

Expository Writing Patterns of African American Students

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Among the critical challenges facing today's teachers of English is the need to recognize and fully utilize the wealth of language resources our students enjoy outside school that often go unrecognized and unrewarded within the classroom setting because of cultural differences in language-use patterns or differences in styles of interaction used to demonstrate knowledge. In our rapidly changing society, this issue meets a critical interface in upper elementary and secondary urban classrooms with predominantly African American student populations. For many reasons, these culturally and linguistically diverse students have historically not fared well in the American educational system. In spite of the considerable rhetoric over the past several years, recent research indicates that African Americans and other students of color are still doing poorly in our nation's urban schools (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989; Quality Education for Minority Project 1990). In light of the history of failure and miscommunication that marks the English language arts learning experiences of many African American Vernacular English (AAVE; see **Note**) speakers, English educators are seeking diligently to discover ways to capitalize on these students' strengths as adept language users.

The focus of this article is to share information on how some AAVE speaking students have successfully utilized their language abilities—the language of their everyday lives—within the context of their expository writing and to share principles that have guided me in my work with language diverse students.

These comments are based primarily on my experiences as an African American classroom teacher, researcher, and speech/language pathologist. I begin with a text that was written by one of the students with whom I have worked, a text which is an illustration of one student's account of her

experience as she attempts to synthesize disparate forms in her creative writing classroom. This is a tale about one teacher's struggle to allow students to take risks in creative ways; however, it sends the message that African American ways of expressing themselves are not valid ways of communicating ideas within the school setting.

The incident that this student describes took place only a few years ago; but it can no longer continue to exist.

[Oral comments on the tape recorder as the student begins writing: "Okay, now I'm gonna be like telling a story, and I know what it's about and everything. I just don't know how to get it started. Okay, I'm just gonna write it out."]

I'd been given an assignment by Mrs. Brakett, my 5th-grade teacher, to write a creative story. I decided to write a story about my shoe. Well, it wasn't actually my shoe but an evil shoe that had the power to make me extremely clumsy. After having completed the story, I discovered it was a masterpiece (I mean that in the most humble way).

Unfortunately Mrs. Brakett didn't share in my enthusiasm. She praised the story, but said that the use of language was unsatisfactory because of the word "ain't." That one little word, that I only used once in the entire four pages of brilliant creativity "forced" her to give me a B-. Now I would've been able to understand her judgment if this had been a book report. But this was supposed to be a creative story. So it wasn't really me saying ain't, but it was my shoe saying ain't. Now I don't know about you, but I've never met a shoe with good grammar.

I think it took me a good 3 years to finally put that behind me, and start taking creative risks again.

In her oral discussion of the incident, the student concluded:

Well anyways, I think that was bad for my writing because I didn't want to express myself anymore. I started writing like what I thought the teacher would like instead of what I wanted to

A study of four African American students reveals the link between oral and written expression.

say. But I have no idea how to put that on paper.

CONNECTING ORAL AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION

Over the past 15 years, my firsthand observations of African American students' skillful use of exposition in informal settings have led me to regard many of their strategies for including the language of their lives in their written exposition as an untapped language resource which educators might use in developing more responsive pedagogy or in designing more effective language arts curricula. As English educators, we know that all students bring into the classroom a wealth of language, much of which is used in skillful, inventive, and dynamic ways outside the classroom. Yet, within some classrooms, the everyday language of AAVE speakers is "judged uneducated, sloppy, and ugly, or believed to be a debased form of so-called correct English, with no discernible rules of grammar or use" (Balester 1993, 2). Thus, the study of language for these students is often reduced to an arid array of dreary drills to identify and correct "inappropriate" language.

This is particularly true in many English classrooms designed to focus on expository writing. Gumperz, Kaltman, and O'Connor (1984) found that the oral styles or structures of expression in AAVE are *less* easily translatable into the standard academic forms of expository written prose than those of some other cultural groups in our society. Smitherman's (1994) study of teachers' assessment of National Assessment of Educational Progress (1980, 1985) writing samples found that, in fact, while most teachers considered AAVE *syntactic features* that appeared in their students' texts as errors, they actually gave higher scores to students that used AAVE *discourse styles* in their writing. This research supports my observations of some AAVE speakers who have been adept at integrating their everyday language into their writing. Through one year of ethnographic and sociolinguistic fieldwork in one urban 11/12th-grade classroom, I met AAVE speakers who broke the traditional norms of experiencing failure. *English Journal's* call for articles motivated me to re-visit the expository writing of these students in order to discover some of the

strategies they used to successfully meet the requirements of their writing classes while maintaining a sense of their own cultural vitality in their work.

FOUR STUDENTS

To demonstrate these strategies, the voices and texts of actual AAVE-speaking students are most compelling. The written texts of four urban high school students, two males and two females, in a culturally and linguistically diverse, college preparatory English classroom were collected over a one-year period in some school and non-school contexts. These four students attended a West Coast high school where at least 40% of the families received state and/or federal welfare benefits.

I visited these students' classroom twice each week and conducted detailed text analyses of the students' writing during the second half of their 11th-grade year and the first half of their 12th-grade year. Three of the four students, one male and two females, described themselves as bidialectal. They spoke AAVE sometimes but were mainstream American English speakers most of the time. That is, most of the time they were speakers of the language of wider communication in American society. One male, however, described himself as an AAVE speaker a majority of the time. In particular, most of the time he used a logical, systematic pattern of language expression that is characterized by a highly consistent grammar, pronunciation, and lexicon that is the first dialect learned by many lower- and working-class African American youth throughout the United States. It is also used in much the same way by many African American adults in their most intimate home settings with family and friends (Labov 1969).

As is the case with many AAVE speakers, these four students demonstrated an ability to skillfully manipulate and interchangeably use AAVE, mainstream, and academic English during discussions—style switching with ease depending on their degree of personal engagement in the conversation and the topic being discussed. These students tended to use more AAVE features in their speech when they were more engaged in a conversation (Labov 1969) and when talking with peers.

TEXT SAMPLES OF THE STUDENTS

The five text samples included in this article were selected from the case study files collected on these students over the course of the one-year study. These texts were selected as a small representation of the many texts that could have been chosen to illustrate the expressive patterns that emerged throughout many of the students' texts. In addition to the students' written texts, my data also included observation field notes, school artifacts, audiotaped class discussions, audiotaped individual and small group discussions, student surveys, non-school writing samples, and interviews with school personnel and the classroom teacher. During my classroom observations I noted that it was not unusual for these students to be asked to write critiques of prior readings and discussions of literary works. The 5-paragraph essay format had been discussed in class, and students were encouraged to include such devices as introductions, conclusions, and transitional links in their writing. As in most academic classroom communities, standard notions of exposition dictated that in most cases text topic would be clearly stated, followed by elaboration on that topic using lexically explicit language with a theme-based focus. The standard notions of exposition also dictated that in most cases text organizational patterns would include topic associations, comparisons and contrasts, and hierarchical structures.

These four African American students had learned what would be required of them for most academic writing tasks, and they demonstrated their abilities to provide it on numerous occasions. On other occasions, these students demonstrated their ability to use strategies that differed from the traditional forms of academic essays by including glimmerings of their own culturally-influenced styles of expression in their academic and non-academic texts.

LANGUAGE SKILLS OF THE STUDENTS

Traditionally, AAVE speakers' expressive skills develop through their cultural socialization practices that emphasize community interaction, adaptability to changing circumstances, and individual interpretive talents. Consequently, AAVE speakers develop language skills characterized by adaptabil-

ity, collaboration, problem solving, and individual responsibility for making interpretive judgments (Smitherman 1977; Heath 1989). These are some of the discourse skills AAVE speakers draw on in their out of school literacy experiences. Traditionally, AAVE speakers also use rhythmic language, patterns of repetition and variation, expressive sounds, and phenomena encouraging participative sense-making, like using dialogue, tropes, hyperbole, and call and response patterns in their traditional ways of expressing their ideas. Although these and other techniques highlighted in this article are by no means uniquely AAVE characteristics, they are nonetheless features used more frequently by students outside the classroom than inside. They are also features that are more often associated with oral contexts than with written exposition.

Although schools and employers often-times picture a majority of AAVE speakers as victims of "language poverty" or "illiteracy," anthropologists, social historians, and folklorists have detailed the long-standing rich verbal and literary tradition, including forms of oral and written narratives, rhymes, stories, rhythmic expressions, sermons, and jokes characteristic of this culture (Heath 1989). Becoming more aware of these historically divergent views about my students' language and literacy abilities, especially as they relate to their out of school oral and written literacy practices, helped me to recognize the skills and resources these students bring to the class. Making frequent reference to these resources in my classroom teaching helped me in my efforts to raise the self-concept and interest levels of my students.

THE EMERSON ASSIGNMENT

On one occasion, the students received a classroom assignment to write a two to three-page essay on Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance." They were asked to select a quotation from Emerson's essay and explain, analyze, and evaluate the quotation as well as relate it to a contemporary, historical, social, or religious figure. The following text is one example of how these students drew on their out-of-school literacy skills (see *italicized* words) while also successfully meeting the requirements of the teacher's academic assignment.

Like many other diverse students, African American students bring rich resources to the classroom in the form of "out of school" orally based text design patterns.

“There is a time in every man’s life when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion. . . .”

These are the sentences I have chosen in this composition. In this composition I will attempt to explain, analyze, and evaluate the sentences, as well as relate them to a contemporary, historical, social, or religious figure.

To explain and analyze what Emerson is saying is quite simple, his thoughts are man versus self-reliance. Emerson is saying that man is afraid to expand his horizons and succeed in society, because of the fact that he clings on to others for support. The true success of an individual comes from self-reliance, because you always know what you need and you’ll always do yourself right. To achieve self-reliance would place you among the list of great human beings. Emerson says, “When private men shall act with original views, the luster will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen.”

To evaluate these sentences on a scale of one to ten, I’d give them a nine. The reason I wouldn’t give them a ten is because they are too deep. These sentences are very complex, but lots of knowledge can be taken from them. . . . Emerson says, “To be great is to be misunderstood.”

I would like to relate what Emerson is saying to the great El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, or better known as Malcolm X . . . Malcolm felt that if we the black race continued to envy . . . we would become an ignorant race . . . Malcolm took himself for better or for worse when his father was brutally killed. . . . He did this by saving all of his hatred and vengeful ideas and focused into something positive . . . Malcolm X had no idea what power resided in him, but he used what he had and only to discover that he had many talents. His main one [was] his ability to earn trust and establish unity among brothers and sisters . . .

This concludes my composition and I hope *you’ve* enjoyed my explanation, analysis, evaluation, and my comparison to a historical figure. In short, Emerson was a great man also, with the ability to write and give words new meaning. I’m sure he was also a misunderstood individual. I will leave

you with this little bit of information to conclude my report.

When first reading this text, it is immediately evident that the student takes a highly political stance toward the assignment, as indicated by his decision to use Malcolm X as his choice of a contrasting biographical subject. A careful reading of the text further reveals that the student skillfully draws on his out of school literacy skills to establish a direct rapport with his audience. Although the first part of this essay is somewhat formal and detached, it becomes much more discursive and performative when the writer talks about one of his personal heroes, Malcolm X. This student uses the inclusive “we.” He also speaks directly to his audience, using “you’ve” and “you” to establish an atmosphere of direct interactive communication with an assumed familiar audience. After establishing this atmosphere the student goes on to use this school writing episode to perform rather than simply communicate (Dyson 1991). After reading his last paragraph, the reader becomes aware that the writer has successfully controlled and enticed the audience into his written performative world.

In this composition the student also draws on a traditional African American discourse characteristic of incorporating the quality of a performance in his text, with the performer delivering his ideas directly to a specific audience. Dyson (1991) explains that a performer differs from a mere communicator in both the nature of language produced and in the kind of stance taken toward an audience. Techniques used to create a performance vary across different sociocultural communities. Within the African American tradition those techniques include such musical phenomena as the rhythmic use of language, patterns of repetition and variation, expressive sounds, and phenomena encouraging participative sense-making, like using dialogue, tropes, hyperbole, and call and response patterns within the text.

Close observations of the writing strategies of the four students in this study revealed that they were able to intersperse what Smitherman (1977) refers to as African American modes of discourse into their formal expository writing; namely, they created an atmosphere of interactive

Students participate in many discourse communities, and each of these communities may have preferred norms for effective communication.

audience negotiation or inclusion in their texts by using phrases like “I hope you’ve enjoyed my explanation” and through skillful uses of style shifting, i.e., when the Emerson author moves from a formal stance in the opening to a performative stance (“I would like to relate”). These strategies created a sense of orality or conversational involvement within these students’ texts. Detailed text analyses of over 30 different texts revealed, however, that this sense of orality and broad range of text representations were more evident in the students’ non-school written texts than in their in-school texts.

THE MENDACITY ASSIGNMENT

On rare occasions, these students were allowed to select their own topics and audiences when completing classroom assignments. On these occasions I noted a heightened sense of personal authority, first hand knowledge, engagement, and more expressions of excitement in the texts. In these few cases, there was also a greater incidence of culturally influenced and individual creativity present in the students’ papers. This was evidenced by a more frequent use of AAVE idioms, double negatives, and questions embedded in sentences without using question inversion. These practices are common culturally influenced AAVE patterns of expression that Burling (1973) and Wolfram (1969) describe when discussing AAVE. Following is one example of how a student uses AAVE styles of expression within his academic writing. Again, I have used italics to highlight some of the out of school literacy skills this student drew on to enhance her written texts.

Mendacity

Mendacity has a simple meaning, a lie. *We use mendacity in our everyday lives, whether we know it or not. We use it to get out of certain situations, to make others look bad, as well as put yourself in favor of others. In Cat On A Hot Tin Roof mendacity is the main theme. It took a father and a son, and gave them a misunderstanding, as well as take a husband and wife, and gave them a shallow hatred of the other . . . Big Daddy lived amongst liars all his life, but he was very tolerant . . . His wife believed that nothing was never wrong, and never questioned him . . . Brick’s whole life turned into a lie . . . He had played football with Skipper*

. . . Margaret never lied but once in the movie, but it was soon rectified. From *coming up poor*, and hungry Maggie knew what it was like not to have material things. . . . In conclusion we see that love prevails, even over such a thing as mendacity. We see how mendacity tore down a family, and how it made people believe. This same thing exists now, but how will you handle it?

Most educators recognize that this student used a characteristic syntactic feature of AAVE, a double negative (“nothing was never wrong”), and a common African American idiom, “coming up poor.” Many educators would not, however, recognize that the student also used another characteristic feature of AAVE, repetition and skill in creating formulaic patterning (see italicized portions in the first half of the text). This strategy, although often found in students’ texts, is not generally acknowledged as a feature of AAVE. Smitherman (1977) posits that African American modes of discourse include “verbal strategies, rhetorical devices, and folk expressive rituals which derive from a mutually understood notion of [Black] modes of discourse, which in turn is part of the rich inheritance of the African background” (103). In the tradition of the African American preacher, these modes of discourse include rhythmic, dramatic, and sermonic language produced in tones reminiscent of traditional Black church rhetoric. In this rhetoric, repetition and formulaic patterning is used to evoke an image or mood, to drive a point home, or to give special emphasis to a message.

TWO INFORMAL LETTERS

To obtain a better understanding of the writing behaviors of my AAVE speaking students, I also met with them during the summer recess months to gather oral and written texts in informal settings, i.e., in my home, at a pizza party and at a casual writing session held on the school grounds. The following informal letter was written by the second male student in the group during a casual writing session held on the school grounds.

The students had been asked to write an informal letter to someone they felt very comfortable communicating with. Beyond that, the students were allowed to select their own topic, audience, and purpose in

writing the piece. This student chose to write an informative letter to his fellow classmates on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. In writing the following letter, he demonstrates a strong presence of personal voice in his writing, and evidences a keen sense of engagement in his text. This informal text, however, adheres to a well organized pattern that would be acceptable in an academic setting.

Malcolm and Martin

People agreed with Martin Luther King because he preached all that non-violence stuff. You know?

I'm not saying he sold himself or his people but I mean he catered to a white need. And they, he was like saying ok you treated us like dogs, you made us look like shit, you know you really, really tore our families apart you lowed our self esteem you made it to where a son can't even look up to his father as a role model anymore you know you whipped his father in his own house and raped his mom so many times, you know? It's so bad.

And well, "Martin Luther Kings is saying to forgive us. Hey, yeah, let's back him up a little bit. We'll kill him later but let's let him calm down the black community. So they're not as bad as everyone."

When Malcolm X said fuck the white people, you know, You know, you did us wrong, you know, you promised me one hundred acres of land and a mule. Which we never got. Now when they went and blew up the Japanese and all that kind of stuff, they gave them land. Now they say ok to the Black man. They say we did you wrong we'll give you a mule and a acre of land. They never did that shit. You know what I'm saying? They never, never did.

When Detroit Red, Malcolm X, said, you know, we have our own stuff, you know, we don't need no white man, you know. We're economically, you know, better off on our own. Have our own teachers who would want to teach our people, who would want to educate our youth you know. Have our own grocery stores where you don't have to go in there and always go to the end of the line cause the white person want to get up there first, you know what I'm saying? You know, and it worked like that for a while, you know. The Black panther movement was going on, you know.

But the white people got scared because they started seeing the Blacks with the same things that they had and that's scary. It's very scary . . . You see them as a nuisance and you're scared. And the only way to keep them down is by physical and mental abuse. Like you tell them "our mind is better than yours." You keep them down mentally. That's what white man's been doing.

Again, this student writes a highly charged political text. Often the political overtones of a text can have a tendency to distract the reader, causing her to overlook other less obvious resources the student uses to skillfully express his ideas. In this highly political text, however, the writer demonstrates his ability to skillfully and thoughtfully use AAVE when he is trying to make a point. He incorporates phrases and terms that I believe are African American idioms, such as "he sold himself," "Detroit Red," and "The Black panther movement *was going on*." This student did not, however, use these kinds of devices, terms, or phrases when writing academic assignments to his teacher.

During a small group discussion the student later revealed that he did not use such devices in his academic writing because he realized that for his teacher to interpret them correctly would require a mutual understanding of these terms based on similar cultural experiences. Realizing that his Hispanic American teacher probably did not come from a similar cultural background, the student chose not to include them in his academic texts unless he was trying to make a very specific cultural or political statement.

In this informal text, the student used the phrases "you know" throughout the text and "you know what I'm saying." He also used language that speaks directly to his audience, e.g., "you promised me one hundred acres and a mule," again, giving the impression of a dialogue. These strategies are somewhat reminiscent of the instances of social group interaction and cooperation during literacy events that Heath (1983) discusses in the lives of her Trackton residents. Note, however, that this student does not use these particular types of discourse strategies in his academic writing assignments.

The following text was written by one of the female students in the group during a

pizza party. Again, the students had been asked to write an informal letter to someone they felt comfortable communicating with and were allowed to select their own topic, audience, and purpose. This student chose to write a letter to her girlfriend describing her reflections on self destruction.

Dear Michell,

Hey girl what's up? I'm sittin' here talkin' to you for an assignment. I guess I wanna talk to you about Self Destruction. Personally I don't know anyone who use drugs but I do know people who are hard-headed and ignorant. And we both know girls who are always in trouble, excluding us of course. To many girls out there are getting pregnant, and using drugs at the same time they don't even care. And all this Stupid Stuff w/colors, you know, Red & Blue, Crips & Bloods, that's all B.S. Just another reason to shoot a brother. It's like Kool Moe Dee said "I never even ran from the Ku Klux Klan and I shouldn't have to run from a black Man cause that's Self Destruction". And it's a serious trip how most violence to Blacks is done by blacks! And then theres discrimination between blacks because of lighter and darker shades. Like, when people call me white girl, before of course I got this tan. I'm sorta glad I'm not that light anymore. but I'm still ____ by the way I talk because it's too proper, but that's just the way I was brought up. Whenever I'm talking on the phone to Marcus when his friends talk to me they right away assume I'm white. But I don't get mad, I'm used to it. It get's me mad when they think that I think that I am better than them. But I don't think that. I guess it's from growing up in Smithtown, *all white* very few blacks. And another thing I hate is drugs. That's stupid too. Drugs ruin peoples life and it's even worse that people are willing to die for them.

Well I guess I'll be going now, I'll call you when I get home tonight.

Love Always,
Ayana
"The one & only"

This text illustrates one of the many instances where the students interspersed a brief narrative in the body of their texts to enrich their expository writing. In this text the student selects a topic familiar to most inner-city residents: self destruction. She draws heavily on a common awareness of

life experiences around gangs and incorporates jargon and slang terms immediately identifiable by anyone that shares her day-to-day experiences. She even draws on familiar songs that she assumes her reader will immediately identify with. She then adds a brief personal story to emphasize the point she is trying to make about discrimination.

Dyson (1994) speaks of the "need for story" for individuals across cultures and communities for providing "some kind of social connection and feeling of mutuality" (5). Dyson also suggests that stories serve a basic function in connecting the diverse sociocultural landscapes of our country and that they have potential for becoming a powerful tool for sharing and interpreting cultures in our classrooms. Erickson (1984) documents the use of stories in the form of narratives, anecdotes, and parables by AAVE speakers as a strategy for giving "a metaphorically concrete manifestation of an underlying abstract point or moral" (91). This coherence device or strategy is used by AAVE speakers to link a text together around an underlying similarity of point.

In my analyses of the case study files collected on these students over the course of the one year study, I noted that all four students interspersed narratives within their texts as a strategy for implicitly linking their topics through a singular or series of personal anecdotes. Sometimes, when using this strategy, the themes of their texts were not overtly obvious to the casual reader. As explained by Erickson (1984), this is a characteristic feature of AAVE which states that it is not necessary to state the underlying point of the story explicitly—indeed it would be inappropriate—since the culturally-informed receiver could be counted on to get the point based on the receiver's assumed communicative competence. Other readers who shared the writer's background could immediately understand the message as logical and well formulated. I noticed, however, that when these students completed academic writing assignments, they generally made explicit associations among topics and marked their topic shifts with terms like "then," "but," and "on the other hand."

HOW LANGUAGE AND WRITING CONNECT

One objective in my sharing these students' writing samples is to demonstrate

Within many traditional writing classrooms, exposition continues to lack broad participation of diverse voices.

with descriptions and concrete illustrations of how some AAVE speaking students have successfully utilized their language abilities—the language of their everyday lives—within the context of their expository writing. Such illustrations give English educators concrete examples to examine and provide illustrations that can help them in developing an expanded notion of available resources that students can use to express their ideas in classroom settings. By demonstrating specific instances when AAVE speaking students have successfully included culturally influenced strategies and styles of expression in their writing, it becomes evident that such inclusions that emerge in their students' texts may not represent random instances of poor writing. Some of the culturally influenced discourse strategies these students have used included:

1. Using repetition to create formulaic patterning;
2. Establishing a link or sense of rapport with the audience through the use of inclusive lexical terms like “we’re”;
3. Taking on a quality of performance in the style and delivery of the text;
4. Using orally-based organization patterns in addition to the topic associations, compare and contrast patterns, and the traditional five paragraph essay used in most classrooms (see Ball 1992);
5. Using interactive dialogue with the audience with phrases like “you know what I mean, man”;
6. Using common African American idioms that assume mutual understanding based on similar cultural experiences;
7. Linking topics through the use of personal anecdotes and narratives interspersed within expository texts.

By looking closely and critically at these students' written texts, I recognized that they participate in many discourse communities (home, school, workplace, etc.) and that each of these communities may have preferred norms for effective communication (i.e., specialized vocabulary, politeness norms, organizational patterns, etc.). A sociocultural view of language supports the notion that different cultures may value and use particular language and literacy behaviors not practiced in other discourse communities.

The academically successful AAVE speakers in this group were able to move comfortably within at least two discourse communities. The fact that they were academically successful means that they mastered the specialized literacies and rhetorical conventions of academic discourse. Their continued acceptance as members of the AAVE speaking community means that they had developed proficiencies in the literacy skills needed for both communities. They were effective style-switchers. For them, the social environment determined the register they used at any particular time. These students recognized that the consequence of not making the required social and cognitive adjustments, of failing to adopt appropriate language use patterns within different discourse communities, could result in academic failure within the school setting or in being labeled a “lame” within their informal vernacular speaking discourse communities. These students recognized that acknowledging the influence of social factors was essential for developing effective interactions within the various discourse communities they came in contact with on a daily basis.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) presents a perspective that helps us view writing as “participation in a dialogue.” He argues that our voices—or articulations of consciousness—are shaped by particular social and cultural histories. He emphasizes the dialogic, or multi-voiced, nature of language and suggests that we create meaning as a new whole that is achieved in dialogue between the self and others. Bakhtin reminds us that our words are already populated with the social intentions of others and compels us to remember that they will always belong in the mouths of others in time and space. This makes us consciously aware of the importance of respecting the voices of others.

TWO KEY PRINCIPLES

This brings me back to the two key principles that have guided me in my work with language diverse students. The first key principle has been the notion of multiple voices—with an emphasis on acknowledging the value in diverse voices and in cultivating a desire to actually “hear” those voices. Within many traditional writing classrooms, however, exposition continues to lack broad participation of diverse voices in identifying, constructing, and formulating

the knowledge we expect all students to master. The presence of voices representing literacy practices among AAVE speakers, both past and present, are particularly absent in most of our English language arts curricula. Yet, anthropologists, social historians, and folklorists have detailed the rich verbal tradition characteristic of this culture (Heath 1989). Like many other diverse students, African American students bring rich resources to the classroom in the form of “out of school” orally based text design patterns and their abilities to interactively include audiences in their writings, draw on culturally-based idioms and expressions, and draw on personal anecdotes to enrich their work and implicitly link their topics.

The second key principle has been to remember that, used strategically, these devices can be translated into practices that promote strategic school success. At the classroom level, African American students’ language preferred text design patterns (Ball 1992) and modes of expression can be included in the curriculum, not only as building blocks for bridging African American students’ community-based experiences with academic-based text design patterns and expressions, but also as rich resources of knowledge that all students should know as they broaden their abilities to express their ideas in a variety of forms.

The inclusion of these devices in the writing curriculum is a strategy that is in keeping with other approaches that have successfully used the experiences of the students to enrich learning experiences. The teacher involvement program discussed in Heath’s (1983) *Ways With Words*, and Hawaii’s Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) are examples of noteworthy projects in which the children’s background, language, and culture are used as the basis for their education. Rather than avoid the students’ experiences, these programs consciously seek them out and use them as a major resource in the curriculum. The results are positive.

These accounts of how AAVE speakers have successfully used the language of their lives to communicate their ideas serve as vivid illustrations of the reservoir of literacy skills students can bring into the classroom from their everyday lives—if allowed to do so. Research confirms that these students’

uses of formulaic patterning, interactive involvement with the audience, orally-based text patterns, and implicit topical links through the use of anecdotes are reflections of untapped resources that can be used to enrich English language arts classrooms. It is hoped that these accounts will help teachers become more aware of the resources of their students and, moreover, that it will help them to exploit the power of these resources for bringing students and their diverse voices into the classroom.

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Note

The linguistic system used by more than 20 million African Americans in the United States is often referred to as Black English Vernacular (BEV) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) when speaking of the full range of language practices used by many African Americans in the United States. The term African American Vernacular English used in this article refers to the highly consistent grammar, pronunciation, lexicon, and stylistic features that comprise the first language variety learned by most lower- and working-class African Americans throughout the United States and used in much the same way by adults in their most intimate home settings with family and friends (Labov 1969). AAVE speakers use certain linguistic features which, although they appear in other American English varieties, occur in AAVE more frequently, systematically, and consistently than in other English varieties. In spite of the fact that linguistic research over the past 20 years has focused on the systematic nature and merits of AAVE, it is generally considered to be a low prestige variety of English (Erickson 1984).

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EJ SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Mission of the NCTE

"We are nearing the end of the period in which we must face unusual conditions produced by the Great War. Already we hear of unemployment. We may expect that soon the agencies for the teaching of teachers will find their resources taxed. What sort of person shall they train? What kind of ability shall be attracted into our ranks? The answer to this question depends partly upon ourselves. It is our mission to attract to teaching as a career the most promising young men and young women now in our high schools and colleges. It is ours, also, to help to guide them in the choice of their courses and to idealize their life-work. They must come to believe . . . that teaching is truly a profession and not a trade, that it rightly requires a long period of rigorous preparation, that it seeks to maintain high standards, and that it is willing to give an unmeasured service."

James Fleming Hosis. 1921. "The National Council of Teachers of English: A Working Program." *EJ* 10.1 (Jan.): 10.

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