Conforming in the Classroom: How Language, Discourse, and Social Justice Interact in Academic Settings

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Abstract

The historical roots of the notion of a standardized English language are well established in composition studies; just as well established is the evidence base supporting the fact that our current composition classrooms, at all academic levels, are not encouraging students of diverse backgrounds to use their culturally native voice. However, less thoroughly researched are alternative solutions to these issues. Some researchers, such as Asao Inoue, have tested foundationally altered classroom ecologies that work against racist, sexist, and classist ideologies (Inoue, 2015).

In this paper, I hope to emphasize the importance of socially just representation of culturally diverse language and discourse in the classroom, as well as the harmful ideas associated with “majority discourse,” “standard English,” and other unquestioned norms in academic settings. I also hope to promote more varied classroom solutions to combat the prejudices and biases in current academic settings.

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There is something insidiously conformist about the way we teach composition classes today, and it isn't serving our students equally. Students are forced into writing "academically," with roots in classism, racism, and sexism (Young, 2007, pg. 117). This is nearly unanimously agreed upon by today's composition researchers in the field: the idea of how to write "correctly" comes from a history of white, privileged men who traditionally held power in society, and is thus perpetuated through composition instructors and their classrooms, even if the intent to do so is not actively present within said academic environments (Inoue, 2015, pg. 708).

Writing in this way stifles creativity and personal expression. Students are discouraged from going against established norms, fighting traditions, proposing new or different ways of writing, and giving their "native voice" (that is, their language which comes from their unique, cultural perspectives) (Clifford, 1991, pg. 866).

Let us examine this on a larger scale. Society is structured around the concept of power, and power is characterized by a specific "voice;" this is the only voice that is respected in the society, and with that respect comes the authority to make suggestions and enact change (Delpit, 1995, pg. 1311). Language, power, and respect are all tied to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in complex ways that have been researched thoroughly in other spaces. Regardless, the concept of a "default" or "normal" voice is established in the field of composition, and researchers have concluded that anything besides this majority is a minority, and thus "othered" (pg. 1312).

"Linguistic discrimination" is at the root of the ideologies composition teachers still teach in the classroom today (Young, 2007, pg. 117). Because authority and power are the tools that can enact change, students are encouraged to maintain the "academic" voice so that their papers and research are taken seriously, thus giving them the resources to break existing barriers. The problem, then, is recursive in a way: students take on the academic voice in order to break the barriers to equality, equity, social justice, and fair representation. But often, the students themselves struggle to remove themselves from the discourse they have adapted, "losing sight" of their original goal, so to speak.

Because it is easier to be taken seriously and to represent oneself as an authority in the field when adapting this academic voice, students no longer want to risk losing that established power. Additionally, speaking in an academic voice provides success and with it, employment and money to survive in the world. Changing the established norm is the ideal, but one needs to have food and shelter to survive; in this way, the "majority discourse" is tied to capitalism, as well (Delpit, 1995, pg. 1312).

Thus, conforming is not only encouraged through society but also enforced through the economy; if a person doesn't conform to the majority voice (i.e. "play the game"), at least to some degree, they cannot support themselves monetarily. In a broader sense, this is just one more layer of subconscious confirmation bias. The writer adapting the academic way of speaking cannot help but think (subconsciously or otherwise): Conforming to the established norm has gotten me this far and has earned me this success, so I should continue to adapt to these rules and restrictions.

Variation – exposure to different ideas, cultures, and concepts – is necessary for critical thinking skills (Clifford, 1991, pg. 868). Teachers and professors are implementing a crucial step

toward social justice by permitting and encouraging the use of various discourses and voices in the classroom. But the road to taking these first steps was arduous: What methods brought us here, and how has the field changed or discarded those methods over time?

Once thought to be a sensible compromise to the issue of language racism, code-switching is the antiquated idea of switching between voices in conversation to adapt to whom one is speaking to (Morrison, 2017). Now, researchers in language, writing, and composition see code-switching as a way of accommodating people from majority discourses and backgrounds, thus conforming to the majority. Furthermore, it establishes the idea of a “default” or “normal” voice versus one’s own minority voice, thus "othering” said minority voice.

Researcher Vershawn Young offers a way to represent different voices, including native discourse, word choices, and language in general through code-meshing (Young, 2007, pg. 105). Code-meshing presents one’s own cultural voice and identity as equally valid and respectable. It combines discourses and voices, allowing others to see and understand that arguments made through minority discourses can be just as effective – perhaps more so, because the writer offers a distinct, unique perspective that challenges the norm. Code-meshing is a direct way to combat the idea that discourses have high, impenetrable walls surrounding them, or that they are exclusive to certain speakers (Delpit, 1995, pg. 1312).

Taking further critical race and decolonization perspectives to analyze existing composition classrooms, some antiracist researchers have taken on the challenge of addressing the academic structures that promote conformist thinking – whether they are created with that intent or not. After all, it doesn’t matter if the teachers or educators are not themselves prejudiced against minority discourses; rather, the existing methods and ecologies of teaching composition lead to encouraging the established majority discourse (whether that’s the “academic voice” or

just conforming to the established norms in general) (Inoue, 2015, pg. 708). In *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies,* Inoue suggests doing away with the established norm of a hierarchy-based classroom – that is, a classroom with the professor or teacher at the top and the students at the bottom, in descending order of grades. Equalizing *teacher* and *student* ensures that students learn to criticize and question hierarchical norms in other societal constructs, as well as provide them the confidence and skills to self-advocate and value their own work and voice (pg. 3926).

In "The Subject in Discourse," found in the *Norton* collection, John Clifford offers the notion of breaking down norms in the field of composition for the purpose of creative pursuit, self-expression, and ultimately laying the foundation for societal changes. As Clifford puts it, readers naturally look for new information; thus writers are *implicitly* encouraged to "[avoid] rigid rules," to "interrogate dominant values," and to "look carefully at […] social contingencies of family, religion, gender, and class" (1991, pg. 868). Therefore, teachers of writing and composition should *explicitly* motivate their students to "[defy] normative discourse" and to "open spaces for […] informed resistance that can […] affect hegemonic structures" (pg. 868). From Clifford's perspective, writers would be doing a disservice to their readers by presenting material that is conforming to the existing majority discourse; furthermore, the writer is responsible for sharing nonconforming ideologies with readers in order to provoke defiance of unquestioned standards and beliefs (pg. 868).

Some research has provided possible solutions to reconstructing the classroom and introducing new, anti-establishment ideologies to students. In Karen Hanna's article published in *A Journal of Women Studies,* Hanna proposes the idea of "pedagogy in the flesh," which describes three main goals that a teacher should use in the classroom to promote critical thinking and invite new discourse. First, teachers should allow for silence and "wait time" to produce

original and diverse thought from otherwise overlooked voices. Second, teachers should discard the idea of "colorblindness" in the classroom; diverse backgrounds should be acknowledged so that they are not made unheard and unseen. And third, teachers should assign plentiful free-writing activities, which encourage students to engage the material in as many avenues as possible (Hanna, 2019).

Another article, published in *Urban Education,* offers a methodology for specifically anti-racist classrooms by encouraging white and privileged educators to develop positive racial identity; this means that they acknowledge their position of power, and they use that acknowledgement to craft "culturally responsive" teaching methods (Utt & Tochluk, 2020). The six focus areas that the authors suggest for privileged teachers are divided into two steps: "understanding oneself" and "accountable action in community" (2020). By first demonstrating an understanding of and relation to their racial identity (including establishing a thorough familiarity with histories of multiracial anti-racism), white teachers can then begin to act in positive ways that give minority groups speaking power in the classroom rather than silence them or otherwise undervalue their contributions. Other suggestions that the authors provide for privileged educators are listening to students of color when they are giving critique of their teaching methods, rather than attempting to defend themselves, and communicating with accountability, which encourages privileged teachers to apologize when they are wrong and outline the steps they will take moving forward to avoid mistakes (2020).

Today's composition studies, particularly in pedagogical fields, are generally moving toward a feminist, decolonialist future, which is overall promising to improve fair representation and social justice in composition classrooms. But knowing that researchers are making progress is not reason to stop searching for new and innovative ways to improve writing classrooms for

students. Now more than ever, it is crucial to empower and encourage students from all backgrounds so that they may develop the skills and self-advocacy necessary for breaking down the traditional, societal barriers that have historically acted as obstacles to their participation in majority discourses. By building new foundations and methodologies for pedagogical composition, we can hope to undermine the uncritical, unquestioning act of conforming to society's harmful beliefs and prejudices.

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