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What's Wrong with Larry? Or a Case for Writing Appropriate Comment on Student Writing

> *The worldviews of many in our society exist in protected cocoons. These individuals have never had to make an adjustment from home life to public life, as their public lives and the institutions they have encountered merely reflect a "reality" these individuals have been schooled in since birth. When these privileged individuals—and they are privileged, whether they realize it or not—see others who operate from a different worldview, they can often comprehend them only as deviants, pathologically inferior, certainly in need of "fixing." Even when individuals believe themselves to have good intentions, their own biases blind them from seeing the real people before them. (74)* —Lisa Delpit

Introduction

Composition is often taught by instructors who have too many students in too many sections with too little time to develop relationships with individual students beyond the end comments we write on student papers. In these end comments, we try to make up for the lack of greater contact in the course and seek to motivate students to do their best work. Often, however, with our current course loads and the numbers of students occupying our courses, we may not have the liberty of time to contemplate students' potential responses to our attempts to motivate them to do their best work. In fact, sometimes our well-meaning comments lead to cases of extreme student alienation. In light of these facts, I examine a specific end comment and its effects on one student's writing within the context of his learning in order to assist us in moving toward creating appropriate commentary that fosters teaching and learning. I hope to help us as teachers of writing to reflect on our comments so that we don't alienate students unintentionally when we are really meaning to help them with the advice we so carefully write to them at the end of their papers.

Bruce Speck in his bibliographic essay published in 2000 notes significant limitations in the research on teacher response to student writing, noting difficulties in fitting evaluation and response into teaching based on a process approach, shifting terminology of

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evaluation that renders suspect instructors' meanings in assigning grades, and the emerging political, cultural, and ethical questions that confuse grading (2–3). Nevertheless, Summer Smith suggests that end comments form a remarkably stable genre (266). They are made up of three dominant forms: judging genres that evaluate student writing, reader-response genres that convey teacher reaction as a reader to the writing, and coaching genres through which teachers seek to prompt students to improve their writing (253). She also indicates that there is a finite pattern in which instructors employ these genres. Teachers start with a positive comment (261). Next, they offer criticism, using either an evaluative or reader response genre, followed by a coaching comment in order to motivate a student to improve his or her work. Smith suggests that students who read the comments, by noticing these similarities, "might tend to dismiss the advice they are given as formulaic and conventional" (266). To be more effective, she argues that personalizing the comment with specific details and examples aids in the sincerity of the comment, which makes it more credible to students. She also advocates the use of "complete sentences" and balancing positive and negative portions to render end comments more effective (266).

C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, anthologized in Richard Straub's 2006 collection on teacher response, further examine end comments in the context of the teaching-learning experience and not as isolated teacher tools designed to bring about immediate improvement in student writing. Recent researchers concur unanimously that "people become competent readers and writers over time as a result of their immersion in this web of influences, even if no one can pinpoint when, or how, or why (Knoblauch and Brannon 15). According to Knoblauch and Brannon, these influences include the large contextual world of teaching:

"cannot be seen in isolation of the process of learning across various contexts"

> Everything in teaching is part of something larger: one response in the margin of a draft is situated in a context of classroom communication, one assignment in a context of assignments, one classroom in a context of classrooms, and school experiences in a context (ideally) of all sorts of other reading and writing experiences. (14–15)

Clearly, end comments cannot be seen in isolation of the process of learning across various contexts.

Also discussing end comments, Gary Dohrer asserts that "teachers' written comments need to be part of a continuing dialogue between the teacher and the student, a dialogue that helps establish a system of values about writing" (7), a point reiterated by

Knoblauch and Brannon and by Richard Straub in their separate recent works. This dialogue within the context of the classroom must necessarily take into account the permutations in the various classrooms settings and among the various student and teacher populations. Chris Anson makes the point clearly: "Response is so rooted in context and human temperament that accepting diverse and even contradictory approaches or rhetorical styles may be more useful than searching for a single method [of responding to student writing] supported by empirical research" (362). Citing Schön's 1983 and 1987 work, Anson suggests that the shift in priorities from attempts to validate a single best practice to a move toward flexibility and informed choice

> . . . mirrors new theories of teaching effectiveness which place the locus of teachers' improvement not on the accumulation of research findings but on developing a higher consciousness, a kind of "thoughtfulness," often captured in the phrase "reflective practice." (362)

I think that the dialogue between teacher and student is essential in creating that vital learning dynamic within the classroom. To foster my own conversation with students and because I know that students don't always read the end comments I write on their papers, I allow students time in class to read and reflect on the comments I make on their papers so that I know that what I say there is clear to them. I ask them—then and there—to bring to my attention anything that is not clear or needs further explanation. I see it as a vital part of the revision process, and, like Dohrer, as well as Knoblauch and Brannon, Straub, and Anson, I think these comments serve to foster the dialogue between teacher and student through which we might come "to agreement about what [we] value concerning writing." As Dohrer suggests, "teachers must ensure that the comments do not betray the values established in the class" (7). In addition, according to Straub,

> . . . the metaphor of response as conversation asks teachers to do more than assume the role of a target audience; it urges them, in addition, to create themselves as demanding, expectant readers and lead students to look for more from their writing than clear communication alone. (352)

Here, it is clear that the end of good writing is not merely the production of error-free, thesis-driven prose but something substantively more, something qualitatively more. The classroom dialogue must of course take into account the negotiation of meaning and must see language as situated. James Berlin puts it very well:

> Our business must be to instruct students in signifying practices broadly conceived—to see not only the rhetoric of the college essay, but also the rhetoric of the institution of schooling, of politics, and of the media, the hermeneutic not only of certain literary texts, but also the hermeneutic of film, TV, and popular music. We must take

> as our province the production and reception of semiotic codes, providing our student with the heuristics to penetrate these codes and their ideological designs on our formation as subjects. (100–01)

If critical engagement by students in these conversations forms the goal of composition, then we must begin in the classroom by creating a dialogue with our students wherein they are comfortable questioning texts with which they are presented as well as questioning our comments on the work that they create.

We must not overwhelm students with the volume of comments we write on their papers. Teachers, Dohrer suggests, should separate the process of writing from evaluation in order to prevent students from giving up and not being able to exercise the opportunity to experience "writing as a tool for discovery" (8). Or put another way, I would like my students to begin the work of intervening in the formation of meaning in ways that Berlin suggests in his representation of the ideological function of language, for no single person is in control of language. Language is a social construction that shapes us as much as we shape it. "In other words," Berlin says, "language is a product of social relations and so is ineluctably involved in power and politics" (92–93). Furthermore, as Berlin notes:

> The subject is a construct of the signifying practice . . . [as] are the material conditions to which the subject responds. . . . [Further] the receivers of messages—the audience of discourse—obviously cannot escape the consequences of signifying practices. The audience's possible responses to a text are in part a function of its discursively constituted subject formations—formations that include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and age designations. (90–91)

In this complex discursive environment, charged and ever-changing with competing ideologies, I want each student to be able to, as Berlin suggests, negotiate and "appropriate messages in the service of . . . [his or her] own interests and desires" (90). In this context, then, it is important for us to examine the trouble with the end comment on Larry's paper and why it nearly turned him off from writing entirely.

Drawing on the advice of these researchers regarding end comments and on the complex context of English Studies that Berlin provides, I will analyze and revise the end comment on Larry's paper to address the issues created when he received the end comment that did not meet his needs as a learner. Through this process, I hope to help us as teachers to be able to respond more effectively to the difficult stories students may sometimes write in response to the assignments we give them. Finally, I want to examine the implications for teaching and learning that come from the revising of the end comment on Larry's paper. To understand the story, the reader will need a little background on Larry and on the course where we met.

About Larry

I met Larry Miles[1] in a class I taught at a small bachelor's degree granting school located in northern Michigan, where I taught in the mid- to late 1990s. Larry had been recruited with a group of students from the Detroit and Chicago metro areas by an innovative admissions professional hired by the college to boost overall numbers of students and to increase diversity on the campus. His efforts resulted in a relatively sizeable influx of African-American students at the predominantly white school located in a working-class community with a population of less than ten thousand people. The college itself enrolled under 1,000 students at the time, the majority of those from northern Michigan and northeastern Wisconsin.

Larry and other African-American students in the classroom were from large, Midwestern urban centers such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and Chicago, while the other students in the classroom were predominantly from the rural Midwest. Thus, they had little in common, but much to share. Classroom discussions included what life was like in the big cities, on the rural farms, and in the country villages. And on the relatively small campus, the sharing that happened inside the classroom carried outside into the activities of the school. The students joined in campus activities together and worked collaboratively on snow statues. They also skied and fished together, creating the kinds of relationships we hope to attain through the recruitment of a diverse student population.

An African-American male of traditional college age (nineteen), Larry enrolled in my first semester composition course in the beginning of the second semester, not at all enthusiastic about having to do so. His attitude was clear as he sat in the middle of the room with his arms folded across his chest as I took attendance. He later told me that he took the course in spring semester because, upon admission, he had been placed into developmental writing based on an essay he had written during the orientation process and, therefore, he felt his placement had delayed, by one semester, his completing the composition sequence. But that explanation was only part of the reason for the anger he seemed to display on that first day.

About the Class

Larry's initial apparent anger confused me, but Larry participated in classroom activities more and more as time went on. In contrast to the angry person who came to class on the first day, I found him a likeable, outgoing young man who had a good sense of humor and a positive disposition. Other students in the class soon noticed his strengths as a writer through the collaborative and process-oriented pedagogy I employed in the classroom. Larry seemed to be able to work with many different students in the mixed classroom made up of

1. A pseudonym

15 white students and 10 African-American students, significantly more racially balanced than many other writing classes at the same institution. This fortunate circumstance happened by accident, but the balance in the classroom created a subsequent balance in the cultural narratives shared by students, and this in turn allowed for the kind of sharing upon which trust is built.

I must point out that having a near balance of white and African-American students in a classroom at that institution was extremely unusual. In fact, it would be more likely to have none than to have more than one or two non-white students in any class. The improved recruiting, however, increased the diversity of students, creating conflicts and tensions that hadn't existed before. It also caused faculty to rethink their methods of presentation to accommodate the interests and communication styles of their students, and the faculty members worked hard to address the needs of students with whose cultures they had had little experience. The school has continued to increase enrollments and currently includes students from Finland, Japan, Turkey, and the Upper Midwest, as well as Native American and African-American students.

In that specific class, as in all the classes I teach, I strove to communicate to the students the idea that their participation in the classroom dialogue is essential and that agreeing with me as the instructor without their own critical input would do little for their learning. I try to communicate to students their importance in classroom dialogue. Using Ira Shor's words,

> A strong participatory and affective opening broadcasts optimistic feelings about the students' potential and about the future: students are people whose voices are worth listening to, whose minds carry the weight of serious intellectual work, whose thoughts and feelings can entertain transforming self and society. (26)

In other words, I encourage all students to make the class an exchange and investigation of ideas and knowledge that will lead all of us to new understandings, a class wherein we can learn from one another, myself included.

Sometime during the semester, after he had received feedback from me on two of the four required essays in the course, Larry asked me if I would read a paper he had written in his first semester preparatory writing class. He said that he wanted to revise the paper for the current course, but he wanted to know if it was okay to do so. By his tension, I could also see that something troubled him about the essay.

In the process of agreeing to read the paper, I asked Larry why he wished me to do so. He responded that he wanted to get my opinion of the work and of the response another instructor had written on it. Of course, I was uncomfortable with the fact that Larry found something awry with the way the other instructor had graded the paper. I agreed to read it,

including the other instructor's comments, because he asked me to and because I was concerned about what had made him feel so uncomfortable in writing classes in general. Near tears when he gave the paper to me that day after class, Larry said, "This is it," and pushed it toward me. The paper was crumpled, as though he had wadded it up and then flattened it out again. I took the paper from Larry and put it in my bag and told him that I would read it and then talk with him after the next class.

Larry's Paper

The assignment to which Larry had been asked to respond suggested that he write an essay about a significant person in his life, one in which he described a person he considered to be a role model. The paper itself was four and one-half pages, hand written. Since the paper is relatively short, as was required by the assigned number of pages, I reproduce it here in its entirety, including errors.

Losing a Friend

The last two weeks of school seemed never-ending. Waiting to take exams for the last time. Thinking of how my summer is going to come about. Wondering if I'm going to be a Junior in High School or not. Finally I'm out, and I'm ready to go to Chicago to spend time with the family. It's the second week in June & the heat is blazing and I'm ready to go on vacation.

It's early May, around and on Mother's Day. The family comes to visit my Great-Grandmother for this special day. This is one of the few time that I'm able to see them because I live in Milwaukee.

It is also Sunday, so everyone gets dressed up to support her & the day.

In the midst of everyone there is only one person that I can trust with anything & who tells me the things that he had done. The Sunday morning service was nice & the choir sung with graciousness.

After church we all go back to my grandmother's house to eat & give my grandmother presents on this day. During the day My Uncle Anthony & I conversate as we normally does, He tells me about his new girlfriend & I do the same. So later on that I ask him to walk down the street with me, & he does. We get to the park that's down quite aways from the house, He tells me that he didn't want to play. We wants me to wait until I come back to Chicago. Anticipating the wait, I count down how many days that I had left in that school year & tells him so that he could be ready to play me in basketball.

It's late now; everyone is getting ready to go back to the big city. As everyone clears I embraces them and show them love & kindness. When they pulled out of the driveway I started to cry, not knowing this will be the last time that I will see, hear, or touch my uncle again.

Before I leave for Chicago I go say goodbye fo friends & when I return home my mother is crying. She tells me that my uncle has gotten shot & died from his wounds. Not knowing, I told her to stop lying to me & when I called Chicago to see if it was true, I was heartbroken.

We has so many plans & so many things to accomplish. I felt as though I lost my best friend, brother, & a father. He had a big impact on my life. I wanted to be just like him in every way. What me love him & appreciate him even more is when I found out how he lost his life. I was on a Sunday, he was getting off from work & getting prepared to go to church.

He stopped by my cousin's house so that he would be able to go also. While they are washing the car three guys are coming down the street shooting at my cousin. In fear they run. My cousin ran down the street & my uncle runs into his (my uncle's) house.

My cousin's wife tells my uncle who is safe from the gun shots to go get the baby in which his coward father fleeds the scene. As he gets the baby our of the car, he goes through the gate, & up the stairs & gives the baby to its mother, a bullet pierces him through his side & goes all the way through.

He eventually dies at the hospital. But I realized, for myself, that God sends everyone down on earth for a purpose & his purpose was to help me be a better person & save the life of another in exchange for his. Even though I lost him, he will always be a motivation & influence in the life of my younger cousins and definitely on me.

In response to Larry's paper, the instructor commented on organization and verb tense. S/he also commented on "phrasing, sentence structure, and punctuation" as well as suggesting that "a sharper focus on [his] uncle and the narrative point(s) [Larry] made about him is needed." None of these comments came as a surprise as they were all things that needed attention if the goal of instruction was for Larry to acquire sentence-level correctness and develop the kinds of language practices that he would use throughout his academic career. To graduate from that university, Larry needed to acquire the kinds of language practices that were seen as appropriate there both by the faculty who, in essence, serve as gatekeepers and by Larry himself who wanted to assert his own interests at that institution and beyond by earning a degree that it certified.

In reviewing the work with Larry, I prompted him to make the changes the previous instructor requested, drawing examples from his paper and explaining what made the work occasionally confusing. Taking up the revision himself, Larry indicated how he might improve the work by changing wording and by including more information. He also agreed that the paper would flow better if he reorganized it chronologically and took care of the verb tense shifts by using the past tense throughout. Larry wanted to give his portrayal of his uncle

a greater livelihood by adding some dialogue including quotations of the language they shared set in the context of their lives together. I supported his idea, and he continued to explain further the inclusions he was proposing. Larry and I never discussed the previous teacher's end comment, which I'll describe in more detail below. It seemed a moot point once he set to work on his paper.

The End Comment

Clearly, I don't know the context of the original assignment or the course in which it formed an important moment. Nor can I know of the interaction between Larry and his first instructor or the individual dialogue they created. Given these facts, my discussion of the end comment written by another instructor straddles some ethical boundaries that I feel must be respected. My revision of that end comment is done with the intention of elucidating what I think are the altruistic seeds present in that comment and to make the supportive intentions perceptible to the student. For Larry, I wanted to provide the support he needed to succeed in the writing course, which meant helping him to reengage in his own writing process to accomplish "his best work," as the original comment urged him to do. For the purpose of this writing, I want to help instructors avoid the problems that arose for Larry in response to this comment, especially when the purpose of the comment was clearly to motivate. With reflection, instructors can attain their intended rhetorical purposes in the end comment (whether or not students actually read them). I think that the interests of both instructors and students are served through the careful examination and revision of this particular comment.

"the insinuation that he had somehow dishonored his uncle's memory"

Larry's early resistance to English classes had nothing to do with the linguistic variation the previous instructor pointed out as errors in his work. His anger rose in response to the end comment. Preceding the coaching segment in which the instructor offered suggestions for revision, s/he began the end comment with the following statement:

> Writing about such an emotionally important event is often difficult—but doesn't your beloved and respected uncle deserve your very best writing?

End comments, according to Smith, move from praising to criticizing to coaching in that order, each with a specific objective in mind. The first sentence, here, clearly attempts to acknowledge the difficulty of writing on such a difficult topic and to establish a rapport with the student that continues to interaction of the classroom. However, the problem arises in the

phrasing of the critical segment of the comment: "doesn't your beloved uncle deserve your best writing?" The rhetorical move is too strong and too abrupt from the first segment and undercuts its effectiveness. Obviously, Larry responded negatively to the insinuation that he had somehow dishonored his uncle's memory by not being able to reproduce Standard Academic English (SAE) in a text that was clearly emotional. In fact, the comment seems to embody the negative responses by teachers to African-American English that Robert Bowie and Carole Bond document in their work and which continue to plague teachers today in spite of the work done in multicultural education. Nevertheless, the comment can be revised easily to meet its pedagogical objective.

First, the intent of the first segment needs to convey fully the teacher's concern for and understanding of the student's feelings. Such a revision could look something like this: "Larry, I can see clearly from your work how important this topic is to you." By recasting this segment of the comment as a freestanding sentence, and not in its prefatory role for the second sentence, the first segment completes its work of praising and creating a link of understanding between teacher and student by acknowledging the efforts made by the student.

The intellectual link between teacher and student could be made stronger by recasting the second segment of the comment into further praise, holding criticism until even later. The second segment, following the standard pattern of end comments, could read thus: "While the topic of your uncle's death must be a difficult one, you show a strong determination to succeed by trying to capture in writing such an important and informing moment in your life." By disconnecting the unintentional link between the criticism of the work from the memory of the uncle, the revision removes the potential for the negative emotional response from Larry who was devastated by the first comment. Instead, the revision activates the powerful motivation that Larry initially brought to the essay—one which the teacher had intended he bring in making the assignment in the first place.

The segment of the comment devoted to constructive criticism should point out the confusion caused by the shift out of chronological order and by the use of linguistic features unfamiliar to the instructor (and perhaps the larger academic community) that Larry employs in his prose, and it must also help Larry to add important details to satisfy the readers' need to know and Larry's own need to draw an appropriate picture of his uncle. Most importantly, this segment of the comment needs to help Larry return to work on his essay rather than wadding it up and throwing it away. Such comments might be phrased as such: "There are some aspects you could address to improve your essay. The lack of chronological order that you use in telling the story makes it hard for the reader to follow. Also, the poignancy of your story creates a need for readers to have a clearer picture of your uncle and the rela-

tionship you share with him." This segment of criticism, then, sets up the final coaching segment, and importantly, it does not link criticism of the writing with criticism of the topic or the author. Instead, it acknowledges the importance of the subject matter and opens an avenue for offering suggestions for improvement.

Finally, the end comment should move to suggestions for improvement as it did, noting the need for a chronological approach and work, as explicated above, on content and usage. Thus the final segment could be revised as such: "To improve the work, perhaps you could reorganize the story to be told chronologically and also add detail to show the readers a more complete portrait of your uncle and of the relationship you shared with him. You should also use conventions of grammar and usage that you think are familiar to your readers. If you want to use variations that might be unfamiliar to them, you should be sure to include enough detail to ensure that your readers will understand. See the body of your text for my notes on the moments when I had trouble understanding your point." In this way, the criticism and suggestions segments are of use to Larry who can use the teacher's recommendations for improvement of his work as a guide to move his writing toward the intended aims of the course.

Finally, to be most effective, the end comment must culminate with the suggestion that Larry revise and resubmit the work to the teacher for reevaluation. The invitation could be worded thus: "Please stop by my office to arrange a new due date for your revised work so that you are able to turn in your very best writing." If the end comment has any purpose at all, it must be to motivate students to produce their "very best writing." To do so, students need the opportunity to revise.

I present the complete revised end comment here:

> Larry, I can see clearly from your work how important this topic is to you. While the topic of your uncle's death must be a difficult one, you show a strong determination to succeed by trying to capture in writing such an important and informing moment in your life.
>
> There are some aspects you could address to improve your essay. First, the lack of chronological order that you use in telling the story makes it hard for the reader to follow. Also, the poignancy of your story creates a need for readers to have a clearer picture of your uncle and the relationship you share with him.
>
> To improve the work, perhaps you could reorganize the story to be told chronologically and also add detail to show the readers a more complete portrait of your uncle and of the relationship you shared with him. You should also use conventions of grammar and usage that you think are familiar to your readers. If you want to use variations that might be unfamiliar to them, you should be sure to

include enough detail to ensure that your readers will understand. See the body of your text for my notes on the moments when I had trouble understanding your point.

Please stop by my office to arrange a new due date for your revised work so that you are able to turn in your very best writing.

Lessons Learned

I think our responses to student writing must reflect Mike Rose's admonition that "[t]he model [of language learning] we advance must honor the cognitive and emotional and situational dimensions of language. . . " (542). Clearly, pedagogy must take into account the real situations in which our students live. In this context, I think Larry's paper needed to be evaluated with consideration of his emotional moment and his situational dimension. Larry's hostile response to the original comment indicated that he needed both guidance and sensitivity from his teacher, who could help him meet the expectations he placed on himself in taking on this specific topic. Also, he needed to be able to revise this work and thus have opportunity to present his best work, the result of his process of learning and his process of writing.

In addition, teachers' comments on students' writing need to reflect what we know of the context of teaching and learning and, thus, move to create, as Straub and Anson advocate in their separate works, conversations in which students are moved to write. As Straub says, within the end comment, "what *is* important is that the teacher speak in specific terms about the content of the writing and use those comments to create a give-and-take discussion with the student—a conversation that is informal and expectant, one that is geared toward turning students back into their texts and their thinking" (359). Using the comment as a means of returning students to their work, as Straub prescribes, would address Larry's and other students' needs to develop skills in revision and in creating and meeting reader expectations in Ong's sense. Further, as Anson suggests, our reflections on our teaching practices and our comments on students' writing within the contexts of our classrooms "will lead us to educational practices that are informed by thoughtfulness, balance, and clarity of method" (378). Had Larry's first teacher engaged (or had opportunity to engage) in reflective teaching practices, perhaps the comment would have more closely met his/her pedagogical goals and Larry's needs as a student in his/her classroom.

In terms of writing pedagogy there are larger lessons hidden in Larry's story. These lessons have to do with students' rights to author for themselves, or at least to participate in the process of their being authored by various forces to fit into, the positions they will occupy in the classroom as well as in society beyond school, as noted by Berlin in discussion of the context of writing. According to Mutnik, many researchers have acknowledged students' needs to negotiate positions for themselves in relation to the knowledge within the academy. Some

trade home culture and values for academic ones as has Richard Rodriguez. Other compositionists have suggested that basic writing students must eventually opt for academic culture as the more powerful even though they have much to lose in doing so (Mutnik 89), a view which I and others (see LeCourt) resist strongly. Yet others, like Deborah Mutnick, acknowledge the importance of becoming bi-cultural and bi-dialectical, rather than ceasing participation in the discourse of one's home community (190). She continues, pointing out David Bartholomae's observation that students, being outside the "habits of mind . . . that define the center of English Studies," must move inside (90). This moving inside must mean that students work to develop academic habits of mind, but it does not mean that they must lose touch with those they love.

"might find it in their best interest to temporarily set aside a cultural alliance"

This movement, I think, has often been over generalized to include a permanence and uniformity that is not possible, for human beings are not uniform or static in what they think or believe. Pressured one way or another by a variety of forces, including their instructors, students will make choices based on their own idiosyncratic reasoning, and these choices are not likely to be static and once-and-for-all. Simply, at one moment students might find it in their best interest to temporarily set aside a cultural alliance to explore the values and beliefs of another. At a subsequent moment, students will wish to reintegrate with their home cultures and beliefs. As Donna LeCourt suggests, "Working-class subjectivity *can* be negotiated and valued without being lost in the academy. Class identity is not nearly as predictable as we have depicted it to be nor as closed a signifier as an oppositional rhetoric suggests. It only becomes so when we have no other terms for understanding it" (42). For Larry, the negotiation process includes working out how he will authentically represent his home culture within the academic context in a way that preserves the integrity of the former and in a discourse sufficient to withstand the scrutiny of the latter that is enacted through the eye of the teacher.

To succeed at this task is no small feat, but for Larry there are additional issues at play, for he must also negotiate issues concerning dialect as well as class. Fortunately, however, as Sonja Launspach and Martha Wetterhall Thomas assert, no one actually speaks Standard Academic English (SAE) of the variety that is employed in academic circles and SAE is privileged over other dialects because of "*social* and not *structural* characteristics" (237). The significance here is that the preference for one dialect over the other is an issue of power and not of innate superiority of a discursive form. Launspach and Wetterhall Thomas continue:

> Speakers of middle-class Midwestern dialects have an easier time learning the standard because their home dialects are closer to SAE than others. . . . All students can benefit from the understanding that the standard is the language of power, and that in order to fully experience their own power students must master the standard dialect. (237)

Clearly, exploring the issues of dialect in the classroom will assist students in coming to understand the conventions of SAE in ways that don't stigmatize their home language practices. As Victoria Purcell-Gates asserts, "[T]wo sources of language knowledge—experience in use and explicit explanation of the language features that distinguish different types, or registers, of language—must inform the curricular decisions teacher make as they teach children to read and write" (139). And the social context of learning is of paramount importance as is pointed out by Arnetha Bell and Ted Lardner:

> . . . if the linguists are right that the social context is the driving force behind literacy acquisition, then *the social context of your English/language-arts classroom is the most powerful and important variable you can experiment with.* (469)

Students such as Larry need to work in classrooms free of the lowered expectations for students and negative biases by teachers against diverse versions of English. They need to work in classrooms where teachers actively reflect on the impact of their teaching on the individuals who occupy their classrooms, much as Ball and Lardner suggest when they advise us to place the teacher, the student, and the site of literacy at the forefront of our pedagogy (482). In Larry's case, and the case of all students whose dialect does not as closely resemble SAE as the dialects of others from middle class or elite backgrounds, understanding the relationship between his own dialect and the one he seeks to learn is useful and can be explored in an environment that nurtures him as a student.

Perhaps we would better serve students' needs by exploring the possibility of a positive and complementary relationship among the influences that inform them, as Peter Elbow does. By designing exercises for students to produce, study, and translate vernacular versions of English in the classroom, Elbow's work in some ways makes that space in which students might safely negotiate the clashes of culture and language in which they are immersed. Elbow's work helps us to dismantle the either/or dichotomy set up in the wider discussion, for students don't make a simple choice between home and academic cultures. The negotiations always mediate among a variety of influences, including but not limited to academic and home cultures, and these two are certainly not static entities.

Finally, using the language that is privileged in freshman composition and in the wider educated society is okay by Larry as long as he doesn't have to use it in places where it is not appropriate, such as putting it in the mouths of people who don't normally speak

that way and in the moments when he talks to those people and doesn't himself speak that way. Using SAE in some circumstances does not eliminate the need for other dialects or versions of English, even in the classroom. Larry will develop competence to choose the appropriate language if he is given the opportunity.

Conclusion

Nothing is wrong with Larry. If we provide him with safe classrooms where his and others' languages and cultures are valued, Larry and all our students can begin the process of negotiating positions for themselves that reflect their own dynamic and growing awareness of the possibilities available through higher education. To foster their success, we need to assist students in developing their abilities to think critically and locate themselves appropriately. To do so, we need to remember to examine our own cultural lenses and to be aware of the ways we interpret in order to develop sensitivity for the ways others do, and we need to make sure our end comments leave room for students to address for themselves the negotiation process in which they are currently engaged.

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