Toward a Pedagogy of Linguistic Diversity: Understanding African American Linguistic Practices and Programmatic Learning Goals

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This essay offers an example of one course that focuses exclusively on Ebonics as a specific African American linguistic practice and on rhetoric and composition scholarship as the primary topics of investigation.

The relationship between cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, and composition has been a topic that has received much attention in rhetoric and composition's disciplinary conversations, even if current pedagogical practices used to address these matters lag behind in progress (Lovejoy, Fox, and Wills). The chair of the 2011 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Convention, Malea Powell, states that the community of teachers and scholars who represent the CCCC “is one where the diversity of our disciplinary fields, and of the people who work here, is understood as the heartbeat of a vital and vibrant future” (CCCC, “2011 Call”). In addition, the CCCC recently formed a committee on diversity and created a blog (CCCC Blog on Diversity) for scholars to discuss what diversity means and, on occasion, what it might look like. Recent topics that have been tackled on the blog include how to encourage college students to take important stances on particular injustices (Prendergast), how to address linguistic diversity (Matsuda; Mao), and how to make race the focus of writing assessment (Poe). While these topics provide productive insight and recommendations on how to address diversity in the writing classroom and discipline, I am especially interested in how to address linguistic diversity and race in writing assessment in the classroom.

One particular strength of the CCCC Blog on Diversity is that it offers specific examples of how not only scholars but also teachers address diversity in their college classrooms. As both a teacher-researcher and writing program administrator, I am invested in finding ways to make both racial and linguistic diversity a central part of the writing program’s curriculum design. One way that I aimed to achieve diversity is by designing African American linguistic first-year writing courses where Ebonics and rhetoric and composition become the subject of inquiry. I recognize, however, that in order to achieve diversity, other courses that focus on additional languages, races, and cultural rhetorical practices are essential. As part of the institutional context where I designed my own African American linguistic

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courses, students do have the option of selecting one of many first-year writing courses where a specific race, technology, gender, class, or other topic serves as the subject of inquiry. Thus, in this article, I offer an example of one course that focuses on rhetoric and composition scholarship as the discipline for investigation with the focus exclusively on Ebonics as a specific African American linguistic practice.

As a writing program administrator at my current institution, I also recognize that courses that engage race and other diversity matters must be consistent with a writing program’s learning goals and objectives. In other words, students must learn something about writing when using diversity-related topics and must be able to execute particular writing practices while also engaging those topics. In this article, I examine how one first-year writing class accomplishes the designated learning goals of a large midwestern institution, while exploring Ebonics and rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary scholarship. In essence, I assess what students learned in relation to the institution’s first-year writing program’s shared learning goals. Because the program’s goals revolve around writing, reading, and research skills and processes (Berry et al. 4), I am interested in how an alternative curricular approach still helps students meet these goals in relation to writing, reading, and research skills and practices.

In order to assess how students meet institutional programmatic goals, I rely on textual analyses from a specific research assignment (see Appendix) that students completed near the end of the course, what I call the disciplinary literacies essay assignment (more on this assignment later). I focus on this method of analysis because my course objectives aim to introduce students to Ebonics as a legitimate form of communication, to introduce them to the discipline of rhetoric and composition, and to fulfill the shared learning goals designated by our first-year writing program. Thus, the rationale for relying on this method of analysis is primarily pedagogical in nature: I wanted to find evidence that my African American linguistic-focused curriculum supports all students in learning about Ebonics and accomplishing course and programmatic goals. The goals on which I focus later in this article require students to demonstrate the following:

- Write for purposes of reflection, action, and participation in academic inquiry
- Understand that various academic disciplines and fields employ varied genre, voice, syntactical choices, use of evidence, and citation styles
- Demonstrate the ability to locate and employ a variety of sources for a range of purposes
- Be able to critically evaluate a variety of sources in purposeful ways
- Apply methods of inquiry and understanding to generate new knowledge

While students may demonstrate their proficiency with the learning goals differently with other assignments, I am most interested in students’ abilities to execute the learning goals with a particular assignment that also requires them to demonstrate their knowledge of rhetoric and composition as a discipline. In the field, while students’ work on Ebonics has been previously assessed in essay exams,
creative writing genres, and digital compositions (Gilyard and Richardson; Ball; Canagarajah), disciplinary scholarship has yet to uncover the work that all students—including non-Black students—can produce in essays that require students to make sense of disciplinary conversations with Ebonics. Thus, in addition to my pedagogical rationale for selecting this assignment for assessment, I also find that a discussion of students’ work with the disciplinary literacies assignment is a productive space for our field to begin thinking more critically about the ways that students make sense of the discourse and its conversations surrounding our discipline.

The disciplinary literacies assignment requires that students demonstrate knowledge of Ebonics and the field of rhetoric and composition by addressing the ways that Ebonics is discussed in disciplinary published scholarship. I also focus on this assignment because much scholarship on first-year writing students calls for students’ writing practices to be studied empirically in relation to academic or professional writing; many argue that such writing should also be relevant for the rest of students’ collegiate careers and majors (Nelms and Dively; Bergmann and Zepernick; Wardle). In “Disciplinarity and Transfer: Students’ Perceptions of Learning to Write,” Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick assess students’ experiences with learning to write in disciplines related to their majors. Their findings reveal that many students consider the

[writing produced in] English classes [to be] personal and expressive rather than academic or professional, and therefore think that teachers’ comments and suggestions represent an unwarranted “intrusion” into students’ own personal and intellectual territory. However, they consider writing in other classes as part of their socialization into the disciplines those courses represent. . . . [Students’] failure to credit English classes with having taught them to write was not, therefore, grounded in students’ belief that what they learned about writing in one setting could not be applied in others, but rather in their perception that the writing done for English classes was inherently not “disciplinary” or “professional” and therefore offered few features that could be transferred. (129)

The lack of disciplinarity in relation to composition appears to be an interesting theme in relation to writing assessment in the field. One of the purposes of this assignment is to assess students’ execution of these goals in relation to the disciplinary literacies assignment in ways that respond to the call that first-year writing courses establish a clearer relationship between first-year writing classes and disciplinarity. Therefore, I am interested in how students engage scholarly knowledge in rhetoric and composition because I believe that first-year writing courses should respond to the call for disciplinarity, where our discipline’s practices are investigated as a source of scholastic inquiry.

The relationship between disciplinarity and first-year writing is the focus of the writing about writing movement, which often proposes that first-year composition be revised as an introductory course to the discipline of composition studies. In “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies,’” Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Ann Wardle argue that teaching an introduction to the discipline of rhetoric and
composition challenges the “typical assumption that first-year writing can be about anything, that somehow the content is irrelevant to an instructor’s ability to respond to the writing” (559). Of the writing about writing movement, I wonder to what extent might using writing about writing as course content potentially overlook other content-based topics such as race, class, and gender. Years earlier, Maxine Hairston noted that potential problems arise when using diversity topics as content in first-year writing as opposed to focusing specifically on writing as content. She argues, “When [composition teachers] try to teach an introductory composition course by concentrating on [social] issues rather than on craft and critical thinking, large numbers of their students end up feeling confused, angry—and cheated” (186) because students find that more time was spent on diversity and social topics and not on improving students’ writing. In response to the need to focus both on writing and diversity, this essay proposes a new angle on the writing about writing movement, an angle that uses writing about writing exclusively to examine issues of linguistic diversity in relation to Ebonics. In doing so, I argue that the study of both linguistic diversity and rhetoric and composition as content support students of diverse backgrounds in meeting first-year writing programmatic learning goals.

A Note about Participants

My study took place during the fall semester of the 2008–2009 academic year. The class for the study was WRA 125, Writing: The Ethnic and Racial Experience, a first-year writing class focused on Ebonics, rhetoric and composition, and Afrocentric pedagogy. Students were not recruited for the class, but student-participants were recruited during the first week of class. Although students knew that they were registering for a race and ethnicity-based section of a first-year writing course, they did not know that the course would focus on Ebonics prior to registering. Twenty-three students were registered, of which twenty-two successfully completed the course by the end of the semester. Of the twenty-two students who completed the course, twenty-one agreed to participate in the study.

Of the twenty-one participants, five were African and African American (four were African American and one was African); two were of Asian ancestry, one was of Latino descent; and thirteen were of European and European American descent (twelve were European American and one was European). These racial/ethnic demographics add complexity to the ways that Afrocentric pedagogy has typically been described in disciplinary scholarship (Redd and Schuster Webb). In contrast to previous studies on Afrocentric language and pedagogy in relation to African American students, this study focuses on a varied group of students of different ethnicities. I argue that all students can also benefit from the study of Ebonics-based linguistic practices in purposeful ways.

How Assessment Is Understood

A great need exists to understand writing assessment not only in relation to particular outcomes or skills that students can meet, but also in relation to how a focus on
linguistic diversity supports students in meeting a program’s shared learning goals. In “(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning,” Brian Huot argues that we “need to begin thinking of writing evaluation not so much as the ability to judge accurately a piece of writing or a particular writer, but as the ability to describe the promise and limitations of a writer working within a particular rhetorical and linguistic context” (107). Such is the approach to writing assessment that I advocate here, that being the need to understand the strengths and challenges of writers working in a particular disciplinary context.

In this study, the methods of assessment conducted are qualitative. Drawing from Huot, I employ qualitative methods that “provide thick descriptions of the kinds of . . . writing performances that occur in . . . the classroom” (152). In his theory of qualitative writing assessment Huot goes on to argue the following:

Instead of being able to say certain students can satisfy x number of outcomes or standards or other sorts of criteria that are easily assembled, quantified and aggregated, it might become possible for assessment to provide the site for rich, descriptive examples of student writing and development. In this way, we can draw upon the theory and practice in educational research that advocates a multimodal approach. (153)

Thus, when assessing students’ work in relation to programmatic outcomes, I provide descriptive examples of the writing that students compose from their disciplinary literacies essays. To provide these descriptive examples, I first read each essay in order to identify patterns and themes that I found to recur frequently across students’ texts. From these recurring themes, I then selected those that identify the ways that students interpret disciplinary conversations. I chose themes relating to disciplinary conversations because they demonstrate the knowledge that students also have acquired of rhetoric and composition as a discipline, one of the primary goals for the course.

Once I selected these themes, I categorized excerpts from students’ essays that corresponded to each theme and was able to place every student’s work within one or more of these categories. To provide evidence of how students’ texts are representative of the common themes, I include two examples that demonstrate each theme. Once I categorized excerpts from students’ responses, I interpreted what was going on in their texts and then assessed the quality of the arguments produced. Based on the assignment, excerpts from students’ essays reflect three of the following themes with respect to the field’s disciplinary conversations regarding Ebonics:

> identified strengths and weaknesses of the CCCC Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) Resolution
> identification of disciplinary advancement of linguistically diverse pedagogies and the need for further pedagogical advancement
> identified research methods and methodologies used to study Ebonics

Based on students’ discussions, I then noted strengths and areas for improvement in their responses in order to assess the relationship between their own work and the shared learning goals. For example, a student who stated that there are
limited explicit pedagogical strategies included in the CCCC SRTOL document but who did not provide any evidence or citations of this in the written paragraph or essay shows that particular research skills and processes are lacking. Or a student who frequently cited incorrectly a source in MLA or another citation system demonstrates that he or she understands “the logics and uses of citation systems and documentation styles” but has limited proficiency in “at least one citation system” (Berry et al. 4). Such examples reveal the skills at which students are most proficient and those skills that require improvement.

Consider the following example of how I coded a theme from a student’s text and assessed the work in relation to the shared learning goals. The student writes:

Year after year, more and more journals are popping up about the composition studies field and the analysis of what needs to be done for all students to be receiving equal opportunity education and competing against each other in the same level. [...] Writing a paper for a required college class, which focuses mainly on AAVE, and learning about its rhetorical and linguistic features, it is clear that there has definitely been improvement on appropriation of this English variety since the 1970s.

The central idea in this excerpt is that progress has been made in the field concerning the study of Ebonics, though more “work needs to be done for all students to be receiving equal opportunity education and competing against each other in the same level.” Therefore, I classified this excerpt as presenting the theme of the disciplinary advancement of pedagogies and the need for more advancement category. What is missing from this paragraph (and the rest of the essay) is a detailed discussion of what this progress looks like and specific areas for making more progress. In relation to the shared learning goals that discuss writing and research processes, I concluded that although the student can identify and locate particular themes, improvement is needed in his or her ability to “apply methods of inquiry and conventions to generate new understanding” (Terry et al. 4). In other words, the student simply summarizes key findings in the field but builds limited knowledge since solutions for additional progress are not offered. She indicates that she has learned much from the research process when she writes, “Writing a paper for a required college class […] it is clear that there has definitely been improvement,” but she does not actually specify the new knowledge that she has learned.

Analysis of Disciplinary Themes

I begin with a discussion of CCCC Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL), acknowledging that SRTOL is not limited to the promotion of African American students’ language rights; however, I do believe that in order to discuss the promotion and enhancement of Ebonics-speakers’ linguistic performances in the classroom, SRTOL needs to be addressed. When reflecting on the disciplinary conversations surrounding Ebonics, my students’ research on the topic also reflects how SRTOL has directly and indirectly influenced these disciplinary conversations. Thus my work—and occasionally my students’ work—with SRTOL is not intended to
conflate the resolution with Ebonics; instead, it is intended to demonstrate how the resolution has historically influenced (and continues to influence) Ebonics-based disciplinary conversations.

The following passages from students’ texts reveal the relationships that exist between SRTOL and Ebonics, as they acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the document. One student writes:

This is where the Students Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) comes into the picture. First suggested in 1972, it wasn’t ratified by the members of CCCC until two years later. It states:

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (CCC)

Without actually mentioning AAVE, the CCCC wrote this resolution mainly to address speakers and teachers of AAVE. Teachers have the responsibility to become informed about AAVE. However, if the teachers remain uninformed about AAVE then what chance does it have at being accepted by the general public? This is especially true in the area of writing and composition where today most documents are written in standard English. Some may argue that even though you have the right to your own language, you have the responsibility to become familiar with standard English.

Another student writes:

1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication or CCCC created a resolution called the Students’ Rights to Their Own Language. The CCCC’s main purposes are to eliminate the prejudices of speakers of different dialects and give the students the right to speak and write in their own language. However, what’s most remarkable about the resolution is that it wanted it to make the teachers adjust to how they teach students who speak a different dialect—a theme that would be recurring throughout my discussion. This resolution encourages the teachers to have background knowledge of different dialects and it’s their responsibility to improve the students’ language. These resolutions are very bold and ambitious and would really help the dialect speakers to express themselves better if followed correctly, however it doesn’t mask what it doesn’t do. These resolutions are good in theory but not in practice. It would be good if the teachers follow the resolutions, but in real life most of them don’t. Also, these resolutions were done without the perspective of students; the perspective which should be considered the most important since they are the ones who would be affected directly. And thus, I think, this shows how AAVE was discussed during
the 1970’s—the time when the discussions of AAVE all started from. Student’s perspectives were not taken into account, while all the responsibilities of improving the language of dialect speakers were put on the shoulders of the educators.

With both of these excerpts, students attempt (sometimes accurately, other times questionably) to assess the strengths and shortcomings of the SRTOL document. With the first excerpt above, although the idea that SRTOL was written “mainly to address speakers and teachers of AAVE” is up for debate, the student’s response does establish a relationship between teachers’ responsibilities to promote language rights and the communicative patterns of Ebonics-speaking students whose language may deviate from Standard English. For this student (and other students), one of the first steps associated with SRTOL’s progress is an acknowledgment of the legitimacies of alternative language varieties, including Ebonics.

As instructors, we might encourage students to resist generalizing too quickly. The second student assumes that “most” teachers still do not enforce SRTOL, a claim that while possibly accurate, is certainly debatable without sufficient evidence. To be clear, however, this student’s discussion of SRTOL still makes meaningful contributions. Later on in the essay, the student argues that SRTOL calls for teachers to adjust their attitudes toward language varieties that deviate from Standard English and later states that “what’s most remarkable about the resolution is that it wanted it to make the teachers adjust to how they teach students who speak a different dialect—a theme that would be recurring throughout my discussion.” Later in this article, I further discuss students’ identification of themes in the field that continue to demand a change in teachers’ attitudes.

As also discussed, like the lack of philosophical practice offered from the document, students’ analysis of SRTOL indicates, while good in theory, the resolution also falls short in providing explicit examples of pedagogical practice. Their findings are also consistent with what Geneva Smitherman has discussed in the “CCCC’s Role in the Struggle for Student Rights” and, more recently, Valerie Kinloch’s discussion in “Revisiting the Promise of Students’ Right to Their Own Language: Pedagogical Strategies.” Smitherman writes:

It seemed that the Students’ Right background document was welcomed because it was informative in terms of theory; however, it did not go far enough in praxis. CCCC leadership acknowledged the need for something more in the form of explicit teaching materials, sample lesson plans, and a more practically-oriented pedagogy. (365)

And Kinlock states more recently:

We must do more than theorize about student differences and language variation. We must use a rights rhetoric such as Students’ Right to encourage students to become active learners and critical thinkers inside and outside of classrooms if we are, in the words of Smitherman, “taking care of business” (Talkin and Testifyin 216). . . . Let us affirm the rights of students to their own language by affirming the practices they bring into classrooms as they enhance their critical thinking, reading, writing, and performing skills. (109)
Kinloch’s work with SRTOL is also significant because it identifies specific strategies for putting SRTOL into practice, using her own students’ conversations about the resolution from class discussions as lenses. It also demonstrates how we can use the document (and disciplinary scholarship) to teach explicit pedagogical strategies related to writing, reading, and research. While students can make the claim (from Smitherman’s analysis) that originally the SRTOL did not sufficiently put theory into practice, more recent conversations like Kinloch’s, however, provide evidence of increasing pedagogical strategies in support of SRTOL and Ebonics-speaking students.

Students are attempting to move toward “critically evaluat[ing] . . . a variety of sources in purposeful ways” (4), but have not completely developed this skill yet. In many cases, students’ responses merely summarize sources and disciplinary trends. Although, in some instances, we see the beginnings of analysis, critical evaluation of sources is still a skill where most students need some additional improvement. Perhaps students’ inability or reluctance to evaluate disciplinary conversations and sources critically stems from the ways in which student discourse has traditionally been positioned in the field. Nancy C. DeJoy argues that student critique and analysis is traditionally seen in terms of students’ identification of and with course texts. She notes:

by the end of high school it is possible that students themselves perceive the use of such critical strategies as inappropriate and/or unexpected. It is possible that the fundamental split between identification of and with the terms for making meaning . . . is foreign to most students by the time they graduate from high school. (19)

As an instructor, I take partial responsibility for students’ analysis of disciplinary themes often being limited in identification of or with course texts, especially considering that the disciplinary literacies assignment prompt proposes that students begin with a summary of disciplinary texts. This is not to suggest that summary as an inventive strategy is not useful, nor is it to suggest that such summary-related strategies are not critical in order for students to demonstrate their knowledge of the field and its disciplinary conversations. Instead, the point that I emphasize here is that students’ limited development of analysis in many cases is also limited to their identification of and with sources. When students rely only on these invention, arrangement, and revision strategies, their discussions often summarize course themes, and when claims are made based on referenced sources, their discussions are often not sufficiently supported with additional evidence.6

Along these lines, students need additional work with the learning goals that state that they should be expected to “apply methods of inquiry and conventions to generate new understanding” (Berry et al. 4). Because students’ responses often rely on summarizing and identifying disciplinary trends and themes, many of their discussions do not necessarily generate new knowledge that has not already been explored in the field, although one could argue that the summaries that students produced generated new knowledge for the students. While students summarize
key conversations, and while those summaries often don’t add anything new that has not been addressed in the field’s published scholarship, the fact that students can identify various themes in disciplinary scholarship with such accuracy does indicate that they are attempting to generate some knowledge on their own. What students might build on, however, is how they can use these disciplinary themes to offer new recommendations for the field with respect to its methods, pedagogy, and philosophies toward the study of Ebonics.

Several students in the study acknowledged and identified disciplinary advancement in relation to pedagogy by the changes in different pedagogical strategies used to teach Ebonics writers in the field. Others discussed progress in relation to the legitimacy of Ebonics. And still others acknowledged an increasing awareness of both the syntactical and rhetorical patterns that constitute significant elements of the language. Consider some of the following examples that illustrate ways that students identify the progress made by the field with regard to Ebonics. One student writes:

Now we venture into the new millennium where the discussion goes further than the classroom, but to the [field of] composition studies field itself. The article’s that are written in the 2000’s are neither about the AAVE in particular nor the people who speak it. By this time, people are aware of AAVE/AAE, AAL, Ebonics, or Black Language. The discussions are now about how to imply AAVE in such a way to where it is not ignored or seen as “incorrect” but as a helpful strategic tool that can be implied in comp. studies or English writing classes. Scholars and linguists are aware of AAVE rhetorical and grammatical features now and see that there can possibly be a solution to eliminate the division of AAVE speakers and those who are not AAVE speakers, there are also more comparisons of those who speak AAVE and their reaction to writing in compositional courses.

Another student writes:

From different terminology to different pedagogy, the explosion of opinions in discussing AAVE in composition studies could easily be traced back from the 1970s to the present. Many teachers, researchers, and compositionists have been evaluating the importance of bringing the Black English in the classroom in order to provide the non-standard speakers learn how to compose in Standard English. Even though The Oakland [School Board] Resolution didn’t exactly resolve the problem to the extent where an actual decision for improvement was made, it brought to the surface the idea of the significant impact teachers have on students. . . . Writing a paper for a required college class, which focuses mainly on AAVE, and learning about its rhetorical and linguistic features, it is clear that there has definitely been improvement on appropriation of this English variety since the 1970s. There are still many more obstacles to overcome, but the first steps in providing the teachers with information and motivation on how to be successful in their job have been made; now it’s up to the teachers to understand how important it is for them to put it to use.
Students’ responses indicate that they identify the following forms of disciplinary advancement: 1) an acknowledgment of Ebonics as a legitimate linguistic system; 2) an increased awareness of the linguistic and rhetorical patterns of Ebonics; and, 3) an understanding of explicit pedagogies for implementing Ebonics.

Like the examples quoted previously, excerpts from several students’ writing reveal students’ abilities to execute some of the shared learning goals. Students can first demonstrate their ability to locate and employ a variety of sources for various purposes. Some students are able to locate and trace name changes, or what one student calls “terminology” from Black English through Ebonics. And other students reference sources on the 1996 Oakland School Board Resolution in order to discuss the role it played in the need to spread existing knowledge regarding the legitimacy of Ebonics to those less familiar with both the fields of sociolinguistics and rhetoric and composition. And because students demonstrate the ability to locate sources and reference information for a variety of purposes, they also understand the logics and uses of citation systems. As in the student examples discussed previously, students understand whom they need to cite and when to cite with respect to the arguments being made.

From these discussions, it is clear that students may need additional work with some of the learning goals, particularly the goal that calls for them to apply methods of inquiry to generate new knowledge. I believe that the students have demonstrated some skill with this goal since their ability to locate, analyze, and make sense of the different conversations in the field does generate new knowledge for them, but much of this knowledge is not necessarily new for the field of rhetoric and composition. While students do provide some information to support their arguments, what is missing, perhaps, is specific examples of areas in disciplinary scholarship where continued progress needs to be made. In many cases, students summarize historical progress but provide limited discussions of where the field needs to go next.

The fact that some students also assumed that most compositionists are familiar with the patterns of Ebonics also raises concern. Although students accurately identify the breadth of work done in both sociolinguistics and composition studies on the legitimacy, structure, and patterns of Ebonics, without further empirical evidence they cannot assume that most compositionists and composition teachers are familiar with its legitimacy, structure, and patterns. In fact, a 2000 Language Attitudinal Awareness survey conducted by the CCCC Committee on Language Policy refutes this claim by noting that teacher educators are exposed to limited knowledge on the structures and patterns governing nonstandard language varieties, especially because such courses are not required in many teacher educator programs (CCCC, Language Knowledge). Thus, students may also need additional support in critically evaluating a variety of sources in purposeful ways. Students’ need for improvement in such critical evaluation of sources in purposeful ways and generating new knowledge is certainly understandable given that this is the first time any of them have inquired into the field of rhetoric and composition at all.

The final theme that I discuss is how students understand and make sense
of the methods and methodologies used to discuss Ebonics in the field. One student writes:

As is the case with many AAVE speakers . . . students demonstrated an ability to skillfully manipulate and interchangeably use AAVE, mainstream, and academic English during discussions—style switching with ease depending on their degree of personal engagement in the conversation and the topic being discussed. These students tended to use more AAVE features in their speech when they were more engaged in a conversation and when talking with peers. (28) Arnetha explains that AAVE seemed to be more noticeable when the student was speaking than when he or she wrote. Ball concludes her research study by arguing that AAVE is an important aspect of writing for these students because it helps to bring out their personal and cultural experiences. When that happens, they will have the desire to continue writing.

Another student writes:

[Canagarajah] cites these words from another scholar, Mary Louise Pratt from her article Arts of the Contact Zone. Canagarajah uses it in the context of a study of a class he did. His study involved a first year college writing class he taught over the summer for ethnic minority students that was made to help them adjust to what he calls “academic culture”, in order to improve their retention rate”. He noted that the African Americans, who were a 10-5 majority over students of other ethnicities in the class, formed Safe Houses (Canagarajah, 5). In the Safe Houses, the students could communicate about writing issues using their own rhetorical elements that come from AAVE. The point that Canagarajah makes, is that in order to really get the most out of writing from speakers of certain other dialects or languages (specifically AAVE in his article) the teacher must work to emphasize on the specific techniques and stylistic patterns that are found from their specific dialects, and through focusing on the students’ culture work teaching basic writing skills.

It is interesting to see how students extensively discuss research methods and identify research methodologies used by researchers. From their discussions, it is clear that not only are they participating in academic inquiry when they are able to talk about research, but also, and perhaps more importantly, they are participating in the conversations as active members of the field. Using these examples of methodological discussions, students also demonstrate their ability to understand that various academic disciplines and fields employ varied genres, voices, syntactical choices, forms of evidence, and citation styles; they provide evidence of this ability in their identification and critique of different research methods and methodologies. If we take students’ discussions of research used to study Ebonics, we can also find evidence of the ways in which students attempt to mimic the discursive practices surrounding methodological talk in the field. They use various stylistic terms such as record, conduct, and concludes. And they also understand how researchers use empirical research as evidence to support their arguments.

Although students successfully identify the relationship between methodology and pedagogy, as instructors we can provide opportunities for them to move...
beyond identifying and summarizing the research methods and toward developing a more thoughtful and thorough analysis of the significance of employing these methods. While it is impressive that students can identify and make sense of these methods and while such knowledge may be new for students, again, this knowledge is not necessarily new to the field. We might perhaps encourage students to think more critically about the gaps that exist in the field’s choices to employ particular methodologies when looking at African American student writers, or to determine which research topics or questions have yet to be explored by the current research practices in the field. In either case, we can use students’ conversations on research practices as a way to think more critically about not only the research practices of the field but also such practices as they cross the various academic disciplines and fields that students may encounter throughout the rest of their collegiate lives.

Conclusion

Students’ work with the disciplinary literacies assignment reveals not only some tensions that are reflected in our disciplinary conversations but also tensions and conflicts reflected in students’ writing, reading, and research practices. Improvement is still needed in argument construction that moves beyond summary, the use of evidence, and citation practices. Despite the limitations associated with students’ writing, reading, and research processes, rhetoric and composition can still benefit from students’ understandings of the work that the field has done concerning Ebonics. Their responses to the disciplinary literacies assignment not only identify themes in composition studies’ conversations but also offer a reminder of where we are and where we need to be in the struggle for student rights. Although much of students’ work reflects a historical summary of the discipline’s struggle, where it is now, and where it needs to be, there’s nothing wrong with reminding the field once more of the problems and gaps in research on Ebonics and students’ rights. The work that students produced with this assignment is merely a beginning for potential conversations that composition studies may continue to have concerning students’ discourse and contributions to the struggle. Perhaps subsequent work in this area may point toward a more critical analysis of the struggle that continues to generate new knowledge to and for the field. Nevertheless, findings reveal that Ebonics-based pedagogy can still support students to a great extent in meeting institutional required learning goals. Such a study further provides an example of how we might also apply the writing about writing movement more critically to student rights, Ebonics, and linguistic diversity.

Appendix: The Disciplinary Literacies Assignment

In the last units, we focused more on the linguistic features of AAVE/AAL and how it exists in digital environments; in this unit, we will focus more on the scholars who discuss AAVE/AAL features and student writing in composition studies. For this assignment, we’ll learn more about
AAL/AAVE and how it affects language and educational policy, college writing, and the teaching of writing. For this, we’ll read various articles within the field of composition studies as an introduction to the discipline of teaching writing and students who speak/write AAL/AAVE.

Task

For this essay, you’ll be asked to develop an argument as to whether composition studies effectively discusses the usage of AAL/AAVE as a language/language variety, and whether or not discussion on the topic has changed or evolved over time. To do this, you will also consider referring to specific journals (College Composition and Communication, College English, Teaching English in the Two-Year College, English Journal, JAC, or others) to gain a sense of what is occurring more recently in the field. You can gain access to these journals by going to www.lib.msu.edu, where you can search JSTOR or the Literature Online (LION) database. Your analysis should include the following:

> An argument/thesis on how composition studies discusses issues of AAVE/AAL
> A discussion of how AAVE/AAL has been discussed historically (1970s–2000) through course readings
> A discussion of how AAVE/AAL is more recently discussed in composition studies (2000–present) in related journals within the field

To accomplish these requirements, you’ll first want to refer to the course readings to make an argument or claim as to whether composition studies fairly and effectively addresses issues of AAVE/AAL. For this, you’ll want to draw on evidence of at least two course readings to make your claim. In your discussion and analysis of course readings, you might consider providing summaries of each reading and authors’ stances, referring to specific examples from the readings to support the authors’ main idea(s) and then shifting toward formulating your own argument that analyzes each author’s effectiveness in discussing AAVE/AAL within the field.

Next, you’ll need to research more recent scholarship within composition studies, by consulting journal articles in College Composition and Communication (CCC), College English, Journal of Advanced Composition (JAC), or Teaching English in the Two-Year College (TETYC). Access to these journals can be granted on campus through www.lib.msu.edu, JSTOR.com, Literature Online (LION), and additional MSU library electronic indexes (we’ll work together as a class in learning how to navigate online indexes). Once you’ve searched and browsed articles within any of these journals regarding AAVE/AAL, you’ll then select AT LEAST 2 articles and explain how they also support your overall argument/claim on the representation of AAVE. An annotated bibliography and works cited page will also accompany your work and be included in the submission packet (more details later).

In short, you should carefully analyze a total of AT LEAST 4 sources (2 reflecting course readings assigned in class and 2 reflecting scholarship demonstrated in recent journals from the online databases). In your discussion of each article, you should make an argument/thesis that demonstrates whether composition studies as a discipline effectively discusses scholarship concerning AAVE/AAL and whether such discussion has changed/evolved over time.

Developing Work

3a (approx. 500 words; to be posted on Blog): For this assignment, you’ll carefully work with one of the readings we’ve read so far. Here, you’ll summarize the author’s main idea, supporting evidence of that idea, and how you think it discusses scholarship of AAVE/AAL in composition studies. What does the reading seem to say about AAVE/AAL? Does it effectively make an argument about its role in composition studies? If so, how? If not, what’s missing?
3b (approx. 500 words; to be posted on Blog): For this assignment, you’ll respond to the same questions listed for DW2a, but this time using evidence from a recently published article in a related journal you found in the library databases (2000–present).

Annotated Bibliography (to be printed out and turned in): For this assignment, you will produce a source description of AT LEAST 4 of the sources you intend to use. You will summarize each source and then explain how they are relevant to your research. Correct MLA citation is required (more details later).

Possible Readings to Use with This Assignment


Notes

1. Each student who participated in this study granted informed consent to quote from their writings. Such consent and procedures were approved by my institution’s human subject review board.

2. One student stopped attending class within the first couple of weeks in the semester. The student did not officially deregister from the class.

3. By frequent use, I mean patterns that recurred in at least five or more students’ essays.

4. By disciplinary advancement, I mean the evolution of understanding linguistic diversity and acknowledgment of pedagogical strategies used to support linguistically diverse speakers and writers, including Ebonics speakers and writers.

5. For the purposes of this essay, *AAVE* (African American Vernacular English) is used interchangeably with *Ebonics*.

6. For an extended discussion of invention, arrangement, and revision, see Nancy C. DeJoy’s *Process This: Undergraduate Writing in Composition Studies*. 

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Works Cited


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Call for Proposals—2012 Graduate Research Network

The Graduate Research Network (GRN) invites proposals for its 2012 workshop, May 17, 2012, at the Computers and Writing Conference hosted by North Carolina State University in Raleigh, NC. The C&W Graduate Research Network is an all-day pre-conference event, open to all registered conference participants at no charge. Roundtable discussions group those with similar interests with leaders who facilitate discussion and offer suggestions for developing research projects and finding suitable venues for publication. We encourage anyone interested or involved in graduate education and scholarship—students, professors, mentors, and interested others—to participate in this important event. The GRN welcomes those pursuing work at any stage, from those just beginning to consider ideas to those who are ready to pursue publication. Participants are also invited to apply for travel funding through the CW/GRN Travel Grant Fund. Deadline for submissions is April 25, 2012. For more information or to submit a proposal, visit our website at http://class.georgiasouthern.edu/writling/GRN/2011/index.html or email Brea Shaffer at gs00874@georgiasouthern.edu or Janice Walker at jwalker@georgiasouthern.edu.