

Compositional Collaboration: The Benefits of Integrating African American Vernacular English
into Rhetoric and Composition Education

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Contemporary discourse surrounding the intersectional endeavors of education emphasizes the absolute necessity of inclusivity within the classroom. Yet several hegemonic structures maintain the exclusivity of academic success—an enterprise realized only by the most privileged pupils in America. Educators—particularly those within secondary and higher educational institutions—have introduced niche courses such as African American studies, Gender and Women Studies, Disability Studies, etc. in which students can explore marginalized communities and learn to critique the power structures that continue to oppress them. These concentrated areas of study aim to reveal hegemonic, oppressive structures, but paradoxically utilize the tools of white supremacy that seek to silence subaltern voices. The dialect in which students must write and speak within the classroom, for example, ostracizes students who do not identify with this specific stylistic approach. Standard American English exists as the arbitrarily assigned norm within classrooms nationwide, yet the study of linguistics fundamentally emphasizes the fluidity of language—both written and spoken. Thus, educational inclusivity translates to observing and encouraging diverse dialects within the classroom. This essay argues that educators must balance between (1) preparing their students for professional and higher educational endeavors by teaching them the academic genre of Standard American English; and (2) fostering an inclusive environment in which diverse voices can comfortably thrive by seeking those voices and the dialects in which they communicate.

Years of scholarship observe the productive nature of multicultural classrooms and support the integration of diverse vernaculars within those classrooms. Several scholars, in fact,

suggest that students of all backgrounds gain a superior education when educators introduce diverse narratives and dialects into their curricula. Generally, the consensus insists that both educators and pupils “benefit enormously from understanding how dialects operate and from incorporating vernacular literature into their curricula” (Ahmad and Nero 69). This is, of course, in direct conflict with standard language ideology, which Vershawn Ashanti Young defines as the “belief that there is one set of dominant language rules that stem from a single dominant discourse (like standard English) that all writers and speakers of English must conform to in order to communicate effectively. Dominant language ideology also say peeps can speak whateva the heck way the want to—BUT AT HOME” (Young 111)! Yet approaching the topic of diverse dialects must be handled in a non-patronizing and constructive manner. In their 2012 essay “Productive Paradoxes: Vernacular Use in Teaching of Composition and Literature,” Dohra Ahmad and Shondel J. Nero preface their research with the consideration of semantics and the difficulty of “choosing and defining a word or phrase common to both of our disciplines that characterizes the native, unrehearsed language of diverse groups of people” (Ahmad and Nero 70). In their essay, they considered the terms “dialect,” “nonstandard,” and “vernacular” (70).

The term “dialect,” according to Ahmad and Nero, is problematic due to its connotation of stereotypes and “caricature,” thus not allowing them to handle the topic with political and cultural awareness (70). The term “nonstandard,” on the other hand, displaces these vernaculars as an obvious and inferior other to the preferable norm, thus not allowing the scholars to speak in language that demonstrates and challenges hegemonic awareness. The final term “vernacular” prevails as the most appropriate choice, as it “captures the richness and diversity of native language used within and beyond the classroom, so that we may show how its use in literature

can serve as an effective tool for engaging and learning about the dynamic, organic nature of *all* human language” (71). Here, Ahmad and Nero implement a unique approach to considering the power of racialized language, thus constructing a foundation of their work that underscores the profound subconscious effect language has on its audience.

Ahmad and Nero further observe the four myths about vernacular forms that dictate attitudes toward language and educational practices: “(1) They are deformed versions of the standard; (2) They have no grammar or are structurally haphazard; (3) They are responsible for the putative decline of the standard variety; and (4) They are spoken only by less educated or lower class people” (72). Regardless of the chronic nature of these myths, they are just that—myths. Ahmad and Nero remind us that linguistics establishes vernacular forms as language varieties that are “complete with phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules, variations, and discourse norms” (72). Further, linguistics assures us that no language variation intrinsically surpasses another, thus demonstrating the arbitrary nature of elitist attitudes regarding Standard American English. These myths prove to be set in place by hegemonic structures and the racial tension ingrained in United States history. Ahmad and Nero ultimately challenge standard language ideology and suggest that the benefits of incorporating vernacular literature in the classroom include “an understanding of the dynamic nature of language; engagement with content and form; and appreciation of the vivid, imaginative language that verbal expression allows” (74). Because standard language ideology is largely enacted through schooling, education reform is absolutely necessary in eradicating these myths. Further, these scholars point to the blaringly obvious argument that is brilliant in its own simplicity: “What we think of as standard was once nonstandard; it gradually becomes institutionalized, precisely through its publication” (77). Because nonstandard becomes standard through institutionalization and

publication, it is equally important to seek subaltern voices in their authentic vernaculars and give them a platform on which to speak. This task begins in the classroom, and is therefore the task of educators.

In conversation with Ahmad and Nero's work, Jang Ho Lee also aims to dispel myths about monolingual hegemony. Lee eloquently reminds us that monolingualism quite literally silences students who speak in diverse dialects. Monolingual classrooms that privilege Standard American English over other vernaculars encourage educators to incorporate the maximum amount of target language use, suggesting that "more exposure to a target language will lead to a better learning outcome" (Lee 139). In these circumstances, the students' home languages are mentioned only "when advice is given on how to minimise [*sic*] its use" (140). This perpetuates the myth that assumes these students will "naturally pick up" the language, just as they did "their mother tongues" (140). In both instances, the students' needs are entirely disregarded and their cultural importance and validity subsequently diminishes. This, of course, contradicts almost every pedagogical method of effective teaching. In fact, Douglas Fisher and Diane Lapp speak directly to this when they say students "are failing not because of their lack of knowledge but because, for some, English is not their first language and they have not yet become proficient with it" (Fisher and Lapp, 634).

In their 2013 essay "Learning to Talk Like the Test: Guiding Speakers of African American Vernacular English," Fisher and Lapp identify multicultural student failure in light of the students' comprehension—or lack thereof—of Standard American English. Yet unlike Lee, Fisher and Lapp affirm monolingual hegemony by insisting students adopt Standard American English as the governing language choice. Although they acknowledge "that not passing the state high school exit exam is just the first step in having doors of opportunity shut to"

marginalized students, Fisher and Lapp fall prey to the exact standard language ideology Ahmad and Nero and Lee critique (637). It is worth noting, however, that Fisher and Lapp make astute observations regarding multicultural experiences within the classroom—particularly experiences of isolation and alienation. One student, they explain,

[...] often felt unable to talk to the principal because he wasn't sure how to say what he was thinking. Kenneth agreed, adding that the principal might think he is too stupid to answer. James quickly noted that when the police routinely stop him because of where he lives, and he isn't sure how to answer their questions, they often think he is being disrespectful. Robert added that sometimes when this happens to him, the police talk so fast and use language he hasn't even heard, which makes understanding and responding almost impossible. (639)

Fisher and Lapp underscore the language barrier these students face both within and outside of educational environments, thus emphasizing the importance of teaching them Standard American English. In a moment of inclusivity, however, these scholars agree in their conclusion that “another step will likely involve teachers integrating language variations into their modeling” (646). But this step toward inclusivity cannot just be one of the future; instead, educators must avoid the fallacy and assumption that diversity is a long-term progression of forthcoming scholarship and integrate diverse language variations into their modeling.

Intersectionality functions as an obvious pillar in fostering inclusivity in educational institutions. In order for educators to acquire a linguistic appreciation of diverse vernaculars, they must first acknowledge and understand the possible intersectionalities of themselves and their students. In their 2011 essay “Intersectionality and Student Outcomes: Sharpening the Struggle against Racism, Sexism, Classism, Ableism, Heterosexism, Nationalism, and Linguistic, Religious, and Geographical Discrimination in Teaching and Learning,” Carl A Grant and Elisabeth Zwiwer argue, “identity axes interact to produce oppression and privilege in schools, so intersectional analyses and practices should be part of our toolbox for increasing student

achievement” (Grant and Zwier 182). Thus, their primary argument of their research advocates for teacher education that centers students, families, and communities in order to aid future and novice educators in developing critical consciousness. Here, Grant and Zwier make a compelling argument regarding establishing inclusivity in the classroom. Rather than focusing on the classrooms and curricula themselves, Grant and Zweir urge the educators *of educators* to consider how they can improve their syllabi. Preservice teacher education, according to them, has the power to “challenge teachers’ ideologies that have negative effects on diverse students, such as individualism, meritocracy, colorblindness, and White privilege” (184). Just as educators have profound power in influencing their pupils, educators of preservice educators also shape impressionable and (assumably) open minds.

Although many scholars agree that classroom inclusivity is paramount in supporting marginalized pupils, how to achieve that inclusivity is allusive within the discourse. Grant and Zweir prove most unique in their consideration of sculpting more culturally sensitive educators. Because their research focuses on how novice and preservice educators learn, they divorce themselves just slightly from the majority of scholarship regarding classroom inclusivity. Grant and Zweir largely encourage “enacting culturally responsive pedagogy,” which “begins with eliciting and responding to the pedagogies that students consider culturally responsive” (185-6). They institute seven components of pedagogy that cultivates this cultural responsiveness: (1) Lenses; (2) Knowledge; (3) Experience; (4) Challenging, relevant content; (5) Modes of expression; (6) Differentiation; and (7) Critical consciousness and engagement. Each component encourages educators to habitually consider the intersectionalities of marginalized individualities that may exist or come to exist within their classrooms.

Grant and Zweir's components of pedagogy each contribute to helping educators construct a more inclusive, intersectionally sensitive curriculum. "Lenses," according to their blueprint, "requires teachers to develop an asset-based view of students and their families. Such an educational approach views students as resources," and "focuses on their lived experiences" (186). An equally important pillar, "Knowledge" asks educators to remain aware of the history and culture of their students, so they may remain in touch with "relevant technological and socio-political knowledge" (186). Educators are also challenged to acknowledge the experiences of their students' communities so as to facilitate unlikely connections, thus representing the "Experience" component. Curriculum should also have "Challenging, relevant content," which increases student engagement, participation, and achievement while also furthering the educator's understanding of intersectional identities. Additionally, Grant and Zweir encourage diversity in "Modes of expression," as "several studies report students value pedagogies that incorporate multiple modes of expression including: music, e.g. writing raps about social justice issues; code-switching between standard English and vernacular; and educators' stories about their life experiences" (186). The pillar of "Differentiation" encourages educators to consider the multiplicities of learning styles, while "Critical consciousness and engagement" asks educators to help students critique "the social injustices that constrain the students' educational journeys" (186). In order to cease the perpetuating stereotypes and eliminate the patterns of privilege and oppression in educational institutions, Grant and Zweir insist that educators of preservice educators map the blueprint to a more inclusive, intersectionally aware classrooms. These seven components point only to the blaringly obvious: Standard American English cannot exist as the sole mode of communication, instruction, and narration within these classrooms.

If not for any other reason, African American Vernacular English must exist within classrooms in order to validate the experiences of the students who speak in these dialects. As Valerie Kinloch notes in her 2010 essay, “To Not Be a Traitor of Black English: Youth Perceptions of Language Rights in an Urban Context,” many students of color report feeling “alienate[d]” within their classrooms due to their linguistically positioned otherness (Kinloch 111). Through a fascinating dialogue between two students of color, Kinloch demonstrates the double-consciousness students of color encounter within American classrooms. In fact, her particular students continuously return to the feeling of betraying—or “be[ing] a traitor” to—their communities of color when they adopt the hegemonic stance on Standard American English (125). African American Vernacular English exists as a significant survival tool that people of color utilize in a movement of solidarity. Because of, as Kinloch articulates, the “history, usage, and structures of Black English and the social conditions under which slaves created ways to communicate for survival, this language is inextricably connected to cultural practices, identity constructions, and Black people’s fights for freedom and against institutional racism throughout the Diaspora” (113). This, in turn, results in the internal conflict students of color must cope with regarding their identities and their educational and professional endeavors.

Despite their internalized, obligatory commitment to their own communities, students of color recognize hegemonic ideologies that continue to exclude them from public, professional, and academic spheres. Many scholars and educators alike underestimate students of color, assuming they do not possess the language to articulate or understand racialized concepts such as those observed in Kinloch’s essay. Yet Kinloch demonstrates her students’ keen awareness of these oppressive norms:

In his drive to succeed (e.g., get a job) and remain a loyal participant in his Black community, Khaleeq recognizes the benefits associated with code-switching: “It’s like

going from one language to another. Making a shift. Knowing how to use one. Being able to use the other when you really have to.” He is not ashamed to speak Black English and insists on its legitimization as a language, a way of life, and a tool for survival. (131-2)

In this instance, code switching provides these students of color with opportunities to coexist within two realms that constantly exclude each other in their histories of racial tensions. Yet the code switching that students of color must mandatorily practice in educational settings, when unacknowledged, simply reinforces the white supremacy that arbitrarily privileges Standard American English over African American Vernacular English. This paradox could be confronted within classrooms by having educators acknowledge both dialects as linguistically valid and useful. As Kinloch demonstrates, each vernacular does in fact have a vast historical past and cultural significance. Identifying these histories can foster inclusive classrooms in which students of all backgrounds may feel validated and heard by their teachers.

As anticipated, there are several opponents to the integration of diverse vernaculars into classrooms and other public arenas. A purveyor of linguistic superiority, Graham Lord mocks those who do not abide by the strict linguistic rules of “proper English” in his 2007 piece “Is it, like, such a tough ask to speak proper English?” Lord insists that “we all know that correct English is no longer taught in most of our schools” and in order to address this problematic assumption, educators must “make it more difficult to achieve the highest ranking” A-level grades (Lord 1). He refers to any vernacular that deviates from this “proper English” as a “strange new linguistic-monstrosit[y]” that acts as a “plague” within public, academic, and professional environments (2). Once again, we see how champions of linguistic hegemony continue to exclude—and nearly physically silence—people who do not assimilate to Standard American English. These concerns with “proper English” certainly seem trivial, as some concerns are as trifling as assuming speaking diverse vernaculars “lead[s] to different types of

spelling errors in adults” (Treiman 338). Despite Lord’s assertions—which seem to come from a point of unchallenged privilege—research suggests that students of color do *not* need educators to make it even more difficult for them to succeed academically. It is the students of color who already suffer academically at the hands of white supremacy and the favoring of Standard American English; decreasing the likelihood for each student to achieve a passing grade in class will most definitely harm students of color, who already are at risk of failing courses of all subject matters. Instead, those who value linguistic studies need to consider ways in which *all* students can succeed—not just those who fluently and flawlessly practice Standard American English.

In his 2011 essay, “Should Writer’s Use They Own English?” Vershawn Ashanti Young confronts the patronizing viewpoints of scholars who insist on the monolingual superiority of Standard American English. Written entirely in Black American and African American Vernacular English, Young’s essay defines and critiques standard language ideology, which Young acknowledges as a racially exclusive hegemony that alienates Black Americans from institutions of professional and educational success. Specifically, Young challenges those who perpetuate this ideology by positioning themselves as sympathetic. Young cites Stanley Fish, who claims speakers of Black American and African American Vernacular English are subject to prejudice. Disagreeing vehemently, Young states, “Dont nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them ‘vulnerable to prejudice.’ It’s ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language. [...] Black English dont make it own-self oppressed” (Young 110). Further, reinforcers of linguistic hegemony often pose Standard American English as a second language Black and African Americans should feel grateful to learn. Paradoxically, however, educators who *do* (usually exclusively) speak Standard American English have the

opportunity to participate in the same language-learning experience they want their students of color to embrace. If this logic assumes Black and African American students benefit from learning Standard American English as a second language, the same logic would suggest students who speak Standard American English fluently can also benefit from being exposed to diverse vernaculars. As Young observes,

It further disingenuous of Fish to ask: “Who could object to learning a second language?” What he really mean by this rhetorical question is that the “multiculturals” should be thrilled to leave they own dialect and learn another one, the one he promote. If he meant everybody should be thrilled to learn another dialect, then wouldnt everybody be learnin everybody’s dialect? Wouldnt we all become multidialectal and pluralingual? And that’s my exact argument, that we all should know everybody’s dialect, at least as many as we can, and be open to the mix of them in oral and written communication. (111)

Not only does Young reveal the hypocrisy of standard language ideology, but he also demonstrates how students of color have valid and useful contributions in classrooms that are often overlooked. Indeed, educators of linguistics should not fall prey to the fallacy of linguistic hegemony. Following Young’s example, educators should instead consider the ways in which vernacular diversity enriches everyone’s academic experiences.

In order to foster a more inclusive classroom, educators must integrate previously unconventional narratives that affirm and expose the narratives of marginalized individuals. Language undoubtedly plays a large part in the otherness some students feel within communities that continue to uphold linguistic hegemony and thus endorse white supremacy. Speakers of Black American and African American Vernacular English “are often negatively affected in material, economic, and emotional ways by dominant, ‘commonsense’ views of [this vernacular] as illogical, ungrammatical, or unintelligent” (Godley and Minnici 321). As demonstrated through several scholastic studies, these myths—albeit falsely and arbitrarily constructed—perpetuate the exclusion of students of color from academic and professional advancements.

Pedagogy has already attempted to take the appropriate steps in providing platforms on which marginalized students can express their individuality and achieve academic success. Particularly, secondary and higher educational institutions grant students more agency in the subject matter they endeavor to study. Concentrations like Women and Gender Studies, African American Studies, Latinx Studies, Disability Studies, etc. allow students to explore intersectionalities in ways that have in the past been oppressed. But an undivided embrace of Intersectionality needs to be realized in a more integrated fashion.

Creating courses that show concern for social justice provides arenas in which marginalized students feel more welcomed and validated, but it also assumes that these individualities are not mainstream and therefore not relevant to or important in conventional, main-course subject matter. Furthermore, when educators actively seek out subaltern narratives, but do not find the narratives written in vernacular as valid simply because it violates the terms of Standard American English, white supremacy and standard language ideology are preserved. Instead, educators should view narratives written in Black American and African American Vernacular English as especially authentic, and thus introduce these narratives into their curriculum. Standard language ideology continues to oppress students of color, leaving them both silenced and unable to academically succeed. These ideologies, according to Mukul Saxena, “are the guiding principle for the top-down language education policies. [...] Consequently, many teachers associate the use of [non-Standard American English vernaculars] in the classroom with underachievement and enforce ‘[Standard American English]-only’ policies” (Saxena 168). Although code switching may exist as a solution to this problem among academics, students of color still must grapple with the internalized “linguistic self-hate” that positions them as inauthentic to their own communities and cultural backgrounds (Young 112).

So beyond introducing niche academic subject matter and introducing subaltern narratives to the classroom, educators must also seek ways in which they can challenge the linguistic hegemony that so often and chronically excludes, ostracizes, and pigeonholes students of color.

Rhetoric and composition classes, in particular, give educators the ideal platform on which they can seize myriad opportunities to introduce the validity of *all* dialects. Young, for example, suggests that educators should “teach how language functions within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it take to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously” (112). Rather than promoting internalized oppression through the hegemonic reaffirming of Standard American English, educators should instead “enlarge [their] perspective about what good writin is and how good writin can look at work, at home, and at school” (112). Standard language ideology plagues educators, academics, and rhetors with a narrow and prescriptive lens that has historically silenced individuals coming from marginalized communities. Educators must carve out time in their curricula for lesson plans involving (1) genre exploration, (2) historical context (3) oppressive hegemony, and (4) othered vernaculars.

Genre exploration must define academic as the genre in which most educational and professional texts are written, so as to de-standardize Standard American English. Educators must also expose the historical context of dialects, so as to validate and explore the marginalization of non-Standard American English experiences. Further, a historiography of linguistics can also reveal that “what we think of as standard was once nonstandard,” thus cultivating hopeful consideration of expanding the historically exclusive canon (Ahmed and Nero 77). Making space within these classrooms to consider oppressive hegemony can foster an educational environment in which critical thinking is encouraged and students may gain political and worldly awareness. When considering hegemonic structures, educators aid students in

critical language pedagogy that “explicitly acknowledges that our society unfairly discriminates against some dialects and privileges others” (Godley and Minnici 323). It is vital that educators express that privilege, racial tensions, and white supremacy operate through many outlets, including linguistic norms and—more specifically—standard language ideology. Lastly, educators must introduce othered vernaculars to the academic sphere that so often alienates them. Classrooms cannot exist as inclusive environments in which marginalized students can thrive without the inclusion of subaltern narratives, voices, and language.

Years of scholarship point to the exponential benefits of multicultural, inclusive, and intersectional curricula. Students of all backgrounds undoubtedly gain a better sense of the real world—not just the one they exist in temporarily within educational settings—when they are exposed to subaltern narratives and diverse dialects. Additionally, educators can foster empathy within students when they introduce these narratives and expose the hegemonic structures that have historically oppressed them. Just as it has been assumed for centuries that Black and African Americans and other persons of color can learn from predominantly White-founded ideologies, students and educators coming from class and racially privileged backgrounds will gain an invaluable knowledge when they embrace the possibility of linguistic diversity. As Young concludes, “When we teach the rhetorical devices of blacks we can add to the writing proficiency of whites and everybody else. [...] And another real, real, good result is we gone help reduce prejudice. Yes, mam. Now that’s a goal to reach for” (Young 116-7). Indeed, reducing prejudice is a goal that educators should strive to attain. African American Vernacular English need not be excluded from educational institutions any longer. Preservice teacher education must encourage educators to consider the many subaltern voices that continue to be othered and oppressed within academic and professional spheres. In particular, novice educators

should challenge themselves in their views of diversity and how their own future curricula can confront standard language ideology that perpetuates the academic encumbrance of marginalized students. When educators expose students to culturally diverse curricula and implement multicultural ideologies within their classrooms, prejudice and hegemonic structures are challenged. Thus, multicultural classrooms can begin to heal the American wounds inflicted by centuries of racial tensions.

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