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A DESIGN FOR A DEVELOPMENTAL WRITING COURSE FOR ACADEMICALLY UNDERPREPARED BLACK STUDENTS

While developing the original design for a developmental composition course at Marquette University, we studied approximately 150 writing samples produced by academically underprepared Black students. Most students were freshmen who had recently graduated from inner-city Milwaukee high schools and, although we found a tremendously wide range in linguistic sophistication among those sampled, slightly over half fell into a fairly homogeneous middle group. The writing of this group was, in general, typified by the following excerpt from a freshman's theme. She had been assigned to analyze Art Buchwald's diction in an article in which he satirized Lester Maddox's stated position on prison reform:

This paper is about a statement Mr. Maddox makes. He said, we need better prisoners in our prison to have a better prison. How Mr. Buchwald disagree with him, but he writes an essay and pretends to agree with Mr. Maddox statement only to make him look worst then he really is. How in Mr. Buchwald essay, he use diction. The way in which he uses word and the way he turn phrases around or the way he say words meaning the oppose to what he really try to say.

An analysis of this sample and others like it forced us to consider whether much of the professional discussion of the needs of dialect-speaking students, and the curricula generated from such discussion, have not been founded upon oversimplified expectations and distorted assessments of their linguistic capabilities. In planning a curriculum to meet her needs, for instance, should this student be described as a "dialect speaker"? Certainly there are several features, including forma-

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tion of plural nouns, subject-verb agreement, and indication of possession, that suggest that she is a speaker of Black dialect. But will she be a competent writer, will she be able to survive in the college classroom if she is treated primarily as a dialect speaker and taught to use the inflections of the dominant dialect, Edited American English, where required? Surely most of us would agree that the most notable feature of this student's writing is her obvious inability to make language work for her. Although her difficulty in using language as a vehicle makes it impossible to fully assess the extent of her comprehension, it does seem that she has at least begun to grasp a complex assignment and that, however incoherent her expression, she does have some inkling of what Buchwald was up to. But the sentence fragments, anxious repetitiveness, and vague circularity at the end of her introduction all indicate that she cannot translate her logic into language and, most important, that dialect differences are the least of her worries.

This *relative* insignificance of dialect variances was a common feature in the writing of most students sampled. Furthermore, we found the overgeneralization of EAE patterns evident in her fusion of past and present tense "rules" ("Maddox *mades*") to be prevalent. Random code-switching was also a recurrent factor in the majority of samples. (In the excerpt above, note the EAE subject-verb agreement and BD plural noun formation in "he uses word," but the BD subject-verb agreement and EAE plural noun formation in "he turn phrases," which occurs later in the same sentence.)

From these observations we concluded that the best possible writing course would carefully avoid two major oversimplifications: 1) that our students are conscious, consistent, and fluent writers of Black dialect, and 2) that any attempt to teach them to become bidialectical could succeed without being related to the larger question of how language itself functions. The samples provided ample evidence that most of the students who would benefit from a developmental, basic writing course were best characterized as inexperienced and unpracticed writers, a fact that probably has less to do with considerations of dialect than with the realities of understaffed, overcrowded urban schools and the tendencies of an increasingly visual, media-oriented society. Consequently, the assumption that has come to underly our course is that before our students can be expected to manipulate the inflectional and syntactical patterns of two dialects, they must have an awareness of the potential of language to be controlled and used and a certain degree of conscious knowledge about the structural components of sentences and how they function. The academic,

social, and political imperative to learn the dominant dialect is simply not the only or even primary challenge most of our students face. A course that would adequately serve their complex and diverse needs would have to look beyond dialect differences without losing sight of them.

By analyzing the writing samples we had collected, it was not difficult to determine what we would teach in the course; among our top priorities were constructing and punctuating sound English sentences, using simple and functional methods of coordination and subordination, adding the inflections of the dominant dialect, and avoiding usage errors, many of them involving the interchanging of homonyms (for example, their-there-they're, your-you're, past-passed, know-no). The problem that soon reared its ugly head was how to organize all of these diverse priorities into a course that would make sense to students and would facilitate the quickest and easiest possible improvement in their writing. Several questions had to be answered. Should dialect differences be taught in special, distinct sections throughout the course? Or should they be taught at the end of the course, after students would have acquired a certain degree of skill in structuring sentences? What would happen, for instance, if students learned the different "rules" governing the systems of subject-verb agreement in the two dialects, but could not consistently identify subjects? How could students be asked to insert appropriate EAE forms of the verb "to be" into sentences in which it is implied but not stated (the BD "zero copula") if they could not determine the point that separates the subject and predicate of a given sentence? If our ultimate objective was the sound, fluent composition of sentences, at what point should students be taught the differences between EAE and BD plural noun formation, since nouns can appear in various structural slots? When should they be taught EAE methods of indicating that a noun is possessive?

Out of chaos eventually came a measure of order. We decided to develop a course which would reacquaint or, in many cases, introduce students to the general principles of sentence structure, and then within that framework, handle inflectional and syntactical differences between Edited American English and Black dialect wherever necessary. Exercises on dialect differences and usage problems would not be relegated to appendices or special sections; they would be integrated into the course wherever they would make the most sense to the students.

Our first step was to write an introductory statement that would

orient students to the purpose and methods of the course and would excite them, or at least make them comfortable, with the prospect of becoming bidialectal. This statement discusses the linguistic equality and academic, social, and political inequality of various dialects at length. Edited American English is presented as the dominant dialect of this society, but even more emphasis is placed on its status as primarily a *written* language and, as such, the idiom of academic discourse. The introduction also stresses the value of being able to use different dialects in different contexts, particularly in terms of the necessity of all good writers to consciously identify their voice, audience, and purpose. What is appropriate or what “works” in one situation may not work in another; the college classroom is, of course, a “context,” a specifically defined environment with its own set of expectations, one of which is the proficient use of EAE.

We decided to use the term “Edited American English” rather than “Standard English” or any other label because of the implications of the word “edited.” Students are reminded that writing is a formal process, that it is not as spontaneous as speech even for the most accomplished writers; good writing is always reworked, revised, and refined. Whatever features of Black dialect are contained in an individual student’s idiolect can, within this approach, be regarded as additional factors subject to the general process of editing. The introduction maintains that all writers have to edit their work, and dialect speakers must learn to edit with specific elements of grammar in mind when they choose to write in the dominant dialect. Editing anything, a film, a book, a theme, is obviously a conscious activity. Therefore dialect-speaking students are faced with a difficult task: to become conscious of the very aspects of language that we are ordinarily least conscious of, those that are morphological in nature.

In the introductory statement, the idea of *expanding* student’s ability to manipulate language is stressed rather than the concept of replacing one dialect with another. In fact, the whole issue of dialect is discussed for several reasons. First, it is intended to be intellectually stimulating, providing students with an opportunity to view language differences from various perspectives. Second, it provides a way of understanding and organizing what most students have perceived of in the past as their “mistakes” or their “lousy English.” Simply by reducing the number of grammatical features one calls “errors,” many students are attitudinally freed to give “one more try” to a subject they have always failed and consequently hated. Third, the notion of dialect supplies the course with a kind of *content* that a basic writing

curriculum might not otherwise have. As Courtney B. Cazden suggests, "It is necessary to design a particular kind of environment for language use, one in which the contrast between language as curriculum content and as learning environment is reduced."¹ As students learn the skill of using language as form, vehicle, instrument, they simultaneously learn language as content, exploring its relationship to thought, its tremendous diversity, its social implications.

After reading and discussing the introduction, students begin the course which is self-paced and divided into five separate but cumulative units. Each is followed by a 200 point post-test which must be passed with a score of ninety per cent before the student progresses to the next unit. Students who do not achieve ninety per cent are given supplementary exercises, alternative explanations, and whatever personalized instruction they need before they can proceed in the course. In each unit, explanations and examples of contrastive grammatical features of BD and EAE are made at appropriate points, but most of the actual exercises involve conversions into Edited American English from Black dialect. We experimented with a fifty-fifty format in which students converted back and forth between the dialects, but met too much resistance from the students themselves. As full-time college students, they are, in most cases, extremely conscious of being unequipped to meet certain academic expectations and are in a hurry to acquire prerequisite skills. Consequently, we developed a system of giving equal time to both dialects in the explanations and examples, but much more time to conversions into EAE in the exercises.

Unit 1 presents the students with an overview of sentence structure by involving them in constructing the most skeletal sentences, those composed of only two words. In this initial exercise, the relationship between the subject and the verb function is stressed. (The word in the subject position names or labels the structural "topic" of the sentence, while the word in the verb position completes the pattern of communication implied and initiated in the naming of a subject.) After this brief overview of the vital components of the simplest sentences, students are informed that the rest of Unit 1 will concern the types of words that can fulfill the *subject function*. Nouns are then defined and students perform exercises circling them in groups that

¹Courtney B. Cazden, "Problems for Education: Language as Curriculum Content and Learning Environment," in *Language as a Human Problem*, ed. Einar Haugen and Morton Bloomfield (New York: W. W. Norton, and Co., Inc., 1974), p. 139.

contain all parts of speech. We found that many students, equipped with only a definition and a few examples of the different types of nouns, failed these identification exercises. We then added a section on using noun suffixes including, for example, -ness, -ity, -tion, -ance, and -ment. This addition was designed to deal with what we perceived to be many of our students' inability to distinguish between abstract nouns and adjective and verb forms of the same word.

Once students can consistently identify nouns and convert adjectives and verbs to noun form, they take up the first dialect difference dealt with in the course: the EAE and BD methods of indicating number. Examples are given illustrating how number is suggested by context, often by a single adjective, in Black dialect, but additionally marked, usually with the -s or -es inflection, in Edited American English. For instance:

BD: Max, the neighborhood grocer, gave me a dozen *orange* in return for some information on who's been ripping him off the past few *week*.

EAE: Max, the neighborhood grocer, gave me a dozen *oranges* . . . *weeks*.

The exercises that involve pluralizing nouns also emphasize the various spelling changes (eg., -y to -ies, and -f and -fe to -ves). Special consideration is given to the "exceptions," man, woman, tooth, child, etc., and to the difference between count and mass nouns.

In the next part of Unit 1, students work with those pronouns that can be utilized as subjects: the personal, demonstrative, and indefinite. Within a framework of exercises involving their subject function, students are also taught the skills of pronoun consistency and logical, clear reference. Finally, in the last section of the unit, students use nouns and pronouns as simple subjects, compound subjects, and "hidden" subjects (especially those preceded by more than one modifier and/or possessive noun). A large section is devoted to insuring students' ability to distinguish between grammatical and logical subjects for the express purpose of minimizing difficulty with EAE subject-verb agreement in the next unit, since such errors often derive from improperly identifying the "most important word" or the logical topic as also the structural, grammatical subject.² Students are directed to identify the simple subjects of sentences in related groups; for example:

²See Valerie Krishna, "The Syntax of Error," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 1 (Spring 1975), 43-49, for an analysis of syntactically weak sentence writing deriving from lack of coincidence of grammatical and logical subjects.

- 1) That dude drives me insane.
- 2) I am driven insane by that dude.
- 3) The ultimate result of my relationship with that dude will be insanity.
- 4) Insanity will result from my relationship with that dude.

This has been one of our most successful exercises, producing a kind of “Now I’ve got it” reaction in many students who previously had trouble conceptualizing grammatical subjects. Not surprisingly, we find that our students often respond much better to a small number of differentiating examples than to long, often necessarily abstract, explanations.

Unit 2 opens with a restatement of the simple sentence pattern and quickly focuses on the verb function, emphasizing what predicates *do* in relation to subjects. Once the overall context of sentence structure is reestablished, students begin exercises identifying the three types of verbs, those that show the physical action, mental action, or condition of the subject. (In the last category we include the verbs “to be,” “to have,” and appear, feel, and seem.) When students complete a number of progressively more difficult tasks involving the identification of both subjects and the three types of verbs, their attention is directed toward the unique capacity of verbs to express time. The basic tenses are explained and students begin the second part of the course that specifically concerns dialect differences: the contrasting BD and EAE “rules” for subject-verb agreement. As in the earlier section on forming EAE plural nouns, a concern with spelling changes is incorporated into the exercises. This section demands recollection of much of Unit 1. Students concentrate on making verbs agree with simple and compound subjects and especially those joined with the word “or.” Considerable time is devoted to insuring subject-verb agreement when pronouns function as subjects. (In examining the writing samples, we found that disagreement often occurred when “this,” “that,” “these,” “those,” many of the indefinite pronouns, and, of course, all of the personal pronouns were used as subjects.) A special section involves one of the verbs that most often and most noticeably differs between the dialects, the verb “to do.”

One of the most demanding exercises requires students to rewrite sentences, identifying the subject, changing its number, and then adjusting the verb to agree with it. For example, students convert “In the second scene, the freshman rushes into the union for a frosty mug of Pabst Blue Ribbon” to “In the second scene, the freshmen rush into the union. . .” Similarly, “The clapboard houses by the riverbank

sink slowly into the muck and grime” is converted to “The clapboard house. . .sinks. . .”

Following the subject-verb agreement section, which is taught as a special concern of present tense, students begin to work on past tense regular verbs with special emphasis, naturally, on the -ed ending. Possibly the most unorthodox aspect of this section is a series of exercises on EAE infinitive verb phrases designed to help students avoid such constructions as “I promise to *loved* you.” In the next section, one of the course’s lengthiest, students deal with the varying EAE and BD forms of the verbs “to be” and “to have.” Finally, they learn to use the basic tenses, including the past participles, of approximately fifty frequently used irregular verbs. Whenever possible they are taught in rhyming groups and special treatment is given to verbs that are regular in BD, but irregular in EAE. The most important feature of the second unit is its cumulative nature. Although language learning does not lend itself to perfectly consistent, linear patterns, we found that in each successive section we could expect students to perform exercises which demanded skills they had acquired earlier in the unit.

Unit 3 deals with modifiers which are introduced to students as words used to characterize or describe other words. The adjective section focuses upon suffixes common to adjective forms, such as -able, -ive, -al, -ant, -ic, and -ous. Functional flexibility is emphasized by having students perform activities in which they choose either the noun or adjective form of a word depending upon the particular context of the sentence. Stress is also placed upon the -ed and -ing endings used in forming verbal adjectives or participles. Similarly, adverbs are taught with emphasis on their -ly inflection. Some of the most effective exercises are sentence rewrites involving conversions of adjectives to adverbs (and modified nouns to verbs). For example, students are given the following sentence, “The Secret Service has made *thorough* plans for the capture of any would-be assassins,” and are asked to rewrite the sentence, converting the underlined adjective to an adverb, producing “The Secret Service has planned *thoroughly* for the capture of any would-be assassins.”

The third type of modifier dealt with in Unit 3 is the possessive noun. Following the format created in earlier sections of the course, students first learn how to mark possession (with an apostrophe plus -s or simply an apostrophe) in EAE, and then apply this skill in contextual editing in which they are required, not only to use the appropriate possessive markers, but also to determine *if* and then *where* possession should be

shown. Finally, in a number of paragraphs and short essays near the end of the unit, students are directed to locate and change usage errors and dialect differences which have been emphasized in Unit 3. The following is an excerpt from one of these exercises; it necessitates five changes:

But, in his book, Dr. Fannel concentrates not on individuals motives for committing suicide, but on the underlying motives of the masses. He emphatic asserts that when people decide to take there own lives, they are really acting out the repression's and anxieties of the society of which their a part.

(Proper use of the homonyms there, their, and they're is one of the miscellaneous skills integrated into this unit.)

Unit 4 is designed to integrate all that students have learned in terms of subjects, verbs, and modifiers into the comprehensive process of sentence construction. The focus of the early part of the unit is on dependent and independent clauses which are presented as the “building blocks” of sentence construction. Students practice combining various dependent and independent clauses with appropriate coordination and subordination. Fragments and run-ons receive special emphasis in the latter portions of Unit 4; students are shown that when dependent and independent clauses are not coordinated or are joined improperly, the results are fragments, run-ons, and ultimately, blocked communication. Exercises involve alternative methods of changing fragments and run-ons to fluent, logical sentence patterns. Students practice these options both in individual sentences and in larger paragraph and essay contexts. Punctuation is taught as a by-product of the skills of coordination and subordination.

In Unit 4 students are also required to deal with the few syntactical differences between Black dialect and Edited American English. Students rewrite sentences such as, “I *asked was she sure*, and she answered, ‘*Can't nobody understand* that teacher,’ ” using EAE syntactical patterns. (Methods of indicating negation and avoiding the “double negative” are also handled in this context.)

The last unit of the course is primarily an *editing* unit and, in this sense, is the culmination of what we have emphasized to students throughout the course, namely, that good writing is the product of a conscious and careful editing and refining process. In Unit 5 students apply all of the skills they have learned (or relearned) throughout the course to correcting errors, manipulating EAE inflections, and restructuring sentences within the process of rewriting sample themes, essays,

and short stories. Our own experiences as teachers and evaluators of others' writing have convinced us of how valuable an experience editing another person's work can be in terms of sharpening one's consciousness of how language works. Unit 5, then, provides our students with this kind of experience and duplicates the editing process we hope they will begin to apply in their own college writing. For example, by the end of the fifth unit, students are expected to be able to edit the following excerpt from a sample theme introduction:

In one sense, his novels might be consider little sermons address to the struggling masses at the bottom of society. Alger's message is very clear — avoid bad habit like smoking, drinking, and swearing, work until your ready to drop, save every meager penny you earn, and eventually, society will reward you with riches and fame. If one were to summarize Alger theme in one short sentence, it would be "Riches come to those who deserve them." And, of course, the obvious corollary to this statement is that those who is poor in our society also somehow deserve there fate. I believe that one can learn a great deal about our value system by studying Horatio Alger's novels because the sermon he preach is one that American society still deeply believe in. I intend to examine how Alger's characters reflect this naive American belief in the myth of the self-made man. Who is always somehow rewarded by society for his hard work and virtue living.

Several of the changes students are expected to make in this excerpt can only be made on the basis of context clues. Students are not instructed to edit any one specific aspect of language, but instead must depend upon sentence context for direction. Though Unit 5 demands considerably more sophisticated and eclectic contextual editing than do the other units of the course, reliance upon context is an essential feature throughout. Besides moving students to an ever-increasing independence, this reliance is particularly important in facilitating the transfer from Black dialect to Edited American English. Because of the specific nature of the differences between the dialects, it is necessary to direct the students' attention to the way tense, number, and possession are often indicated by word order and modifiers (context) in BD, but are additionally marked with inflections in EAE. The kinds of demands placed upon students in Unit 5 — in which they must apply all the skills they have acquired with little overt, specific direction — represent the "end-point" of our developmental objective to make students conscious editors of others' work, as well as the "starting-point" of integrated application of these skills to their own writing.

We are still in the process of evaluating the effectiveness of our course. Our experience to this point, however, suggests that the success

or failure of any such course is in large part dependent upon a number of interrelated factors not the least of which concerns the willingness of colleges and universities to accord legitimate status to developmental education. Requiring students to acquire prerequisite, basic skills in a non-credit context in which needed skill work functions primarily as a time-consuming adjunct to regular course requirements not only places an added burden upon students, but also reinforces their feelings of inadequacy and failure. Further, the kind of disjointedness which results from the ancillary status of non-credit developmental courses defeats what is perhaps the primary goal of a course such as ours, which is to integrate language skills into the larger process of thinking and writing. It is absolutely essential in this regard that students be shown the relationship between language and the thought process, and between sentence, paragraph, and essay structure.

Finally, to any of those who may still insist that teaching Edited American English is denying students the right to their own language, we offer this excerpt from one of our writing samples. This student had been asked to write about what he wanted for his future. Readers may draw their own conclusions as to his rights, and perhaps more significantly, his *needs*:

I want to have me a job working behind a desk, because working in a foundry all my life wouldn't be cool. I'd be collecting dust in my systems and burn from the machines. I looks at the people's in my family, they looks so awful that I said ain't know way I'm going to be in that same situation. So that I want to finish my education, so I know I can get a good job.