

TEACHING
FOR JOY AND
JUSTICE

RE-IMAGINING THE LANGUAGE ARTS
CLASSROOM

Linda Christensen

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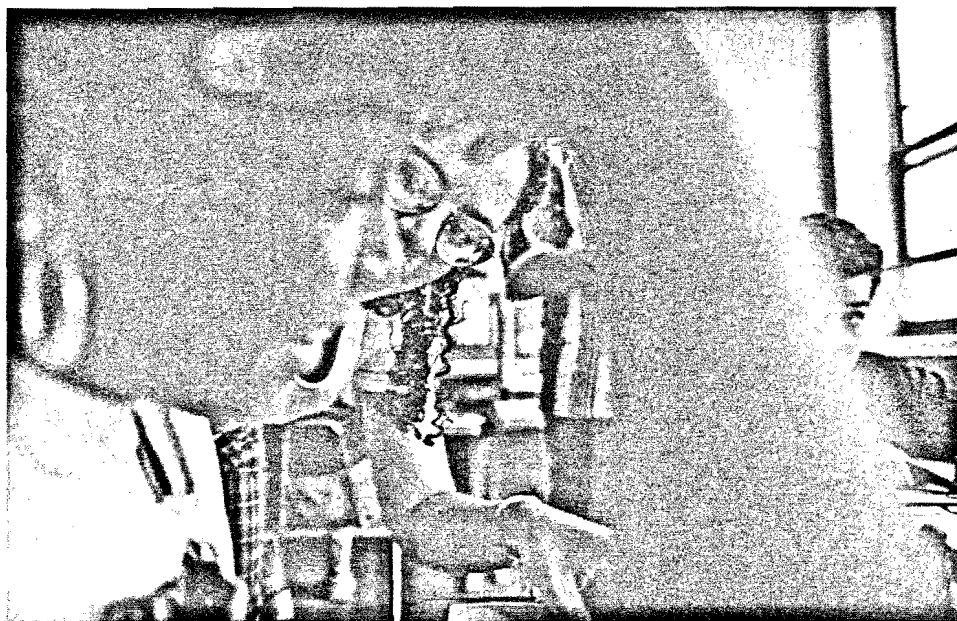
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The Politics of Correction: Learning from Student Writing

How do we both nurture students in their writing and help them learn the language of power? We start by telling them what they're doing right.

Although I am now the Director of the Oregon Writing Project and should know how to talk right, I still have to watch my words because when I get emotional, home slips out. I say “chimbly” instead of chimney, “warsh” and “crik” when I least expect it. I frequently substitute words because I can’t get my tongue around the correct pronunciation. My brother and sisters

used to chuckle when our mother talked. Her mouth, grown and raised in Bandon, Ore., had a hard time acquainting itself with foreign words that have become part of our daily language—burrito or futon.

As her children, we struggle too, but our language—which has caused us shame in the outside world—bonds us when we’re together deliberately mispronouncing words and conjugating verbs the way Mom did.

These days, I’m frequently called into schools to “fix” students’ grammar and punctuation errors. I admit to feeling churlish about using conventions—punctuation, grammar, spelling—as the entry point to student writing. I believe writing must begin in students’ lives and be generated for real audiences. However, in recent years I’ve witnessed too many low-income students, students of color, and immigrant students who have not learned how to use Standard/Marketplace English—the language of power. Sure they can write great slam poetry; some can even write killer stories; a few can write essays, but they are often riddled with convention errors. As I discussed in Chapter 5, “Language and Power,” failing to learn these skills handcuffs students. Their

lack of fluency with the language of power will follow them long after they leave school, silencing them by making them hesitant to speak in public meetings or to write their outrage over public policy because they "talk wrong."

So how do we both nurture students in their writing and help them learn the language of power? We start by telling them what they're doing right. Too many students are scarred by teachers' pens in the margins yelling, "You're wrong. Wrong again. Ten points off for that comma splice. Where is the past tense?" Language Arts teachers become accustomed to looking for errors as if we will be rewarded in some English teacher heaven for finding the most. I know this from experience. I still remember the day when in a frenzy of doing my job right, I corrected every error on Jerald's budding paper and witnessed his transformation from eager to dejected student. I had to turn that practice around and look for what the student does right.

As I've indicated throughout the book, I teach conventions in the context of student writing. While we play with language through poetry and sentence combining, teaching students how to "correct" their writing happens most often within the text of the students' essays and narratives. Yes, there are moments for whole-class lessons on getting rid of passive language, for example, but the real work takes place on the page where students wrestle with their own prose.

Nathan, for example, was a tongue-tied writer when he entered my class in the 9th grade. At the beginning of the year, he gave me very little writing—expecting to be hammered, I suspect. In September, he wrote "My Freshmen Football": "I Realy Enjoy the sport. I like Hiting and running. We had a great team and a great year. I would like to encourage all to play the Sporth."

In this writing, it is clear that he's afraid to write. Instead of marking his errors, I asked questions and made comments in the margin of his paper. "Show me what you like about football. How do you feel when you're on the field? Tell me about a moment in the game. Make me see the movie." I brought in models written by other writers, especially student writers. In a revision, he wrote:

When the halmut toches my Head my body turns Like doctor Jeckel and Mr. Hide. I become a safage. And there's no one who can stop me when this happens. My blood starts racing my hart pumping. Like a great machine of power. And when that football moves that's the time for me to move and get that quarterback. And anyone who get's in my way is asking for problems.

His paper went on for two error-filled pages. But in this passage he wrote with passion on a topic he cared about. This comes when a student is freed from the teacher as marksman waiting to "correct" every word. In my response to his paper, I pointed out what he was doing right. For example, I love how he uses similes and metaphors throughout the paper. He also uses strong verbs: touches, racing, turns, pumping.

Teacher as Scientist: Looking for Patterns of Errors

Obviously, when a student's paper is filled with errors, giving only positive feedback is a dereliction of duty. Students need to know how to access the "language of power." Clearly, Nathan struggled with conventions. But he had so many errors that as a teacher, I had to choose which ones to first target for change. In her book, *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy wrote, "[T]he teacher must try to decipher the individual student's code, examining samples of his writing as a scientist might, searching for patterns or explanations, listening to what the student says about punctuation, and creating situations in the classroom that encourage all students to talk openly about what they don't understand."

At the beginning of each year I sit with my students' papers and categorize each student's errors, looking for patterns.

Using Shaughnessy's scientist analogy as a model, at the beginning of each year I sit with my students' papers and categorize each student's errors, looking for patterns. I keep this list for myself, so I can work with students to eliminate their errors one at a time. I also create a personalized page for each student on my computer which is ongoing and part of the Patterns of Errors folder I keep for that class. (See "Student Patterns of Errors," pp. 269-270.) When I return students' papers, I attach their "pattern of error" sheet to their drafts and revision, so they can review them to correct their individual "code," as Shaughnessy calls it, before they turn in their next assignment.

As I work with students on their errors, I hold them accountable to self-correct before turning in a final draft. Nathan's paper, for example, demonstrates problems with capitalization, apostrophes, spelling, and basic sentence structure. I tackled capitalization first because it was the easiest problem to solve. Then I made him accountable for checking to make sure that he used capital letters

correctly. By correcting just the capitalization problems, Nathan eliminated many errors. Once he mastered that convention, we moved on to another.

When I first explain this process, it sounds so time-consuming that teachers nod and turn away. Believe me, I am not a martyr. At Jefferson, I taught three 90-minute block classes, typically totaling around 90 students, but I would continue to do it even if my student load was 150 or more. Because each student's error chart is on my computer, I can update it regularly and print it out when I hand back papers. It actually takes less time than marking—and remarking—the same errors on paper after paper. It is also more effective. When I mark student errors, instead of making them responsible, I'm doing all of the work. If students read their error sheets and make the changes, they do the work. Also, they have to review their error sheet prior to turning in final drafts, so I see fewer errors as the year moves on.

Like most writers, I have patterns of errors I need to watch out for in my writing. Published writers know their Achilles' heel and return after their draft and revise based on this self-knowledge. For example, I often use passive voice, so after I complete my first draft, I go back, highlight every *is*, *was*, *were*, and see if I can rewrite the sentence to make it more active. I also tend to use too many "buts," so I check myself for those as well. This self-knowledge and self-check is a habit I want to instill in student writers.

Teaching Mini-Lessons

Many students in my classes make the same errors—punctuating dialogue, for example—and I can teach mini-lessons on that topic. I find the best way to deal with these problems is to ask students to generate the rules. They remember their rules far longer than when they read the rule and correct the errors in a punctuation exercise.

When I'm teaching students the rules around dialogue, I copy a page from a short story or novel that demonstrates many of the rules—a piece of dialogue interrupted by an attribution, a question, a dialogue where the speakers change but there is no attribution. Then I put the students in small groups and say, "I want you to imagine that you have been consulted by a textbook company to write up the rules for punctuating dialogue. I want your group to examine this passage and figure out the rules. Here are some clues: Look at where the quotation marks are. What do they surround? Look at the punctuation. Highlight it and write up a rule that describes where it is. Look at where the capital letters are. You need to write the rules

so that students across the United States can follow them. Include an example for each rule." Students post their rules on large sheets of paper or the black or white board. After the class checks to see if the rules are correct, we post them on the wall. If I have time, I also type their rules and distribute them, so students can have a reference when they write. At the end of the lesson, I tell students, "If you forget the rules, just pull out a novel that has dialogue and figure them out again." Sometimes I bring in dialogue published in a text from another country so students can see that conventions change from country to country. They are socially constructed, not a part of nature.

Logical Errors from Home Language

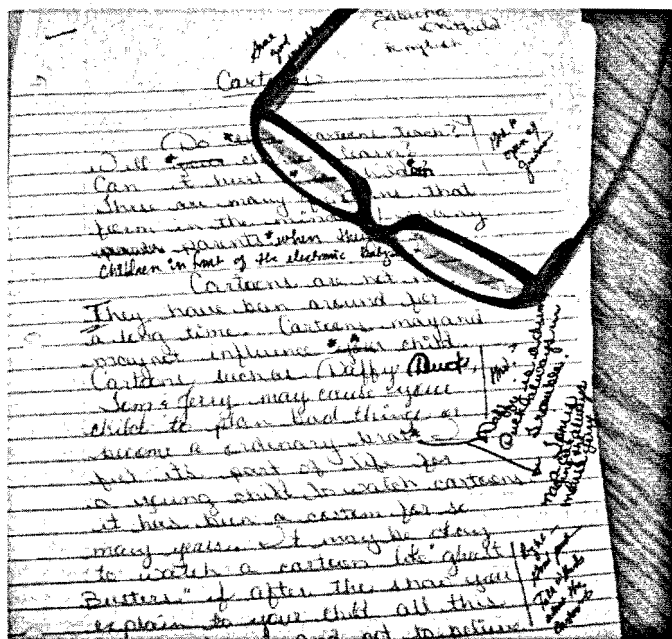
Sometimes the "errors" are part of a student's home language. In that case, the "correction" process needs to make it clear that the student isn't "wrong," but that each language has its own way of making plurals or using verb tenses. Students need to learn the differences between their home language and Standard English.

Students need to learn the differences between their home language and Standard English.

In my classes, I attempt to value language variations by studying—and honoring—their use in literature first. After reading authors who use home language and Standard English—for example, Lucille Clifton, Jimmy Santiago Baca, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka—the class discusses which genres and situations call for them to code-switch between their home language and Marketplace English. Students are quick to point out that when writing poetry or dialogue in narratives—genres that call for informal language—they may choose to use their home language. But when they write essays, college or job applications, state writing tests—genres that call for formal language—they may choose Standard English.

As I discussed in the last chapter, as a teacher in a predominantly African American school, where the majority of students exhibited some features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE, also called Ebonics or "Spoken Soul"), I needed to learn the rules and history of the language so I could help students move between the two language systems.

In my student Larry's narrative about shoes, for example, I kept track of his patterns of punctuation errors,



Sabrina Whitfield, a 9th-grade student, revises her own essay.

but I also helped him understand when he used features of AAVE:

Them old Chuck Taylor high top nasty looking Converse these are the ugliest shoes I had ever seen. I thought as I put them on.

"Mom why I have to wear these ugly shoes." My mom say they was in style.

"Larry be quiet these are in style right now."

"I don't see how they raggedy."

While Larry made some basic errors in punctuation, many of his "mistakes" correctly use the grammar structure of African American Vernacular English. As I wrote in the last chapter, this can be difficult for a teacher without a linguistic background to understand. Geneva Smitherman noted in *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, "Linguistically speaking, the greatest differences between contemporary Black and White English are on the level of grammatical structure." It looks like Larry's errors are simply grammatical, but if a teacher studied the grammar of Ebonics/AAVE, she would recognize that he followed many of the linguistic features of black vernacular.

For Larry, simply correcting these grammar errors without acknowledging their roots in his home language is not only inefficient, it sets Standard English up as the "correct language" and African American Vernacular English as wrong. To walk in the halls of academia or the halls of power, Larry needed to understand how he was transferring the "logic" of his home language into the

sentence structure of Standard English, and he needed to know how and when to change that.

For example, in the sentence, "My mom say they was in style," the lack of the third person singular present tense *s* (*say* instead of *says*) follows the grammar patterns of AAVE. I like the explanation John and Russell Rickford give of this rule in *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*: "In getting rid of third-person *s*, you might think of AAVE as making the rules of English more regular, or as an advocate for equal opportunity: the verb doesn't have special endings with other subjects, so it shouldn't with third-person singular subjects."

The lack of a *be* verb in the run-on sentence, "I don't see how they raggedy" is another example of Larry following the rules of AAVE. In mainstream English, the sentence would read: "I don't see how. They are raggedy." The absence of an *is* or *are* is called "zero copula." Copulas couple, or join, a subject (in this case, "they") and a predicate (what's said *about* the subject—in this case that the shoes are raggedy).

As I mentioned, to code-switch, he must be aware that he used AAVE, which has a complex set of rules and restrictions—especially around the verb *be*. According to the Rickfords, "As with most rules of spoken language, no AAVE speaker has ever been taught these things formally, and few speakers could spell them out for you (unless, perhaps, they had learned them in a linguistics course). But AAVE speakers follow them, almost religiously, in their daily speech." And, I would add, many students incorporate their spoken home language into their writing.

In my experience, teaching African American students the grammar structure and history of Spoken Soul, or AAVE, evoked pride in their language, but also that electric "aha" moment of discovery. All students, not just African Americans, benefited from learning that African American language is a highly structured grammar system.

Teacher Study Groups

In my previous role as a high school language arts specialist, I encouraged teachers to form study groups to analyze the patterns of errors their students bring to class. During one summer, a small group of language arts and ESL teachers looked at the errors their Russian-, Vietnamese-, and Spanish-speaking students made in writing. Once they identified the patterns, they discussed and studied the original languages of their students. In a draft guide for language arts and ESL teachers, they noted the "logical errors" students made. In their introduction, the group reminded teachers that "ELL students: 1) experience

linguistic interference from their first language sound system; 2) apply first language rules to Standard English; 3) speak fluently before they learn to write fluently; and 4) over-apply newly learned grammatical rules." They also listed common "errors" and related them back to the rules governing the first language. For example, in Vietnamese, the adverb expresses time; the verb remains unchanged; therefore a student whose first language is Vietnamese might write: "Yesterday, I go to the mall."

Teachers at a predominantly African American school formed a study group to analyze their students' errors and study AAVE. The majority of the teachers in the group were African American. During a discussion one morning, a teacher pointed out, "I always told my students what my teachers told me, 'Read your writing out loud and correct those places where it doesn't sound right.' One of my students said, 'But it does sound right.'" The teachers discussed this point for a while. "It sounds right because it sounds like the way we talk at home. It can sound odd when we use Standard English." The study group helped clarify that the old piece of advice might work with Standard English speakers, but not with students whose home language is not the same as school language.

Once students begin—error by error—to understand how to "clean up" their writing, they gain confidence in their ability. They no longer feel like targets in the cross-hairs of the teacher's red pen; they don't need to "wash history from their throats" as poet Patricia Smith so passionately writes in her essay "Talkin' Wrong." Teachers exercise enormous power when we take our pens to student papers. Will we use our power to help students understand that Standard English is one dialect among many or will we use it to whittle away students' voices and home languages one error at a time? ■

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SAMPLE: Student Patterns of Errors

Student Name: Nathan

Date: September 10

Punctuation

1. Check capitals: Do you

For example, *I Realy In*
You don't need the ca
Ask yourself the quest
Is this a name?

Capitalize names of str

As the year progresses,
students gradually
become responsible for
more editing.

Student Name: Nathan

Date: October 15

Punctuation

1. Check capitals: Do you need the capital?

For example, *I Realy Injoy the sport. I like Hiting and running.*
You don't need the capitals on really, enjoy or hitting.
Ask yourself the question: Is this the beginning of a sentence?
Is this a name?

Capitalize names of streets—Kerby Avenue, Killingsworth Street

2. Run-on sentences: Do you have two or more sentences strung together without punctuation?

Count the number of words in each sentence. Put the number in the margin. If the number is large, you might have a run-on. If the number is small you might have an incomplete sentence.

You wrote: *Start with fifty if you need more I will give it to you.* This breaks down to two sentences:

Start with fifty. If you need more, I will give it to you.

Spelling/Vocabulary

1. Common errors: it's = it is; its = possessive

It's raining again today. My basketball lost its bounce.

Narrative Writing

Great job on dialogue and blocking in your most recent piece.
Add more character and setting description.

SAMPLE: Student Patterns of Errors

Student Name: Larry

Date: December 10

What I love about your writing: Your writing is rich in story. It made me laugh out loud when I read your first line: "Them old Chuck Taylor high top red nasty looking Converse shoes." I liked your description of the shoes: "they was way too flexible ... I thought they was supposed to support my ankles." You capture the natural sound of dialogue between you and your mother.

What you need to work on for your narrative: This is a delicious first draft. It provides lots of opportunity for you to develop it more. Look back at the narrative criteria sheet and see which elements are missing—add those. Read back over Sarah's "Pro Wings" and notice the way she "blew up" the scene in the store when her mother was buying her shoes. Could you add a scene like that? Could you add a scene where you felt uncomfortable in the shoes as Chetan does in his school scene in "Baby Oil"?

Grammar

African American Vernacular English/Standard English:

- AAVE uses subject and a pronoun, SE uses one or the other.
You wrote: My *mother she* went to the store.
In SE: My *mother* went to the store.
- AAVE drops the "s" on the verb when you use he or she:
You wrote: My *mom say* they was in style.
In SE: My *mom says* they [are/were] in style.
- AAVE drops *is* or *are* between a subject (in this case, "they") and a predicate (what's said about the subject—in this case that the shoes are raggedy). SE inserts the *is* or *are*.
- You wrote: I don't see how *they raggedy*.
In SE: I don't see how. They *are raggedy*.

*Note: Due to space limitations, this example does not show: punctuation, spelling, syntax, genre patterns.