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TEACHER BACKGROUND AND STUDENT NEEDS

ABSTRACT: *Basic skills teachers are in the business of helping students to achieve proficiency in standard English. Yet, when students leave the classroom they are sometimes faced with a dilemma that is not addressed by the instructor. A parent tells a student that reading The New York Times is forbidden in the household because that newspaper is for snobs. And another student is told that if she speaks grammatically she will be punished . . . by her friends. Thus this article attempts to help teachers help students navigate the breaches that occur when what is learned at school is diametrically opposed to the values the student learns at home or in the community—particularly when those values inhibit language acquisition.*

Teaching was not something I was supposed to do with my life. I grew up in the South Bronx, so odds were greater that I'd end up on drugs or killed in a gang fight. In fact, in an article written when I was a college senior I once described my drug abuse, my life, this way:

One night, I swallowed a dozen Tuminols and downed two quarts of beer at a bar in Manhattan. I puked and rolled under a parked car. Two girlfriends found me and carried me home. My overprotective brother answered the door. When he saw me—eyes rolling toward the back of my skull like rubber—he pushed me down a flight of stairs. My skull hit the edge of a

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marble step with a thud. The girls screamed. My parents came to the door and there I was: a high school graduate, a failure, curled in a ball in a pool of blood. (43)

So there are days when I marvel that I now have a box of chalk in my book bag instead of a knife—which I carried throughout high school. A thought that horrifies me; but at the time, it seemed like a good idea.

After all, I didn't go to school with apple-cheeked teenagers in bow ties and monogrammed sports jackets. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx during the 1960s—the era of Black Power and Kill Whitey; acid dreams and dreams of Martin Luther King; Vietnam and body bags. And all of it ripped my school apart. Shorthairs beat on longhairs; and Blacks fought for the right to sit on the school's front steps, which were historically controlled by the "White Angels" and "The Golden Guineas," gangs that fought back with well-thumbed baseball bats. And often there were more undercover policemen in my classroom than students.

So it's strange to be in front of a class, clutching a piece of chalk instead of a knife. Strange—and yet, there are times when I find my experiences can be rewarding. As a teacher, I've found there are certain aspects of my background which I can use to help my students improve their language and writing skills. That is, I can make my students aware that in deciding to become educated there will be times when they will be forced to choose between their home culture and that of the school, which means that, at some point, they will have to reject or *betray* their family and friends in order to succeed—as I did.

But I don't mean to suggest that one has to be a former gutter rat, like me, to benefit from the teaching strategies that have grown out of my background. There are many teachers who came from homes where English was a second language and they could certainly share their own conflicts with balancing their home culture with that of the school. Nor do I mean to suggest that these techniques can work only with students who have backgrounds similar to my own—those who are educationally disadvantaged. What's unique about where I teach is that many students in my classes (at least one-third) do come from homes where someone is college educated. And they, as much as the others, can benefit from the lessons I've gathered from my own struggle to acquire language skills.

I'm not ashamed to admit it and I tell my students: while a freshman at the City College of New York (CCNY) I was in Basic Writing 1. And what I recall is how that label "basic writer" did have an impact on my self-image. I felt that the lack of writing skills

was also a sign of a lack of intelligence. And no doubt there were teachers who reminded me that grammar was something *real* college students mastered in the 5th grade. And so, every paper I failed didn't make me want to do better on the next one, as the teachers hoped. Rather, every "F" only confirmed what I already suspected: "Gee, I must be stupid."

So I now believe that an introduction to a remedial class should begin with a discussion of how "we" feel being in basic writing; and I use "we" deliberately, for even if the teacher has never been a basic writing student, he/she can still talk about how it feels to be a basic writing teacher.

In some academic circles, no doubt, there is still a stigma attached to being a "remedial" writing teacher—as opposed to one of the blessed few chosen to defend the canon. And there are certainly many who'd rather be lecturing to Ph.D. candidates. These teachers usually complain about the mind-numbing ritual of having to repeat, ad nauseam, the same lessons on how to write a five-paragraph essay with a topic sentence.

And, no doubt there are also negative stereotypes of basic writing teachers which don't even originate in the academic community. I've, unfortunately, had too many relatives approach me at parties only to comment: "Now honestly, wouldn't you rather be teaching in a *real* college where students know the difference between a subject and a verb?"

Of course, if teachers and students are positive about being in basic writing these feelings should be shared. But I've met few students who are happy about taking a class they know they must pass in order to continue their college education. Also, I've heard far too many teachers grumble about the dismal quality of their students' writing to be convinced that many teachers feel great about being in basic writing. One professor I know begins each quarter by asking me about the intellectual level of my classes: "Hey!" he cries out. "What are you teaching this quarter—mollusks or crustaceans?"

So by acknowledging negative labels, for both the basic writing student and the basic writing teacher, I've found that the potential negative impact of these labels can be diminished. The classroom can become a kind of support group—teachers reminding students, and students reminding teachers, that: *No*, just because *we're* in basic writing doesn't mean there is something wrong with us.

In fact, an added advantage of this dialogue is that it allows that teacher to initiate a further, equally open and supportive, discussion of the all-important question: Well, then, if there isn't anything wrong with us, why are we in basic writing? Why?

To answer, I begin by putting a list of sentences on the blackboard (taken from the students' essays). Sentences like:

- 1) He be a friend of mines.
- 2) We going buy car today.
- 3) I'm going to reach over and have me a house.

Then I ask the students: "You tell me why? Tell me why you write sentences like these?"

Often, students are surprised by the question. Someone once said: "If we knew why, we wouldn't be in here, would we?" So before I elicit their responses, I often add: "I know why I used to write sentences like these when I was in basic writing." As in the discussion of labels, I begin by drawing on my own experiences.

In my case, I used to write sentences like "Mom and me was *tinking* about home." And why? One day, a speech teacher at CCNY pulled me into his office and asked me if I'd mind reading aloud into a tape recorder. Okay. I was curious. But when he played back the tape, I was shocked. For some reason I was leaving out the "th" sound on every word that required one. I said "ting" for thing and "tought" for thought. Obviously, I was transferring the way I heard language to the way I was writing it down. And where did I hear this language?

I didn't have to look far. My Russian mother, a high school dropout, who came to the United States after World War II, didn't pronounce the "th" sounds either. Apparently, there are no "th" sounds in Russian.

I should add that even though some teachers may come from homes where parents are college educated and language use is important, this shouldn't prevent them from sharing their background with the students. Their experiences can be instructive. The teacher who comes from a home, like my wife's, where parents are quick to note the nuances of "phenomena" and "phenomenon," can certainly talk about the impact a family sensitive to standard English use has had on their language skills. In my wife's case, upper middle class, east side Manhattan, she became a poet—what else?

As for teachers who have grown up in homes where a foreign language was spoken, they too can speak openly about their struggles with acquiring standard English. For example, one Puerto Rican colleague once told me how she tells her class that her greatest struggle with English was breaking free of Span-glish—the habit in her community of combining English words like "pen" with "el," the Spanish word for the article "the." So sometimes she

used to say things like: “Give me el pen” instead of “the pen” or: “Are you going to el movie?”

Anyway, after sharing my experiences with the class, I always find students eager to offer their explanations for sentences we’ve put on the board. For example, one student complains that her girlfriend uses the “F” word in nearly every sentence. Another, a Chinese student, says her mother forbids her to speak English at home. Still another student recalls how his friends called him a “sissy boy” because he told someone to use “is” instead of “be” as in “He be.”

Naturally there are always some students from families where a college educated person did serve as a role model for the acquisition of standard language skills. And their anecdotes are also instructive to the others. One student, for instance, says that his parents’ insistence on “proper” language drove him to rebel—to use language improperly just to get on his parents’ nerves. Another says she was driven to use slang because of high school peer pressure to be cool—hip.

And so, in answer to the question, Why do we students write the way we do? I use the students’ anecdotes to create yet another list.

We write like this because:

- 1) English is a second language for our parents
- 2) English is our second language
- 3) Our parents know English but they are not educated
- 4) English is the second language of our friends
- 5) Our friends are uneducated
- 6) Our friends speak more slang than English

So what’s the point? I want students to see that the people they depend on the most are apparently the same people who most influence their language in a negative way. And that raises still another question: Where do I fit in? What role does the teacher play in the student’s life?

Usually, few hands want to field this question. And those that do end up telling me that I’m an okay teacher. But what I’m after is deeper: “How many of you seriously wonder, outside of my classroom, if you’ll disappoint me because you misuse the English language? Do you care?” “After all,” I go on, “isn’t it true that outside of this room you are really more concerned about doing those things which make your friends and family happy than doing those things which would make your teacher happy—such as speaking like an academic?”

The point is, I tell my students, I’m the one person they are most distant from—I only see them 3 hours a week for 11 weeks. So I am

the one person they are least dependent on—and I say “least” because they know they are not entirely independent of me either. They do need me for their grades. However, as they are quick to point out, this has traditionally made me their nemesis.

Consequently, what we discover is that in the final analysis the one person who is given the job to most influence their language skills in a positive way is the one person they are most remote from—the least important person in their lives, if not someone who is seen as their enemy.

This dynamic is no doubt what Stanley Fish meant when he discussed the problems we all have getting outside of our own communities:

That is why it is so hard for someone whose very being is defined by his position within an institution (and if not this one, then some other) to explain to someone outside it a practice or a meaning that seems to him to require no explanation, because he regards it as natural. Such a person when pressed is likely to say, “but that’s just the way it is done” or “but isn’t it obvious” and so testify that the practice or meaning in question is community property, as, in a sense, he is too. (320–21)

Therefore, I initiate further analysis to make students sensitive to the crucial role language plays in binding them to their communities. I ask the class: “In spite of what we’ve seen in the sentences on the board, does the way you use language in your neighborhood or your home serve any positive purpose? Is there anything good about using slang, say, with your friends?”

Here again, I begin with my own experiences. I recall how when I hung out on the corner of 183rd and Davidson Avenue nearly twenty years ago, my friends and I had our own slang. And when we went to a high school dance, we’d use this language to start trouble. As we passed a rival gang, for example, my friend Louis might say, “Yo, Pete, what about a little daddy lo lo tonight?” What he meant was: how about waiting outside for these suckers with baseball bats so we can give them a good beating? So, in that case, our language was a secret code which gave us a kind of perverse power like those in government who like to name missiles “Peace keeper.”

And again, through the use of such anecdotes, the students are able to generate yet another list on the board. This one focuses on the positive role that nonstandard language plays in the students’ community. For example, an Arab student says she feels more in touch with her soul when she writes poems in her native language,

while another student says that the lyrics of rap songs seem more exciting than the language he's forced to use in school. So, we see, our community language plays a positive role because it's:

- 1) A way for the community to identify itself
- 2) A way for the community to keep secrets and thus protect itself from potential enemies
- 3) A way for the community to pass on its values from one generation to the next
- 4) And often it's a language that is more expressive and creative than the one used in school

I expect that teachers, regardless of their background, can address this issue of acquiring a community language which is foreign to the one they normally use. That is, at one time in our college careers, we have all been called upon to master a particular jargon which can only be used within a narrow context, like the language of sociology—not to mention the language of the academic community. And as we know, it did take government intervention to force one community (lawyers) to break down their language into one which everyone could understand—a testimony to the grip a specialized language has on its community, especially when that community depends on its language for survival.

Which raises yet another point: Though students have seen that there are good reasons for using the language that binds them to their communities, even if that language can be negative, I also seek to make it clear that these influences on how they use language are not benign or passive. I don't want students to think that the way they are influenced to use language is simply a matter of being surrounded by it, like a stone surrounded by water in a pond.

To make my point, I return to some of the anecdotes we'd already heard in class. For example, I go back to the anecdote of the student who said his friends called him a sissy boy because he told them to use "He is" instead of "He be."

I also recall how when I started college I used to sit on the stoop of my tenement in the South Bronx on hot evenings and read books. But now and then, a carload of my old buddies would drive by and they'd yell: "Hey, hey, look at Petey Weety. He's weeding a book. He must be a chump!"

Again, through sharing my experiences, a dialogue begins. Anecdotes are shared. One student says that her father told her not to bring a copy of *The New York Times* into his house because "that newspaper is for snobs."

"So, what is happening here," I ask my students? I attempt to

demonstrate that these influences on the way they use language are not passive. They are coupled with what I call "messages." And if we look at these messages closely, I tell my students, we can see a community's attitude toward language use.

This view is shared by Kenneth Bruffee. In his essay, "Liberal Education and the Social Justification of Belief," he recommends that students "identify in non-evaluative ways, their own beliefs and the beliefs of the local, religious, ethnic . . . and special interest communities they are already members of" (108).

For example, through classroom discussion, students discover that messages like "*you're sissy boy*" if you use "*He is*" instead of "*He be*" are threats from the community, reminding us that any effort on our part to improve our language skills will result in our being kicked out of that community.

Why is this? I believe, like Bruffee, this happens because, "Learning involves shifting social allegiances." For example, Bruffee describes what happens when a group of watchmakers want to become carpenters. "To do that," he says, "you have to do more than teach them how to use a hammer and saw. They have to swear like carpenters, drink like carpenters, to walk, eat and make love like carpenters and to see the world from a carpenter's point of view" (105).

And the impact on students as they attempt to shift their social allegiances should not be underestimated. There is, I would agree with Bruffee, "emotional stress involved in leaving one's community to join another" (106). After all, the messages which tell students not to leave their communities come from just those people that the students are most attached to—their family and friends.

Therefore, to sensitize my students to these messages and their potential impact, I have them write an essay that explores the use of language and the attitudes toward language in their communities. The essay has five parts:

Part I.

a) Students must not only listen carefully to the way language is used in their home, they must also transcribe a word-for-word sample of that language taken from a short interview with a family member.

b) After the transcript has been made, the student must then provide a grammatical analysis of the language contained in the sample. What have they found? Does the family member use a lot of slang? Span-glish? Sentences with verb errors?

Note: Given that some students may not be able to identify lapses in their family's language, students can have their transcripts reviewed in student groups so their more knowledgeable peers can

help with the analysis before the essay is written. Also, to prepare students to provide a word-for-word language sample, I have students practice note taking and listening by interviewing their classmates. These notes can then be used for this essay, as you will see.

Part II.

a) After obtaining the language sample, students must also ask the *same* family member if he/she thinks using standard English is important? And why or why not?

b) Based on the response to the above question, students must assess their family's attitude toward standard language? In other words, what is the family message—negative or positive?

Part III.

a) Students must transcribe some language from a friend and

b) provide a grammatical analysis, as in Part I.

Part IV.

a) Students must also ask that friend if he/she thinks using standard English is important. In other words, what is the message from friends—negative or positive?

Part V.

a) Students must describe how language use and the *attitudes* toward language of other friends and family have affected the students' language use. Students must also give examples from their own language use to illustrate these influences—negative and/or positive. And this is where the earlier language samples from the interviews with classmates can be valuable. Students who may not be able to see their own patterns can now have peers review their language samples in order to point out the language errors—which are often the same kind of errors found at the writer's home or among his/her friends.

Once students have written their essays and shared them with the class, the class is usually surprised to find so many negative influences from friends and family. So I pose yet another question: Given that so many students identify negative influences, I ask: "What can you do to avoid these influences?"

Again, I begin by drawing on my own experiences. For me, improving my language skills meant giving up the guys on the street corner, as well as avoiding my family. It meant developing strategies to stay on my college campus for as long as I could, like studying in the library until it closed. After all, like most students at commuter schools, I lived at home. So I also joined clubs and my school newspaper, which allowed me to enter a new community—one which obviously paid a great deal of attention to language, unlike my friends and family.

However, I offer my solution to improving language skills more as a challenge to my students than a prescription. I don't want anyone to think that my way is the only way to improve one's language skills. After all, I know that my message to students is a radical one: *knowing that without having certain language skills, particularly writing skills, you won't be able to reach your goal in life, like graduating from college or having a better life than your parents. What are you willing to do to get these skills? How far are you willing to go? What are you willing to sacrifice? Are you willing to give up those friends on the street corner who'd rather read Batman than Kant?*

That's the challenge. Whether or not students accept this challenge, I believe, like Bruffee, that the job of the teacher does entail "helping students examine how knowledge communities express and justify beliefs." It does entail "helping students discover communities of beliefs relevant to their interests." And it does entail "helping students learn to join, to maintain, and where appropriate to move from one knowledge community to another, or to disband a knowledge community altogether" (110).

And I do believe that some students *do need* a community other than the one they often describe. Some do need to disband their communities altogether. Unlike those students who come from communities that nurture their citizens, some of my students come from communities that hinder them as mine did; and after they graduate, they don't want to stay in those communities anyway. Like poor kids for generations, they want a house in the suburbs on a tree-lined street. They want a place away from the gunplay of crack dealers.

Besides, as one student put it: "If I do get a good job, and I have money and stay on my block, who do you think the crackheads are gonna jump on payday?"

In other words, for some students, staying in these neighborhoods wouldn't make them objects of admiration or role models; rather they'd become targets—objects of prey. Our inner city neighborhoods are no longer havens for the returning prodigal son. As one woman in my class put it: "Oh yeah, after graduation, I'm going back to my neighborhood all right. I'm going to get my mother out of there. 'Cause over there, they'll blow you away."

In fact, it was this kind of threat of violence which ultimately drove me to overcome my circumstances. Which is not to suggest that I grew up with the expectation of going to college. Like my brother, who is a janitor, like my sisters, who are clerical workers, I was expected to get a job right after high school. And what jobs were

these? The usual ones for a high school city kid: policeman, fireman, or sanitation worker. And so college was not on the list of things to do. It was luck which got me on that path.

At the time I graduated from high school with a 67% average there was a budget crisis. City jobs were not available, so what was I supposed to do? A high school counselor told me about a unique educational opportunity—a social experiment. The City University of New York had started an open admissions policy which allowed anyone regardless of their high school average to attend a four-year university. And thus in 1972, I entered the City College of New York—one of thousands of unprepared students who were considered by some to be the end of education. But as it turned out, after a year of remedial writing, math, and reading, I was performing as well as my more advantaged peers—many of whom I used for tutors, as well as mentors to introduce me to the culture of college.

I really wanted to join this community. At that time, I witnessed too many friends join gangs only to get blown away with shot guns. A few got stabbed. Some overdosed on heroin. Others just hung out on the street corners all day, smoking cigarettes and drinking Mad Dog—a cheap wine. I wanted to escape this violent, dead-end world. And school was the obvious way out. I often heard about graduates earning more money in one day than my father made working two jobs, when he wasn't too sick to work, seven days a week, peddling hot dogs on Times Square or selling Christmas bulbs door-to-door. As far as I was concerned, my neighborhood was not a fertile place to sink roots.

In fact, I quickly learned that even if I wanted to go back to a community like this, whether I liked it or not, the very process of becoming educated alienated me from the community. What I found is: now that I had these new and sophisticated ideas in my head, there was no one to share them with. How, for example, could I discuss phenomenology with my Dad or my friends when the last book they read was usually wrapped in brown paper.

That is, I believe, if students don't make use of what they've learned, like language acquisition, what results is what linguists call *fossilization*—where “the learner no longer revises his intralanguage system in the direction of the target language” (McLaughlin). For example, linguist J. Schumann cites a study of a 33-year-old Costa Rican immigrant, Alberto:

As a member of a group of Latin-American working class immigrants, Alberto was seen as socially and psychologically quite distant from the target-language group. He interacted almost exclusively with a small group of Spanish-speaking

friends, and showed no interest in owning a television, which would have exposed him to the English language, because he said he could not understand English. He chose to work at night as well as during the day, rather than attend English classes. Alberto showed very little linguistic development during a 9 month study. (McLaughlin 112)

So, basically, I encourage serious discussion of ways someone can mature academically and linguistically in an intellectually deficient community. And students do offer their own strategies. Some students say that though they may have to leave their communities behind while they are becoming educated, once they get their skills together, they plan to return to their communities to share their knowledge.

Still, I believe that most students will have to close the distance between their communities and the academic one which is their target. After all, we don't just give students skills. We provide alternate world views. Educating students often means passing on values which may be different from those of the home and/or the peer group.

For example, I remember when I took an art history course. After a day at the museum, I got home and told my Dad about it. But he just laughed: "Whata you wasting your time for? Is staring at a piece of dried paint gonna put money in your pocket? Is it gonna put food on the table? You coulda been working, you jerk!"

And that (in microcosm) is what many of my students are up against. Which is why I feel basic writing teachers should not underestimate the enormous benefit of making students aware that the acquisition of language and writing skills may mean resisting or *abandoning* the very people they love the most—their friends and family.

I hope I have emphasized that a teacher's background should not inhibit that teacher from knowing a student's needs. To know these needs, I believe, means knowing a student's background, and this is best achieved when the teacher is willing to explore how his/her background is linked to the student's background.

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