

Carol Severino

WHERE THE CULTURES OF BASIC WRITERS AND ACADEMIA INTERSECT: CULTIVATING THE COMMON GROUND¹

ABSTRACT: Despite the fact that we live in a heterogeneous society of intersecting and mixing cultures, literacies, and languages, scholars and teachers have overemphasized the distance and mismatches between basic writers' and academic cultures and ignored important correspondences and areas of overlap and intersection between the two. Evidence for their disproportionate emphasis on disparities and incompatibilities is the pervasive use of transportation and in-group metaphors in the discourse on academic literacies. The author examines two such areas of overlap between home and school, between basic writers and the academy: journalistic reading and leisure writing in the home, and positive high school writing experiences.

Metaphors of Mixing

The continuing furor over E. D. Hirsch's notion of a single national cultural literacy symbolized by the melting pot has strengthened the competing notion of (plural) cultural *literacies* (Bizzell, "Arguing" 141), more aptly represented by the metaphor of the U. S. as salad bowl. The salad bowl suggests that the ingredients retain their separate identities, whereas the melting pot implies that they blend together and lose their individual identity by contributing to the collective personality of the larger society.

Carol Severino is interested in how culture, personality, and politics affect writing and writing pedagogy. An assistant professor in the Rhetoric Department at the University of Iowa, she directs the Writing Lab and teaches courses that explore the above issues.

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1992

Both of these metaphors are problematic for different reasons. The melting pot doesn't describe the experience of African-Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and Asians who, confronted with discrimination and prejudice, find "melting" difficult if not impossible; nor does it describe those people of color who, victimized by racism and motivated to preserve their native culture, are not even interested in completely assimilating into the mainstream amalgam. The salad bowl metaphor accompanying "Cultural *literacies*" means that each cultural community operates with its "own" configuration of discourse patterns and linguistic features, but exclusive ownership of discourse features is impossible to sustain in a heterogeneous society; in most locales of the U. S., especially urban areas such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Boston, cultures are in close contact. Consequently, some communities' discourse features are inevitably borrowed or shared by other communities, both "minority" and "mainstream." In the sixties, for example, progressive White college students borrowed rhetoric from the Black Power movement, and much of both groups' discourse has been gradually incorporated into the rhetoric of the Democratic Party. With the homogenizing influences of media, education, and business, when classroom and workplace draw a mix of Asians, Latinos, African, and European Americans, no community is an island. Cultures mix, intersect with, and overlap one another.

As an example of cultures in contact, consider the hybrid snack "nachos" now available at every mainstream sporting event and movie house—tortilla chips coated with melted, processed American cheese. More specifically, an illustration of cultural literacies in contact is the March 18, 1991 cover of *The New Yorker*—a painting by artist A. McCarthy of a Puerto Rican "Cuchifritos Restaurant" in Manhattan. Signs on the storefront announce that besides Puerto Rican specialties of "bacalaitos" and "alcapurias," "cafe expresso" and "cuban sandwiches" are offered. Thus, in one illustration, features of Puerto Rican, Cuban, Italian, and American cultures and the Spanish, English, and Italian languages mix. (The Irish American artist must be included too.) Here, the cultural literacy of the upper-middle-class world of *The New Yorker* intersects with the less-than-affluent world of Spanish Harlem. Because cultures in many U. S. urban areas are, as Ralph Cintron (in press) observes, porous and permeable, the salad-bowl metaphor inadequately describes sociolinguistic processes in action, unless the cucumbers, absorbing liquid from the tomatoes, get soggy, and the tomatoes become more crisp by virtue of their contact with the cucumber. As

Betty Jean Craige notes in her explanation of the holistic model for the humanities:

There are no culturally static populations of human beings any more than there are permanent genetically homogeneous populations of organisms of any kind; there are no ideal cultural types; there is no purity. Nor does any population evolve either genetically or culturally in isolation. Intermingling—of genes and of ideas, values, languages, religions, and models of reality—occurs in time. (400)

Intersecting Cultural Literacies

Investigating cultural literacies, as well as disciplinary literacies across the curriculum, is becoming part of composition studies as our classrooms grow more diverse. And, as there are multiple literacies based on cultures, there are multiple *academic* literacies based on particular disciplines and emphases within the same discipline. David Bartholomae's definition from "Inventing the University" is the most often cited; academic literacy is students extending themselves, "by successive approximations, into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine 'what might be said' and constitute knowledge within various branches of our academic community" (134).

Instead of emphasizing conventions of each individual discipline like Bartholomae, Mike Rose in *Lives on the Boundary* emphasizes *interdisciplinary* connections. For Rose, academic literacy is using the strategies of summarizing, classifying, comparing, and analyzing, to *cross* disciplines (138) especially between the humanities and social sciences as we do in rhetoric. For Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, and Robert Pattison, academic literacy is critical/political literacy—the ability to comprehend the disempowering messages from Washington D. C., General Motors, Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and CNN (Cable News Network) in order to formulate empowering arguments *against* them, arguments grounded in valorizing working class, minority, and women's culture. On campuses where critical academic literacy has been institutionalized in curricula, or at places such as the University of Texas where such attempts were made, we have witnessed a backlash of protests with cries of "ethnic particularism," "reverse racism," and "political correctness" directed against what more conservative faculty and students see as a kind of "diversity didacticism."

Ironically, some folks at both the left and right ends of the political spectrum have the same tendency to see students' home culture and academic culture as disparate, distinct, and distant entities. This dichotomous characterization of home and school cultures, I will point out, is even more extreme when the students are considered basic writers by the institution's placement mechanism. Yet given the aforementioned multiplicity of both cultural and academic literacies, a number of areas of intersection, overlap, and feature-sharing exist between them. I will argue that while the numerous and important disparities and mismatches between home and school literacies and cultures should be acknowledged and described, it is these areas of overlap that we should also emphasize in the way we perceive our students, their backgrounds and abilities, and the curricula we design for them. In Bizzell's Venn diagram of circles representing the "native" and the "school" discourse communities, perhaps the area of intersection should be larger ("Cognition" 219). Consider, for example, the way persuasion is done in writing at the university—with factual evidence, documentation, and appeals to scholarly authority, along with the way persuasion might be accomplished at home—through personal testimony, cajolery, and appeals to parental authority. As rhetoricians and teachers, we must acknowledge and describe in detail the differences but, at the same time, we should not fail to notice the obvious common features: the common aim of persuasion for getting work done, the common use of evidence, common appeals to authority and audience. Citing Bakhtin, Kurt Spellmeyer writes in his essay entitled "A Common Ground":

Because languages "intersect" with one another on many levels at the same time, entry into a community of discourse must begin, not with a renunciation of the "home language" or "home culture," but with those points of commonality that expose the alien within the familiar, the familiar within the alien. (266)

Transportation and In-Group Metaphors

Our neglect of these points of commonality between two cultures is made painfully obvious when we examine two kinds of unsettling metaphors that pervade descriptions of academic literacy in composition—transportation and in-group metaphors. Transportation or journey metaphors include crossing bridges, crossing boundaries, traveling from the margins to the center, and *being on the way to or on the road to* literacy with a mentor as kind of

chauffeur or tour guide. Listen to composition teachers discuss their students and you will hear them asking, “How *far away* are students from academic literacy when they enter the university? How do we help them *get to it*? And then what happens to them psychologically and socially when they finally do *arrive*?” It is indeed difficult to avoid these metaphors in educational discourse. Bridge-building is Shirley Brice Heath’s metaphor to describe the function of ethnographic study by teachers and students to make connections between home and school. Although this was not Heath’s intention, the way we interpret the bridge metaphor, often used with “gap,” as in “bridging the gap,” is that the student crosses over the bridge (gap) from home to school culture as Richard Rodriguez did, not that s/he uses the bridge to go back and forth between cultures; the assumption is that after the student, with the help of the guide, crosses the bridge, s/he burns it. Operating with a certain missionary mentality, we neglect Heath’s corollary that the bridge enables *teachers and tutors* to cross into the student’s culture (354). Usually, when we speak of crossing boundaries, it is the student who is on the journey, not the teacher, and the implication is that the student has only a one-way ticket. When the student crosses boundaries, s/he is surmounting the barricades of race, the quicksand of class, and the boulders of gender, and moving linearly toward academic literacy. The movement is unidirectional—from home to school culture. Like Richard Rodriguez, you can never go home again. As a matter of fact, neither Rose nor Rodriguez seemed interested in bringing his home culture into the academy. In their particular circumstances, ethnicity represented a handicap to be overcome, not common ground for intellectual pursuits. To the young Mike Rose, being Italian meant being poor and depressed. To the young Richard Rodriguez, being Chicano meant being shy and excluded. Neither seriously considered going back and forth between communities—the option of a bilingual/bicultural mode. They felt impelled to *move on*, not back and forth. The journey metaphors have religious connotations, too; the student is being spiritually transported by the teacher and by an inspiring humanities program from the margins to the center. He is being brought into and invited into the club—the second metaphor.

Rose uses the club to describe the role of his mentor, Father Albertson, in his intellectual development: “Nothing is more exclusive than the academic club: its language is highbrow, it has fancy badges, and it worships tradition. It limits itself to a few participants who prefer to talk to each other. What Father Albertson did was bring us *inside the circle* . . .” (58). The other popularizer of the club metaphor is Frank Smith, whose book urges teachers to tell

students that learning to read earns them membership in the literacy club. The problem with the transportation and club metaphors implying moving from the outside to the inside, is that they are unidirectional and don't allow for the integration of home and school literacies, an acknowledgement of the common ground between the two, the back and forth movement between them, and the rhetorical movements made by the teacher/tutor as audience. Another problem with "the journey to join the club" is that rarely does anyone mention that the club should revamp its membership policies and its purposes for being, instead of inadvertently or, as children say, "accidentally on purpose" excluding by elitism, intimidation, and those mysterious discourse conventions and tricks that keep us all off guard, as Peter Elbow recently demonstrated in his article, "Reflections on Academic Discourse" (145). Eliminating the highbrow language and fancy badges, and diversifying the curriculum, including more third-world and women writers and texts, will be interpreted as signs of welcome to students (Guerra 83-84), most of whom rarely encounter mentors along the roadways of higher education.

Academic Advantages of Double Consciousness

When I taught composition in Chicago, my rosters listed students with exotic names: one quarter for example, I had Phongsak, Yuya, Lambros, Wieslaw, Moises, Jose, Sarkis, Teratha, Devonna, Ursula, Chemaine, Berko, Ilya, and Marek. In certain ways, I found that some concerns of this United Nations rainbow group intersected more with some academic concerns than do the interests of some of the mainstream students I teach in Iowa. Many of the Chicago-area students possess a double, even a triple consciousness; they have already experienced two or more cultures; many know two or more languages. Hence, even though many received less than adequate preparation for college, were admitted to the university through the opportunity program under "different qualifications," and are considered basic writers by the composition program, they are in some ways more experientially ready for, and indeed are active participants in, some of the inquiries into comparative cultural study and contrastive language study that occur in history, anthropology, political science, sociology, geography, psychology, linguistics, comparative literature, and foreign languages. For example, second- and third-generation Chinese and Filipino students pursued research projects on the Tiananmen Square Massacre and the Marcos regime with the same zeal and productivity that Terry Dean describes in his article "Multicultural

Classes: Monocultural Teachers.” These students may not have mastered English verb tenses and modal auxiliaries, but their stories, analyses, and arguments about culture conflict, isolation, and acceptance are moving, powerful, often poetic examples of ethnic literature; the appeals of their writing and speaking move and change their audience of fellow classmates, tutors, and teachers. We also cannot overlook the fact that some are literate in biochemistry, fiber optics, and heat transfer—subjects in which we teachers of the humanities and social sciences are often illiterate.

Two Areas of Cultural Intersection

In my research and teaching, I have studied two other areas of intersection and common ground: 1) journalistic reading and leisure writing in the home, and 2) positive reading and writing experiences in high school. Survey data I collected on 45 academic support program students that registered for two credit-bearing composition courses, reveal home and high school literacy experiences that are rich and varied, contributing to generally healthy attitudes toward literacy. These data refute common and false stereotypes that working class and minority students are deprived of intellectual and print stimulation in the home, whereupon, the assumption is, they go to bad schools and develop bad attitudes toward reading and writing that we college teachers then have to change. As a matter of fact, much of the college literacy literature seems to ignore or dismiss high school altogether, creating in one’s mind a picture of the entering college freshman just emerging from the comfortable womb of the home culture’s oral tradition. College students are given the same psychological profile as five-year-olds leaving home to go to kindergarten for the first time. How can we fail to acknowledge that freshmen have just spent the last 12+ years in school? Even if schooling took place in a country other than the U. S., it was still an academic environment, often more demanding than the typical U.S. high school. Freshmen’s backgrounds are not the blank slates on which we will write the new literacy experiences we design for them. Their psyches have already been engraved with a multitude of out-of-school and in-school reading and writing experiences, many of them positive. In the university where I taught, one of the reasons we revised our writing assignments for the sequence called “Issues in Writing and Schooling” was that we realized it was based on the premise that the students’ language arts experiences up to the time they entered *our* classrooms had been filled with failure. We had even assigned essay tasks eliciting from them contrasting English class experi-

ences, high school vs. college, with subtle hints in the assignment that the college experiences were far different and far better than the high school ones.

The Literacy Profiles of 45 Basic Writers

By reporting the following survey information, I will paint a portrait of students from working class and minority cultures to counteract some popular beliefs about them based on impressionistic and anecdotal evidence and to demonstrate common features with academic culture. This group of 45 basic writers was admitted through the opportunity program usually because of low ACT's or low high school ranks. They had an average reading level of 11.8 (the eighth month of the 11th grade) and average ACT verbal score of 12.6. A little over a third of the group was African-American, a little less than a third White, one-sixth was Hispanic, and one-sixth Asian.

At-Home Reading

Lack of reading material in the household is a common deficit explanation for students' difficulties with reading and writing. In what Stephen North calls the practitioner's "lore," anecdotes abound decrying how the living rooms of working class and minority families are bereft of bookshelves, or if bookshelves exist how they are occupied by ethnic and/or religious knickknacks instead of books. Knickknacks, instead of the latest magazines, also rest on the coffee table.

However, as an index to the availability of reading material in their homes, the students in the study were asked which magazines their families subscribed to. Over two-thirds said that their families subscribed to one or more magazines, and over one-third said they subscribed to two or more, figures that are especially positive because many academic support students are economically burdened and receive financial aid for their tuition. The most frequently mentioned magazines were news weeklies such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Second most frequently mentioned, but only by African-American students, were *Jet*, *Essence*, and *Ebony*. Third most frequently mentioned were magazines geared toward teens' and women's fashions and other traditionally feminine interests: *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, *Vogue*, *McCall's*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*. However, special and academic interests were well-represented; a number of students' families subscribed to the kinds of publications that Maxine

Hairston recommends as serving as excellent models for student writing: *Popular Science* (4 students), *Consumer Reports*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Reader's Digest* (each mentioned by 2 students), *The New Yorker*, *New Shelter*, *Discover*, *Psychology Today*, *Rolling Stone*, *Crain's Chicago Business*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Photography*, *Photo World*, and *Architectural Record* (each mentioned by one student). This magazine reading is a clear area of intersection between family and academic literacies, between home and school cultures. Four students subscribe to computer magazines—*Byte* and *Family Computing*, two students to car magazines like *Hot Rod*, a student on the tennis team to two tennis magazines, two to *Playboy*, two to the gun magazines *Combat Arms* and *Combat Weapons*, and one student apiece to *Playgirl*, *People*, and *True Story*. Nine of the 45 students, one-fifth of the sample, read publications in another language. Three read Spanish publications, one each read Chinese, Filipino, Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian ones, and another read Armenian, Arabic, and Turkish periodicals. When asked about out-of-school, unassigned, or voluntary reading of *books*, all but 6 of the students reported doing some. Most of this reading was for pleasure and enjoyment which contradicts the assumption that hardly anyone reads anymore. Especially popular were books about teen-age alienation, especially Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and among African-American students Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Science fiction and horror were next in popularity with Ray Bradbury and Stephen King frequently mentioned. Nine students, all female, read romantic stories and novels, especially V. C. Andrews and Jackie Collins. However, even works in the canon were mentioned as having been read in the students' leisure time. One student said he had read *War and Peace* and *David Copperfield*; another read Hemingway.

Out-of-School Writing

When asked about writing outside of school, all but two reported doing writing that was not assigned by a teacher, which again seems to invalidate the corresponding piece of lore that hardly anyone writes anymore. The most common genre was letters to friends away at college, boyfriends, and relatives. Almost two-thirds of the students said that they wrote letters. Two students wrote to pen pals. One wrote letters in Spanish to pen pals in Chile, Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. A Philippine student wrote to friends she left behind, a Chicano student wrote to friends in Ireland. The Burmese tennis player wrote letters of inquiry to tennis coaches across the country.

A total of 11 students were at the time of the study writing in a diary or journal. Three students wrote poetry, one in Croatian. One student wrote short stories when she was bored and another was working on a novel that she hoped to have published. In addition, a few students reported doing extended writing on the job. One fellow who worked for the Boys' Clubs had to write about the activities he organized and the way the boys responded to them. Two who were doing consumer surveys had to write down customers' responses.

When asked to describe positive high school writing experiences, every student had a writing story with a happy ending to tell, especially if the assignment involved writing about themselves, writing on their own choice of topic, or winning a prize. These data refute the stereotype we college writing teachers have that writing curricula of inner-city high schools are punitive at the worst and at best pedagogically naive or unsound, and that therefore we college teachers have to redeem them from their sordid pasts.

The literacy histories of these basic writers contributed on the whole to generally positive attitudes toward reading and writing. Before and after their composition course, students were given the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test and a parallel Reading Apprehension Test. On a scale that went from 26 (the lowest apprehension or the most confident) to 130 (the highest apprehensive, or the least confident), the average apprehension score for both reading and writing before the course was 63, closer to the bottom than the top, that is, closer to confident than apprehensive.

Of course, one may reply that browsing through popular magazines and breezing through teen-age novels do not a scholar make, but these journalistic and leisure activities are undeniably more common ground for extending the practice of rhetoric. This common ground can be expanded and cultivated by increasing students' rhetorical, linguistic, and cognitive repertoires of purposes and ideas, genres, and composing processes, by helping students comprehend others' arguments, criticize them, and incorporate them into their own. Likewise, social science and humanities curricula can use the common ground of culture as a base to expand students' interests and knowledge and to foster a multicultural education. Historically underrepresented students may even find themselves advantaged rather than disadvantaged, the traditional perception of them, as universities mainstream multicultural education into the canon and core curricula. A double consciousness should be viewed as an asset to academic literacies, not a detractor from them.

Not only do transportation metaphors in the discourse of academic literacy fail to acknowledge the common ground between

student and school culture, they also fail to provide a model for what happens to the teacher, tutor, or fellow students. What kinds of moves do *they* make? Surely in that rhetorical situation, both teacher/tutor and student alternately act as the moved or persuaded audience. Surely, we as teachers have been changed by the appeals of our students' speaking and writing, especially by their ethical appeals, the appeals of their backgrounds, culture conflicts, and past struggles. As Patricia Bizzell asserts, education should be truly reciprocal, not "something done to one person by another" ("Arguing" 151).

Clearly these rich and varied experiences do not fit a deficit model of alleged cultural and linguistic deprivation; nor do they even describe a culturally exotic "other." Such multicultural literacy experiences are fertile ground for exploration, by both teachers and students. When learning is a two-way rhetorical street, teachers can abandon the roles of chauffeur/tour guide for the role of collaborator/facilitator—orchestrating the sharing of knowledge, perceptions, and experiences. Instead of trying to "transport" students to academic culture, teachers can strive to replace metaphors of transportation with those of collaboration and, through curricular change, make academic cultures even more diverse and multicultural, thereby cultivating the common ground between basic writers' and academic cultures.

Note

¹ The author would like to thank the members of the Rhetoric/Composition Study Group in Chicago, especially John Schilb and Sally Harrold, for helping stimulate some of the ideas in this article.

Works Cited

- Aronowitz, Stanley and Henry Giroux. *Education Under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Debate Over Schooling*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985.
- Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems*. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford, 1985. 134–65.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "Arguing About Literacy." *College English* 50 (1988): 141–53.

- — —. "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing." *Pre/Text* 3 (1982): 213–43.
- Craige, Betty Jean. "Literature in a Global Society." *PMLA* 106 (1991): 395–401.
- Cintron, Ralph. "A Reading of Walls: The Politics and Economics of Print in a Mexicano Community." *Julian Samora Research Institute Working Paper Series*, in press.
- Daly, John and Michael Miller. "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension." *Research in the Teaching of English* 7 (1975): 272–89.
- Dean, Terry. "Monocultural Teachers, Multicultural Classes." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 23–27.
- Elbow, Peter. "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How It Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." *College English* 53 (1991): 135–55.
- Guerra, Juan. "Bridging the Gap Between Home and Academic Literacies." *Purposes and Ideas*. Ed. David Jolliffe. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1991.
- Hairston, Maxine. *Contemporary Composition*. Boston: Houghton, 1986.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Hirsch, E. D. Jr. *Cultural Literacy*. Boston: Houghton, 1987.
- North, Stephen. *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton, 1987.
- Pattison, Robert. *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock*. New York: Oxford UP, 1979.
- Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. New York: Macmillan, 1989.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam, 1982.
- Shor, Ira. *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Smith, Frank. *Joining the Literacy Club: Further Essays into Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.
- Spellmeyer, Kurt. "A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy." *College English* 51 (1989): 262–76.