstein, nor would it have helped me much to consult Bernstein’s collected works as a guidebook to Andre’s writing problems. Knowing Andre’s class origins in some rigorously objective sense would not necessarily help me to help him master the elaborated code, but knowing the class origins of codes may help me help him to imagine the class future he desires and to foresee how his writing will function in that future. Where Bernstein is concerned with class origins, I can only be concerned with class futurity, with helping students achieve the class mobility they set out to attain from their studies.¹

Andre and his writing make an interesting case study about class futurity. When he and I chatted at the end of the semester, I learned that he had changed his program of study from “undecided” to a certificate in manufacturing technology. As we talked, I asked more questions about his academic and career interests and found that he enjoys and excels in math classes. I suggested that, after he gets his associate’s degree at Prairie State, he consider pursuing a bachelor’s degree, and maybe even further studies. He could complete his two-year program at Prairie State, work in a better-paying job for a few years, and begin studying for his next degree when the time seemed right—but before he waited too long. In the meantime, he could have a job that would be more satisfying than what he could get with his GED and that would pay the bills decently. He and I both thought that he might eventually want to enter a more challenging field (or, we also imagined, maybe he would not need to change fields, as one can sometimes

¹ Bernstein captures both aspects of this class transition in a comment on developing “voice” in education: “Socialization into norms… is then always socialization both into another’s voice and into one’s own ‘yet to be voiced’” (Class v. 4, 159). Andre may be learning someone else’s voice, but that voice could one day be “his.”
find quite interesting and challenging work in manufacturing technology), and that a bachelor’s degree would at least give him some flexibility on the job market. I had seen that he was a capable student, and while I had no idea whether he would like the rest of college (this was at the end of only his first semester), it seemed to me that he had the kind of disposition and intellect that would allow him to enjoy his studies—and perhaps to capitalize on them afterward he graduates. And so I told him so.

When I suggested that he think of an educational trajectory beyond Prairie State, he brightened. He had wanted a job where, he said, he could be left alone to complete discrete tasks, and where he could problem-solve on his own. He had considered a career in construction, having enjoyed an experience laying a floor with a family member, but he realized that the field of construction might depend too much on the vicissitudes of the housing market. With a family to help support (his wife works in the health professions), he could see the benefits of getting a full-time, decently-paying job and trying to work his way up as he gets more experience. As we discussed various majors, I also suggested that for his bachelor’s degree he consider majoring in something pure, like Math or Chemistry, rather than applied, like Engineering. This would prepare him differently and better for the broader industrial job market, I suggested, thinking about recent advice from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which cites research on the educational outcomes that business leaders value: business leaders are “more interested in students’ broad educational [liberal arts] experience, rather than their specific major,” because they desire students who know how to be lifelong learners rather than students who have mastered only a specific set of skills that will quickly become obsolete. Plus, Andre could always follow up a bachelor’s degree with a more applied master’s if he needed it.
I was trying to butter him up. He had done well enough in my class, and I probably would not see him again as a student in my own classes, as I teach mostly basic writing courses. While I recognize the affective and economic perils he faces as a male African American college student, I also wanted to let him know that someone at the college had seen, or thought he had seen, a potential for him to create his own class destiny, to have a job that not only paid decently but would provide a satisfying lifelong occupation.

Was I being patronizing? Maybe. I was trying to present these possibilities as choices, or even just as possibilities that he might not have considered. I also assume, based on ten years’ experience teaching students in Andre’s position, that most students in my developmental/remedial writing courses do not positively associate themselves with education, and part of my task as a teacher is to undo some of the damage that the college’s placement process inflicts on students’ psyches by summarily dumping them into a remedial track. So when I heard Andre wondering what major he should ultimately choose, or what kinds of jobs he could pursue with his major, I read him as someone who has an inkling of class mobility but who is not sure how to use college to move on up.

Was I being misleading about the benefits of higher education? Maybe. It seems like at least once a month there is an editorial in a publication like the New York Times or in The Chronicle of Higher Education that claims that U.S. higher education either is or is not preparing today’s students for the “future.” There are those, like me and the AAC&U, who think that in general it is best for undergraduates to major in something broad, like English or Mathematics, so that they will learn how to think critically and then acquire specific knowledge on the job. There are those who think that students like Andre should study something narrowly applied so that they can enter the workforce quickly in a specialized field, like surgical technology. Then
there are those who think that Andre’s college education will not prepare him in any case for the work force; that whether he completes or does not complete his degree will matter little; that his career prospects are bleakly defined by the hyper-flexibility of capital in our neoliberal age; that he, that most of us, are fodder for the great Inequality Machine; that our nation’s wealth and potential will be extracted from the poor and middle class and redistributed to the Have-Mores unless workers unionize and policy-makers reverse the government’s abetment of the upward redistribution of wealth. Each of these views of higher education has its own version of a pep-talk for a student like Andre—even someone who thinks that higher education is all about class domination might try to raise Andre’s critical consciousness about the perils of capitalism but pragmatically encourage him to stick with his education.

I am being careful here, as I was careful with Andre, not to pooh-pooh a career of manual labor—there can be immense rewards, even intellectual ones, to working regularly with one’s hands. But, let’s be honest, in today’s job market, manual labor jobs can be physically tough to perform for a lifetime, they sometimes are not paid well, and specializing in a single manual skill can leave a worker subject to being outsourced or replaced with a machine. And sometimes manual labor jobs become boring and repetitive and destroy one’s body, especially manufacturing assembly jobs. Andre knew this, and I knew this; what he did not seem to know, or perhaps had not thought about, was that he had other options, that even if he got one degree at Prairie State he could get more degrees elsewhere, that he could see whatever job he wanted for now—manufacturing technology, automotive repair—as a stepping stone to other work, hopefully even to work that is more interesting, more highly-paid, or more stable.

2 During summers while I was in college, I worked on a dashboard assembly line at Honda. My co-workers were mostly in their mid-30s, had worked at Honda since they graduated from high school, and were starting to suffer from repetitive-use injuries to their hands and forearms. They were universally encouraging of my studies: stay in school, they all said. Many mentioned that the well-paid factory job enticed them early on, then they became used to the money and felt that they were not in a position to further their studies or advance their job skills.
I am no career counselor. We have them at Prairie State, and Andre had visited one already. And I am not claiming that Andre’s future will for sure be some primrose path. The future I was imagining with him would be shaped according to his options under our current regime of economic neoliberalism. Forty years ago, he and I might have talked about getting an entry-level job at the local Ford plant and, if he wanted, working his way up through the hierarchy over the course of his adult life. Today, he and I both know that the Ford plant might not be there next year, let alone in twenty years. Today, Andre, like so many young people, faces a future of “flexibility” and change, where he might work for several employers rather than just one, and where he will likely have to re-train and learn new skills to survive. Bernstein’s elaborated codes and related theories can help me help Andre imagine how this re-training and ongoing learning might work and which code-habits might help Andre keep food on the table.

The very idea of a “middle-class” life trajectory is lurking in the background, but what kind of middle-class life? In his work in the late 1980s, Bernstein continues sorting out the relationships between social class, codes, and pedagogic practices as part of his ongoing attempt to describe how communication reflects and reinforces social class formation. Helpfully, he does not treat the middle class as a monolith but distinguishes between what he calls “fractions” of the middle class and their conflicting visions of how schools support and reproduce the class relations each sees as advantageous. Although some of Bernstein’s distinctions between middle-class fractions are by now becoming outdated, these middle-class fractions—and their visions for education—continue to influence the ways Andre and I think about how his college education can prepare him for his future career.
In Bernstein’s theory of the relation between class, codes, and pedagogy, one fraction of the middle class is comprised of those employed in the economic field or the “production, distribution, and the circulation of capital,” by which Bernstein seems to mean industry, transportation, construction, and the like. This “old” middle class favors “visible” pedagogies, educational practices that reproduce the clear hierarchies of the economic sector by, among other practices, sorting children according to developmental sequences: “At 5 you should know and be this, at 6 you should know and be that, and at 7 you should know and be something else” (74). In the visible pedagogy, schools clearly define competition and success, and the child “is not measured against himself/herself but only against those sharing a similar temporal category” (82). Teachers clearly and publicly define what children should learn and in what sequence, and schools categorize children according to age and, as they advance into later grades, ability.

Another fraction of the middle-class, those employed in “the field of symbolic control,” includes what Bernstein calls “regulators,” those involved in religious and legal agencies; “repairers,” those involved in medicine, psychiatry, social services; “reproducers,” or the school system; and “shapers,” or “universities, research centres, higher education agencies, research councils, [and] private foundations” (Class v. 4, 139, 74). “Symbolic control” refers to “the means whereby consciousness is given a specialized form and distributed through forms of communication which relay a given distribution of power and dominant cultural categories. Symbolic control translates power relations into discourse and discourse into power relations” (134). The field of symbolic control, then, comprises the agencies where those with specialized knowledge and credentials define and restrict access to power for those who do not have specialized knowledge and credentials.
This “new” middle class favors “invisible” pedagogies. In invisible pedagogies, “age statuses give way to the unique signs of the child’s own constructed development” (82). In a classroom dominated by an invisible pedagogy, children are free to play and do as they wish, while teachers monitor development without making known a timetable for development. Ostensibly there are no norms or standards in this pedagogy—this is what makes it “invisible”—but there is still a pedagogy and still a transmission of codes. Unlike the tidy, hierarchically-defined competitions of the visible pedagogy, in the invisible pedagogy “the child, by apparently competing only with her/himself, competes with everybody” (82). Though it is wrapped in a cloak of progressive principles and rhetoric, Bernstein sees in the invisible pedagogy a Hobbesian dystopia, the competition of all against all.

Although it is impossible to separate neatly the practices and interests of the class fractions, I would argue that, even more since the time Bernstein developed this theory, the pedagogic practices and cultural values of those employed in the field of symbolic control has seeped over into the field of economic production. Invisible pedagogies have mixed with visible ones, making it difficult for a student like Andre to figure out how best to pursue an education. Thomas Friedman, for instance, tells a popular story of the economic world of the early 21st century in his bestseller *The World is Flat*. Friedman has developed his own lexicon, referring in his *New York Times* columns to the “flat earth,” a metonymy which stands in for the ways in which globalization has rendered obsolete certain predictable economic relationships and the national, ethnic, and class affiliations which used to animate them. On a flat earth, capital is much more mobile than it was in earlier economic arrangements and so employers take less and less responsibility for their workers’ long-term security. Workers in these new economic arrangements have to be flexible and look out for themselves: “The whole mind-set of a flat
world is one in which the individual worker is going to become more and more responsible for
managing his or her own career, risks, and economic security, and the job of government and
business is to help workers build the necessary muscles to do that” (284). Though Friedman does
not name education as responsible for the development of workers’ new “muscles,” he might
have noted that teachers must also be aware of changing economic trends and how education can
support or stymie students’ economic prospects. As Friedman makes clear, the disorderly,
highly-individualized maplessness of the invisible pedagogy has in some important ways
supplanted the orderly progression of development and rewards envisioned in the visible
pedagogy.

The resulting mixture of visible and invisible pedagogies seems to contain contradictory
impulses. Schools seem to value both self-directed drive and dogged subservience to current
economic realities, making it difficult to figure out just how to use a college education to
advance economically or which “muscles” to build to manage one’s own career risks and
succeed in the economic competition. There is a growing consensus, seen in what Friedman
takes for granted about the global economy, that every worker today must be, in Foucault’s
phrase from *The Birth of Biopolitics*, an “entrepreneur of oneself.” Or as Evan Watkins puts it
somewhat darkly in *Class Degrees*, “It is as if [today’s smart workers] were built and educated
from the beginning to be at once continually changing and yet always available as an
inexhaustible resource for changing forms of production in the new workplaces they are to
inhabit” (12). Yet for Andre, as for so many college students, there can seem to be no consensus
about what this entrepreneurism should look like or what kind of middle-class life one can
expect.
I have already suggested that one version of a middle-class future for Andre is outdated—stable work for a single employer with steady career advancement. This economic vision was strongly associated with what Neo-Marxist scholar David Harvey calls “Fordism,” a twentieth-century alliance between capital, labor, and government that supported stable, well-paid manual labor jobs for American workers (see, for instance, his chapter “Fordism” in The Condition of Postmodernity). The kinds of pedagogy that supported this Fordist version of the working class are the same favored by the middle-class fraction Bernstein associates with economic production: school practices that emphasize hierarchy and obedience to those in positions of authority. By following these practices, schools produce good working-class and middle-class workers who know their place, show up to work on time, and get the job done, day after day, decade after decade.

In what Bernstein calls the “new” middle class, by contrast, the fraction of the middle class employed in agencies of symbolic control, workers cannot depend on stable employment with steady career advancement. Instead, they can expect to change jobs many times, acquiring new skills and adapting themselves to the ever-evolving demands of the labor market. To produce workers for such a flexible economy, Bernstein noted that schools do not emphasize the need for students to conform to roles of authority and hierarchy through systems of rules and discipline, but rather that schools expect students to internalize the rules of the system and to self-regulate according to those rules. Schools would then, as in Friedman’s vision for education, produce smart workers who can adapt themselves within ever-changing markets.

To prepare for this new middle-class future, Andre would do well to succeed according to the invisible pedagogy: to develop, as Bernstein puts it, “access to the principles of [his] own discourse,” “to understand that the heart of discourse is not order but disorder, not coherence but
incoherence, not clarity but ambiguity, and that the heart of discourse is the possibility of new realities” (75-76). Though the distinctions in these lofty binaries may not always be precise, they seem to me to provide a convincing account of the nature of symbolic power in the emerging global economy and its culture. Bernstein’s point may be that those who appropriate it understand that, as in the invisible pedagogies and their competition of all against all, there appear to be no fixed overarching principles that structure symbolic power. The game has winners and losers, but it may appear to have no rules.

Bernstein endeavors to name these invisible rules, the social structures that shape opportunity and reproduce class divisions. Indeed, he considers the invisibility of structures as a kind of cover for the exercise of symbolic (and, increasingly, economic) power of the new middle class, a way to maintain power without appearing to be in control. In the new middle class, for instance, the invisible pedagogy reinforces the sense that each person is responsible for herself, although it is of course a false sense of self-responsibility, concealing the ways that educational institutions shape and limit students’ economic horizons by valorizing some families’ codes while devaluing others’.

Andre is learning that success in the world shaped by this new middle class, in the rule-less game, is personal success, the result of the right combination of qualities and identity inhered in the person, portable with the person into any situation. This success follows the storyline of the action hero in the “against-all-odds” plot, a version of the “getting-ahead” story that, according to Watkins, proliferated in popular media during the 1980s and 1990s. Watkins sees the against-all-odds plot everywhere—from the grocery store self-checkout that offers shoppers a way to “beat the odds” of long waits in checkout lines,” to the superhero movie, to the “lifetime of fun in every car commercial just because the model [shown]… beats the odds of
boredom attendant on every other possible model” (4-5). The against-all-odds hero triumphs over a backdrop of anonymous, waste individuals, “the mass of characters whose sole purpose is to establish that there are ‘odds’ in the first place” (6). Watkins argues that this storyline reflects and reinforces the labor processes of the “New Economy” of the 1990s, in which “smart” workers “would seem to have grown up with the endlessly replicable identities in all those new versions of against-all-odds plots, saturated with choices and expecting more and more to come” (12). Even for vocationally-minded students like Andre, his goals of modest economic success take on a sense of heroism: “For the first time vocational students would no longer be the extras hired to get killed in the first ten minutes or who remain invisibly working in the scene rooms offscreen. They would be encouraged to join everybody else in the theater in seeing themselves in the hero of the against-all-odds plot” (8).

The against-all-odds hero is emblematic of what Watkins calls a process of “hyperindividualization,” “an expanded ideology of the individual… pushing everything to an extreme” (14). Hyperindividualization makes it seem as if an individual person relies on her own resources and owes nothing to the social structure which produced her, and Watkins uses the term to illuminate current discussions of the purposes of higher education. He emphasizes the way that the social is hidden or masked in the forms of hyperindividualization found in college—if there was individualization before, adding “hyper” means that the process has lately become intensified amidst a “heating up” of expectations of the benefits of higher education: a lot is at stake in college, and cultural and economic success depends on the qualities inhere in the person, qualities that college will help to reveal. The many contributions of patron institutions, from family to school, are obscured, and the hero triumphs thanks to his own power and wits.
My interaction with Andre could be read as pushing an agenda of hyperindividualization, “heating up” his expectations about his career and the competitions he will win (rather than “cooling out” his sense that he can make choices about his life or encouraging him to resign himself to a bit part). In the narrative I was shaping with him, Andre was cast as an against-all-odds hero. For what would it mean for a young man like Andre to beat the odds and work his way through a higher education by acquiring degrees while working a series of jobs? It would be heroic and unusual for sure, for Andre’s is not the path of the stereotypical American college student, the frat brother or sorority sister who enjoys leisure time, paid for by parents, from ages 18 to 22 while working toward a bachelor’s degree. That student has been given some freedom from necessity, the time to examine herself and think and study, a time of leisure that reinforces her middle-class identity as she begins to imagine the ways she will fit into middle-class adult society. No one at the college has to heat up her expectations, for they are already hot; she has long thought that college will solidify her position in the middle class and help her discover exactly how her education will translate into her career opportunities.

Though there are some limited similarities between this traditional college experience and Andre’s, for Andre, there is no freedom from necessity while he is in college. He is reaching for his bootstraps and—with the help of his publicly-funded community college—will pull himself up. He may aspire to the same future as a stereotypical frat boy’s—a stable, middle-class income and the American consumption package of house, car, and family—but to get there Andre will have to negotiate perilous and confusing situations, since his patron institutions have shaped him differently from those of his college peers.

In these negotiations, knowing elaborated codes will help him to uncover the shifting and hidden mores of the classroom and workplace and make himself better understood. For Andre
cannot expect to encounter just one way of getting ahead in either setting. To speculate about Andre’s past and present: he has been formed by visible pedagogies, filtering his experiences through the prism of “static hierarchies of labor demarcations” (Watkins 7). These pedagogies may have prepared him well for his current job, in which he is likely to work around others whose social trajectories began and ended with relatively blue-collar labor. But to get to the well-paying, interesting, and degree-requiring job that he ultimately wants, Andre will have to succeed in college courses that will ask him to question common assumptions, distinguish his own ideas from those of others, and move “between abstract and concrete statements” (Shaughnessy 240). Then, in the workplace, he will need to show that he has been “habituated to the accelerating flood of technological development and, even more importantly, empowered by [his] education to welcome innovation and change” (Watkins 7). Andre will have to do what the traditional college student does, but because he is starting with a different class background his orientations toward meaning will make the odds feel ever-more insurmountable.

In his English classes especially, which stand between him and his degree or certificate, Andre will have to write essays in ways that show he can communicate personally through an impersonal medium. Initially his writing seems inclined toward an expectation that his audience shares his sentiments and assumptions; he makes general statements in his essays, showing that he expects, rightly, that his readers (his teacher and fellow students) will understand the background conversation and intellectual context for his claims. But of course his expectation, though plausible, is also completely wrong: Andre’s orientation towards an audience is not what his teacher expects. In reading Andre’s writing, his teacher expects to be treated like an alien audience, does not want common experience to be taken for granted, wants Andre to be explicit about all of his meanings. Andre will really struggle with ideas as he works on his essays, and he
will have cogent and interesting things to say, but as he writes he imagines the wrong kind of audience and so uses restricted rather than elaborated codes. He imagines his writing teacher as he really is, a kind person who has been provoking discussion all semester. He might not understand, especially at first, that his writing teacher expects him to forget all of that personal interaction and write as if they had never met. Andre’s success with his college writing, not to mention any writing he will need to do on the job or job market, depends on his figuring out many such encounters with alien readers.

The traditional college student, whose parents before her also went to college and who had the benefit of attending a high school in which she was expected to write in these ways, already knows that her writing teacher is two-faced, two-brained, a hypocrite, an actor; she knows that when her teacher reads her papers, he will pretend as if he had never met her, as if they had not just this past Wednesday talked about the topic for ninety minutes. Andre, by contrast, trusts that his writing teacher is who he appears to be. In Bernstein’s terms, the traditional college student has already acquired the elaborated codes’ context-independent orientation, whereas Andre expects the concrete communication typical of restricted codes.

And why would he not expect his restricted code to work? In class, after all, he argues, quips, and questions, and his teacher encourages and praises him. Andre feels good. He is excited about school and actually likes coming to class. But his writing teacher is fooling him: one set of rules governs class discussions and another set governs papers. In class discussions, meanings quickly become tacit and shared, and those that are unclear can be clarified on the spot by asking questions. Indeed, in classroom situations, asking a question seems like a good thing, provoking the instructor to light up, take the question seriously, and elicit further discussion and
questions from the students in ways that feel productive and exciting. This is what college is about.

Or so Andre thinks, anyway, until he gets his first paper back, and finds that he must have missed something. He really loves the class and even respects the teacher, but the comments on his paper seem to show that his teacher feels taken-for-granted. “Don’t assume I know what you’re talking about,” the comments’ subtext reads. “Tell me! Be explicit!” How can Andre experience such comments as anything but a confusing betrayal of the trust he thought he enjoyed?

Even if the traditional college student who brings to bear an elaborated orientation towards meaning makes a similar mistake in her writing and takes too much for granted her audience’s familiarity with her context, she is likely to understand the teacher’s response to the mistake better than Andre did. She will understand why she needs to say more and is therefore more likely to do better next time, even if her teacher offers no explicit instruction on what to change about her papers.

These kinds of encounters and the miscommunication that can result from them in Andre’s case are what Bernstein and his code theories can help teachers to recognize and address. Andre and the more traditional student are accustomed to different communicative codes that are critically important in determining their chances of failure or success, but the differences between these codes have nothing to do with surface features of language and everything to do with meaning, with students accessing what Bernstein calls the “principles of their own discourse.”

To simplify Bernstein’s argument, we conduct most classroom discussion in a restricted code, but when we ask students to write we expect them to employ an elaborated code. Whereas
the classroom tends to be a scene of familiarity, intimacy, and shared context, written communication needs to be relatively independent of knowledge of a shared context, to address an anonymous audience the writer has not met and may never meet. This is why students who are used to using an elaborated code adapt readily to this writing situation, while students oriented towards a restricted code may not understand the difference between communication in class and communication in writing. And to complicate the picture even further, not all students become comfortable even with the restricted codes of the classroom, which can be more or less difficult to grasp. Andre picked up on them quickly in my class, but some of his classmates were not as quick as he was to play the role of student—challenging claims, making arguments, and raising questions.

Taking a page from Bernstein, a number of literacy scholars have studied the relationships between social class and communication and offer their own accounts for why working class students sometimes have trouble mastering the school’s ways of using language. In her influential book, Ways with Words, Shirley Brice Heath discusses how differences in the ways children of different social classes ask questions, for example, can lead teachers to conclude that working-class children are being “smart-alecky” or, in the case of some Black children, that they “did not know how to answer what seemed ‘the simplest kinds of questions’” (283). These children can also misunderstand teachers’ ways of asking questions and thus be categorized as recalcitrant or stupid. Lisa Delpit points out that when a teacher uses “known-answer” questions that demand recall of simple information, working-class students can respond with silence or extremely short answers, whereas questions that probe “the students’ own analyses and evaluations” can elicit energetic and effusive responses (56-57). These contrasting
orientations wreak havoc, then, for the working-class child, who misunderstands the demands hidden in her teacher’s questions.

In higher education, some have celebrated visible, “explicit” instruction like mine, in which teachers try not to take for granted that their students already know how to be students. Instead, I teach students as explicitly as possible what they are supposed to be learning and how they are supposed to learn it. Explicit instruction coincides with aspects of the recent push for “assessment” projects that name the outcomes of education, but it collides to various extents with models for learning based on invisible pedagogies, particularly those that value forms of discovery learning—in which education exists to uncover a student’s waiting potential, not to force upon the child the contents of her learning—or forms of learning based in students’ experiences. Delpit has criticized the White liberal educational establishment for advocating models of learning that do not work for Black or working-class children—these progressive literacy pedagogies, which often focused on helping students find their own voice and not on acquiring literacy skills, were often ineffective and sometimes hurtful because they were too invisible, too implicit, too dependent on the child’s family already being middle class. From Delpit’s and Heath’s perspectives, “discovery” learning unearths nothing that the class system has not already deposited. For children whose families the class system has already marginalized, these progressive teachers’ tactics of discovery only prove frustrating and feel like a waste of time.

Though neither cite him explicitly, Delpit’s and Heath’s approaches to language and learning coincide with Bernstein’s and help to uncover nascent new middle-class bias among educators. While Delpit questions both the legitimacy of the “Standard English” children are
expected to learn and the ways in which it is taught, Bernstein seems, comparatively, more
comfortable with, though not unconflicted about, extending the reach of elaborated codes.

Indeed, Bernstein seems to advocate teaching a kind of “code-switching” between
restricted and elaborated codes. Responding to Labov’s criticism that examples from working-
and middle-class speakers show the alleged superiority and pithiness of working-class language
over the flaccid circumlocutions of middle-class language, Bernstein points that “[i]t may well be
the case on [Labov’s] analysis that the middle-class Black adult has access to two argumental
forms whereas the Black working-class youth may well have access to only one” (Class v. 4,
115). In other words, Bernstein does not accept Labov’s preoccupation with whether working-
class or middle-class argumentation is superior—from the perspective of the code theory, each
has its place. Instead, Bernstein suggests that it is better to have access to multiple forms of
argumentation than to be limited to one. Is it better to give a command directly or indirectly?
That is a bad question; a better question is whether we should teach students to be able to “read”
and communicate in both kinds of situations. Is it better to use “known-answer” or evaluative
questions? Bad question; probably better if students and teachers know how to use both kinds of
questions for teaching and learning. Is it better to speak Hindi or Swahili? Again, a bad question,
but we can say that it is advantageous and enriching to be bilingual.

Read this way, Bernstein could plausibly be accused of thinking that working-class
people have some kind of argument deficit, an uncomfortable position he is well aware of and
tries to avoid falling into. He understands that it is a form of domination to force working-class
students to conform to the communication standards of the middle class, and he also recognizes
that people who use elaborated codes may not support policies inimical to middle-class interests:
Working-class children, especially lower working-class children relative to middle-class children, are crucially disadvantaged, given the way class relationships affect both the family and the school, but… their forms of consciousness, their way of being in the world, must be active in the school, for without such expression there can be little change in the children or in the society. The steps required to validate this inclusion will also, in the end, involve a restructuring of education itself. Yet it is also the case, according to the thesis, that the code which facilitates the systematic examination of, and change in, the boundaries of experience is not initially made available to the children as an essential part of their socialization within the family. The contradiction is that where such a code plays an essential role in family socialization, its realizations are shaped by the ideology of class. My intellectual position is not comfortable; neither is the reality. (Class v. 3, 28, emphasis in original)

Working-class students will find elaborated codes useful, but as they learn them they may also pick up attitudes that orient them away from fighting for structural economic change and towards what he comes to call “safe rather than dangerous” discourses (Class v. 4, 76). Middle-class students who do have access to elaborated codes, or even just those from any class with access to elaborated codes, may not be inclined to subvert their own social class and advantage and contradict “the ideology of class.” Like Bernstein, I am not sure I have a way out of this impasse, but the need for successful cross-cultural communication seems to warrant hope for change. Making a different version of this point more than thirty years ago, Gerald Graff conceded that academic discourse can be put to nefarious use, but that it is still worth teaching: “Analysis and detachment may of course serve inhuman ends. But then they are among the few weapons we
have for becoming critically aware of these inhuman ends and fighting against them” (124). Regardless of what I may think of my students’ politics, I want to help them procure economic security and avoid, again in Graff’s words, “a life of poverty and wretchedness” (120). To level the educational playing field, teachers must become more aware of the advantages conferred by the elaborated code and more explicit in pointing them out to students.

As for Andre, when we talked at the end of the semester he seemed impressed by the possibilities before him. The connection between his written communication and his class future was perhaps clearer than before. I had treated the restricted code of his writing not as a cultural deficit, but as an influence from his oral language habits that would prevent him from reaching many audiences outside the classroom.

From the perspective of the code theory, the thing for Andre to focus on is not surface or style. Rather, he should work on imagining an audience who might have no idea who he is or why he is writing. I am asking Andre to imagine himself as a member of the new middle class, pointing out to him as visibly and explicitly as I can what kinds of language habits he will need to succeed, to avoid confusion, and to get his ideas across. In time his writing style can become more relaxed, more like his unpretentious in-person speaking style, which does not hide the surface elements of his racial performance and which enables him to express his wit and thoughtfulness. If I have a rather narrow class future in mind for Andre, I hope he can also imagine himself feeling comfortable in his own skin as he achieves whatever modest economic dreams he strives for.
Chapter 4. Deficit, Not Difference

The preceding two chapters argue that basic writing instructors need a better way to talk about the relationships between student writing and sociocultural difference. We have tended to speak as if the only language differences that matter were those we associate with students’ home dialects, especially racialized surface elements of grammar and vocabulary. As Philip M. Anderson points out, our narrow focus on racialized language difference reflects preoccupations in U.S. education policy: “For decades, U.S. education has been resistant to social-class discussions, preferring to focus on race” (147). In terms of our profession, this resistance has meant that “discussion of sociolinguistic differences in social class dialects in the United States [has been] an obsession with ‘Black English’” (149). Our obsession has yielded many insights, but we have tended to ignore other approaches to social class and language differences. I offer Bernstein’s code theories to widen our perspective on the sociolinguistic differences that matter in writing for diverse audiences.

Yet most basic writing faculty I know—and most of my students and many others—would demand that I address what I have been referring to as surface features of language. Though they are indeed “surface,” our students want to learn to control those superficial language differences, and, because our professional debate about difference tends to conflate surface features of language with racial and class identity, faculty feel acutely the tensions between respecting students’ home languages and helping them learn academic discourse. We do not want students to feel as if they have to give up their identity to succeed in college, but we also want to challenge them to use language ever more rigorously and precisely. The debate about language difference has framed this double bind in ways that only make it harder to figure out how to teach basic writing students, for in progressive writing circles it seems that the only
acceptable way to describe a student’s literacy is that it is “different.” In these circles, the terms “strong” and “weak,” “adequate” and “deficient” indicate reified conceptions of language and so are considered taboo. These taboos stand in the way of an open exchange about students’ writing.

In part, of course, writing teachers’ reluctance to “fix” these superficial aspects of students’ home language is a laudable development. For far too long, English classrooms have been places unwelcoming to language diversity—and to students who feel they do not fit the profile of the successful English student. And for far too long, English teachers ignored the work of language scholars who, in the words of the CCCC’s “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” resolution, “long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity.” Linguists have long understood that there is no such thing as “Standard English” and that social dialects of English are equally labile and valuable, none inherently better or more useful than any other. And so it is a very good thing that English teachers are more aware of the linguistic facts about social dialects and of the therefore-unnecessary pedagogical and emotional strains entailed by calls for standardized grammar.

But injunctions to respect language difference, like the “Students’ Right” resolution, have not made the problem of standardization go away. Indeed, because those who issue these injunctions tend to proscribe the ways teachers can legitimately discuss their students’ writing, they cannot make the problem go away but only make it more difficult to talk openly and honestly about how to help struggling writers. In 2005, Patrick Bruch and Richard Marback published a collection of documents representing a range of views on the “Students’ Right” resolution and related debates about language difference, from those who support the resolution in the name of the democratization of literacy to those who reject it because they think it
undermines a common ground for communication. The tensions that the “Students’ Right” debate contains, Bruch and Marback point out, remain prominent in the experience of writing faculty today. Most primary and secondary English teachers, hemmed in by state educational guidelines and a sense of what students will need in the future, continue to stress the importance of learning what are to some degree “standard” forms, even as new voices repeat old arguments against standardized discourses. The “Students’ Right” resolution offers a valid moral imperative for English teachers, but working out that moral imperative has proven difficult.

I argue that it is particularly difficult to work out that moral imperative because the resolution—like so many arguments that champion “difference” over “deficit”—frames the problems of language difference in terms of rights to an identity and style. We can see the trouble for teachers at the beginning of the CCCC resolution: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language – the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.” Since the student decides what types of language count—“whatever dialects in which they find…”—it seems like teachers should nurture any “pattern” or “variety” of language that a student has—to do otherwise, the resolution cautions, “amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another.” The “Students’ Right” resolution does not say that teachers have nothing to teach or should feel badly about giving their students instruction, yet the controversy it has inspired has led teachers (rightly, I think, given how the language of rights and diversity frames the resolution) to be defensive and wary from the get-go about offering their students any form of correction or pushing any kind of language change.

More recent calls to respect students’ language diversity, like the translingual approach to language difference offered by Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacquelyn Jones Royster, and John
Trimbur, seem to claim that students have a right to any perceived deviation from a linguistic norm, and that faculty are wrong to treat deviation as anything other than legitimate difference. Such approaches, which can often sound like absolute pronouncements, do not give teachers an adequate conceptual apparatus for resolving these tensions between what students may want and what many faculty feel is in students’ best interest. Instead, these arguments pin teachers between an approach that assaults students’ dignity and one that insists that students have nothing new to learn. As so many calls to respect language difference characterize the problem, one side asserts that the students have a skills deficit and must be remediated, an approach which they think leads teachers to ignore students’ clear displays of intelligence and maturity and to insult students’ home languages, while their own side asserts that the students’ language is merely different, not inferior to “Standard” forms. Starting with an assumption of difference, however, can lead teachers to ignore the ways in which students seem to lack basic reading and writing skills.

If that word “lack” sounds harsh, it is meant to, though I use it not to indict the students or their home cultures but the school system that passed them along to college without the ability to read and write well. A student who cannot read and interpret a paragraph may be displaying a “difference from” the dominant discourse—the same student may be capable of understanding and making complex oral arguments—and so the problem, according to some, is not that the student has some deficit of understanding but that the student is accustomed to a different way of using language. This argument would make sense if the student was highly literate in some non-standard way. But if the difference is between an apparent mastery of oral language and trouble with written language, then the student cannot properly be said to have just a “different” form of literacy. Rather, that student has a deficit. She lacks an ability to write.
Advocates of a difference approach reject what they see as deficit approaches to language education in part because the concept of “deficit” has in the past been used to imply that a student’s cognitive potential or home culture is inferior; “deficit” has been a critique of a student’s brain or family, a term that has been used to stigmatize individuals and races of people. It need not be so. Linking “deficit” to brain or family unfairly personalizes or culturalizes what is, to begin with, a class problem. In recent debates on elementary and secondary education in the U.S., Jean Anyon and many others have argued that inequalities in parents’ income—and in the public resources (not) allocated to individual schools along social class lines—determine educational inequalities. Yet regarding language learning, educators sometimes confuse unequal performance with cultural difference and, rather than addressing inequalities in education or in funding, they question the learning standards that define inequality.

Questioning learning standards can be a good thing, a way to refine the goals of education and better prepare students for happy lives as workers and citizens. But how much questioning is too much, and at what point does political sensitivity about difference get in the way of students’ learning critical skills by making teachers afraid to teach? Math educators, by contrast, may from time to time question when and how students should learn algebra, but algebra itself is not deeply questioned in the Math education community. That is good—teaching algebra is hard enough, and it would be made all the more difficult by asking Math teachers to question their life’s work every time they grade an exam or prepare a new lesson. English teachers, thanks to confusing calls to respect students’ language difference, face the difficult

---

1 Anyon, for instance, argues in *Radical Possibilities* that an array of unfair public policy measures—besides educational policies themselves—strongly influence unequal outcomes in school. Basil Bernstein makes a similar point about educational reform movements in the UK. In a critique of “compensatory education,” schooling that is meant to compensate for the inadequacies of a child’s person or upbringing, Bernstein writes: “I do not understand how we can talk about compensatory education to children who, in the first place, have as yet not been offered an adequate educational environment” (*Class* v. 1, 191). Give poor students’ schools more resources, Bernstein argues, and draw the contents of learning from a child’s “experience in his family and community” (192), and the supposed “deficits” may disappear.
pedagogical task of helping students learn to write well, plus a complex, irresolvable moral problem: if their students become good writers according to the usual college standards, the teachers will allegedly have succeeded in oppressing the students by imposing from outside a dominant discourse. Unlike teachers in any other discipline, our professional discourse thrives on a robust squeamishness about what should be taught. As long as difference and deficit remain confused, this squeamishness will persist, and basic writing faculty will speak to students with two voices: one that says students must learn academic discourse and another voice that says academic discourse is no better than what students already know. One of these voices is lying, but the sensitive politics of the situation make it difficult to tell which one. The lie comes from a confusion about difference and language, and the tendency to treat differences in literacy—a form of language, but unlike oral language in important ways—as a matter of differences in culture, such as differences in style.

Style is arbitrary, having little natural basis or utilitarian value. A person’s fashion style can signal all kinds of things, but for most occasions it does not matter in any deep way whether one wears a necktie or a tube top, designer brand or Kmart special. There is no “natural” reason why tailored shirts are more formal than t-shirts; all gradations of formality are culturally arbitrary and superficial.

---

2 Horner, for instance, argues that composition faculty should present all linguistic forms as in flux: “[Teaching composition] means always questioning and challenging the workings of power in any particular instance of language use, under what conditions, when uttered by whom, to whom, and listened to how, in what relation to one another” (“Students’” 753-754). Such tactics of questioning involve “continuously weighing and challenging the material social conditions under which specific linguistic forms are reified, elevated, and demoted” (753). Horner has also inveighed against an “archipelago” model of literacy, which allegedly treats occasions for literacy as islands isolated from one another and from social conditions of production. Instead he argues for a “traffic” model of literacy, in which the complex interactions between literate agents can be mapped in highly interconnected ways (“Relocating”). I do not oppose discussing literacy with students in ways that make it sound complicated and that call attention to its contingent connections to the social structure, and I admire the care with which Horner often treats social dialect difference. But I find his insistence on questioning to be impractically thorough-going, as if neither student nor teacher were free even momentarily to speak generally of standards or conventions.
Yet there are matters of tailoring that do have a natural basis or utilitarian value. Weaving, cutting, and sewing are the basis of fashion, and a shirt of whatever style that is poorly sewn or woven will not keep its wearer warm (unless that is the point of the shirt, but that is a different matter yet). Within an arbitrary stylistic display—collar, cuff, ruffle—are utilitarian skills and abilities—stitches, cuts. I am not saying that weaving, cutting, and sewing are outside of history, nor that they cannot be politicized—think of Gandhi or the traditional Maya—but that in any style of garment there is better or worse crafting and that there is a logic to the crafting that has some utilitarian basis. If writing faculty always treat their students’ language as the equivalent of baggy jeans in a black-tie setting, they and their students will miss out on the ways in which literacy is the very art that keeps those metaphorical jeans from falling apart in the laundry.

“Wear what you want,” the difference theorists would have us say to our students, “people should accept you no matter what clothes you decide to put on.” But the students, to stretch this metaphor just a little farther, may not be wearing clothes that have integrity as garments; their seams may be poorly sewn because their sewing machine is broken, or their elbows may be threadbare because their shirt is old or cheap. Just because someone wears dirty sweatpants does not mean that he wants to wear dirty sweatpants or that they express an aspect of his home culture that is important to him; dirty sweatpants may just be the best thing he could afford to wear on a given day.

In other words, students’ writing may look as it does because they have not had the leisure time to read or to develop a habit of written self-expression. The way they write may not be an intentional political statement.
To use another analogy to describe the problem of treating differences in language like we treat differences in culture, the term “poor” indicates a deficit of money. It is certainly not classist to say that poor people do not have enough money and should have more—indeed, to say as much is the very beginning of any argument against economic inequality. It would be perverse and wrong to treat a money-deficit as if it were a cultural right to protect or to talk as if a perpetually empty wallet were merely “different” from an overwhelmingly fat one. Yet it has become common to avoid talking about literacy deficits and instead to reinscribe them as differences.

To be clearer, students who cannot control written language are not necessarily exhibiting a difference between ways of speaking or ways of writing; they really may lack a critical skill. And that lack is not best described as the result of cultural difference but as a deficit, the result of class inequality, of inadequate resources and inadequate will-to-educate. I believe that there is good reason to think that this class inequality is itself often a manifestation of structural racism, but I do not believe that using the language of race or culture has helped us talk more clearly about our class problems.

But, Really, Isn’t There Such Thing as Language Discrimination?

The difficulty, of course, is that when it comes to language there are some ways in which we seem to see real discrimination happening based on racial or cultural difference. That is, some kinds of language are arbitrarily valued more highly than other kinds of language, and those who can use the highly valued ones are frequently enough rewarded with jobs, degrees, and esteem. We enlightened English teachers, thanks to the long-suffering work of linguists, know (or ought to know) that this arbitrary valuation is mostly bogus. And yet, we think we are
caught in a bind—give our students the wrong education and they might be, depending on the bad choice their teacher made, using their home language but unemployed or using the school’s language but psychologically miserable.

Unfortunately, much energy gets expended worrying about home languages and future employment without listening to students or thinking closely enough about what might be culturally valuable, significant difference and what might be, well, something else. A distinction might be made, for instance, between students’ semantic habits and their social dialects to help them see that elaborated codes, while perhaps not a key part of their home language, will help them in a variety of educational, career, and civic settings. But teachers can also help students to distinguish between types of surface difference in language—between, for instance, a spelling error and a culturally-meaningful intentional “misspelling” like the substitution of “a” for “er” at the end of certain nouns. Teachers of basic writing, especially, are caught between wanting to help students with their career and educational goals and wanting to help students appreciate and protect the value of their home languages, but without careful definition about what constitutes a “home language” in writing, progress is difficult.

Progressive approaches to language difference often seem to speak for students. But the students themselves, rather than claiming a right to a home language or demanding to be allowed to write in their dialect of choice, often expect to be taught “college English” or something like it—they may or may not appreciate the value of non-college Englishes, even their own. Should a teacher who does not want to correct the students’ language correct their desires?

These problems might not be as intractable as they seem. A story, and some examples, will help to show why. Since about 2003, sometime in the first few weeks of each basic writing skills course I teach at Prairie State, my students and I face together a question that frames the
entire course: Why do colleges have English requirements? The students will always say something about the importance of writing properly, correctly, professionally, in an educated way; about avoiding negative judgments about one’s writing that can affect one’s life chances. I press them on this understanding of “proper”—Who says what’s proper? Doesn’t it make as much sense to say “We wasn’t” as “We weren’t”? Eventually, we flesh out an understanding of how people use language to make judgments about other people’s intellect or education or degree of laziness, and with a few examples I can usually convince them that, on some level, such judgment is offensive and wrong. I talk about my grandmother, who may or may not have finished high school, and who would sometimes use “incorrect” phrases like “He don’t” or “ain’t”; what kind of a terrible person would I be, I ask my students, if I disregarded what my grandmother had to say just because her language was not “proper”? So why is it acceptable to discriminate based on language in any other situation?

My students, though, do not buy it. At least not totally. For them, a phrase like “ain’t” is an immediately recognizable class marker. And though they will admit that some language difference factors arbitrarily as a component of discrimination, they still want to be the kind of language users who can switch from one form to another. They want to use their home language comfortably in some situations, yet command “proper” English in settings that call for it. And who am I to tell them they are wrong, that their desires are all mixed up? Some advocates of a difference approach would have me point out to my students the ways their language attitudes devalue their home communities, but using my position of authority to correct my students’ ideologies seems to repeat the ugly power dynamic that those same advocates want to avoid: teacher knows what’s best for you, so you’d better listen up.
What is a teacher, then, to do? It seems that teaching a dominant discourse promotes racial and cultural oppression, yet it seems that not teaching a dominant discourse violates the students’ expectations and perpetuates class inequalities.

One reason this seems to be a problem is that the examples I have just given are ones that really are about differences, not deficits. The person who says “he don’t” instead of “he doesn’t” does not lack a way to express a negative in the third person, she just does not put an “s” on the helping verb. The person who cannot punctuate her written ideas, though, does lack something consequential, as does the person who cannot paragraph, create readable sentences, or convince a reader of her point. These last skills do not express race or culture in the same way, and I point out to students that those are the skills I will push them to learn no matter what. I also tell them that paragraphing, creating sensible sentences, and convincing a reader of my point are things that I continue to work on and struggle with—indeed, these skills are hard work for pretty much every writer I know—and while their writing will improve and these skills will come more easily, writing something well will always be a difficult task. Thus, “deficits” are really a matter of degree, a natural part of learning anything.

The high-stakes urgency of difference arguments can make it sound like I should “correct” my students’ backward thinking immediately. But it is possible to introduce students more subtly to the politics of language, even while using methods that are consonant with the goals of liberal learning. To help students navigate racial and cultural difference in their writing, I am much more comfortable presenting them with the problem of language discrimination, as I describe above and as Gerald Graff suggests doing in “Code-Meshing Meets Teaching the Conflicts,” and working through the issues with them, rather than trying to shame them into becoming more open and tolerant of language difference, as Lu and Horner seem to suggest.
doing in “The Logic of Listening to Global Englishes” (more on such correcting and shaming in the next chapter).

Graff’s approach to code-meshing, like his approach to “teaching the conflicts” in disciplines in the 1990s, offers teachers a way to respect students’ agency and ability to make up their own minds. Rather than try to settle the debate about difference for oneself before entering the classroom, teachers instead can organize a writing course around the relationships between race and language as a way “to help students discover the social stakes of the kind of language they chose—and the stakes for their personal identity” (18). The key word for me is “discover”: while the teacher introduces the ongoing debate to students, the students themselves suss out implications and figure out where they stand. Graff suggests making this conflict the focus of an entire writing course; I tend to limit the discussion to a few class periods, for fear of “race fatigue” or of my students thinking that I only see them as racialized persons—plus there is so much more to think and argue about. Yet teaching language conflicts solves for me a potentially thorny pedagogical issue about how to approach language difference and address my students’ sometimes atavistic views of proper and improper language.

It may sound like I merely present both “sides” of the difference argument and let the students figure it out, but I find, at least with my community college students, that I can put my own views into the mix without trampling on their intellectual freedoms, and indeed that doing so can be helpful to spark their own thinking. It is also honest, since I do not have to pretend that I have no views. And the honesty makes more real my unfeigned delight when a student presents a cogent counter-argument or disagrees with me in a way I had not yet thought of. In learning more about how the debates have evolved, they will also see that others before them have argued
these issues, and that there really is room for debate, to consider more examples and try to reconcile opposing accounts.

For instance, I can introduce them to the views of educators Lisa Delpit and Vershawn Young, who recommend opposite courses of action for English teachers who teach African American students. I tell my students that, like Young, I am uncomfortable with the teaching strategies Delpit suggests in Other People’s Children, like this sample lesson she quotes from a teacher who presents to her young Native Alaskan students an analogy for language difference:

In the village, everyone speaks informally most of the time unless there’s a potlatch or something. You don’t think about it, you don’t worry about following any rules – it’s sort of like how you eat food at a picnic – nobody pays attention to whether you use your fingers or a fork, and it feels so good. Now, Formal English is more like a formal dinner. There are rules to follow about where the knife and fork belong, about where people sit, about how you eat. That can be really nice, too, because it’s nice to dress up sometimes. (41) Granted, this teacher is speaking to young children, so we can forgive the simplified picture of language difference. But the underlying message seems unintentionally harmful: one language is for serious, formal occasions; another is for pleasure. One language has rules and structure; in the other, anything goes. Rather than challenge the hegemony of table-manners, or help the children come to see that the potlatch, too, has its own rules and manners, the teacher tries to draw a bright line between home and school, home and work, home and formal occasion.

And yet, until I read Young, whose arguments I examine more closely in chapter six, I was pretty much a conflicted advocate of code-switching a lá Delpit; as Richard Westbury Nettell sarcastically describes the position that many writing teachers have taken, “Of course [I]
respect diversity, and of course there’s nothing wrong with [minority discourses]..., but it’s a big bad world out there, and students cannot achieve success without access to the language of wider communication” (174), or, as Gloria Ladson-Billings calls it, to “the language of money.”

So I can tell my students what I think is best for them regarding language difference but that they do not have to agree with me because I might very well be wrong, and Graff’s teaching the conflicts helps me to make the complexity that much more human and approachable and to solve a potential problem of teacherly authority. To hear that I have changed my mind over the years, and that I am genuinely interested in what students have to say about language difference, does quite a bit to mitigate my authority as a teacher and to open up space for students’ agency in the classroom.

Considering students’ agency might sound out of place to someone who argues for seeing students’ language use as “different,” since I also advocate using the term “deficit.” I will even admit that many who point to students’ deficits are politically retrograde and may even wrongly think the worst of students’ intellectual abilities. The peculiar teaching dilemmas of the basic writing classroom, though, require a brutal honesty with the students—the logic, if not the exact words, of deficit-diagnosis, in order to move them along as writers—as well as affirmations of the students’ intellect and decision-making. They expect that we will show them how to improve their writing, but they often need (and do not expect) to find out how smart and what excellent communicators they are already, or, as Graff says, to “discover that [academic and student discourse] are not as far apart as they seem” (Clueless 13). My students, in other words, know that they have deficits. Rather than try to convince them that they’re just different, that’s all, I can help them put into perspective their current skills and the many writing tasks that await them in their college careers.
Chapter 5. Being Correct in Any Dialect

In the previous chapter I questioned the assumption, which has become axiomatic in progressive writing circles, that ascribing any “deficit” to the writing of students, especially minority students, is little more than an expression of race or class prejudice. I argued that student writers do have “deficits” that it is the responsibility of writing teachers to ameliorate—indeed, it would be hard to justify having teachers at all if this were not the case. When student writers use a restricted code, for instance, writing faculty should help them see how to use an elaborated code instead.

Yet even if students do learn to use an elaborated code they may have still more to learn as writers, especially in the mastery of what I have been calling the “superficial” elements of written language, which though superficial can be of vital importance in communication. In this chapter I review controversies over “correctness” and “error,” and I offer a revised definition of error that should help writing faculty to assess whether a language pattern reflects usage in a student’s home community or reveals an idiosyncratic mistake in the attempt to reproduce in writing either academic or home language. In order to help students write well according to any discourse pattern, writing teachers and their students must distinguish between pattern and error, between purposive uses of language and “mistakes.”

Much of the professional conversation about basic writing in the era of open admissions, starting in 1977 with Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, has focused on interpreting and learning from students’ errors. One strain of the conversation on error, especially the work of Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae, “re-educates” teachers about the logic of students’ writing errors; another strain, reacting mostly against Shaughnessy and echoing the imperatives of the “Students’ Right” resolution, has condemned the practice of labeling “errors” in student work as
politically reactionary. In light of the ongoing controversy about language difference and student writing, it is worth taking another look at Shaughnessy and the study of error, not simply to repeat her type of analysis but to inquire into the difference between evidence of a student’s home dialect and his mistakes.

**Studies of Error**

To read *Errors and Expectations* is to see “bad” writing in an entirely new light: rather than treat errors—mistakes, deviations from normal expectations for writing—as evidence of laziness or stupidity, Shaughnessy instead treats errors as evidence of intelligence, signs that a student is thoughtfully trying to appropriate an unfamiliar discourse. At every turn, Shaughnessy offers actual examples of student writing, and she carefully uncovers the logic of passages that are sometimes difficult to understand at first glance. She promotes a way of reading student work that helps teachers better understand the strategies students adopt: “It is important in helping a student master formal written English to try to classify the kinds of problems he has so that one can design lessons that meet his needs” (46–47). Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all approach to helping students develop academic writing skills, Shaughnessy encourages and models a way of reading of individual students’ work that uncovers the assumptions students make that can lead to peculiar-sounding writing.

For instance, she offers a sample from a student who appears to use commas and periods interchangeably:

> I remember working on a new puzzle father bott for me one summer. It was fun finding the different parts of the puzzle, this was an animal puzzle with jungle animal from the African continent. As I made progress on the puzzle, I discovered
new animals. My mother came into the living room where I was working on my puzzle, She looked over the puzzle and said to me “are you having difficulties with this puzzle? I answered no ma. She look around for a while then she called my brother to come and help me anyway. This took all the fun out of this activity, I was angrey but no matter what I said and did, mother always had the last word. I know my brother did not care to help me, he is three years older than I am and had his own intereses…. (21-22)

On close reading, though, this writer does use commas and periods to mark different kinds of breaks between sentences; Shaughnessy shows that “the commas hold closely related sentences together whereas the periods mark the ends of the sentence clusters or terminate narrative sentences that advance the anecdote” (22). Knowing this student’s logic—and being able to read student work with such careful sympathy—will help the teacher point out to the student both the pattern of error and the way to correct it.

Bartholomae’s 1980 essay “The Study of Error” echoed Shaughnessy’s call for habits of “close reading” of basic writing. He cited then-recent developments in “error analysis,” a sub-field of linguistics that focused on errors made during second language acquisition:

> Error analysis provides the basic writing teacher with both a technique for analyzing errors in the production of discourse… and a theory of error, or, perhaps more properly, a perspective on error, where errors are seen as (1) necessary stages of individual development and (2) data that provide insight into the idiosyncratic strategies of a particular language user at a particular point in his acquisition of a target language. (256)
Like Shaughnessy, Bartholomae approaches errors as complex phenomena that provide a window onto an individual’s learning. Many of the errors found in basic writing are “evidence that these writers are using writing as an occasion to learn” how to produce correct academic discourse—errors are not, as some might have supposed, always evidence of stupidity or laziness (254). Bartholomae describes “idiosyncratic strategies” that students use that are both logical and, apart from interpreting the error in the larger context of a student’s work and development, unpredictable.

Bartholomae probes this distinction between unpredictable and predictable language patterns. Predictability counts for a lot in communication; to understand one another’s writing, we depend on “a structured, systematic code” (257). Basic writers conceive of written language as such a structured system, but they do not yet know how to manipulate that system fully, nor how to make their own language follow its structure. For this reason, errors in basic writing are sometimes evidence of an “idiosyncratic system,” language behaving according to a structured system but not a system that is shared in full with anyone else (258).

For instance, when second language learners regularly make an error that belongs to neither the home nor the target language, the error indicates an idiosyncratic system. I am a native English speaker and learned Spanish as a second language. Spanish has two verbs for “to be” and employs them for different purposes. I often assume that the verb that signals permanent qualities is also used for permanent locations, and so I will wrongly say that mi casa es en Chicago, rather than that mi casa está en Chicago. The phrases that I speak in my confusion are not correct Spanish but are not directly caused by my English. The result is a type of error that, by itself, belongs to no language.
Another type of idiosyncratic system error is the kind made in writing by a native speaker, as in this repeated phrase in a paper by one of Bartholomae’s students: “1600 childrens.” When this student read his paper aloud to Bartholomae, he spoke “1600 children” in every instance; asked why he added the “s” to children in his writing, the student replied that there were 1,600 of them (266). The student was being logical but making an error in an unpredictable way—that is, since the student obviously used the word “children” to indicate more than one child, “1600 childrens” is what we might call a hypercorrect use of language that could not be predicted by the usage patterns of the student’s home dialect nor those of academic English.

An idiosyncratic system is one explanation for the errors of basic writing; Bartholomae goes on to discuss two more types of error:

errors that could truly be said to be accidents, or slips of the pen as a writer’s mind rushes ahead faster than his hand; and... errors of language transfer, or, more commonly dialect interference, where in the attempt to produce the target language, the writer intrudes forms from the “first” or “native” language rather than inventing some intermediate form. (257)

The first kind of error is truly idiosyncratic and is not the subject of much controversy in debates about writing; if a student wishes to make fewer of these kinds of errors, she will simply need more practice putting thoughts to paper. Dialect interference, on the other hand, an intrusion of a form from one language upon another, presents one version of what for good political and linguistic reasons one might not want to call an error.

Bearing in mind Shaughnessy and Bartholomae’s generous approaches to error, basic writing faculty could help students eliminate idiosyncratic errors even while recognizing that
“dialect interference” in academic writing can be treated as the positive influence of a home language. Reading practices like Shaughnessy and Bartholomae’s are still alive and well in many basic writing classrooms and represent a resource for distinguishing between home language and errors.

An “Almost Pathological Fear of Giving Offense”

Error studies and its habits of reading would seem to be a politically progressive resource for helping students learn to write more correctly even from the perspective of their languages of nurture. Students can learn to distinguish, if they wish to, between mistakes that no one wants to make and deviations from standard discourse that reveal a cherished aspect of their language or culture.

Advocates of progressive approaches to language difference often overlook the ways that error studies could valorize students’ home languages. Instead, they have sometimes broadly attacked Shaughnessy and, it seems to me, dismissed her approach to composition. As early as 1979, a leftist critique of Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations* appeared in *College English*, when John Rouse alleged that Shaughnessy was complicit with capitalist exploitation of the underclass because she advocated that students learn to write well according to the school’s standards. In 1991, in a more generous treatment of Shaughnessy’s work, Min-Zhan Lu echoed Rouse’s critique and claimed that Shaughnessy’s “pedagogy enacts a systematic denial of the political context of students’ linguistic decisions” and that she promotes “a politics of linguistic innocence” (37, 38). I concur with some of Lu’s arguments, such as the view that “language is best understood not as a neutral vehicle for communication but as a site of struggle among
competing discourses,” yet I disagree about the extent to which that struggle should be made central to basic writing courses (27). I also value Shaughnessy’s generous approach to error.

In a recent essay, “The Logic of Listening to Global English,” Lu and Bruce Horner revisit Shaughnessy and Bartholomae only to dismiss their approaches to error as implicitly upholding an ideology in which English belongs only to White Americans. They seem to argue that the only kind of error—a label they resist applying to student writing, elsewhere calling it “the interpretation of last resort”—is Bartholomae’s second kind of error, the purely accidental kind, mistakes (“Language” 304). In their view, English belongs to everybody as a global language, and so readers should first respond to perceived deviations from Standard English as an opportunity to learn about how another culture sees the world. They seem to imply that there are no wrong ways to use English.

To support their claims and to illustrate how they teach this kind of culturally sensitive reading, Lu and Horner discuss signs in English that were posted in China: “Money Collecting Toilet,” “Little Grass Has Life,” and “Every form rape.” (The idiomatic translation of the first two signs can be guessed at—“Pay toilet” and “Keep off the grass”—and the last is from a restaurant menu.) They show these signs to their students and provide lessons on Chinese culture that reveal the logic of what appear, at first, to be simply errors in approximating English idioms. Lu and Horner use these examples of what they call “Chinglish” to help their students understand the material basis for what appears to be a deviation, a process not unlike the kind of sympathetic reading that Shaughnessy and Bartholomae suggest. Yet whereas Shaughnessy and Bartholomae might have explored the origins of these errors to help a writer see how to produce an idiomatically correct version, Lu and Horner use these signs as an opportunity to educate their American students about cultural diversity and the politics of reading. That is, Lu and Horner
defend non-idiomatic uses of English and call for listeners (or readers) to be more tolerant and open-minded about what appears to be deviation or error: “We need to explore with our students ways of listening that, instead of producing misunderstanding, allow for the possibility of cooperation by showing honor and respect to all those speaking” (“Logic” 109).

Who could disagree with a call for more cooperation, or for showing more honor and respect? Yet it seems to me more than a little condescending towards these so-called “Unauthorized” users of English that Lu and Horner would have us honor and respect to treat their every utterance as a cultural right to be protected. Lu and Horner explain that the sign “Money Collecting Toilet” may reveal the worldview of the public official who wrote it—in his or her way of life under a Communist regime, public and private are not what Americans expect. But they do not ask whether that public official knew or cared that he or she was not translating the sign into idiomatic English. Knowing the translator’s intention would help determine whether the deviation should be considered a mistake.

I find Lu and Horner’s discussion of the final example, “Every form rape,” to be extreme in its political correctness. Their discussion is so politically hypercorrect, in fact, that it leads them to condemn American students’ reactions to the sign—their students sounded shocked and confused—as evidence of provincialism (my term, not theirs), and to pass over the horrifying and violent images that the word “rape” conjures up for English speakers all over the world—especially for American college students, whose schools often battle rightly and mightily to prevent rape and bring rapists to justice. Rather, Lu and Horner point out that “rape” is also a name for a vegetable. I certainly do not mean to condemn the menu translator for being unaware of the botanical ignorance of the typical American undergraduate. But neither do I think it would “honor and respect” the translator to put the onus of right interpretation only on his or her
American readers. Did the restaurant proprietor know that the word he or she thought denoted a healthy vegetable also referred in the idiom of some guests to a heinous and reviled criminal act?

It does not seem like honor or respect for the translator, in other words, to explain away the potentially confusing and painful effects of a word choice.

I am struck most by the way Lu and Horner condemn Americans for being provincial in their attitudes towards these signs. Their students find more information on the uses of the word “rape,” research that to Lu and Horner “illustrat[es] the peculiarity of students’ native ignorance of rape as a vegetable” (109). Indeed, they point out that “none of the students in the class had been aware” that “rape is also a vegetable,” and they use the occasion of this research to show their students “the logic of a translation that appears ludicrous to our supposedly developed tastes” (109). I do not begrudge Lu and Horner their central point, that Americans tend to be ethnocentric and that we would do well to be less so, but their critique of American ethnocentrism sounds to me like a condemnation of American students for not being cosmopolitan enough to have already known, before setting foot in their classroom, the social practices and language patterns of a people—one of thousands of cultures worldwide, even if the Chinese are one of the largest trading partners of the U.S.—on the other side of the globe.

If students are ignorant about the ways of life of their international counterparts, it is a useful occasion for education and probably indicates that the students do not get much chance to travel or to interact with foreigners. I know that my own students can be wildly ignorant about daily life in other lands, but it does not follow that I should hold their ignorance against them. It seems that Lu and Horner honor and respect their students by believing that the students, too, can become cosmopolitan, but they seem to contradict their own politics when to do so their students must be willing to toe their multicultural line of honor and respect.
Like Lu and Horner, I think that cultural difference can enrich our lives and that cultural exchange can open us up to new and improved ways of being in the world. And while I have to agree that we should treat others with honor and respect, I find it troubling to suggest that the flow of learning about language difference should only move in one direction and I find it patronizing to protect every difference. Approaches like Lu and Horner’s seem to want to compensate for American cultural hegemony, but in doing so they paradoxically end up creating a dynamic in which one side must be totally open to change and the other side plays the role of wisdom-giver. The former hegemon succumbs to an “almost pathological fear of giving offense” while the former subaltern glories in the role of cultural instructor—arguably a better situation than before, but still not a relationship of mutual honor and respect (Rushdie 36).

It may be that Lu and Horner’s examples were merely poorly chosen or that, based on these anecdotes, I have read too much into their pedagogical approach, which seems to me to be an unfair set-up for students, a form of “Gotcha.” Yet I find it telling that the examples that they give in “The Logic of Listening to Global English” are not of great consequence nor are examples of writing by identifiable authors trying to share an idea with a multicultural audience. (How would Lu and Horner respond to Shaughnessy’s and Bartholomae’s students, or to mine?) Like the only examples they give in their co-authored College English piece on a translingual approach to language difference—a student writing “spills out” instead of “spells out” or “stepping stool” instead of “stepping stone”—these signs are pretty superficial examples to carry such weighty political significance.

To carry that significance well, an example would have to bear some political import for its author, which leads Lu and Horner into an authenticity problem: many students both in the U.S. and abroad want to learn to write correct Standard English, yet Lu and Horner see this
desire as evidence of the hegemony of Standard English, and so a desire that must be discounted as inauthentic, a form of false consciousness. Examples of political consciousness and resistance among English language learners are not impossible to come by—in *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*, A. Suresh Canagarajah discusses a movement at the University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka in which students questioned the necessity of learning English and the politics of English in a post-colonial state. Yet educators in the United States are much more likely to encounter students like mine whose language differs from the perceived norm but who want to close that gap, leaving Lu and Horner in the awkward position of knowing what is really in the best interests of language users but without corroborating evidence that these language users actually agree with them. From Lu and Horner’s perspective, the true threat of error analysis is that it reveals basic writers’ desire to be correct.

**Being Correct in Any Dialect**

In basic writing instruction, error analysis can help both teacher and student understand the sometimes idiosyncratic patterns that can get in the way of understanding writing. Teachers can use error analysis to show that they indeed have something to teach the students, and that the students have something to teach them. That sentence sounds a lot like Paulo Freire’s advice in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that education should be comprised of “student-teachers” and “teacher-students” (80). Yet the development of critical pedagogy in the United States has tended, as Lu and Horner’s call for more honor and respect does in the case above, to scare teachers away from “imposing” standards and correcting any of a student’s errors. Instead, I argue that writing teachers should use Bartholomae’s approach to errors and inquire whether features of students’ writing are part of a code or are simply mistakes, and writing teachers
should involve students in making these distinctions. Features of students’ writing that are part of a language of nurture—whether it is Chinglish, AAVE, or, like mine, some shade of White English Vernacular (WEV)—can rightly be considered as “correct,” predictable usage. Everything else is an error.

Correctness affects how instructors across the disciplines read essays, and it remains a key learning outcome for students, parents, and many educators. For the wider public, claims that “Johnny can’t write” most often refer to Johnny’s inaptitude with the conventions of formalized “Standard English”—spelling, punctuation, syntax, proofreading. There is a strong emphasis on surface mechanics in these claims—what Johnny has to say is not as important as his command of words and punctuation. If Johnny can’t write correctly, Johnny can’t write at all. And if Johnny can’t write, he won’t get a job.

This is the vision of Johnny’s future invoked by Shaughnessy and Bartholomae and by supporters of correctness instruction in composition: incorrect writers are dismissed out of hand, cut off from power or jobs, marginalized. (If bad writing is as pervasive as the alarmists say, I wonder how anybody knows that Johnny can’t write in the first place.) Some writing theorists have argued that readers should not demand correctness, that what Johnny says ought to be more important than how he says it. If the judgment of Johnny’s level of correctness is wrong-headed, evil, racist, or classist, this argument goes, then it would be wrong-headed, evil, racist, or classist to impose the same judgments on Johnny in his basic writing class. No doubt: judgment of Johnny’s correctness is in some instances wrong-headed, evil, racist, and classist. But I do not think it follows that students should not then learn correctness, and not only because learning it will help them to avoid negative judgments in public. For correctness is not inextricably tied to Standard English but can be measured against a perceived norm or against a home language.
To explain why correctness is still a worthwhile learning outcome in spite of its being used sometimes perniciously to judge incorrect writers as unworthy, it will help to look at some concrete examples of student writing and some published work from composition scholarship. Published work about students’ writing and critiques of college composition, as we see in Lu and Horner’s, are often short on examples from such writing, making inevitable misunderstanding what we mean when we talk about important concepts like correctness. ¹ Here, then, are two student examples from my recent basic writing courses. The first is an explanation of a passage in the novel GraceLand, about a father and son named Sunday and Elvis; the second, a response to a narrative prompt about the best argument one ever had:

1) i dont think that [the father named] sunday hates [his son] elvis i think sunday is jealous that elvis is making money for the family something that sunday doesnt do.

2) The best argument I had with is my mom. We was argument about something I for got but I kno I did smrthing and she got in my face in started yalling at me and I was yalling at her back. So I walk out the house to get some air all day. In went to my cousin house. In the next best argument I had with my girlfriend we was argument abou this other girl text my phone and said hi baby what are you doin so i left her house in went home in went to sleep.

From a correctness standpoint, there are several glaring problems with each. The first student seems unfamiliar with the capital letter, the period, and the apostrophe. The second seems unfamiliar with how to spell the word and, among other, deeper unfamiliarities with written

¹ For notable exceptions, see Harley and Cannon’s “Failure: The Student’s or the Assessment’s?” or Suresh Canagarajah’s close reading of Geneva Smitherman in “The Place of World Englishes in Composition.” More typical are treatments like Lu and Horner’s, in which the authors outline theoretical or political positions while offering few specific examples.
language ("argument" vs. "arguing"). The question I am posing is how much we should care about such matters. *So what* if these students are completely unfamiliar with these things? If a reader can get the general idea, why label these writers as deficient?

The response of traditional English teachers to these passages is easy to imagine—try to teach better proofreading, or try to teach capitalization, punctuation, or subject-verb agreement. The responses of those who say that correctness does not matter are harder to predict. Imagine a professor who strongly believed in protecting students’ right to their home languages and who took the position that these students need not learn capitalization and punctuation—conventions, after all, that are part of a classed- and raced-system that values the writing of the elite over that of the non-elite. Instead of encouraging the student to correct and overcome these mechanical errors, this professor focuses on what he sees as the more important issues of argument and support, or encourages the student to develop her own ideas in her own ways. The question for me is whose response serves student writers best—the first, who focuses on mechanics, or the second, who does not? Has the “Students’ Right” professor let the students down, assuming that these passages are representative of their mastery of mechanics? My students would certainly think so, especially when, further down their career as a writer, someone pointed out to them the frequency of their “errors.”

Another measure of whether the hypothetical “Students’ Right” professor has let the students down: would the professor herself send a passage of her own writing, similarly de-capitalized and de-punctuated, un-proofread, as part of a professional email, a departmental memo, a journal article, a grant application? This is a hypothetical professor, but we have empirical proof that those who hold this kind of political view nevertheless embody in their own writing the standards of correctness they might not demand in their students’ writing: just read a
published paragraph by almost anyone who argues against correctness on political grounds, and you will see flagrant mastery of the conventions of written English. A few avant-garde scholars will deliberately use language and symbols “incorrectly”—and here I am referring mostly to habits of punctuation and capitalization—but these rules are usually broken purposively and with savvy and cunning. As for scholars who use a home language with some frequency within academic writing—Geneva Smitherman is an excellent, strong example, as I will soon show—even in their written use of non-standard English they almost always make use of punctuation to clearly represent the nuances of spoken language. That is, they are correct, too. Smitherman even uses the phrase “correct Black English” throughout Talkin and Testifyin to refer to language use that follows the patterns of AAVE.

Accurately writing in a home language can give writing the force and nuance of a material connection to a given community. In the second example above, the student’s writing is mostly not a reflection of AAVE speech, though its writer speaks AAVE; what is on the page does not match how he himself might speak his story. It is not clear, then, that defending his “errors” is the same as defending some aspect of his racial identity. As a quick re-write shows, it would be possible to preserve or even augment some of the AAVE features and make the short passage more readable, more like the student might speak the story (additions are marked by underlining, and deletions by strike-through):

The best argument I ever had was with is my mom. We was argument-arguin’ about something—I forget but I know I did smthng somethng—and she got in my face in an’ started yalling at me and I was yalling at her back. So I walk out the house to get some air all day. In-an’ went to my cousin house. In An’ the next best argument I had with my girlfriend; we was argument-arguing abou’ how this
other girl text my phone and said “hi baby what are you doin’,” so i left her house 
in an’ went home in an’ went to sleep.

The “voice” seems to come through as clearly, or more clearly, with the addition of some punctuation; replacing some of the original orthography (“kno” for “know”) alters the character of the piece somewhat, but now the text would read aloud more like how the student would actually speak it. Some AAVE features remain—“We was,” “I walk,” “my cousin house”—but now they are more authentically part of a transcription of live, spoken story-telling, less an indication that the passage was written hurriedly or that its writer cannot proofread or match written and oral language. These suggested repairs would address mastery over components of literacy—how punctuation and standardized spelling (“and” for “in”) can help ease a reader’s understanding—without compromising the student’s racial language markers. That is, the re-write makes it seem possible to address the writer’s educational class (poor writing skills, not college-ready) without denying him features of his home language.

Because the damage in the original speaks to other aspects of race and class relations and the failure of the primary and secondary educational system—its writer was a recent high school graduate—it would not do to end the argument there and not teach this student better mastery of correctness, just as it would not do to withhold numeracy from those who are weak in Math. The ardent advocate for this student’s right to his own language imagines that he is defending the student’s racial or class identity from a system that judges unfairly, but really he is avoiding the uncomfortable truth that this student has already been failed by every teacher he has ever had. No amount of readerly generosity will erase this failure.
I cannot claim not to have failed that second student, too—he failed my basic writing course, and I failed to teach him and improve his writing skills by any measure. Most teachers in the community college basic skills classroom, in my experience, would have approached both of these students as I did: at least in part as Shaughnessy and Bartholomae would have. They would work with the first student to improve her correctness, praising her ability to analyze the text and offer support, praising some elements of her phrasing and analysis, but urging greater control over the conventions of written English. With the second student, the approaches would be more diverse: in many community colleges, teachers would “skill and drill” this student with grammar exercises; in others, perhaps, they would offer him a holistic workshop that teaches writing and reading together. In any case, though, this student would be the focus of intensive remediation until his writing achieved a minimum level of correctness.

So far I have been discussing “correctness” as a set of orthographic conventions, or patterns, that help readers to make sense of writing more easily and writers to manipulate symbols predictably. “Correctness” becomes more controversial when it is used to posit a “standard” dialect in opposition to “non-standard” ones; this controversy goes beyond orthography and into the realm of ideology, and the alleged superiority of the Standard has no basis in linguistics or communication, only in prejudice. This is where I agree with Lu and Horner and advocates for students’ right to their own languages: there really is nothing inherently better or worse about saying something in AAVE or in WEV. On some occasions one
or the other may have a better way of framing an issue or telling a story, but if the measure is whether one can get a point across there is no deep semantic difference between the two. The argument story, for instance, would be weakened if its voice were changed from AAVE to something more traditionally academic, though the meaning would arguably remain the same:

The best argument I ever had was with my mother. We were arguing about something—what it was I can no longer recall; the content is not important—and she stepped into my personal space and began yelling at me in a loud voice, and I was yelling loudly back at her. So I walked out of the house to get some air. I was out all day and went to my cousin’s house. The next best argument I had was with my girlfriend. We were arguing about how another girl text-messaged me and addressed me in the message as “baby,” which my girlfriend assumed signified romantic endearment. I left my girlfriend’s house to go home and sleep.

Here the voice is almost entirely different—the anecdote has the feel of a different person, and it is certainly not how this writer would have spoken. Indeed, it is not how anyone speaks, for the most part, especially when relating a heated personal anecdote. Its form, though, would please many writing traditional teachers—it is highly correct, clearly punctuated, and conforms to the idea of how Standard English should look on the page and sound when read aloud. Someone who wanted to defend this student’s right to his own language might make two points about the changes to the passage: 1) while the passage no longer sounds like anyone in particular, it sounds a lot more like a middle- or upper-class person and a lot less like a poor person; and therefore 2) to urge poor students to write like this, especially poor students of color, is to urge them to accept a kind of deep, negative judgment of their home communities and the kinds of language used
there. And I would agree. Although the paragraph is now in puffy Standard English, as a personal story it is not as good as the correct Black English version.

It does not follow, though, that the student’s original version is OK—because it is incorrect, much of it still belongs to no community’s pattern, and it shows that the student really did need to learn how to produce “correct” writing. As we saw in the last chapter, differences, like those between AAVE and WEV, are not always deficits. A student who “lacks” WEV does not really lack anything in any pedagogically important sense, just as a student who “lacks” AAVE does not really lack anything. But a student who cannot control written symbols with accuracy lacks an important skill: the ability to be correct.

Even this skill deficit, though, need not be presented to students as a personal deficit or indicative in any way of an individual failure. Rather, it is a sign of a collective deficit, a failure of the educational system to help someone become literate. If students do lack skills, faculty need not berate students as if it were their fault, nor bemoan the situation as if it is now impossible for them to catch up. It is harder to learn to read well at 25 than it is at 10, but it is not impossible.

Catching up will be made easier for students if teachers can be more clear about just what correctness is meant to capture, can read more like Shaughnessy, and can give examples of scholars who use a home language while writing for an academic audience. For instance, even in this one paragraph from Geneva Smitherman’s *Word from the Mother*, students could see correct, published use of AAVE in an academic monograph:

We Black folks be knowin we got some unique patterns of language goin on up in here in the U.S. of A. Yet, still today, in the twenty-first century, after more than four decades—count ‘em, *foe decades!*—of research by language scholars, it’s
some people who say Black Language ain nothin but “slang and cuss words,” or “it’s just broken English.” Not to mention those who be sayin ain no such thang as Black Language! Well, I guess it’s always gon be some folk don’t believe fat meat is greasy. Dem’s the ones gon be left behind in the dustbin of history. (3)

Here, in a scholarly publication, Smitherman uses features of AAVE—“be knowin,” “goin on up in here,” “dem’s the ones”—as she recounts opposition to the legitimacy of Black Language. Both these features and the rest of the passage are correctly punctuated and would likely reflect Smitherman’s spoken voice, along with its culturally distinctive features. There are no errors here, just a writer showing off tight control of printed language. We can hope for the same, eventually, from our basic writing students.

**There Are Different Kinds of Vulnerability**

There is no necessary opposition between a student’s right to her own language and correct writing. Rather, theorizing a difference between code and error will help teachers of basic writing help their students improve their writing and validate their students’ language of nurture. Teachers should still communicate with students with honor and respect, which often means helping students put their learning into proper perspective. As Rebecca Cox has shown, community college “students [exhibit] very low tolerance for feeling confused or making mistakes, phenomena they could easily attribute to their own inadequacy rather than to the process of learning new skills or information” (37). These students need to hear that making mistakes is a vital part of the learning process, and faculty would do well to remember that honor and respect are not synonymous with blind validation. Using the wrong language—just as with
committing an error—can make one feel vulnerable, but that feeling is inevitable when learning something new.

In many personal accounts of those who argue for respect for language difference, one detects sensitivity to this vulnerability that animates calls for linguistic inclusion: Rosina Lippi-Green discussing a party in Munich at which someone insulted her Swiss-accented German (*Code-Meshing* xi); Vershawn Young describing how at times he has been made to feel not White enough or not Black enough or not man enough (*Your* xvi); Nichole E. Stanford or Katherine Kelleher Sohn feeling out of place because of, respectively, a Cajun or Southern American accent.

In such situations, where some social or linguistic difference makes a person feel out of place, one option—the option I might generally recommend, and the one that Lippi-Green and “Students’ Right” advocates generally call for—is to deny the negative judgment of oneself or one’s home culture. Lippi-Green quotes Eleanor Roosevelt: “Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent” (xv). It is good to feel comfortable in one’s own skin.

But painful identity-related encounters make an imperfect analogy for learning how to use one’s language correctly in writing. When it comes to the patterns of our home languages—those features of our writing which really do represent a cherished aspect of ourselves—we should learn to be more comfortable in our own “skin.” But when it comes to errors, mistakes, those features of our writing that do not represent some cherished aspect of ourselves, the analogy begins to cloud our thinking. It may seem as if a reader demanding correctness is analogous to a listener demanding a certain accent or to a cultural elitist’s contemptuous snort at some innocent who confuses Chardonnay with Cabernet, but demanding correctness is more like demanding that our plumbing is properly fitted, our clothes well sewn, our accounts correctly balanced—in
short, correctness in writing is functional in a way that cultural identity just is not. Vulnerability due to error, then, ought to be treated differently than the vulnerability due to negative judgments about one’s identity or culture. As English faculty we should better distinguish between types of vulnerability, and between errors and patterns, so that we can teach students to write, if they wish, more like Smitherman, to use elements of a home language even while they tap into those aspects of the school’s language that will help diverse audiences understand what they have to say.
Chapter 6. Code Confusion, or the Trouble with Code-Switching and Code-Meshing

English teachers have struggled for many years with how to teach writing to students whose home language differs from the school’s privileged languages. The options, for teachers who think that students need to know the privileged languages, seemed to be either to teach Standard English as the best and only way to speak and write or to encourage students to use Standard English at school and non-Standard English at home, a separation that was once called “bidialectalism” and is now called code-switching. Recently, a new vein of scholarship on the teaching of writing has developed a more promising option: code-meshing. Code-meshing promotes a kind of linguistic democracy in which multiple varieties of English work together to enrich communication; if code-switching separates home and school language, code-meshing tries to bring them together.

But what exactly does code-meshing try to bring together, or code-switching try to keep separate? Advocates of both code-meshing and code-switching use the term “code” rather imprecisely, inevitably confusing writing teachers who would apply their theories. Most often these advocates seem to use “code” to refer to what Bernstein calls social dialect, although in many cases they might have used the broader term “language pattern” to capture both social dialect and rhetorical tactics. In this chapter I also employ the term “codes” in this broader sense, and I argue that writing faculty and students should consider code-meshing as a viable and constructive approach to language difference. I also contend that, for code-meshing to work well, writing teachers need to work with students to determine which “codes” ought to be meshed. Some features of students’ written language represent a home language and should be encouraged, other features belong to the students’ home language code but should be
discouraged, and yet other features are idiosyncrasies—errors—that result from earlier inadequate writing instruction.

So far the research on code-meshing is limited to a few publications and scholars: A. Suresh Canagarajah’s 2006 College Composition and Communication essay, “The Place of World Englishes in Composition”; Vershawn Ashanti Young’s book Your Average Nigga; and Young and Aja Y. Martinez’s edited volume Code-Meshing as Global English. Other recent developments in the scholarship of teaching writing bear a family resemblance to code-meshing, such as Min-Zhan Lu’s term transcultural (as opposed to a monocultural) literacy and the translingual approach to language difference which I discuss in the introduction to this dissertation. Yet these other attempts to address language difference, the translingual approach especially, frame the problem in tired old ways, implicitly opposing a supposedly new concept to a monolingual approach which nobody really believes in anyway and making it sound like every aspect of academic language should be resisted. Code-meshing, on the other hand, because of the “meshing” involved, leaves room both for what the students bring and what the academy has to offer. Plus, the term readily calls to mind its opposite, code-switching, a pedagogical term in rather widespread use.

Throughout the code-meshing scholarship I mention above, the authors discuss their personal experiences with language and code-switching in both informal and academic settings. While the authors come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, their message is consistent: creating some room within English classrooms for non-standard, non-dominant Englishes will help students unfamiliar with academic conventions to learn them, and academic writing will benefit from incorporating new voices and modes of expression. Far from promoting blanket resistance to academic forms of discourse, code-meshing advocates seem to want students to
learn new forms of communication, even while keeping intact some aspects of their home language varieties. As Canagarajah describes the pedagogical benefits of code-meshing, “Valuing the varieties that matter to students can lessen the inhibitions against dominant codes, reduce the exclusive status of those codes, and enable students to accommodate them in their repertoire of Englishes” (“Place” 592). This balance of new and old, outside and inside, is sure to play well to English teachers who feel they have something to teach their students but who nonetheless want to maximize their students’ freedom of expression.

I am particularly interested in code-meshing because I teach basic writing and chair the English Department at a predominantly Black community college. Basic writing occupies a hybrid institutional position within both higher education and English departments; it shares parts of the missions of freshman composition and of adult basic education, yet basic writing students are dissimilar to students in either of those disciplines. Basic writing is a sub-discipline for which even excellent and well-intentioned suggestions for teaching writing, such as code-meshing, can seem only marginally relevant, schemes intended for other people’s students.

Yet teachers of basic writing have much to learn from code-meshing. Theorists of basic writing have long recognized the awkward institutional fit of basic writing students; as Mina Shaughnessy puts it in *Errors and Expectations*, the era of open admissions brought to higher education those who had been left so far behind others in their formal education that they appeared to have little chance of catching up, students whose difficulties with the written language seemed of a different order from those of other groups, as if they had come, you might say, from a different country, or at least through different
schools, where even very modest standards of high-school literacy had not been met. (2)

Colleges groped for ways to help such students, and students found themselves caught, to an extent greater than any other group of students in the history of U.S. higher education, between the worlds of school and the worlds of home. As a teaching practice, code-meshing can help such students feel as if their voices can be heard, even as they struggle to catch up to the level of their peers.

In helping these students catch up, though, faculty may have to engage in teaching that might sound regressive to an advocate of code-meshing. When, for instance, a teacher encourages students to practice the correct use of punctuation, to consider sentence boundaries and syntax, or to provide more context than the student is used to supplying, it might seem more like supplanting language habits than meshing them. The basic writing teacher, in other words, tries to change the written language of the student, which would seem to violate the democratic principles of code-meshing.

If changing students’ language appears to violate these principles, it is only because advocates of code-meshing have yet to account adequately for the basic writing student; while code-meshing advocates claim to want students to learn new forms of communication, they also seem to posit a sacrosanct “code” that students possess upon entering a classroom. These advocates are partly correct: students do sometimes bear a code that is different from that of the school. Yet students often do not command that code with equal dexterity in speech and in writing. A student’s spoken language may fluently display a home code, but the same student’s writing may use alternately a home code or a school code, or the writing may not, as we saw in the last chapter, look like any “code” or pattern at all. Code-meshing can help teachers and
students navigate the politics of how to blend the home and school code, but teachers may come away from the scholarship on code-meshing still feeling sheepish about correcting students’ language errors or about suggesting an expanded repertoire of approaches to argumentation. Teachers should not feel that way, and students’ writing in any code would be well-served by an approach to teaching that accounts for and corrects unpredictable errors and that seeks out the best in every code.

It seems there is enough conceptual room in code-meshing to allow for such correction. In his afterword to Code-Meshing as World English, Canagarajah notes that “If we cannot distinguish between translanguaging, error, and mistakes, we have little or nothing to teach” (277). Others seem to concur. Young, Martinez, and Julie Anne Naviaux, in the introduction, hope that “teachers will find moments in the classroom day to slip in the message that code-meshing can make formulaic writing more interesting reading,” presumably conceding the rest of the classroom day to more traditional instruction (xxviii). Asao B. Inoue believes that “educators should expect and accept code-meshing language practices that bend the rules but do not get folks kicked out of the game,” a pragmatic approach to language use that seems to admit that some of the “rules,” even if they should be “bent,” are worth playing by (97). None of these quotations are ringing endorsements of the conventions of academic discourse, but they each suggest some space for those conventions within the code-meshing approach to language difference.

As many contributors to the collection Code-Meshing as World English note, there is more work to be done to research code-meshing and to promote linguistic inclusion more broadly among the public. I would add that there is also work to be done from within the code-meshing approach to make a positive case for some academic conventions like elaborated codes.
Filling in a picture of code-meshing with some pedagogical specificity will help writing teachers distinguish between those types of language students ought to mesh and those types of language which students ought not to mesh or even ought to outgrow—that is, code-meshing can help writing teachers to find a balance between encouraging the use of home languages and pushing their students to be more rigorous and precise.

Basic writing teachers come away from a text like *Code-Meshing as World English* with a clear moral purpose – to promote students’ dignity and help them improve their writing by encouraging a mixture of home and school language – as well as a range of excellent examples of code-meshing in classroom use and in scholarly texts. But the code-meshing scholarship, like the code-switching scholarship before it, suffers from an under-examined notion of “codes.” Neither the scholarship on code-switching nor the budding code-meshing scholarship will help basic writing faculty imagine how to approach language difference. Re-tracing some key arguments for code-switching and code-meshing will help to sort out our approaches to students’ language differences.

**Code-switching from what to what?**

In her seminal *Other People’s Children*, a text well-known among educators for advocating that minority students should be taught to code-switch, Lisa Delpit argues that students of color must learn White English Vernacular to head off discrimination in the job market or workplace. Hers is the best pragmatic rationale of “code-switching” I have encountered, one that held sway over my teaching for many years. Like her, I would try to help my students advance in the world by encouraging them to code-switch, an approach to language difference that, by choice or necessity or both, they were inclined to practice already. This
approach never sat well with me, even if my students seemed to believe in it, but in my limited imagination it seemed the least bad of my options.

Explaining how schools reproduce social inequalities, Delpit discusses a “culture of power” and uses the term “codes” to describe the cultural signals of power that act as gatekeepers to institutional power in the U.S.: “There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a ‘culture of power.’” The codes or rules I’m speaking of relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting” (25, emphasis in original). From this recognition of a culture of power, she argues that explicit instruction is the best way to spread power to those who do not have it, pointing out to students the differences between the codes they bear and the “codes of power” and helping them to master the “rules for participating in power.”

Although Delpit does not believe that the codes of power are intrinsically better than any other codes, she adds her voice to the lengthy tradition of educators who argue that it is misguided to resist for political reasons teaching Standard English to Black children. In Other People’s Children, Delpit often questions the assumptions of well-meaning, mostly White, liberal educators who maintain that Black children should not be taught Standard English, and she sometimes indicates how being “well-meaning” is part of the problem. Here, she quotes a White liberal educator who, echoing the language of the “Students’ Right” resolution, argues that Black children do not need to learn WEV:

---

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. It is not they, the children, who must change, but the schools. To push children to do anything else is repressive and reactionary. (37)

In the mind of this educator, evil hegemony is countered with acceptance of diversity. Delpit finds this acceptance misleading and even patronizing, an approach to teaching that will ensure that Black children are kept out of power. Instead, she believes that “each cultural group should have the right to maintain its own language style,” but “that there is a political power game that is also being played, and if [her students] want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play” (39-40). Her compromise is for students to value their home cultural codes “as well as to understand the power realities in this country” (40).

To illustrate how a progressive political stance can harm students of color, Delpit tells the story of one of her students, a Native American woman who almost failed out of upper-level education coursework for her inability to write well. When Delpit showed a sample of the student’s work to her departmental colleagues, some argued that the student should not have been allowed into the program, while others suggested that Delpit was “attempting to function as a gatekeeper by raising the issue, and had internalized repressive and disempowering forces of the power elite” (38). In other words, some of her colleagues wanted to exclude students who wrote like this, while others accused Delpit of being an Uncle Tom. Neither side, Delpit realized, actually wanted to help this student improve her writing.

In between her colleagues’ approaches—to exclude such students or to overlook what some consider academic weakness—Delpit finds a middle-ground and maintains a stony
pragmatism. She wants this Native American student to learn to write well according to the university’s standards and to maintain the value of her home language. In other words, she wants her to learn to code-switch.

I think Delpit’s case for code-switching would have been stronger—and more useful to those who have responded to her work, and less troubling to me as a teacher—had she included and discussed some writing samples from this student whose work polarized her department. An actual sample might tell us, for instance, which particular aspects of the student’s writing could be attributed to being Native American and which to the inferior elementary and secondary instruction that results in sub-par writing. That is, some of this student’s writing may have been influenced by a language community with different verb endings, word choices, syntax, and so on, or the student simply might have not had very good control over her writing, regardless of which language community she intended to represent.

The distinction is important to the theory of code-switching and to the pedagogical problem of language difference more generally. If the student was using codes from her home language in an academic paper, seeing her writing through the lens of identity politics might make sense—Delpit’s response might have indicated an internalized racism, as her “progressive” colleagues alleged. But perhaps the department saw the student’s writing as bad just because it was, well, bad, and then, because its writer’s ethnic origin was a known quantity, the hot politics of race occluded clear thinking about how this writer came to write in this way and what should be done about it. (What if Delpit had told her colleagues that it was a White student’s writing? Some colleagues may still have maintained that such a student should not have been admitted in the first place, but it is less likely that Delpit would have been charged with gatekeeping and harboring “repressive and disempowering forces of the power elite.”) If the perceived flaws in
the student’s writing were language uses related to her ethnicity, a code-switching approach might better help the student to manage language difference. Code-“switching” does not frame the problem correctly, however, if the perceived flaws are some form of error. In that case, the real problem with the student’s writing would not be the interference caused by the combination of a home language with a school language, but the student’s incomplete mastery of the conventions of writing.

Without a sample from this student or a writer like her, it seems that Delpit may well have conflated race and poor writing. Indeed, until recently I had not been bothered by Delpit’s omission and had accepted that the student’s perceived writing weakness must have originated in some cultural difference. The confusion of race and poor writing is due in part to the very tense politics of race in higher education, but whatever its cause, its effect is to lead Delpit—and her readers—away from any rhetorical reading of the student’s work, whether the writing is better or worse at communicating ideas, and towards a strictly racial reading, whether the student will be able to “hide” her race enough to get a job upon graduation and whether her writing would make employers think “that the university was putting out only incompetent Natives” (38). Those racial concerns are surely valid, but “codes” here are given an almost strictly-racial reading, and the elision of “Native American” and “poor” makes it difficult for teachers to engage in teaching students any new codes. What “ways of writing, dressing, and interacting” was this student allegedly missing? The particulars matter.

For when Delpit characterizes the problem as one of race and not of poor writing instruction and thus of social class, she limits the possible interventions into this student’s education by instilling doubt in teachers’ minds. If the student’s problem is strictly a racial one, meaning a problem of using racial identity markers that are not widely accepted in academic
writing, then any attempt to teach the codes better will merely be an attempt to “Whiten” the student, erase her color, stomp out expression of her home culture. If the problem is an economic one, meaning a problem of having had inadequate literacy education, the plausible intervention becomes trying to help this student make up for a substandard education. Because Delpit combines class and race in her analysis, she argues from both sides—that we should better educate poor students and students of color in the codes of power, and that in doing so we also enact hegemony.

This dilemma may be as unavoidable as Delpit claims it is, but without more careful distinctions between literacy and racial hegemony, she leaves her readers with the impression that all writing instruction is also hegemonic. That is, because Delpit does not offer a very well-defined sense of what these “codes” are, or which features of students’ language these “codes” might refer to, the way she frames the issues makes code-switching seem like the only if odious option for teachers who are pragmatic and want to see their students succeed in the world we live in: “I don’t speak of how I wish things to be,” she writes, “but of how they are” (39).

**Code-meshing what and what?**

Writing some ten years after Delpit, and with a similar use of autobiographical detail in making his arguments, Young rejects Delpit’s code-switching and advocates instead for code-meshing. But like Delpit, Young does not distinguish between racialized linguistic “codes” in writing and those that come from subpar literacy education. Without further elaboration, then, his otherwise excellent work might not be helpful to basic writing instructors.

Young’s code-meshing, born out of his experiences as someone whose language, he says, makes him at times not Black enough, not White enough, or not man enough, encourages
students to sound like themselves wherever they are, and not to focus so narrowly on the
differences between so-called dialects. One virtue of this being-onself, as Young sees it, is in the
way code-meshing avoids “redescri[ing] the tools for escaping poverty as tools for escaping
identity or as ways to protect it” (101). Young contends that as long as we continue to teach
code-switching, and to pit Black English against White English as if they are diametrically-opposite choices and as if learning White English is the ticket to escaping poverty, we will continue to create the conditions for poor Black students to fail in school. A code-meshing approach, by contrast, avoids such oppositions and encourages students to feel comfortable in their own skin in the English classroom—presumably while still learning how to improve their writing.

Code-meshing seemed to solve for me some of the trickier dilemmas of code-switching, especially the problem created by valuing a home language while at the same time trying to discourage its use. Thanks to Young, I could begin to imagine my students’ writing incorporating aspects of both a home language and a school language. And I strongly agree with some of Young’s points, especially his wise observation that Black and White English are not so very different, and that our continued preoccupation with their difference will lead us toward either “fatuous remedies” like code-switching or to a sense of helplessness in the face of an overwhelming problem (97). His theories seemed to fit my experiences as a White teacher in a predominantly Black college. I have never corrected a student’s speech, nor made correction of oral language the focus of any of my instruction; if we have lively, deep, and enjoyable classroom discussions using mixed codes, why not mix them in writing?

Again, though, an ill-defined sense of “codes” in code-meshing might leave writing faculty, especially those teaching basic writing, confused about how to guide students’ efforts
with language. Unlike Delpit, Young offers a few examples of student writing that highlight the political tensions between “Standard” and non-standard Englishes. And unlike Delpit’s student, whom she considered to be a poor writer, the student Young cites, Cam, seems to be a good writer. Young discusses Cam’s writing and racial performance throughout the chapter entitled “Your Average Nigga,” after a phrase from one of Cam’s early papers. While Young wonders how Cam’s future teachers will react to his writing, and what retrospective judgments they may make of Young as Cam’s writing teacher, the other students in the class seem to recognize quality work when they see it: “Hands down, all the students thought Cam’s papers were the best” (102).

My teaching experience, too, tells me that Cam’s writing looks really good and is an excellent example of literate control over language:

When I come to school, I see a whole generation of scholars getting ready to take on the new challenges of the world. Then I come home and I know there are no scholars here. The only scholars in the streets are dead. The only thing you are taught in the streets is pain, how to give it, how to take it, and, if you’re lucky, how to avoid it. Since the only thing you really learn on the streets is pain, it is safe to assume the last test of the streets would be cheating death. If you win, you live to try again, if you lose, you die. (100)

Assuming that Young did not alter the original punctuation, this passage shows that Cam has good mastery of writing in standard forms. Many first-year composition students, for instance, do not use commas to set off phrases like “if you’re lucky.” Beyond just being correct, Cam also seems to have an excellent sense of comparison, of hyperbole, of logic (or at least of phrases associated with logic, as in “Since… it is safe to assume…”). Elsewhere in the samples Young
cites, Cam does use some “Black” turns of phrase, as in the phrase that titles the chapter and book. Overall, Cam seems to be able to communicate well according to typical college writing standards. Young imagines that in the future Cam will face a rather narrow-minded audience, but without specifics about what that audience might find lacking in Cam’s writing, we can only presume that the bias would be against a handful of racial language markers.

Is code-meshing, then, merely a plea to give students license to use a few non-standard turns of phrase, like “playa-hate,” in the midst of an otherwise “academic” paper? If so, it seems to me that by most standards, such a move is already OK with most writing instructors and for most readers, a matter of giving a personalized “voice” to enliven prose, and not so different from any use of informal phrases in an ostensibly formal paper; this is about as far as Young goes with his own prose throughout *Your Average Nigga*.

Taken to more of an extreme, “code-meshing” could offer license to use with some frequency non-standard grammatical constructions. Young does not discuss the extent of code-meshing license or exhibit much of it in his own prose, but there is precedent in scholarly writing for a more thorough-going use of, for instance, AAVE language features, as in these first lines of Kermit Campbell’s *Gettin’ Our Groove On*:

> In the heat of the national Ebonics debate back in ’96 and ’97, seem like every black person (and quite a few overzealous white folks, too!) with a mainstream rep, a microphone, and editorial space claimed the right to speak on Ebonics and the proposal by the Oakland Unified School District… to incorporate Ebonics into their English-language curriculum. And the mainstream press loved it—ate it up, in fact, cuz for one rare moment some of the staunchest conservatives and the most bleeding-heart liberals were lockstep in condemnation of both. (1)
This passage is one example of what code-meshing could be: a lively and thorough blending of surface language markers that indicates control and voice, and that makes its ideas intelligible by providing context. Campbell uses some AAVE-inflected phrases (“seem like,” “cuz”) yet it is difficult to imagine a reader doubting his command of language or questioning his choice of tone. A traditional evaluator of college prose might call his choices “distracting,” or even treat them as errors, though perhaps some leeway would be granted given the subject matter. It would help a traditionally-minded reader, of course, that he is discussing the Ebonics controversy and that the chapter is titled “Who You Callin’ ‘Igno’? In Defense of the Black Vernacular Voice”—his audience may already expect something other than standard academic prose.

I would argue, and I think that many readers would agree, that Campbell’s prose is both masterful and fun to read, and that it is a sense that the writer is in control that makes a major difference for a reader. That is, Campbell is definitely, obviously not trying to sound “formal”—he uses an exclamation point early on to indicate a kind of playful bombast—and so he shapes his readers’ expectations from the very beginning of the article. He also uses punctuation correctly to help his voice come across on the page—the dash; and in other places, like the chapter title, an apostrophe to indicate a dropped “g” from an –ing verb form. Plus, from the very beginning, he refers to a memorable national debate and makes subtle points about it, showing the reader that this writer is someone who pays attention to things and has keen insights into complex situations. So right away, Campbell both uses an “authentic” AAVE voice and some “traditional” rhetorical moves that establish his legitimacy. Maybe it is his confidence, maybe it is his subject matter; whatever it is, it seems to work and it seems to be meshing codes.

Campbell’s successful blending of codes seems to say to Delpit that code-switching presents a false choice, and that what Young hints at can come true: it is possible to use AAVE
and be academic at the same time. Students learning how to write need not feel as if they face a Black or White choice, or as if it is impossible to write in both an “authentic” and an academic voice. It seems that Campbell writes in the spirit of Young’s code-meshing, but his example helps to advance the concept with some specificity.

First, Campbell’s prose is correct and exhibits control, and this correctness has something to do with the system of signs and symbols of literacy that helps readers and writers understand what is on the page and to “hear” the voice and its intended subtlety. In other words, Campbell’s writing is predictable and not error-filled, a distinction that will help writing teachers guide students as they code-mesh. For code-meshing to be successful and intelligible, a writer must have some control over correctness and be able to avoid unpredictable errors, what Canagarajah calls “unintended deviations from the norm,” whether that norm is AAVE or WEV or something else (277).

Second, both Campbell and Cam seem to have a strong sense of what context is needed to make their ideas make sense to readers—that is, they use elaborated codes even as they write in AAVE. Elaborated codes help these writers anticipate a reader’s objections and provide background information as it is called for, so that the reader experiences the prose as effective and begins to engage with their ideas, rather than missing or misunderstanding their points. The subtle providence can best be described as a semantic habit.

In this sense the most important “code” that Campbell and Cam use is not the kind commonly referred to in discussions of code-switching and -meshing, but the sort of code that Bernstein refers to in elaborated and restricted codes, semantic habits formed by the different life experiences of social classes. This elaborated code often must be developed with special focus among writers who are new to academia or who are among the first in their families to attend
college. It is not a code that lines up with racialized language communities, though it is a code that, like Delpit’s “codes of power,” can begin to explain why students from some communities seem to do better in school.

For code-meshing to be successful, writers will need to develop strategies of preemptive contextualization so that a reader unfamiliar with an expression or turn of phrase will follow the meaning clearly. In part this will mean providing what Reading instructors have long called “context clues,” details surrounding an unfamiliar term that can help a reader understand its meaning without turning to an external source. In many cases, as I showed in the examples in chapters two and three, referring directly to the situation one writes in can help to link an idea to its intellectual context.

Context clues may not always be necessary for some code-meshing to be intelligible. In “The Place of World Englishes in Composition,” Canagarajah discusses at some length a CCC article in which Smitherman code-meshes. He notes that in most occasions of AAVE in her article, “Smitherman doesn’t use quotation marks to flag them as distinct or strange,” for doing so “would have distanced the author from the language” and invoked “the traditional biases” against non-standard Engli
holes (604). Also, because “some elements of AAVE have become mainstreamed,” Smitherman does not need to offer additional information to help her readers understand her sentences (604). According to Canagarajah, the only place that Smitherman glosses a term from AAVE is “to introduce an item that is recent and probably an in-group expression among a subcultural group—black teenagers”: “In the 1998 celebration of African American History Month, a television commercial for Mickey D’s (Ebonics for McDonald’s) featured a White father and his young son browsing through a gallery with paintings of African American heroes and she-roses” (607). Canagarajah thinks that Smitherman glosses this name
because “the nickname is perhaps new to the older generation of AAVE speakers” (607). In other words, it seems that Smitherman rightly assumes that most of her uses of AAVE will be perfectly intelligible to her readers and that it is only in the rare case, when a term may be too new to be in widespread use, that she offers any kind of self-conscious aid to the reader. It is unnecessary and even counter-productive to put quotation marks around or to footnote each use of AAVE, but we might learn from Smitherman that, on occasions where an audience is unlikely to be able to figure out the meaning of a term on their own, a gloss strategy can help. Indeed, a gloss strategy indicates an elaborated orientation towards meaning—not taking an audience’s understanding for granted.

It is worth reemphasizing that restricted codes are not the same as AAVE, and that elaborated codes are not the same as WEV. Supplemented by Bernstein’s elaborated codes, code-meshing can help basic writing faculty address important questions about language difference. We can begin to picture in more detail the promises of code-meshing, and we can develop a stronger sense of what we can teach our students that will both help them in life and help them feel more comfortable in their own skin.
No study of basic writing would be complete without mention of Mike Rose and his excellent work *Lives on the Boundary*, a widely-read text that puts human faces on literacy policies in higher education. Everyone, it seems, loves and respects Mike Rose, and rightly so, yet his claims about literacy may be more controversial than many realize. For instance, he argues that “[t]o understand the nature and development of literacy we need to consider the social context in which it occurs—the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage or inhibit it” (237). To many, this call supports a pedagogy of radical questioning, in which students are introduced to any and every “standard” or “convention” with a forceful accompanying program of questions, as when Bruce Horner suggests that writing teachers “have students investigate the acceptability of [any] set of notations, by whom, under what conditions, when written by whom in what sort of text” (“Students’” 754). Since literacy is culturally contingent, as Rose claims that it is, composition scholars like Horner believe that it is politically and pedagogically best to foreground that contingency relentlessly and to remind students at every turn of the complex relationships between literacy and social structures.

Others see in Rose’s work a call for faculty to consider the social contexts of literacy to help students learn the standards and conventions they will need in college and the workplace. This view is more like that of Rose himself, who discusses individual students with insightful empathy even as he describes the ways in which they struggle to learn how to read and write according to the university’s standards. The problem, for Rose, is not always literacy standards or conventions themselves but the sometimes unimaginative ways faculty approach students who have trouble reading and writing in college. Rose interprets basic writers’ errors and limitations as part of poverty’s “own damaged script, scars manifest in the spelling of a word,” a view
which, like Bernstein’s code theory, takes serious account of how language and literacy develop socially while still looking for ways to help students improve their basic skills (214). Bernstein’s code theory can help teachers to uncover their nascent middle-class biases and also to resist class inequalities by teaching more effectively the elaborated codes.

Debates about teaching for “social justice” in higher education reflect these divergent responses to Mike Rose’s call to contextualize literacy. Teaching for social justice means fighting hegemony and liberating students from oppression and poverty, and it certainly sounds good. Who could oppose “justice”? Likewise, who could possibly openly advocate for the opposite, “social injustice”? The difficulty begins with the details. For some, pursuing social justice might involve teaching traditional numeracy and literacy and thereby providing the rudiments of employability and citizenship. For others, influenced by radical educators like Paulo Freire or William Ayers, education only promotes social justice when it is conducted using highly progressive, democratic methods. To the more traditional educators, the democratic classroom invoked by these other social justice pedagogues can sound dangerously like teachers abdicating the responsibility to teach students anything new or useful. To social justice pedagogs, traditional educational goals and practices sound like they reinforce structural racism, classism, and a pernicious status quo for marginalized students. The hot rhetoric surrounding education for the poor in the U.S. makes it seem like, either way, a great deal is at stake for the students and their future happiness. It is not surprising, then, that because social justice motivates many English educators and figures as a reason many consider becoming teachers, these conflicting claims can lead to confusion if not disillusionment for new teachers and their students.
One way to reframe these arguments about social justice is to question the value of education as a tool for making a more just society. Rather than debating whether this or that pedagogy will help poor students most, it is worth stepping back to ask whether education is the best tool our society has to help poor people. Staking out a position that has been taken up by many on the left over the past forty years, Louis Althusser claimed that education reproduces the inequalities of the class system, and he left no hope for schools to do otherwise. English professor John Marsh joins in this tradition of educational critique in his 2011 book *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way out of Inequality*, in which he argues for “a new modesty regarding education, to stop believing that it is a magic potion for the poor or for anyone else” (22). Dismissing the claim that education is the poor’s best pathway to social equality, Marsh holds that the best ways to end poverty are to create more better-paying jobs for low-skilled labor and to modify public policies to make it easier to form and join labor unions. I do not disagree with Marsh’s economic suggestions; unions really do help maintain fair wages and create stability for workers, and it is only logical that more opportunities for decently remunerative work would help the most vulnerable in our society.

Yet Marsh does not seem to account for the benefits that I see in my own community college students’ pursuit of higher education. These benefits are partially economic—every year Prairie State graduates a cadre of nurses and others who immediately go on to well-paying and meaningful jobs, earning paychecks that lift them out of poverty and provide security for their families. Marsh would point out that, while these economic success stories are a good thing for those students and their families, more unionized low-skilled jobs are still necessary to address America’s ongoing poverty and employment problems, and many students drop out as they try to advance their labor skills through higher education. And Marsh is correct, but as long as there are
more openings for nurses than there are people with nursing degrees, and as long as people see nursing as a meaningful vocation, we should try to expand access to nursing programs. In place of “nurses,” substitute mechanics, welders, social workers, or childcare workers, and the imperative is the same. As Rose puts it, such students who aim for modest economic goals “remind you of how fundamentally important it is—not just to your pocket but to your soul as well—to earn a decent wage, to have a steady job, to be just a little bit in control of your economic life” (215).

And there are educational benefits besides a steady paycheck: so many of my students find themselves enjoying school for the first time in their lives, thrilled by the challenges of intellectual pursuits and by the self-respect of becoming a successful college student. Even for those who take their general education English courses as requirements for an applied degree, college writing classrooms can offer a worthwhile and uplifting experience. There are very few occasions for adults in our society to exchange ideas and argue with fellow citizens, pursue knowledge, learn new skills, or, as Rose adds, “to feel their minds working, to remedy a poor education, to redefine who they are” (“Remediation”). Indeed, one of the most exciting aspects of teaching in a community college is the joie d’étudier that students often discover, especially those older than about twenty-five. Their joy may not immediately change their economic situation nor ensure that they complete their degree program, but when students experience it, their time in higher education cannot have been wasted.

Assuming that there might be some modest ways in which higher education can promote students’ overall well-being, another way to reframe the social justice argument about education is to reevaluate the ways in which the core contents of learning support economic justice. The time is right to re-examine these issues, especially to reconsider skills from a social justice
teaching perspective, for some who argue for social justice pedagogies seem to have lost sight of such basic educational goals as literacy skills.

I became sharply aware of the underrepresentation of “skills” in social justice conceptions of teaching at a 2009 meeting of the Social Justice Committee of the Council on English Education (CEE), a sub-group of a sub-group of the National Council of Teachers of English. At this CEE meeting, I found myself surrounded by well-meaning activist educators, college and university faculty members charged with training high school English teachers. “Skills” did not seem to have a place in the social justice vision of this group; they hoped to promote social justice through creating inclusive curriculum that would highlight the experiences of marginalized groups, and presumably help all students become more sensitive to and tolerant of difference in all its forms. While I support inclusive curriculum and teaching students to be more empathetic and understanding, every time I raised questions about the social justice cause of helping students learn to write well, the conversation died. Another teacher in attendance, who was the only other faculty member from a two-year college, shared that he, too, felt that the question of skills deserved more attention as a social justice topic. I sense that the lack of interest in the “skills” conversation had to do with both opposing “standards” for political reasons and being accustomed to teaching middle- or upper-middle class students who have already acquired basic literacy skills. This CEE group may have thought either that “skills” were aspects of hegemony or that their students did not need skills instruction—in either case, I felt that the group did not understand students like mine or what they want from their education.

Students like mine—community college students pursuing a variety of career pathways—must learn to use elaborated codes if their education is to be socially just and help them cross over class boundaries. Bernstein takes up the neo-Marxist interest in how schools reproduce the
class system and offers a leftist critique of educational systems, but he does not share Althusser’s fatalism. Instead, he hopes that the system can reform to work more for the interests of working-class students: “It is an accepted educational principle that we should work with what the child can offer: why don’t we practise it? The introduction of the child to the universalistic meanings of public forms of thought...is education. It is in itself not making children middle class. The implicit values underlying the form and contents of the educational environment might” (Class v. 1, 199, emphasis in original). Through research and criticism like Bernstein’s, we can examine these implicit values to make school a happier and more productive environment for working-class children.

In the latter chapters of Ways with Words, Shirley Brice Heath documents what happens when middle-class teachers improve communication with working-class students. In a fifth-grade science classroom, for instance, teachers modified the traditional curriculum so that the students became “ethnographers of a sort” and “had improved in their knowledge of science” by acquiring a working knowledge of the scientific method (320). The students found a joy of scholarship but did so in ways that helped them according to traditional learning standards: “Of the twenty-three boys in the class, none failed the [standard unit] test [of the textbook]. Their cumulative folders indicated that none of these boys had ever passed a standardized unit science test in his school career” (320). Heath’s interventionist research shows that we need not oppose humane learning conditions for working-class students with learning traditional educational skills.

Nor should we conceive of “skills” only in terms of standardized measures of learning. It is also helpful to remember that skills have a place for even the most radical of progressive educators, like Freire. He embraces literacy wholeheartedly—it is freeing and powerful to master
reading and writing. It is, in my view, but a short leap from embracing literacy to embracing also elaborated codes. Elaborated codes, after all, are a feature of literacy and language that accesses power and aids in the development of even some cherished goals of social justice pedagogy, for instance, in Freire’s conscientization, or an increasing awareness of the social and of one’s roles in it. In his reply to John Rouse’s leftist critique of the politics of composition, Gerald Graff discusses the potential social benefits of elaborated codes: “Analysis and detachment [features of elaborated codes] may of course serve inhuman ends. But then they are among the few weapons we have for becoming critically aware of these inhuman ends and fighting against them” (124). For elaborated codes depend on an awareness of the social that includes recognition of one’s power relationships with others and of cultural constructs, of shared assumptions and special differences. To give poor students greater control over their own code production, both grammatical and semantic, is thus to distribute to them a form of power.

Bernstein’s code theories are assets for today’s basic writing teachers, a way of looking at the types of language students bring to school and identifying how to build on students’ existing strengths. According to Bernstein, elaborated codes are not solely the property or product of the middle class; rather, far from being just a form of inherited cultural capital, they are habits of language that are suited to making oneself understood by a variety of people. In this sense, elaborated codes are not merely interchangeable with restricted codes—some habits of language really do help to increase one’s success in communicating with diverse audiences. Yet in the debate about literacy skills, fear of being classist or racist makes faculty members reticent to talk about language as Bernstein does, or to describe themselves as authorities on language and communication, or to suggest that students need to change their language habits. This reticence,
even embarrassment or shame, causes teachers to ignore a powerful component of literacy in a multicultural age.

From my students’ perspective, elaborated codes name some of what they seek from their education: the ability to examine a topic or issue from multiple angles; to make clear their organizing categories; to have, as Bernstein says, “access to the principles of their own discourse” (Class v. 4, 75). In this sense, “elaboration” supports the ideals of social justice pedagogues and others who see literacy as a technology of power. Bernstein’s work can help clarify the class origins of these codes, but that does not mean we should reject elaborated codes as part of a classist project. Elaborated codes are a technology that aids communication, and it makes as much sense to reject them as hegemonic as it would to reject technologies like calculus or the light bulb. Elaborated codes may have developed among the middle class, but they can be used for the benefit of the poor and working class.

Marsh may be correct: to promote economically redistributive social justice, the most expedient policy changes might really be those that create more low-skilled, highly-paid jobs. Yet it will not hurt to promote equality of access to higher education, as long as we do not pretend that equality of access is the only and magical solution to our social and economic woes. For instance, the success of the current push to increase college graduation rates in the U.S. will depend in large part on whether we can help many working-class students to transition successfully to the life of the university, part of which means learning the elaborated code. Open access and these students’ life opportunities depend greatly on political will: do colleges and public higher education systems adequately understand the importance of basic skills courses and support expending the resources they require? As recently as August 2010, Chicago Mayor
Richard M. Daley decried what seemed to him the large public expense of remedial education in the City Colleges of Chicago, and he threatened to end open access and deny many students—actually, the majority of the students currently in the City Colleges system—access to a college education. Business leaders often argue to the same effect: since the public provides an opportunity to learn basic skills in the high school, colleges should not offer remedial tracks. If students cannot meet the college’s expectations, tough. They should have paid more attention in high school. Even if Marsh is right about policy priorities, why not fight such atavistic thinking wherever we find it?

There are many studies of basic writing that give basic skills faculty and advocates resources for understanding and supporting basic skills programs. Warm, personal accounts of the importance of basic skills programs, like Rose’s Lives on the Boundary, are one kind of effective argument. I have offered here another kind, by arguing within and against dominant ways of approaching English education. As such, this dissertation is a resource for basic writing faculty trying to understand the political implications of their practice—especially the ways in which elaborated codes can help students advance their careers—and for policy makers trying to understand the place of basic skills in higher education.

In this contribution to the field of basic skills theory and pedagogy, I bring new or under-discussed outside voices to the attention of veteran faculty and researchers, re-frame the discipline’s debates for newcomers, and defend what is, after all, the only open door to higher education for so many in our country.
CITED LITERATURE


Allen, Michael. “Writing Away from Fear: Mina Shaughnessy and the Uses of Authority.” *Bruch and Marback* 127-140.


Hawkins, P.R. “Social class, the nominal group and reference.” Bernstein ed. 81-92.
Inoue, Asao B. “Structuring Code-Meshing into Educational Policy.” Young and Martinez 95-98.
Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular. Philadelphia:

“The Logic of Non-Standard English.” The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the

Print.


Lippi-Green, Rosina. English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the

“Foreword.” Young and Martinez xi-xv.

Lu, Min-Zhan. “Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone.” College


Lu, Min-Zhan, and Bruce Horner. “The Logic of Listening to Global Englishes.” Young and Martinez 99-114.


Nembhard, Judith P. “A Perspective on Teaching Black Dialect Speaking Students to Write Standard English.” Bruch and Marback 141-148.


Stanford, Nichole E. “Publishing in the Contact Zone.” Young and Martinez 115-142.


CURRICULUM VITA

Jason C. Evans

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS
Prairie State College, Chicago Heights, IL
   Associate Professor of Developmental English and Writing, 2006-Present
   Department Chair, English, 2007-2011
   Department Co-Chair, English, 2006-2007
   Assistant Professor of Developmental English and Writing, 2003-2005

University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
   Visiting Associate Professor, Master of Arts Program in Humanities, 2009-Present
   Visiting Assistant Professor, Master of Arts Program in Humanities, 2008
   Visiting Lecturer, Master of Arts Program in Humanities, 2006

Clark State Community College, Springfield, OH
   Adjunct Professor, Developmental Writing, 2002

PUBLICATIONS
“The Trouble with the Translingual Approach.” College English (forthcoming).

EDUCATION
University of Illinois at Chicago
   Ph.D., 2012
   Dissertation: Other People’s Students: Elaborated Codes and Dialect in Basic Writing

University of Chicago
   M.A., 2002
   Thesis: Hoping, Doubting Faith: The Ethics of Form and Content in E.L. Doctorow’s City of God

Milligan College
   B.A. in English and Humanities, magna cum laude, 2001

REFEREED CONFERENCE PAPERS
“Digital Coaching for Measurable Outcomes in Basic Writing”
   Conference on College Composition and Communication, St. Louis, MO, April 2012

“The Role for Ambiguity in the Basic Skills Writing Classroom”
   National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago, IL, November 2011
REFEREED CONFERENCE PAPERS (continued)
“Our Conflicted Bourgeois Values: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Capitalism”
Conference on College Composition and Communication, Atlanta, GA, April 2011

“Structuring the Color Line through Composition”
Allerton Articulation Conference, Monticello, IL, April 2009

“We Shall Then Kill Socrates, Again” (co-presentation)
Community College Assessment Fair, Waubonsee Community College, IL, March 2008

“Ken Bain’s What the Best College Teachers Do for Developmental Educators” (co-presentation)
League for Innovation in the Community College, New Orleans, LA, March 2007

“Dignity and Discourse in the Developmental Writing Classroom”
Association for Core Texts and Courses, Chicago, IL, April 2006

“Reading, Writing, and Socialization, or Hello, Life of the Mind” (co-presentation)
Learning Communities and Collaboration Conference, Chicago, IL, November 2005

INVITED PRESENTATIONS
“Adjuncting and Teaching in Community Colleges”
GradUCon Graduate Student Development Conference, University of Chicago, January 2012

“Writing a Scholarship Application Essay”
Hispanic Heritage Month, Prairie State College, October 2011

“Teaching in the Community College”
Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Chicago, September 2011

“Teaching Grammar in an Age of Progressive Pedagogy”
Mile 8 Conference, University of Illinois at Chicago, October 2010

Respondent to Douglas Hesse’s lecture “Scholars or Citizens, Workers or Poets?”
Distinguished Lecture Series, Governors State University, IL, November 2007

“Dysfunction Junction,” “Welcoming Students to the Academic Community” (co-presentations)
Roundtable Workshops, Prairie State College, Fall 2006-Spring 2007

“Evaluating the New English 099” (co-facilitation)
October Tune-Ups, Prairie State College, October 2005

Assorted poems
Nine Writers Reading, University of Chicago MA Program in the Humanities, May 2005
INVITED PRESENTATIONS (continued)
“Applying Writing Theories” (co-presentation)
    Summer Institute, Prairie State College, May 2005

“The New English 099: Title III Changes” (co-presentation)
    March Workshops, Prairie State College, March 2005

“Learning Communities and Writing” (co-presentation)
    Prairie State College Spring Faculty Convocation, Prairie State College, January 2005

“Writing and Democracy, or Why Do I Have to Take This Class?”
    Mornings with the Professors Series, Prairie State College, November 2003

“Romeo Bengal and Hindi Juliet: An Indian Reads Shakespeare”
    Blue Ridge Undergraduate Research Conference, Lee University, TN, Spring 1999

PROFESSIONAL and COLLEGE SERVICE
Illinois Board of Higher Education Faculty Advisory Council, 2010-Present
Illinois P-20 Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness Council, Steering Committee, 2012-Present

Organized panels for the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2011-2012

Prairie State College
    Chair, Faculty Search Committee for full-time ESL faculty position
    Chair, Faculty Search Committee for full-time English faculty position
    Peer Member, Faculty Tenure Committees
    Curriculum Specialist for federal Title III grant, 2004-2006
    Faculty Advisor to All Latin Alliance, 2004-2006
    Vice-President of American Federation of Teachers Local 3816, 2006-2008
        Member of Faculty Federation negotiation team for 2006-2009 Contract

CONSULTING
Global Skills for College Completion
    Faculty Coach, 2012-Present
    Design Associate, 2010-2011

Beecher High School English Department
    Curriculum Development and Assessment, 2010
PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS
Council on Basic Writing
Community College Humanities Association
National Council of Teachers of English

AWARDS
Sabbatical Leave, Prairie State College, 2012
Tenure, Prairie State College, 2005
Academic Merit Scholarship, University of Chicago, 2001-2002
Hopwood Merit Scholarship, Milligan College, 1997-2001
Ivor Jones Outstanding Senior Award, Milligan College, 2001
Greek Award, Milligan College, 2000

COURSES TAUGHT
Clark State Community College
  Developmental 071 – Fundamental English

Prairie State College
  English 097 – Fundamental English I
  English 098 – Fundamental English II
  English 099 – Fundamental English III
  Reading 099 – Fundamental Reading III
  English 101 – Composition I
  English 102 – Composition II
  English 243 – Non-Western Literature (new course)
  English 252 – Introduction to Drama
  English 262 – Western/World Literature II
  Theatre 101 – Introduction to Theatre

University of Chicago
  MAPH 476 – Teaching in the Community College

TEACHING INTERESTS
Basic writing, composition and rhetoric, community college pedagogy, theories of cultural capital