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**Grammar to Get Things Done** offers a fresh lens on grammar and grammar instruction, designed for middle and secondary preservice and inservice English teachers. It shows how form, function, and use can help teachers move away from decontextualized grammar instruction (such as worksheets and exercises emphasizing rule-following and memorizing conventional definitions) and begin considering grammar in applied contexts of everyday use.

Modules (organized by units) succinctly explain common grammatical concepts. These modules help English teachers gain confidence in their own understanding while positioning grammar instruction as an opportunity to discuss, analyze, and produce language for real purposes in the world. An important feature of the text is attention to both the history of and current attitudes about grammar through a sociocultural lens, with ideas for teachers to bring discussions of language-as-power into their own classrooms. A copublication of Routledge and NCTE.

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Editors’ Introduction

Struggling to Belong: Literacy Instruction, Coaching, Learning, and Development

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The poet Claudia Rankine compellingly explores the theme of belonging in Citizen: An American Lyric (2014). In the lead piece of that collection, the narrator describes a small moment within a history and apparatus of schooling that systematically excludes her and many, many others—those who are not White, those with failing grades, those who do not observe the normative religion:

You smell good. You are twelve attending Sts. Philip and James School on White Plains Road and the girl sitting in the seat behind asks you to lean to the right during exams so she can copy what you have written. Sister Evelyn is in the habit of taping the 100s and the failing grades to the coat closet doors. The girl is Catholic with waist-length brown hair. You can't remember her name: Mary? Catherine?

You never really speak except for the time she makes her request and later when she tells you you smell good and have features more like a white person. You assume she thinks she is thanking you for letting her cheat and feels better cheating from an almost white person. (p. 5)

In dialogue with our issue, this episode of schooling is about the challenges to belonging when it comes to writing in school: Mary/Catherine doesn't speak to the narrator (perhaps not really seeing her as a person, because she's Black) and doesn't acknowledge her existence except to ask her to cheat. By the same token, the narrator doesn't recognize the “girl sitting behind” her, identifying her by stereotypical Catholic girls’ names. Those attentive to childhood cultures in school know that accepting a request to cheat can often function as an act signalling a desire to belong, or a way to belong with, alongside, as part of a group with the person cheating off you. Such negotiations of belonging, focused on cheating practices, get vividly put on display in Gordon Korman's (2014) novel Ungifted. In Rankine's piece, however, the request, acceptance, and act of cheating do not enact reciprocal relations that would have, at least in part, constituted belonging. The only gesture toward such reciprocity is being thanked and informed that “you
smell good and have features more like a white person”—microaggressions only serving to alienate and other.

Since before explorers and settlers came to this land now called the United States, it has been a place of diverse peoples. But as the increase in hate crimes, upsurge of White supremacist activities, and penning of exclusionary immigration policies attest, this nation still has far to go in becoming truly inclusive, equitable, and pluriversal in its conception of diversity. Inclusion unfolds in everyday language-learning activities in classrooms and communities, and authors in this penultimate issue of Volume 52, the last of our editorial term, invite consideration of the moment-by-moment experience of struggling to belong, placed against the backdrop of normative and exclusionary conceptions of literacy instruction and development. These notions were evoked in the Forum paper published in RTE 51.3 by Bazerman and his distinguished colleagues. Normative definitions, practices, and approaches to writing and its instruction can form the backdrop against which belonging becomes a struggle, often sending the message to those cast as “other”: “You don’t belong here, you are not one of us.” At the present political moment, as White supremacist discourse vies for legitimacy (and receives it in some very powerful corners) in American life, the field needs to keep pushing to understand the equity implications of such normative notions of literacy development.

Anne Haas Dyson’s paper, “A Sense of Belonging: Writing (Righting) Inclusion and Equity in a Child’s Transition to School,” leads the issue and inspires us to frame our opening essay using the theme of belonging. The struggle to belong—whether in classrooms, schools, communities, or the nation itself—suggests a critically important framework for literacy research and teaching in a political and cultural milieu where exclusionary rhetoric and policies have become the new normal. It is fitting that Dyson should be publishing this paper in RTE, in the year 2017, 35 years after the publication of her first RTE paper (a paper that earned her a 1982 NCTE Promising Researcher Award) “The Role of Oral Language in Early Writing Processes,” in which she began her decades-long critique of narrow models of child literacy development that take White, economically privileged children—and their literate repertoires—as the norm against which all other children should be judged and, indeed, around which literacy education in elementary schools should be organized.

This most recent study interprets a child’s—Ta’Von’s—experience of transitioning from preschool to kindergarten, and his perspective on the challenges to belonging (and inclusion) in that transition. Studying child writing in elementary classrooms closely and respectfully, from the “ground up” rather than from the “top down,” has been a hallmark of Dyson’s research over the decades, as can be traced from her 1983 paper. Yet in this recent work, Dyson explicitly addresses the macro-level societal categories of race, gender, and class as she critiques the political and institutional backdrop of the linear “stepladder of success” (p. 237) in school and shows—through classroom data—how this ladder, and the model of writing development holding it up, is ideologically normed to Whiteness and economic privilege. For example, Ta’Von’s teacher identifies as “bright” (and thus
dominating the top of the skills ladder) only the White children who hail from the local middle-class neighborhood. But Dyson also points out the curricular and instructional erasure of race- and class-based child worlds, evident (for example) in the “images not portrayed, the cultural childhoods not textualized, the variations in home dwellings not presented, the possibilities of family languages never noted” (p. 257) in Ta’Von’s kindergarten classroom. Dyson vivifies the exclusionary environment of Ta’Von’s kindergarten classroom through description of the inclusive curriculum and environment of his preschool classroom, where belonging wasn’t such a struggle, but rather a given.

Ta’Von’s struggle for belonging in kindergarten illuminates how the dominant ideologies embedded in the “ladder” of literacy success strip “written language . . . of its social use and situational sense and [divorce it] from its roots in symbolic play and drawing” (p. 257). Dyson shows Ta’Von using writing to negotiate belonging, to challenge existing social hierarchies of race, gender, and class: “His communicative progress as a writer was supported as he orchestrated his growing resources to respond to, and participate with, others.” Yet it was an uphill fight, for at the same time, written language functioned in this classroom space as a tool for categorical exclusion, for naming who belonged and who did not. Ta’Von faced “dislocations,” experiences of not belonging due to: “intersecting societal constructs of gender, race, and class, against a shifting demographic landscape”; “assessed academic standing on the literacy ladder, against curricular and ideological shifts about learning”; “social distance itself, against relational shifts from the preschool community to the more socially fractured kindergarten classroom”; and “constricting space/time for imagination and play, against shifting curricular concerns” (p. 258).

Methodologically, Dyson expands her signature longitudinal ethnographic classroom case-study approach by following Ta’Von for over four years, across his preschool and kindergarten classrooms and beyond. Dyson focuses on “encounters” as the unit of analysis, defined as “episodes . . . in which the topic included the appropriateness of some aspect of Ta’Von’s self (i.e., physical, material, social, academic),” and description of “the roles composing played in Ta’Von’s negotiation of inclusive relational space (i.e., of social belonging) in the kindergarten classroom” (p. 247).

This study frames this issue in focusing on the importance of reciprocal relations and uses of language in classroom, and indeed school, environments—the kind of reciprocity that is missing in the “encounter” presented by Rankine that opened this essay. As Dyson puts it, “When children seem to have led a socially restricted childhood, like a number of White children whom Ta’Von encountered, they may not engage reciprocally with those they regard as ‘others,’ not ‘us’” (p. 259).

In the work of Carolyn S. Hunt, “Toward Dialogic Professional Learning: Negotiating Authoritative Discourses within Literacy Coaching Interaction,” teachers too are navigating a linear ladder of school success, with the ideal of “fidelity to best practices” perched atop that ladder, accomplishment of which leads to recognition as a “good teacher.” Like Ms. Sheila, the preschool teacher in Dyson’s study, the elementary teachers studied by Hunt are White women in their 30s—Grace the
literacy coach and Katie the teacher. Bringing this ladder view of school success to the domain of literacy teacher development, Grace takes on the role of helping Katie move up that ladder toward “fidelity to best practices” (p. 274). This paper conducts a micro-level and multilevel analysis of how that imagined movement, toward fidelity to best practices, is interactionally negotiated by a teacher and coach. Such work ultimately does little but serve the instructional status quo, yielding intersecting monologues about practice rather than generative dialogues that could lead to change. In the coaching talk, Grace comes to be positioned as the authority evaluating or sanctioning Katie’s practices within the existing hierarchy of the school, whereas Katie comes to be positioned as one needing “absolution” when she commits the sin of deviating from best practices. Ultimately, the relationship is not reciprocal, nor is that talk. Katie’s contributions to the relationship seem to make little difference to the practice of learning to teach.

Although it looks at macro-level discourses of “best practice” circulating within the school or the district, this paper does not take up themes of how broader societal hierarchies of exclusion (i.e., those of race, gender, and class discussed by Rankine and Dyson) intersect with notions of fidelity to “best practice.” Rather, it seems to underscore the creation of conditions in which some child worlds, skin tones, and languages get sanctioned and others come to be cast as “other” within school literacy curriculum and instruction. We find ourselves pondering the connections between the micro-level discourse of coach/teacher interactions and the broader societal inequities explored by Rankine and by Dyson, especially racial discrimination and gender inequity. What ideologies of literacy, and written language, interact with the talk here? How do literacy coaching interactions interrelate with existing (and possible) social hierarchies of written language in schools? How might coaching conversations reify or disrupt the step ladder of school literacy success normed to Whiteness and economic privilege? We hope ongoing work around literacy coaching talk can more explicitly take up these critical themes.

In “Rethinking Grammar in Subject English: Insights from an Australian Survey of Teachers’ Subject Knowledge,” Mary Macken-Horarik, Kristina Love, and Stefan Horarik, like Hunt, choose teachers as their object of study, though they do so with an eye toward grammar instruction. Their work investigates Australian teachers’ knowledge of and feelings toward the teaching of grammar, in the context of the introduction of the Australian Curriculum: English (AC:E), which reframes grammatical instruction relationally, requiring that teachers “not only . . . understand language at levels of text, sentence, and word, but also . . . the relations between each level” (p. 292). Data in the form of quantitative and qualitative survey responses from 373 English teachers across all years of schooling “provide a national snapshot of teachers’ beliefs about what is important in knowledge about language (KAL); their confidence in their own levels of KAL; areas of KAL they find challenging; and professional learning needs” (p. 291). Interestingly, the analysis reveals a “tension between a general belief within the profession that grammar is a good thing and a significant number of surveyed teachers’ apparent lack of confidence (perhaps even competence) in their ability to deliver on the
promissory note” (p. 311). Such a lack of confidence may be unsurprising, given that “many teachers struggle with negative attitudes toward grammar” (Watson, 2015, as cited on p. 312).

The implications for our discussion of belonging here are twofold. First, teachers’ lack of confidence (and even competence) revealed in the survey gestures toward the way teachers themselves may feel excluded by the grammatical demands of recent curricular reform. As one teacher in the study puts it, “Anything above punctuation, nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions is particularly challenging. I was one of those teachers who wasn’t taught this myself as a student . . . and I actually feel that I have no idea.” Such feelings of incompetence and the resulting lack of confidence can alienate teachers of grammar from their work, leading to negative and accusatory self-perceptions, as another subject revealed: “I teach first grade for a reason!” A second implication asks us to consider the ways grammar reform, framed as it is in the AC:E, may continue to alienate students whose ways of using language are not represented or valued in academic English. Macken-Horarik, Love, and Horarik note that a defining aspect of the relational approach to grammar in the AC:E is a contextual orientation: “an interest in how grammatical choices figure in larger discourse frames and social processes,” which “means relating grammar to different genres, registers, and dialects.” While this is an expressed purpose of the AC:E curriculum, the emphasis remains on the relations between and contexts of grammatical concepts themselves, and not the broader social experiences of students in classrooms. This study provides a much-needed survey of grammar pedagogy in a particular national/sociocultural context (Australia) and a particular, important set of actors within that context (teachers); more studies are needed that contextualize the teaching of grammar, with students and in other contexts, if we are to gain a better understanding of what exactly it will mean to teach grammar in inclusive, affirming, and effective ways for both teachers and students.

The issue closes with Jon-Philip Imbrenda’s piece, “Developing Academic Literacy: Breakthroughs and Barriers in a College-Access Intervention,” which engages with belonging by looking at the struggles of nonmainstream students to succeed in college writing courses. Imbrenda’s study reports on an instructional intervention implemented in one 11th- and one 12th-grade English classroom designed “to acculturate students into a social language so they can produce effective written arguments” at the collegiate level. Specifically, the intervention comprised a series of units employing simulated texts, semantic differential scales, and paragraph templates to help students “engage in argumentation around issues of existential significance [to] leverage their tacit understandings of argument to acquire more formal academic habits of reasoning” (p. 323). Drawing on pre, mid, and post administrations of a university writing placement exam, writing portfolios from key informants, and stimulated-recall interviews for analysis, Imbrenda found that the intervention succeeded in raising college placement exam scores and moving otherwise alienated students “toward more legitimate efforts to engage in the social life of the classroom” (p. 338).
As evidence of students’ development, Imbrenda identified three aspects of argumentative writing: *indexicality*, *intertextuality*, and—most importantly for our purposes here—*reciprocity*. The last aspect assumes that “effective academic arguments are answerable to the immediate context in which they occur” and “in order to participate legitimately in academic life, student writers must achieve reciprocity with their classmates, instructors, etc.” (p. 320). We couldn’t agree more. And following Rankine, we’d likely include, in that vast and ambiguous “etc.,” peers, whose reciprocity (or lack thereof) can do so much to shape students’ sense of belonging, both in terms of their academic connection to the curriculum and within the larger social environment of the school. Imbrenda’s intervention promisingly positions students’ college writing as a project of developing belonging: “By establishing argumentation as a social activity central to participating in ongoing, culturally significant conversations, students progressed from the role of ancillary participants to that of legitimate contributors to such conversations” (p. 339).

Yet, as the author himself notes, the comprehensive view of the yearlong study limits its ability to engage student writing development on a day-to-day level. Questions remain about how academic belonging is fostered by teachers (and peers) in micro-interactions like the one detailed by Rankine above, as well as how enculturation into the social language of college/argumentative writing might resist an assimilating impulse toward students’ un(der)valued cultural literacy practices. While the impetus of belonging to discursive communities in academe that value argumentative genres may be noble from a neoliberal perspective, such acculturation still begs the question: What is gained and lost from belonging to these social, epistemic, and linguistic hierarchies? What types of writing might be useful for challenging these hierarchies so deeply enabled by the educational mission of schools, teacher training programs, assessment practices, and writing assignments? These questions we find particularly urgent to consider in the face of reassertions of White supremacy and patriarchy, in policies and civil discourse.

In asking these questions about belonging and in the ways in which the research appearing in these pages takes up ideological questions about the value of such practices and conceptions of development, we understand ourselves to be following in the footsteps of Brian Street, an *RTE* editorial board member whose passing has been felt deeply by many. He contributed a great deal throughout his career to questioning theories of literacy and notions of literacy development that function to exclude and cast out as “other” those who are not White, middle-class, or of European descent. Grounded in his work in social and cultural anthropology, Professor Street influentially argued that literacies are always plural, rather than singular, monolithic, and unidirectional in development, and he theorized autonomous versus ideological models of literacy. These insights helped launch a line of work within the New Literacy Studies. Much of the work following from Professor Street’s insights and contributions focused on how written language and its development can function for various groups of people, particularly nondominant groups. His methodological approach to studying literacies helped introduce ethnography and participant-observation to the field of literacies studies,
particularly as this work took up issues of power, perspective, and location. Brian Street opened the door of literacies studies more widely, making it possible for more studies, perspectives, methods, insights, and reading and writing practices to belong to the field. To be heard. To be included. To expand what counts as literacy. And to take positive steps toward creating a truly pluriversal area of study.

REFERENCES

