Reforming Writing and Rethinking Correctness

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Reforming Writing and Rethinking Correctness

Emphasizing "the dynamic aspects of language correctness," community college teacher Gregory Shafer helps students understand that achieving correctness is not simply a matter of following a set of rules. He then asks students to write letters and speeches in which they demonstrate the relationships among language, power, purpose, and audience.

Language never stands still. It is a living, breathing organism—one that is adorned with human aspirations and intertwined in politics. When we begin to consider the many conventions of language—and paradigms for right and wrong in our classrooms—we do so without a map upon which to plan our course.

Language correctness, like reality itself, is contingent on context, audience, and power. Instead of ignoring these linguistic verities, the language arts teacher should help students appreciate the complexity of reading and writing in many contexts. In my writing class for first-year college students, we try to expunge simplistic rules of right and wrong and begin to define notions of correctness more complexly.

Many students who enter a high school or college English class are not aware of the questions and controversies surrounding language and notions of correctness. They see reading and writing as objective, dispassionate endeavors that require one to simply follow a set of rather standard rules. Teachers teach because they have learned the rubric—because they have mastered the right way to speak and write. Students listen and try to become proficient in acquiring models of correctness, so that they will be successful in a world that demands a common set of standards. In this scenario, language is not fluid and dynamic but stagnant, fixed, monolithic, and impervious to the rhythms of culture and change. There are correct and incorrect ways to use language and no need to ponder the social or cultural aspects of the interaction.

In reality, we know that language is forever contingent on the dynamics of the specific linguistic act. When two people of the same culture write to each other, shared rules of correctness are determined by their relationship and aspirations. When people of different cultures speak, other political dynamics are revealed. The African American who seeks a job from a white manager is quick to articulate the standard dialect that the manager speaks and writes. In contrast, when the white applicant seeks a job from the African American employer, there is no chance that the applicant will use the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that is a familiar part of many African American homes. It would immediately be exposed as being contrived and ingratiating. Interestingly, when the African American student uses AAVE in a formal setting, it is deemed inappropriate despite the complexities of the dialect and its clear efficacy as a communication system. Such political dynamics are rarely covered in the grammar and usage books that line the shelves of English departments, but they are critical to an effective, egalitarian pedagogy. "See," writes linguist Geneva Smitherman in pondering questions of correctness and the language of minorities, "when you . . . dissin dem, you talkin bout they mommas!" (151). Gloria Anzaldúa offers yet another perspective when she writes, "[s]o, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language" (59).

Correctness and Power

Teaching writing effectively—its rules and conventions—demands that we reveal to students
many images of correctness and the ways the standards fluctuate to fit the complexities of real life. We must move beyond the simplistic notion that we reject the double negative, the first-person narrative, the contraction, or the sprinkling of vernaculars. We also must consider the impact of telling students that they are not permitted to use elements of their dialect or language in writing because such usages have yet to find their way into Warriner’s English Grammar. Since all dialects are rule governed and equally complex, we cannot ignore or impugn them without first considering their social significance.

Notions of language correctness depend—and always have. A political speech for a group of construction workers includes a different language than a commentary for a political magazine. Our notions of appropriateness are different for a journal than for a business letter to a potential client. With every writing assignment, a different set of malleable standards presents itself for our scrutiny. Is it OK to use a racial epithet? What about a pejoring of words specific to a certain minority group? At what point in a relationship does one assume a more informal tone with one’s audience? The answers to such questions probably depend on the race or ethnicity of the audience members and their relationship to the writer. One cannot answer such questions without plumbing the nuances of linguistic transaction and deciding on what might work and what is inherently fair. Even among academic journals there is ambiguity as to what constitutes appropriate English. Some require an elimination of the first person. Others embrace a more informal style. As with the reading of a piece of literature, one must consider the “transaction” (Rosenblatt 16) before making caveats about conventions.

Each semester, I teach a unit on the many faces of Standard English and invite students to explore the dynamics of various writing environments and the implications for style and correctness. We discuss power and language and the subtle ways that language can be used to shape thought and values. I ask students to explore essays that illustrate the ideological nature of language and poems that reveal the power of dialect and diction to touch readers. While there are countless examples, none is more effective than the work of Geneva Smitherman. In her writing, Smitherman deftly illustrates the effective use of African American Vernacular English and the way it can be used in academic prose. Readers of her scholarship are immediately provoked by the way paradigms of correctness tend to obfuscate larger issues of power and relegate minority students to inferior positions. Language is not simply a matter of right and wrong—of correct and incorrect—and when we reduce such cultural issues to monolithic simplicities, we invariably exclude the richness of language as it reflects the energy of our culturally diverse society. Smitherman argues, “What students need (and here I would say both Black and white students) is not models of correctness—they have their own anyway—but a broader understanding of the intricate connection between one’s language and his cultural experience, combined with insight into the political nature and social stratification of American dialects” (128).

Central to Smitherman’s work is the idea that an emphasis on correctness often acts to oppress some people so that others may flourish. If African American students are mired in an interminable search for another’s way with words, they are less likely to be successful and more likely to see their own language and culture as inferior. Smitherman led a campaign to make AAVE an accepted dialect—and even a separate language—to empower students to define correctness in their own words and through their cultural syntax and diction. With notions of correctness expanded to fit the language of myriad races and ethnicities, we learn more about the realities of authentic speech and become more inclusive as educators.

This is exactly what happened two decades ago, when Smitherman joined other educators in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to fight for language equality. When Martin Luther King Elementary refused to acknowledge the language of its minority students—and relegated them to failing grades and inferior performance—parents sued to have their language recognized. In the lawsuit that followed, dozens of linguists and activists defended students’ rights to a particular dialect or language, asking the school to make provisions

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for all students. Previously, the school had been labeling the African American students “learning disabled” and had refused to consider the richness of their ways with words. After much wrangling, the judge agreed that AAVE is a legitimate language and “mandated that the language had to be recognized as legitimate and that the School District had to come up with a remedy to train King teachers to take the language into account in teaching the children” (Smitherman 155).

Such cases, Smitherman reminds us, underscore the ways that intractable views of correctness can lead to subtle racism and the creation of an academic underclass. While minority students are adept language users, their particular dialect may not be accepted simply because it is emblematic of their race. When we enforce strict rules of grammatical correctness, we risk being unwitting racists, perpetuating false and anachronistic notions about language. In speaking of the effect on many African American students, Smitherman contends that “[t]hey too have been brainwashed about the ‘inherent and Absolute rightness’ of white, middle-class dialect and do not realize that language can be/has been for Black people in America a tool of oppression” (128–29). Later, she laments, “the Black junior high students I interviewed all conceded that their speech was ‘wrong’ according to school standards, [and] none said that they would change their dialect nor that of their parents or peers” (129).

Clearly, language conventions are not objective. “That errors in writing are somehow ‘social’ is no news to the field of composition,” writes Bruce Horner (139). “Yet,” he adds, “there is a recurring discrepancy in the approach compositionists take toward this dimension of written error” (139). Horner suggests that writing instructors never forget the social or personal aspects of correcting errors because writing is always a complex negotiation with readers and is a reflection of power. Rather than seeing the production of a text as unambiguous and clearly defined, it is a dynamic interaction that is unique and rife with politics. When a teacher sits down with a writer and establishes the rules for correctness, it is essential that the writer understand and participate. It must be true dialogue, where the writer has a real voice and is engaged in the process. Why are double negatives wrong in a certain setting? Why must a sentence never begin with and? And finally, why can’t the language of one’s culture be incorporated into the writing?

To understand writing and the ideas of error and correctness, students must be part of the process. They must be active players in the dynamic of what constitutes error and legitimate language. Instead of being passive listeners, students must be active participants, making their voices heard when they have a question about the efficacy of a certain approach. “[S]uch an achievement can be reached only through a process of negotiation,” writes Horner. “Negotiation is not a matter of one party persuading a second to adopt the position of the first, nor a process of exchange (barter) between two parties, but a process of joint change and learning in which power operates dialectically” (142).

Important to Horner’s assertion is the concept of mutual and vigorous participation—of people working together to understand what is needed for communication to be validated and valued. “For the errors to be ‘achieved’ as errors,” Horner adds, “the achievement must represent an agreement reached between the writer and reader to attribute a certain kind of significance to specific notations, and that
agreement must be the result of a relationship in which both writer and reader hold a degree of power and authority” (143; italics in original).

Again, we are thrust back to the notions of power and authority. In understanding the dynamics of crafting a paper, writers must transcend simplistic scenarios where authority resides in monolithic ideas of correctness—where omniscient teachers simply invoke the words of the grammar book in the manner of a religious injunction. Writing, like speech, is defined by the context, by the dynamic relationship between reader and writer. In accepting a phrase or word as incorrect or ineffective, there must be an understanding of the specific situation that renders it a problem. In treating language as social and fluid, teachers invite students to think in more realistic terms about the language they use and the audience for whom they write.

Specific Activities

Letters

Perhaps the most effective way to teach about the dynamic aspects of language correctness is to engage students in various writing activities, involving them in compositions for different audiences and goals. Because students are quick to see writing as a formal and sober activity, I often begin the lesson by assigning a letter to a real or fictional friend who still is or once was part of the author’s life. In the letter, students are asked to capture the distinctive relationship and employ language that is appropriate for their level of intimacy. Immediately, students must consider the approach, diction, style, and unique views of correctness that they are going to use for the work. Unlike the formal essay—where standards are purely academic—the friendly letter poses special challenges in generating a personal voice and a genuine persona. It leads students into a linguistic conundrum where they are compelled to consider how notions of correctness change to fit the linguistic and social setting. Especially in a scholastic setting, it is an edifying experience for students to reflect on audiences that are not fixed or static.

Most students write letters to a friend of the opposite sex, so the complexity of language becomes more interesting. As students begin to ponder the nuances of the letter, they must consider the power dynamic within the language transaction. The style, language, level of formality, and content of the writing are determined by the power relations inherent in the discourse. When Paul, a student in my class, wrote a letter to a former girlfriend who was now attending a college two hours away from their hometown, his style and approach were interesting. As he explained in discussing the letter with the class, “I need to help her to remember what it was like when we were together, so my language is going to be informal and even incomprehensible to some. Because there were certain phrases we shared and nicknames we used, the letter is going be different from more formal letters.” Later, he added that this was a person who liked him and who felt bad at their separation. So, he felt he had a lot of power in the way he wrote.

The letter that he eventually wrote was a model of linguistic complexity. Beyond the nicknames and the fragmented sentences, there were subtle and more conspicuous strategies used to cajole the reader to allow him to visit her at her college. While some might see friendly letters as being less challenging than formal academic writing, there are clearly sophisticated rhetorical strategies being employed to move a reader. The language, the tactics, and the style symbolize a specific language that helps students to learn about the correctness in myriad contexts.

“Hey, babe,” he began his letter, “I’m studying and trying to keep busy in Flint, but I keep thinkin’ of you.” Many class members wondered about his level of informality with a woman he had not seen or talked to for several weeks, but Paul assured us that this was the way they spoke to each other and that anything less affectionate would seem distant and cold. Much of the rest of the letter was an interesting confluence of a friendly letter and a hip-hop song. Again, after his readers wondered about the language’s efficacy, he assured them that his audience—Amanda—would be most moved by the language that they shared together. Further, he felt that he had the latitude to write from a position of power since the reader liked him more than he liked her.

“The days float by and you know it’s true that the nights are long because baby they ain’t with you,” he wrote not long after beginning his letter.
and communicating his enduring attraction. Throughout the letter, Paul tailored the missive to respond to the unique requisites of the reader and their established relationship. In his diction and style, he had crafted a complex piece of writing that was both friendly and argumentative.

Other letters reflected a less informal style. Discourse is never a matter of simply adhering to static flats for success, so students explained the strategies they had used and the ways their letters seemed consonant with their relationship. Carmen’s letter to her estranged husband was intriguing for what it revealed about discourse in a social situation. She explained that certain cultural and social conventions must be considered because she and her husband are Hispanic. In a traditional Hispanic relationship, such a letter would have to be deferential. “I know what he expects and how a letter with too much hubris would anger him,” she said as she worked on her first draft. “He is a second-generation Cuban and he still lives by the tacit belief in the superiority of the man.”

Her letter, then, reflected a more formal, measured tone. Carmen wanted to express her willingness to be submissive while still maintaining her dignity as a person. She sprinkled the missive with Spanish words so as to immerse it in warmth and cultural celebration. Again, nicknames and phrases specific to the dialogue were included. Throughout the letter, there was an affectionate and inviting style—one that oozed contrition and reunion. “I think there were mistakes made, Papi, and I think many of them were mine. You work hard and the family does not always appreciate you—but I do.”

Speeches
From informal letters, our class moved to essays with a more distant audience. I asked students to write a speech for the governor of the state asking the audience to consider an end to a controversial scholarship that was given to students who scored well on a state standardized test. As with the letters before, the speech had to be composed so that it considered the feelings of the audience and the complex power of both listener and speaker. It had to be composed so that listeners knew that the governor respected them and was not making commands from a position of omnipotence. “We need to remember that the governor is in a position of high regard but that she is also a public servant. It is a daunting line that we must walk,” I told the class.

The final speeches were fascinating for what they revealed about writing and conventions. Students included research on the number of roads requiring repair and the fiscal travails confronting the state. The style and diction were a nice confluence of deference and strength. When the speeches were especially effective, speakers seemed to know the audience and anticipate their reactions. Most importantly, the writing was done with a knowledge that every text is contingent on the demands of the audience and the transaction that occurs. “The writing process differs to some extent with every situation or task,” writes Sharon Crowley, “which also implies that no universally useful model or tactics for generating writing will ever be found” (46).

Carol’s speech asked her audience to consider the bumpy, dangerous, and annoying holes that their cars sank into as they drove to this speech. “We need road repair, ladies and gentlemen, before anything else. This state has to protect itself before it can dole out scholarships. Fixing roads is an act we do for all citizens—and it is a task that is long overdue, a task that demands our immediate attention.”

The parallel structure and the sweeping length of the speech were indicative of the way students tailored their speeches to fit the context of the writing. In each case, their rubric for correctness had mutated to fit a new standard, a new audience. In discussions, in the prewriting stages, and through drafts and revisions, students worked to comprehend the context and to transcend simplistic notions of writing conventions.

**The Dynamics of Communication**
To agree that correctness and standards are in flux—and responsive to a living, social language—is not to suggest that there are no standards or that correctness does not count. It does not mean that there is no room for the academic research paper or the creative description paper. Instead, it rekindles the social aspects of composition and invites participants to probe the many ways that language can be con-
structured to move and touch real people. In The Reader, the Text, the Poem, Louise Rosenblatt suggests that reading is a performance, an act of making a text into poem. The same could be said for the essay, speech, or letter. In every instance, we learn to fashion a writing that considers not only correctness but also the social and cultural dynamics of communication in an age of diversity. Language is as dynamic and evanescent as the people for whom we write—a performance for a real audience with feelings and culture and values.

Works Cited

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