

DISCOURSE, DIALECT, & MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Student-Responsive, Strengths-based Pedagogies
for First-Year Composition

Mara Lee Grayson, Ph.D.
California State University, Dominguez Hills

*PLEASE NOTE THAT SOME OF THIS MATERIAL
IS CURRENTLY IN REVISION OR IN PRESS
TOWARD PUBLICATION*

Additional references will be added as soon as possible.

BACKGROUND

Why We Implemented this Workshop

Survey of Composition Instructors

Composition Instructors' Experiences with Language Variation in the Classroom

- Instructional practices related to dialect and language variation
- Training and experience working with multilingual learners
- Perceptions of students' writing struggles
- Interest in faculty professional development
- 30 respondents

Deficit-Model Thinking

Instructors' perceptions of student performance and attitudes

- 97% of instructors said students struggle with grammar conventions and mechanics
- 67% said students use “vernacular” and/or “colloquialisms” in their academic writing
- 73% reported that students have expressed a lack of confidence in their academic writing abilities
- 60% reported that students have expressed a lack of confidence in their abilities to write in English

Instructors expressed frustration with students' progress, preparation, and initial performance.

- Inadequate preparation
 - Quality of high school English instruction
 - Lack of experience with conventions
 - Limited preparation for college-level critical analysis
- Emphasis on students' inadequacies
 - Assumptions that students just aren't good writers
 - Frustration with students' lack of self-editing

Instructor Anxieties

Concern about the new course requirements

Instructors emphasizing grading and evaluation over student progress

Pedagogy and the Student Population

Student Population

- 64.3 percent Hispanic/Latino
- 13.4 percent Black/African American
- 10.2 percent Asian or Pacific Islander
- 8.5 percent White
- 3.1 percent two or more races
- 0.1 percent American Indian
- Immigrant and visa students on our campus represent 100 countries

Our Goals

- Provide theoretical and pedagogical grounding of the connections between composition, multilingualism, and dialect in context
- Emphasize a student-responsive, non-deficit orientation to composition pedagogy that meets students where they are rather than where we think they should be
- Pedagogy needs to be connected to the curricular requirements of the course(s)
- Offer training in concrete practices for teaching and evaluating the writing of multilingual learners

THE WORKSHOP

November 9, 2018

What is “good writing”?

How did you learn to create “good writing”?

What are your goals for your students?

INSTRUCTOR POSITIONALITY

What It Is and Why It Matters

What is Positionality?

- One's orientation relative to a particular space or situation based upon the confluence of one's beliefs, ideas, and experiences, as well as one's interaction with the space or situation at hand
- Traditionally associated with social science research ethics and methodology
- Positionality is contextual because "people are defined not in terms of fixed identities, but by their location within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed" (Maher & Tetreault, 2001, p. 164)
- Positionality is not limited to one social identifier (e.g. race or gender) but is the result of the intersectional experiences resulting from identification (self or social) with multiple groups

Why Does Positionality Matter?

- Positionality influences what we know as well as how and why we know it
- We have “assumptions that we take as universal truths but which, instead, have been crafted by our own unique identity and experiences in the world” (Takacs, 2003)
- Understanding positionality encourages a dimensional, complex understanding of experience, perspective, and situatedness
- Our conceptions of literacy influence our teaching
- “Positionality is a helpful reminder that what is normative in society may not feel normal or typical for everyone” (Grayson, 2018, p. 82)

Positionality: Questions for Consideration

- What is your past experience with the situation at hand?
- What is your role in this situation?
- How might your race/ethnicity/gender/age/religion/location/language/(dis)ability influence how you perceive this situation?
- How might your race/ethnicity/gender/age/religion/location/language/(dis)ability influence how others interact with you in this situation?

Positionality Enters the Curriculum

- Textual choices
- Essay assignments (subject matter, genre, approach)
- In-class activities
- Classroom rules and course policies
- What we view as “correct” grammar, “good” style, and “elegant” prose
- How we frame and address students’ writing struggles
- How we talk about language in the classroom
- How we address students’ dialect
- How we speak

LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

Identity – Community – (In)Equity

Primary Struggles of Multilingual Learners

- Grammar and mechanics
- Less familiarity with linguistic and rhetorical conventions
- Limited experience with conventions of quoting, paraphrasing, citing
- Incomplete understanding of writing assessment practices
- Feeling different and/or inadequate
- Some of these struggles are more discursive than they are linguistic

Terms to Know

- **DISCOURSE:** ways of saying, writing, doing, being, valuing, believing (Gee, 1989)
 - An “identity kit” (p.7)
 - *Primary Discourse:* first learned, home-based
 - *Secondary Discourse:* learned in social institutions
 - *Dominant Discourses:* secondary discourses that, once mastered, bring the potential for material gains
- **DIALECT:** “a variety of a language associated with a regionally or socially defined group of people” (Adger, Wolfram, & Christian, 2001, p. 1)
 - When we speak a language, we speak a dialect of that language
 - No dialect is intrinsically superior or inferior to another

Terms to Know (cont'd)

- **MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS:** A linguistically diverse group of students who are simultaneously learning the English language and other subject matter
- **GENERATION 1.5:** refers to a diverse population of students born and educated outside of the U.S. “who enter the U.S. educational system while in the process of learning English” (Nielsen, p. 130)
 - May also refer to U.S.-born children of recent immigrants
 - From a wide variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds
 - 1.5 students are often fluent in spoken English (Mikesell, 2007; Thonus, 2003) and may be familiar with U.S. educational structures
- English Language Learner
- Emergent Bilingual

Deficit-Model Instruction

- Looks at and teaches toward what students lack rather than the strengths, intelligences, and experiences they bring to the classroom
- Tied to ideologies of meritocracy and cultural deficiency
- Claims that students would succeed if they only worked harder
- Assumes that students' struggles result from cultural, social, or familial inadequacies
- Replaces substantial intellectual emotional growth with limited measurables

Discourse and Othering in Composition

- Discourses of power (dominant discourses) are most easily accessed by those of privileged social groups (e.g. white, middle-class or wealthy, educated, male, English-speaking)
- Discourses of power may feel inaccessible or inhospitable to students of color, poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, or nondominant home languages
- Criticisms of student writing and language are often laden with microaggressions
 - “This student isn’t working hard enough” (myth of meritocracy)
 - “That doesn’t seem realistic” (questioning authenticity)
 - “This writing doesn’t make sense” (to whom?)
 - “This isn’t proper English” (assumes there is one English)
- While no discourses are intrinsically superior or inferior, society makes them so

“Teachers must acknowledge and validate students’ home language without using it to limit their students’ potential. Students’ home Discourses are vital to their perception of self and community connectedness... Teachers can transform ‘the new Discourse’ so that it contains within it a place for the students’ selves.”

(Lisa Delpit, 1992, p. 301)

MEET STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

Inclusive, Student-Responsive Curricula

Aligning Course Goals and Student Needs

- What are your goals for your students?
- What are your students' goals for themselves?
- Our students' educational and sociocultural experiences may differ considerably from our own – and from their peers'
- We *can* teach students where they are without decreasing the rigor of the curriculum
 - Rigor may differ from student to student
 - Identifying where students are – and where they want to be – narrows the scope of our work
 - More clarity and focus → less stress and frustration

What challenges do you foresee?

Creating an Inclusive Classroom

- Students must be given “safe” opportunities to describe and analyze their educational and linguistic backgrounds – and to share their reflections with instructors
- Cultivate trust and openness via the faculty-student relationship
- Highlight students’ strengths
- Consider the ideologies and assumptions *you* bring to the curriculum
- “Teachers can acknowledge the unfair Discourse stacking that our society engages in... Open acknowledgement of it in the very institution that facilitates the sorting process is liberating in itself” (Delpit, 1992, p. 301)
- **Meet students where they are**

See the Student as well as the Writing

See the person behind the writing

- Identify where they are – and invite them to identify where they are
- Consider students' goals as well as curricular learning outcomes

See the person *in* the writing

- Students' identities inform what they say and how they say it
- Work with students to make connections between their oral and written uses of English
- Address and legitimize the content of their writing

Approaches to Feedback

- What does this student do well?
 - Noting successes may improve students' confidence in their writing
 - Identifying what works – and why – may help instructors explain to students why other moves have been less successful and may help students consider approaches to revision
- High-order emphasis
 - Respond to the content of student writing before the mechanics
- What does the student want feedback on?
 - Invite students to note where they feel they need guidance
 - Work with students to set long-term and short-term goals

Approaches to Feedback

- What themes of style, syntax, and structure do you notice?
 - Organizational patterns may be culturally situated
 - Syntax may have patterns from another language or dialect
- Prioritize and narrow corrective feedback
 - Where does the student seem to struggle most?
 - Where does the student seem ready to improve?
 - Don't try to correct everything!
- Work with students to track their progress
 - Follow up with students on
 - Assign an ungraded mid-semester reflection

Key Points

- Our positionality influences how we conceive of, recognize, and assess “good writing”
- Our students’ perceptions of themselves, the classroom, and writing may differ considerably from our own
- We must recognize and honor the strengths students bring to their writing
- Students’ struggles with language and writing may be more discursive than linguistic
- The instructor-student relationship is a significant factor in student success
- Setting both long-term and short-term goals helps both students and instructors prioritize revision
- Language proficiency takes time
- Writing development takes time

MOVING FORWARD

Feedback and Looking Forward

Feedback from Instructors

- “This was a particularly helpful presentation. Much of what we covered here I’ve encountered before, but this training session helped to put some names to many of these ideas.”
- “It was very informative. The guided discussions were most helpful, as we were able to discuss specific applications of the ideas/information on positionality.”
- “Glad you called attention to our tendency to fall into the deficit model so we can make attitude adjustments.”
- “This was the most helpful and productive session thus far. The lecture and discussion on positionality was insightful and a necessary reminder to us that we need to be mindful of our own practices, experiences, and beliefs that shape our pedagogy, which does impact our students’ perception of us and themselves.”
- “I look forward to exploring the resources provided.”
- “I think we need to discuss instructor bias more.”

Possible Next Steps

- Guest speakers with expertise in these areas
- Smaller, optional faculty development groups around individual issues or pedagogical approaches
- Faculty development across the disciplines where applicable
- Collaboration with local two-year “feeder” colleges
- More formal research to examine the efficacy of specific faculty development initiatives and approaches

References & Additional Resources

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MARA LEE GRAYSON

mgrayson@csudh.edu