DIALECTS AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES: RECLAIMING LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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> *I grew up in rural Kentucky, yet I had little understanding of why we spoke, believed, and lived as we did, and I am sorry to say that I was ashamed of my heritage. The one thing that bothered me most was the way people talked, because education had taught me that their use of language was "incorrect," the result of their ignorance and illiteracy, and nothing more. (Peterson 53)*

In an essay exploring the effects of conquest on the modern imagination, Edward Said suggests that William Butler Yeats's writing functioned as an open fight to reclaim the turf of the imagination lost to "imperialists" who had preceded him. For Said,

> Imperialism . . . is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. . . . For the native, the history of his or her colonial service is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored. From what? . . . [From] a whole other agenda whose purpose and processes are controlled elsewhere. (36)

We believe "geographical violence" is an appropriate metaphor for what many students face after years of schooling. Too often students see the English curriculum (and the writing

course) as an elitist, indecipherable program "whose purpose and processes are controlled elsewhere." Mike Rose, an eloquent spokesperson describing what many students must give up in the process of becoming "literate" in American schools, suggests that in order to survive, students must assimilate the precepts of a bland, often alien standardized English and leave behind the language of home, peers, and culture. Nowhere does this cause more problems than in the writing class.

If students are to retain any semblance of "authentic" voice, writing teachers must confront this issue by creating an organic curriculum which finds at its core the language of home and community. Here, we describe such a curriculum and suggest that our approach may be adapted for any writing course. In first-year, advanced, and teaching of composition courses at Appalachian State University, University of Missouri, and University of Georgia, we have helped students examine language features, dialects, and language attitudes in their communities. In this article, we will show how the students' inquiry has directed class discussions and (re)shaped attitudes toward their own dialects as well as toward the language communities of others.

Reclaiming Lost "Turf" through Collaborative Inquiry

Said describes the response of the colonized to the imperialists' rape of "the land":

> The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes, myths, and religions, these too are enabled by the land. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical re-development of the native language. (36–37)

Thus, if we are to continue this metaphor, the essential underlying goal of the writing class is to help students both

reclaim previously lost "turf" and assume ownership of larger tracts. The guide we can look to here is Paulo Freire. His primary aim for reestablishing ownership is to help students with the "re-development of native language." As Freire suggests, students who find themselves submerged in a culture of silence can begin to look critically at their world through dialectical encounters with others, and can gradually become more aware of their personal and social realities—as well as the contradictions within those realities. Following Freire's lead, we suggest five tenets for reestablishing ownership and reclaiming native language in writing classrooms: (1) honoring individual voices; (2) developing a discourse community; (3) integrating reading, writing, and language study; (4) promoting continuous self-reflection in learning; and (5) promoting the systematic investigation of the role of language in culture and community.

First, the writing class that nurtures ownership of language should welcome in the native voice that is too often absent or has too often been silenced in the past. As the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* explain:

> Language is a tool for representing experience, and tools contribute to creative endeavors only when used . . . . [T]he oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write—sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self. (25–26)

The process of learning in the writing classroom involves continual conversation. We argue that students must not only be drawn into the conversation—they must initiate the conversations. Such activity produces a varied and sometimes cacophonous class community—for our students' individual voices represent many varied cultures.

The writing class must also forge its own interested discourse community. "The first principle of imperialism,"

suggests Said, "is a clear-cut and absolute hierarchical distinction between ruler and ruled" (38). However humane we are as teachers, our students are familiar with others who function largely as rulers. Since students must actively take responsibility for their products in our writing classes and must provide the substance for the class through their actions, questions, response, and self-evaluation, then these ruler/ruled distinctions must go. Writing classes must become forums where problems are collaboratively generated and discussed, and students feel challenged to work toward their own well-informed answers. In fact, as Joseph Harris suggests, students are "always simultaneously a part of several discourses, of several communities" (19). Participants in the writing course—all students, all teachers—must work together in the process of community-building.

Third, the writing class must break down rigid distinctions between writing, reading, and language study. Despite the problems integrating these concerns in traditional English departments, we know that each is deeply interrelated. Eleanor Kutz and Hephzibah Roskelly remind us: "Our ways of knowing are aspects of our culture and are embedded in our language. . . . Language represents shared concepts that are rooted in shared experience" (14). In a writing class that "studies" literacy, language is the core, and writing and reading are the tools we use to explore our understanding. "The study of literacy," Andrea Lunsford writes, ". . . constantly moves outward, inevitably shading theory into pedagogy, research into practice, cutting across lines of class, age, race, and gender, reaching out to us all" (11). In our courses, the integration of reading, writing, and language study unravels individuals' attitudes toward others and toward themselves as members of particular cultures.

Fourth, students in writing classes must be involved in self-reflection throughout the process of writing, for such reflection can provide much of the self-generated "content" for class discussion. Berthoff, Britton, Kutz, Roskelly, and others link learning to theory-making. Kutz and Roskelly document how this cycle of learning occurs:

> As people learn, they ask questions to which they actively seek answers; they generate informal models of how the world works and test these models against the data of their ongoing experience in the world. . . . Conscious learners reflect on this process . . . and their learning is active and constructive, not passive. (18–19)

Our emphasis on self-reflection invites students to participate in experiences which support continual, lifelong, self-regulated learning. We want our students to become knowledge producers rather than knowledge receivers, moving from what Kutz calls *unconfident answer-knowers* to *confident question-askers* (69).

Engaging in reflective talk about learning requires language—language rooted in the intimacy of daily lives. Kutz and Roskelly, borrowing from Vygotsky, suggest that the "culture or community . . . provides the language to explain the reality the [student] perceives: the [student] actively constructs a world, and language helps shape the construction" (38–39). Thus, the writing class, with its goal of improving communicative skills and fostering literacy through reading, writing, listening, and speaking, seems the natural place to investigate the role of language and culture. As investigators, or what Shirley Brice Heath calls "junior ethnographers," students in our writing classrooms become immersed in research in their local communities, a fifth tenet for reclaiming native language in writing classrooms. All course experiences contribute ultimately to the systematic investigation of the role of language in culture and community.

Invitations: A Community-Based Writing Curriculum

In her synopsis of literacy and composition studies, Andrea Lunsford comments on "the importance of invitations in our lives," for writing requires the confidence to use language, to be welcomed in, to prevent statements like these:

> No one will listen.

I can't be coherent.
They'll know I'm a hick.

The invitation is too often fumbled in school. Often the problems faced by our students are closely related to the teachers who have come before—teachers hostile to students, teachers who would prefer that students didn't write, teachers trying to bring students in line with their often incoherent program. The process of learning becomes especially difficult when "home" language is cut out of the equation:

> Most schools have regarded "home" language and anything else that students carry with them—cultural differences, individual learning styles—primarily as a liability to their learning, something to be dismissed or erased before school learning can take place. Schools are accustomed to seeing what students do bring with them "from the outside"—stories, ideas, beliefs—as excess baggage rather than chests full of tools to aid the learning. (Kutz 57)

As writing teachers, we fight to turn over power to our students; however, the invitation we extend must go beyond saying, "Come and join our world." Instead, it must begin by saying, "We're all in this together. Let's pool our knowledge and see what we can produce."

When individuals begin to voice felt needs in the classroom, the first steps in promoting fluency in writing have been taken. However, even when individual voices grow strong, there is more to be accomplished. Ultimately, the challenge is to move students to employ their individual voices to speak about and to the community (or communities) in and out of the classroom. These concerns lead back inevitably to the linguistic community:

- the language of home, dad at the table, sister at play, the dog on the lawn
- the language of peers—in the dorm room, boys at the nintendo table discussing women, the language of relationships, drugs, music, sex, and school

- the language of communities: formal and informal, work and school, church and bar, classroom and playground

A natural starting place for posing questions in a writing course concerns the notion of literacy itself. Jay Robinson suggests questions that naturally occur when students simultaneously study language and their communities:

> Is our community a closed or open one? Is the common language that constitutes it for members only, or may others come to use it, even if they change it in the process of doing so? In forming our community, whom and how many people have we systematically excluded, and at what cost to the possibility of common understanding and social cohesion? (19)

These questions serve as the backbone for the classroom research in our writing courses. The following paragraphs illustrate each of three major strands of our community-based writing curriculum: (1) discovering student knowledge and attitudes, (2) constructing a valuable product, and (3) returning newfound information to the community.

1. Discovering Student Knowledge and Attitudes

Having grown up near the Mississippi River Delta, we liken this process of tapping into the wealth of student knowledge to dredging the depths for hidden treasure (sand, ancient history, and alligator gars). In our courses this process is primarily accomplished through focused freewriting and mini-essays. Students typically write on these and other topics:

- language pet peeves
- characteristics of "home" dialects
- those language users characterized as "other"
- how gender influences language
- characteristics of Standard American English
- racism and attacks on the language of minorities
- idioms, phrases, colorful metaphors

- the language of advertising, politicians, television
- slang and profanity
- age and language differences.

These focused writings fuel class discussion immediately following the writing. When accompanied by reading from various texts, the writing provides the "showing" to back the "telling" of textual sources. Following are excerpts from the focused freewriting on language pet peeves:

- *dinner* for *lunch* or *supper* for *dinner; yonder; you'sn* or *wes'n*
- *ol* for *oil; idear* for *idea; hit* for *it; pop* for *Coke™; ax* for *ask*
- *hunerd* for *hundred; warsh; funner/funnest; chick* for *woman*
- *I seed it* (saw); *ya'll; you'ins; I'm fixin; ain't; that there's*
- *orta* for *ought to; flar pot* for *flower pot; deers;* I'm doing *good*
- *far* for *fire; stewped* for *stupid;* he's *contrary; drownded*
- I *seen* a good movie; *tarred* for *tired; x-mas* for *Christmas*
- *thang* for *thing;* the way "outsiders" pronounce *Appalachian*
- *extry* for *extra; strenth* for *strength; of a morning; missy* for *girl*
- *rightcheer* for *right here; if'n;* nuc*u*lear for *nuclear; how's come*
- *irregardless; pacific* for *specific; i* sounds in *i*ce, r*i*ght, n*i*ce

When students discuss pet peeves, they quickly see the variability of Standard American English and the subjective (and sometimes ludicrous) nature of language preferences. They begin to ask crucial questions: How do country people talk? Do Southerners talk differently from Northerners? What phrases mark a speaker as clearly different from the mainstream? What is the difference between colorful language and irksome usage? Which speakers or groups are consistently marked as different?

Because so many pet peeves center around pronunciation, students quickly see that a standardized method of showing

"sounds" of English is needed. Soon after this initial writing, students are introduced to the International Phonetic Alphabet. Learning the IPA helps students to talk about how pronunciation differs from spelling, and how words or phrases are shortened or run together in normal speech. In short, they learn the "little ways" each "talks funny." In this continuing discussion, students are typically delighted in the diversity they discover.

This preliminary groundwork is followed by further freewritings on individual dialects, slang, and profanity. Subsequent discussions of these topics help students explore the speech of insiders, discuss style shifts, and lay out often hidden language rules. In the process, students apply community standards to a variety of formal and informal contexts. These writings also lead to discussion of gender and generational differences. Following are selected excerpts from freewritings about profanity:

- Now I choose the times I curse. I always cuss at the stables or back home, but I never talk dirty around people I don't know.
- We try to watch our language now that Heather, my daughter, is always listening. She falls and lands on her "bumper." She poops and pees.
- I was raised on the humor of Lenny Bruce and know how cuss words can be used and misused. I don't like to see cussing used merely for the sake of cussing.
- Profanity has been a regular part of my vocabulary since junior high. I suppose my friends and I thought that we were somehow cooler and rebellious. Using profanity is something you couldn't do around your parents, so it was a way to get away with something dangerous.
- It is sort of a turn-off to me when women curse a lot . . . . I have always felt that cursing is masculine, and pleasantly dirty.

By this point in the course, students are ready to take on the "dangerous" topics relating to "others," to gender and racial stereotypes, and also to explore how they feel about their own

dialects. Their responses quickly provide a battleground for diverse viewpoints. Following are excerpts from a focused writing on "those in your community who speak differently from you":

- Many times I find poorer black people using sentences and words that I wouldn't consider correct as far as the way I talk.
- My stepfamily is more mountainy in their speech than the people I grew up around. They use double-negatives and the word "ain't." My stepfather used to go out in the yard and call his old dog Barney, "Ho Barney, hyup, hyup, hyup!" My family and I have always perceived ourselves as "Southern" rather than "Country."
- Linville Creek is the kind of area that Jed and Granny (on the *Beverly Hillbillies*) came from . . . . The lady I was visiting told her husband to spread cow dung on the garden to "richen" the soil.
- The only people who talked differently were the blacks and the upper class.
- A co-worker doesn't differentiate between social classes as far as his speech goes. He talks hick to the rich Floridians just as easily as he does to his coonhunting buddies. He is treated as an inferior by the upper class, but he doesn't realize it.
- When I first moved to North Carolina from Maryland, my friends up north warned me about Southerners. When I first heard my neighbor talk, I considered him to be illiterate. He had a twangy accent.
- There was a group of kids at my high school that we called rednecks. They smoked cigarettes in the bathroom, raced their junky hot rods, and had their own language . . . . We thought they were stupid trash as a result of their language and behavior, and they thought we were snot-nosed brats because of ours.

As they articulate their stories, students discover uncomfortable prejudices as well as feelings of inadequacy and ostracization. They remark that they have never fully

considered the implications of their own language attitudes. By sharing hidden feelings about dialects and attitudes toward the language of "others," they become more aware of the ways language binds people together and also keeps people apart. After a class discussion on these issues, one student wrote, "I have begun to analyze my own thoughts on accent and speech. Am I prejudiced because of the way someone talks? What are my own preconceptions about a person when I listen to them speak for the very first time?"

2. Producing a Valued Product

The two larger papers (both 6 to 10 pages) are a refinement of informal writing, discussion, assigned reading, and individualized research. These papers move students *beyond* the classroom into the local community.

The first paper asks students to conduct research by interviewing intimate others (family members or close friends within their communities) about their actual language use as well as their attitudes toward dialects. In this paper, students report their findings and summarize what they discover about themselves and their cultures. Building upon the focused writings and class discussions, students prepare for this paper by compiling lists of pronunciations, meaningful vocabulary, and collections of phrases which illustrate interesting grammar and usage. Here we use selected texts and videos to offer students options for gathering information on language and dialects (Shuy; Wolfram and Christian). In addition, students generate lists of specific questions which are explored first within the classroom and answered later by the language users whom students interview:

- Do you have an accent or dialect? How would you describe it?
- Do you ever try to change or eliminate your accent?
- Do dialects cause misunderstandings? Can you think of an example?
- Do you alter your speech in different settings? (Work, home, school, etc.) How?
- Does your family use any special phrases or words?

- Who do you think has a funny accent? What images do you associate with that accent?
- Do you ever feel out of place because of your accent or the way you talk?
- Do you speak Standard American English? How would you describe Standard American English?
- What is bad grammar? Can you give examples?
- Are some dialects superior to others?
- Who most influences the way you speak?
- How would you describe the speech of people from your hometown?

As they move from the classroom into the broader community, the interview process enables students to situate themselves among members of their own cultures. As researchers, they stumble upon pockets of personalities and borders of language discrimination. The following excerpts from this first paper provide examples of their discoveries about local dialects and language attitudes. Often students are surprised and delighted by what they discover during the interviews:

"The Way Things Used to Be"

Mom tells me the way things used to be pronounced. Mom says "reckon" occasionally and eats "taters." Pants are dungarees and "probably" is invariably pronounced /prawbli/. Bait worms were fishworms, syrup maples were sugar trees, colas were dopes, hide-n-seek was hoopey-hide and corn-on-the-cob was roastnyears. Dragon flies were often snake-feeders.

"Rhythm and Pace in Language"

Wendy runs in her speech, Avahlee jogs in her speech, and Jamie walks in his. Wendy thinks people from the country speak slow whereas Avahlee and Jamie see no difference in their speech and country speech. They do think Northern speakers talk too fast.

"Work Talk and Vocabulary"

While at work, Liz puts sandwiches in a sack. Bob puts them in a bag. Jean sells soda, Bob sells either soda or coke. Jean sells cola, either Pepsi-Cola or "coke-cola." Because Liz's hair is long, she pulls it back in her elastic band. Jean calls it a baray, and Bob and Judy call it a barrette. Everyone uses frying pans, except Liz, who uses a skillet. Judy, Bob, and Liz use spatulas for scraping bowls while Jean uses a "spatular." Bugs that light up at night in Liz and Jean's yards are lightning bugs. Bob and Judy have fireflies. Bob and Liz have glove boxes in their cars. Judy has a glove-compartment, and Jean has a glove pocket. A person who doesn't change his mind is stubborn or pig-headed to Bob and Liz. Judy's word is "butt-head" or Bob.

Students are also sometimes shocked and disturbed by what they find, particularly when they discover their friends and family reveal xenophobic attitudes:

"Language and Gender"

Bernie gave examples of language use that demonstrated his idea that women tend to take the edge off what they say: they sugarcoat.

Gary said that he had to be careful speaking to women because they may not like him if he was himself: "You have to woo women and sing them pretty songs."

Linda said that although she was teased about her southern accent, she usually used it to her benefit. "Guys love it. All I have to do is flash my lashes, say y'all, and snip, snap—I've got 'em."

"Establishing 'Others'"

Southerners received a mixed review. Some portrayed them as hospitable, others as hillbillies, and some as both. "Hillbillies from the south sound unintelligent and uneducated," said one informant. "I always used to, and still do, imitate southern girls because I thought boys liked it." The same person who thought northerners were criminals thought of southerners as rich and sophisticated and sweet and soft. "But a man with a southern drawl—I

don't trust him. He sounds shifty, too sweet. Like southern preachers."

Jerri linked stereotypes to different dialects: "Somebody that has that Arkansas twang, you think they're ignorant. People from Boston, you think they're kind of snobbish—too damned proper! Inner-city people sound uneducated. Valley girl talk makes me think they're immature."

Bob said that he can't understand Blacks. He says, "They don't seem to take time to talk right. They are lazy when they speak. They can't talk professional like, even though they've had the chance to learn standard English."

One 20-year-old woman pictured New Yorkers as criminals who have lived rough lives. Another didn't think much of New York accents because they were only a little better compared to her "standard midwestern" English. To her, those from New York sounded more professional and business-like. Another commented on the "nasality" of their speech.

"Dialects and Shame"

Scott said that the people who have the most correct dialect are from the Midwest, who don't have an accent. He said that it's what he wants to sound like. He was very emphatic about how much he despises his speech.

Stacey said that even though she was from the South, Northern people seemed to be more intelligent.

Marc is ashamed of his accent which he labels as Southern rather than country. He feels that his pronunciation of certain words labels him as a country hick and therefore ignorant. He has tried for the last few years to totally remove any traces of an accent from his speech.

For the second paper, we invite students to choose a topic or issue emerging from class discussions and the interview project. Born out of students' personal reflections as well as their initial reactions to their research findings, these extended papers gain a sense of voice often lacking in much expository prose. Their native voices are no longer silenced; these students have stories to tell, feelings to express, positions to defend.

For this second project, our students have written about their beliefs and growing knowledge concerning these and other topics:

- gender and language
- local slang
- language and cultural stereotyping
- Appalachian English
- English Only movements
- language policies in bilingual communities
- effects of technology on language
- language features of regional dialects
- language of local advertising
- attitudes toward regional dialects.

Based upon Ken Macrorie's "I-Search" model, their research leads them to a variety of important sources of information, including people as well as books. They learn valuable writing and research skills on a need-to-know basis; their inquiry immerses them in meaningful learning. Because the research seeks knowledge grounded both in theory and in their "homes," and because the writing is returned both to the classroom and the broader community, students see language at work in a variety of contexts. As they become authorities on these subjects, we have watched them speak with a new sense of conviction and awareness. When students share drafts of this paper with peers, we notice that the information shared deals as much with the process of learning as it does with language specifics:

- Through this project, I was surprised to learn about my own family's attitudes toward bilingualism. To hear my brothers talk about Hispanics really opened my eyes. Can I be related to people who think this way? I've come to the conclusion that education has a great deal to do with attitudes.
- In our pride of self-expression, we need not devalue the expression of someone else. Instead, we need to be listening actively, trying just for a moment to see the world through that person's language.

- The most interesting thing about this assignment is the person whom I learned the most about, and that's me. When I sat down to listen to the recorded tapes, I was amazed at my Southern accent and how I spoke certain words.
- My study revealed that English teachers have been somewhat responsible for close-minded attitudes about dialects and language. As a future teacher, I need to promote more accepting and tolerant attitudes so that in the future more people will embrace linguistic diversity.

3. Returning Newfound Information to the Community

Writing teachers must nudge their students toward topics that hit at the core of individual concerns (utilizing the communities which students bring to class) and must also provide opportunities to find connections to a larger community. As students share their voices and experiences with peers, they need "skills" (organizing and revising strategies, training in formulating good questions, documenting information, presentation of material) in order to place conflicting discourses into a coherent, larger framework. The culminating goal of our writing curriculum centers on product. We believe that these formal products need an audience beyond the immediate classroom community.

Throughout our courses, we invite our students to participate in writing groups and to eventually "present" their final papers to the entire class. With the support of the classroom community, students feel affirmed as well as challenged:

> Heritage is something you take for granted, but when it is analyzed, it is amazing how much it influences your life. My accent was essentially molded by my community and family and is continually shaped by my surroundings as I will shape others. While giving my presentation to the class, I was struck by the surprise in some people's eyes. It was the first time that I realized that my speech and community were somewhat different than others. It was

the first time I have ever been proud to claim my country accent.

Often, class members invite individuals from the local community to these final celebratory class meetings. Sometimes students submit their papers for publication in local newspapers or magazines. We encourage our classes to publish their own "books"—bound collections of selected writings from every student in the class. In addition, we have invited students to help us disseminate information about our community-based writing curriculum at professional conferences, including annual meetings of the National Council of Teachers of English (Fox, Vogel, and Kottmeier). Finally, we have organized a paper-exchange between classes from different universities: students from Dana's classes in Missouri exchanged papers with Mark's classes in North Carolina. As a result of this paper exchange, students from North Carolina and Missouri corresponded with one another. Their written comments, filled with praise as well as criticism, reveal what they learned through this sharing with a wider audience:

- Some of your points encouraged me to think more about my own experiences with dialects and language. When I read about your family using the word "witchdoctor," I stopped to think about my own family's use of special words. We have a form of sign language that only my family can understand since our farm equipment is loud enough to make speech impossible.
- Gee, how does your friend feel about your reference to her accent as "hick"? We noticed during this paper exchange that if any of us made reference to "hick" southern accents in our papers, we got responses back from your class that weren't exactly positive!
- Are the people in black T-shirts in your paper those who listen to heavy-metal music? We call them "headbangers." You can tell your brother that I don't wear black T-shirts, but I do listen to heavy-metal music.

- I'd like to know more about your mother's speech. She sounds really interesting. I liked the way you showed how your three questions of concentration (age, occupation, education) affected a person's language. Do you think men's language is different from women's?
- I feel the same way about prejudice against certain speech patterns. It's sad to me that in a country founded because of differences and diversity, so many prejudices exist. Let's educate people about dialects and stress the fact that no dialect is better than another. Dialects are wonderful expressions of individual heritage.
- Thanks very much for sharing your papers with us—as well as your responses. And for your information, Missouri is in the midwest, between Kansas and Illinois.

Conclusion: Toward a Cultural Democracy

An underlying purpose of any writing curriculum should be to enable students to recapture lost "turf" through a systematic exploration of the language of their own communities and cultures. Such a curriculum centers on inquiry, and students seek answers to questions concerning literacy which probe at the heart of self, race, class, gender, culture. Information in this curriculum flows from several directions: from assigned texts to anecdotal classroom discussion, from focused freewriting to more formal products.

On their own, students write about the intimacy of their lives in their own language. Through this process, they reveal not one community but many voices reflecting sometimes discordant points of view. Our community-based writing curriculum asks students to take a close look at themselves and, through the articulation of their own individual voices, to situate themselves both within the cultures of their own communities as well as within a larger societal framework. We hope that through working together, students become more tolerant of discordant points of view, and listen to and honor voices from a variety of cultures and communities.

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As James Banks has pointed out, American schools tend to practice cultural conformity and cultural imperialism rather than cultural democracy. A community-based writing curriculum strives to reject cultural imperialism and to promote cultural democracy—a philosophy which embraces everyone's communal identity and subcultural values. As teachers who engage our students (and ourselves) in a close examination of the role of language in culture and community, we seek to help students reclaim their own voices and "re-develop their native languages." In our courses, students teach us much about the ways in which language and culture interweave, and together, we learn the ways in which "language establishes the bond . . . that makes group life possible" (Banks 261).

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