

Michelle Crotteau

Honoring Dialect and Culture: Pathways to Student Success on High-Stakes Writing Assessments

Honoring students' home dialect is a complex task when preparing them to take state writing tests that require the use of Standard English. Working with students who had failed the test and were in danger of not receiving a diploma, Michelle Crotteau created a supportive learning environment in which students could develop linguistic and mechanical fluency. In the Writing Strategies class, students spoke and wrote about their interests, drew on their dialect (Appalachian English), and learned to recognize audience-appropriate situations for using their dialect and Standard English.

At the beginning of his senior year, Bucky shuffled into class feeling defeated; his graduation plans were on hold because he had failed the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) End-of-Course Writing Test the previous year. As his writing remediation teacher, I needed to provide interventions so he could pass the high-stakes test, a new graduation requirement starting with the class of 2004. Bucky was well-known at our rural high school, located at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He presented himself politely, dressed in denim overalls and work boots, and he spoke a non-Standard English dialect familiar in our community. I soon learned Bucky rarely missed a day of school and had earned average to above-average grades in his classes. He was a devoted member of the school's agriculture program, and he worked construction after school and during the summer. Yet, despite his academic and vocational achievements, he faced the possibility of being denied a diploma because of one standardized test.

Like many states, Virginia requires students to pass a writing assessment to receive a Standard or an Advanced diploma. There are no exceptions. The untimed writing test is first administered in eleventh grade at the beginning of March. Students take a multiple-choice writing test on one day and write a response to a prompt the next day. The prompt

response, scored by a testing company subcontracted by the Virginia Department of Education, is holistically evaluated based on the writer's demonstrated control of three domains: Composing, Written Expression, and Grammar/Usage/Mechanics. The student's score on the multiple-choice section is combined with the prompt-response score. Students may retake the test numerous times but only during prescribed testing windows in July, October, and March. A senior who retakes the test in March will get test results at the end of May, so some seniors will not know their graduation status until days before the ceremony.

In the 2003–04 school year, our school of approximately 1,300 students had 8.7 percent minority enrollment, 12.8 percent special education enrollment, and 14 percent who received free and reduced lunch. Only eight students were identified as English language learners, but some students in our school community speak Appalachian English (AE), which differs grammatically and phonologically from Standard American English (SE). Dialectal speakers are not tracked in the school's statistics because as white English speakers, they are not considered a subgroup.

Many of the students who speak AE live near the Shenandoah National Park in mountain communities settled in the early nineteenth century, and their families have lived in the area for generations. Historically, "restricted experiences and social contacts reinforced differences in speech and

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customs [of the] mountain people” (Reeder and Reeder 17). Although improvements in transportation, education, and technology have lessened their isolation, the people of this area proudly carry on their mountain heritage. Resourceful and self-reliant, they maintain close family ties and care for the land by farming, fishing, and hunting.

In her study of Appalachian students in writing groups, Sherry W. Powers noted, “Rural and urban Appalachians have been called the ‘invisible minority’. . . . They are frequently discriminated against because of cultural differences between the mountain subculture and the mainstream culture” (88). Appalachian speakers can be negatively affected by the pervasive, stereotypical belief that dialectal speech is inferior to Standard English (Lyman and Figgins; Powers; Spencer and McClain; Wolfram and Christian; Zuidema).

Addressing High-Stakes Test Results

When our school’s writing scores came back from the state in 2004, we were initially jubilant—our students achieved a 95 percent pass rate on the SOL Writing Test. The scores vindicated our English department’s tenacious commitment to maintain-

ing heterogeneously grouped, special education-inclusive English reading and writing workshop courses in grades 9 to 12. For over a decade, writing instruction in the three county high schools had

focused on student development of individual writing portfolios. Under the direction of the language arts supervisor, English teachers who had participated in the Central Virginia Writing Project’s summer institute led countywide inservices in which teachers across the curriculum and across grade levels developed, implemented, and assessed the K–12 writing program. Analyzing student writing was a rich opportunity for staff development, and we used the results of the portfolio assessments to refine classroom writing practice. Even with the demands of high-stakes testing, we did not waver from our mission to foster authentic student writing.

As pleased as we were by students’ success on the first round of barrier tests, we quickly turned

our focus to the students who did not pass. We were not willing to allow one standardized test to take away even one student’s opportunity to earn a high school diploma. To provide remediation for the students who did not pass the writing test, the assistant superintendent for instruction approved the creation of a new semester-long course called Writing Strategies. A team of high school English and special education teachers outlined the curriculum, giving classroom teachers the flexibility to provide interventions based on the individual needs of the students.

In addition to teaching tenth- and eleventh-grade English, I was the school’s test coordinator, so the English department head asked me to teach the new Writing Strategies course. The students enrolled in Strategies had all succeeded in their previous English classes, but they were not successful on the standardized test. I needed to know why each student had failed before making lesson plans, but the state had not released the students’ disaggregated testing data by the beginning of the school year, and it could be weeks before the “Student Performance by Question Student Report” for each person was sent to the school. I wondered how to fill the first ninety minutes of instructional time.

Focusing on Students’ Interests and Strengths

The four students who had failed the writing test enrolled in Strategies. Three of the four students excelled in vocational programs at the county’s technical school. One student was the first girl in the technical school’s thirty-two-year history to earn two welding precertifications under the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. She was recruited by area businesses during her senior year, but her employment required a diploma. Every student in my class was discouraged, anxious, angry, and feeling singled out by failure despite their achievements.

I struggled to be upbeat, but I could not answer the students’ most urgent question, “Why did I fail the test?” To find a way to provide them with an answer, and to get to know them as writers and as individuals, I started class by asking the students to write a response to the following prompt: “I’m an important person; you should know about

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me.” The last thing the students wanted to do was write again but, after allowing them to vent their feelings of helplessness and indignation, I encouraged them to record their thoughts on paper. They were reluctant to share themselves with yet another person they didn’t know or trust, so I promised them that their writing would not count as a grade. Relieved, they began to write, and I worked with each student individually as they turned their brainstorming into personal essays.

Bucky’s writing gave me my aha moment and set the tone for the rest of the semester in Strategies and for future test-preparation instruction in regular tenth- and eleventh-grade English classes. This excerpt comes from Bucky’s first draft, reproduced exactly as it was written:

Hello. My name is Bucky. I’m 17 years old. I lived in Virginia my whole life. I’m proud to be a plain old country boy in Elkton, Virginia. . . . I’m going to tell you some stuff that you can do in the country

One thing you can do is hunt. . . . Some animals you can hunt dogs with if you have good blood hounds and that you are in the right county to run legal. . . . Some things that you can do is ride 4-wheelers. . . . You can have cookouts with out someone wanting to fight.

In the country you can walk outside and it be peaceful and quit. In the city its all noisey but here its not. You can sit outside in a chair and you want be disturb.

I’m just a plain country boy that likes to hunt, work on the construction site evening have time to have a cook out to spend time with family and friends. Welcome to my every day life.

I was moved by Bucky’s essay; he trusted me enough to share himself and his culture with me. As I reread his essay to diagnose his writing miscues, I paid particular attention to his verb forms: *Some things that you can do is ride; it be peaceful; you want be disturb*. These constructions would lower Bucky’s grammar score according to the state rubric; however, “nonconcord” of subjects and verbs is a grammatical characteristic of AE. His adverb construction *run legal* drops the *-ly* suffix, another feature of AE (Wolfram and Christian 77, 105).

Bucky’s dialect is a powerful connection to his family, history, and place. I could not tell him the way he uses language is wrong; rather, I had to teach him how to use SE in addition to his home

language so he could pass the writing test. Bucky, like the other hardworking students in Strategies, had succeeded in the regular English classrooms where teachers sensitive to dialectal differences instruct in SE and allow students to express themselves in their vernacular, their authentic writing voice. However, to an SOL prompt scorer reading for a student’s control of writing within the parameters of SE, Bucky’s non-Standard English could be interpreted as a lack of control of either the Written Expression or the Grammar/Usage/Mechanics domain.

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Honoring Students’ Dialect through Language Collections

Honoring students’ dialect in the age of standardized testing is a complex teaching task, but it is essential if we are to give all students access to a full education that results in a high school diploma. In “Democracy, Dialect, and the Power of Every Voice,” Huntington Lyman and Margo A. Figgins argue, “students’ right to *both* [their dialect and SE is] essential to the democracy our nation proclaims through its commitment to public education” (41; italics in original). Students can learn the features that differentiate their vernacular from SE, which empowers them to alternate between the two depending on their audience. “Standard English, to the degree there is such a thing, did not emerge because it was a thing of beauty, precision, and grace; it is a form of English that became a standard because it codifies how the rich and powerful talk” (41). Standardized tests are written in the language of the powerful.

My search for teaching materials turned up a few commercial workbooks hastily crafted by testing corporations. None of these test-prep publications specifically addressed the needs of dialectal speakers, so I began to create a curriculum based on my study of linguistics. In *Dialects in Schools and Communities*, Walt Wolfram, Carolyn Temple Adger, and Donna Christian describe how students can analyze their vernacular through language

collections. Working with these collections helps students recognize the differences between SE and their speech.

The language collections my students created were based on an exercise taught to me by linguistics professor Dr. Larry Foley of James Madison University. Students made a list of ten words and expressions they use every day and defined what those words and expressions mean. Bucky's list included words for deer and hunting dogs:

13 pointer: a big deer, a trophy deer

buck: a male deer

Walker: a breed of hunting dog

tricolor: a black, white, and tan hunting dog

Other students recorded and defined colloquialisms commonly heard in our school community:

yonder: a few yards over there

get 'er done: start working hard right now

ain't no count: it is not good

y'all: you all

hollar: a place to live back in the mountains

These simple word lists served many purposes. The assignment was accessible to the students; they were empowered to be the authority on the subject of their speech. By collecting their words, the students

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discovered the rich sounds and meanings of their vernacular, which helped them to further develop their writing voice. Defining words was a powerful exercise in communicating meaning, for the students had to explain in SE what they meant by their

words. I learned more about their culture and was better able to converse with them about topics that pertained to their interests and experiences.

Hunting is highly valued in our community. When I questioned Bucky about hunting, based on his word list, his face lit up as he described his beloved hunting dogs. The next day, he brought in pictures of his dogs and a cherished photograph of the first deer he had killed. An authority on the

subject of his hunting experiences, Bucky could write about them with confidence and control.

The word lists also gave me an idea for the next writing prompt, an invented scenario: "The County Board of Supervisors is considering a ban on hunting because of residential growth within the county limits. Do you agree that hunting should be banned? Why or why not?" The students immediately voiced their opinions with a chorus of, "They ain't stoppin' me from huntin'!" I reminded them that the scenario was not real and urged them to write a list of all the ideas going through their minds. "Put that on the paper!" was my response to every comment. Bucky wrote the following verbs on his brainstorm list in AE: *There is too many deer; There be too many accidents; Hunting season aint but only 4-6 months out of the year except coyote, skunk.* I wrote out the standard verb forms on his brainstorm list, and he revised the verbs as he was drafting.

To reinforce the idea that one's language will change depending on the audience and the occasion, I asked the students how they would dress for the upcoming homecoming dance. The boys complained about having to wear ties. "Choosing to wear formal attire to fit the occasion of the homecoming dance is like choosing to use Standard English on the writing test." I continued the analogy, "You use Standard English in school, but you probably wouldn't use Standard English with your hunting buddies."

"No," Bucky chimed in, "if my huntin' buddy was talking like a teacher while we was hunting, I guess I'd have to shoot him." He smiled to show he was kidding. I rebuked him for his inappropriate comment, but he understood the analogy.

Incorporating Students' Interests in Prompt-Response Writing

When I suggested that Bucky write about hunting to practice on a released SOL prompt, he was incredulous that he would be allowed to write about his experiences. Writing to a test prompt is a different type of writing task than answering a question on an essay test. The students don't know their audience, and they may mistakenly believe the scorers will be looking for one correct answer. I reminded Bucky that a prompt gives an invitation to write—he should tell his audience a story only

he could tell. Bucky practiced with Released SOL Prompt No. 111: “British writer George Eliot has said, ‘Decide on what you think is right, and stick to it.’ Think about a time in your life when you made a decision or choice about something and it turned out to be a positive one. Write about what happened” (Virginia Department of Education 20). As soon as Bucky read “British writer,” he balked. I asked him to read the entire prompt aloud to me and to highlight the most important phrase. He highlighted “made a decision or choice.” I asked him then, “Have you ever had to make a choice about hunting?”

He quickly responded, “Well, sure.”

“Then write about a time you had to make a choice about hunting.”

He began his story by including key words from the prompt:

The day that I decide to do something and stick with it was when I decide to go hunting with my dad.

As he continued to draft, his voice became more clear and his writing more descriptive:

When we go to where we was going to hunt at, it was a cool breezly morning. Dad took off . . . I walked 40 yards away from the truck, theres a huge monster buck running through the field.

It was a pretty 13 pointer. So I raised my gun, and squeezed the trigger. Then the gun went off, and the deer dropped I started to calm down, since I was nervous, so hurry up and ran fast to the truck.

Writing about a subject he knew well allowed Bucky to develop fluency in his prompt responses. He used vocabulary from his word list, and he used tense markers on some of his verbs: *walked*, *raised*, *squeezed*. He was making progress in all domains of the state rubric.

After Bucky was confidently getting his ideas on the page, we began work on mechanics. He claimed his difficulty with punctuation was due to his dialect. Skeptical, I asked him to explain. He replied, “In Redneck conversation, you ain’t got no punctuation.”

“You keep right on talkin’ ’til the story’s over,” his buddy added.

Oral drills, rather than traditional grammar worksheets, allow dialectal speakers to hear the natural breaks in their prose and hear the differences

between SE and their dialect (Spencer and McClain 37). I read Bucky’s story aloud to him, and every time my voice stopped, he added a period with a green pen. By the third paragraph of the story, he took over and added periods and commas. Then we worked on dialogue markers. He could write out conversations in AE by enclosing the speech in quotation marks, and this more-complex construction would demonstrate his control of both Written Expression and Mechanics.

Once Bucky was comfortable writing in SE, he practiced the multiple-choice part of the writing test. He answered questions about the writing process correctly, but questions that focused on grammar and usage were more difficult, especially when the distracters are written in AE. This question is from the Spring 2000 Released Test:

In sentence 21, ways to get out of there as quick is correctly written—

A ways to get out of there, as quick

B ways to get out of they’re as quickly

C ways to get out of there as quickly

D as it is (Virginia Department of Education 13)

To Bucky, both A and D would be correct answers. In AE, the *-ly* suffix is dropped on many adverbs.

Creating a Supportive School Climate for Success on High-Stakes Tests

The students in Strategies worked together and supported each other like a family. According to Spencer and McClain, “A key factor for [non-Standard English] speakers to acquire SE at the junior and senior high-school levels is peer approval” (37). As the semester went on, many class periods began with one student animatedly telling a story about something that happened outside of school, which encouraged other students to tell stories, and these stories eventually made their way to the page. The students edited together, sharing the techniques they had learned for revising their dialect to SE. Our class had become a writing workshop focused on standardized-test preparation. The students felt prepared and confident for the October retest.

Teaching the students how to convert AE to SE was not the entire solution for remedial instruction,

but it turned out to be an important place to start and provided a frame for instruction for the rest of the school year. Bucky did not pass the writing test in October; he needed more than six weeks to master the new skills he was practicing. He was disappointed and irritated when he received his score; however, this time he was not feeling defeated. He had a much better understanding of the work he needed to do, and he willingly signed up for a second semester of Strategies.

In May, a few weeks before graduation, the assistant principal received Bucky's writing score from the March administration of the test. She sent a pass to the agriculture shop requesting that Bucky come to her office. The pass was attached to a bunch of "Congratulations!" balloons. Bucky had passed the SOL Writing Test on his second try after remediation, and he, like the other three students in Strategies, would graduate with his class. Beaming, Bucky tied the balloons to the side-view mirror on his pickup truck while friends and teachers patted him on the back and shook his hand. The senior class adviser gave him a cap and gown.

In the three years since the SOL tests have been a barrier to graduation, no student at our school has been denied a diploma due to high-stakes testing. Authentic writing instruction and test preparation are not antithetical. The reading/writing workshop still fosters student success, even in the era of standardized assessments. Narrowing acceptable classroom writing to only SE disenfranchises students whose future depends on fluency in both SE and their home dialect. As barrier writing assessments become mandatory in other states, writing teachers have an opportunity to engage students in activities that increase the language capacity and celebrate the diversity of our nation.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Crotteau discusses the conflicts that can arise between Standard English and the dialects used at home. The lesson plan "Exploring Language and Identity: Am Tan's 'Mother Tongue' and Beyond" addresses that same dilemma. In the essay "Mother Tongue," Tan explains that she "began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with." How these "different Englishes" or even a language other than English contributes to identity is a crucial issue for adolescents. In this lesson, students explore fiction and nonfiction texts and write literacy narratives as a part of their exploration of issues of language and identity.

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=910