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Minority College Students and Tacit “Codes of Power”: Developing Academic Discourses and Identities

John Wesley White and Patrick R. Lowenthal

Learning involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person. . . . To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities.

—Lave & Wenger (1991, p. 53)

Obtaining a college degree—in particular a four-year college degree—is an increasingly crucial step toward greater personal and professional freedom for most Americans. Radical economic changes in the United States over the past two decades have only made a college degree even more important for reaching and maintaining a middle- or upper-class lifestyle (College Board,

JOHN WESLEY WHITE is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Foundations and Secondary Education at the University of North Florida. His research examines the effects of language and code-switching on students’ engagement in academic tasks and their integration into academic settings. PATRICK R. LOWENTHAL is an Academic Technology Coordinator and doctoral student at the University of Colorado Denver. His research examines instructional communication, with a specific focus on social and teaching presence, in online and face-to-face environments. Address queries to John Wesley White at 1 UNF Drive, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, FL 32224; telephone: (904) 620–1244; fax: (904) 620–1821; email: j.white@unf.edu.

2005; Dinwiddie & Allen, 2003; Murray, Tanner, & Graves, 1990). It should therefore come as no surprise that enrollment rates at colleges and universities continue to grow at staggering rates (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005; [Roach, 2001](#)). With demographic shifts in the national population and an increased focus on the importance of a college education have also come changes in the makeup of the national collegiate student body; students entering college over the last decade represent increasing diversity in terms of culture, religion, race/ethnicity, native language, physical ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, levels of academic preparation, and family background (Ishler, 2005; Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Yet, even though students are entering universities in ever-greater numbers, the transition to the university—and, consequently, success in the university—continues to be disproportionately more troublesome for native-born students of color (hereafter referred to as “minority students”). Despite affirmative-action admissions policies and universities’ attempts to recruit and retain minority students, the college degree “gateway” to greater career and financial success remains elusive for far too many of these students. Researchers have proposed myriad theories to explain the disproportionate rate of minority students’ failure to enter college and complete a degree. These theories tend to focus on cultural differences, inadequate academic preparation for college, or minority students’ resistance to the White college culture. Though these lines of research have proven highly informative, they stop short of fully examining the central role that literacy—or more specifically the academic language that is required for “full participant” status in the discourse community of the university ([Lave & Wenger, 1991](#))—and the successful development of an academically literate identity play in students’ collegiate success.

Using the theoretical lenses of the sociocultural nature of literacy (New Literacy Studies), sociolinguistics, discourse communities, and resistance theory, this article posits that achieving academic success on a college campus is, in large part, predicated upon students’ respective exposure to academic discourse and willingness to learn and employ it. By “academic discourse,” we mean the specific yet tacit discursive style expected of participants in the academy. Unfortunately, not all K-12 students receive the same access to or have the same motivation for learning and appropriating academic literacy. Our study highlights the fact that academic literacy is seldom explicitly taught in the K-12 setting; rather, students are expected to learn its use through exposure or, in many cases, through coercion (Bunch, 2009). Though academic literacy is essential to future academic success, it remains a significant part of the hidden curriculum of K-12 schools and universities (Gildersleeve, 2006; [Gutiérrez, 1995](#); [Margolis, 2001](#); Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001).

Even when academic discourse *is* taught in the K-12 setting, appropriating academic discourse is disproportionately complicated for many minority students. Because language is inextricably tied to culture, students tend to cling tightly to their native "ways with words" (Heath, 1983) despite academic and social pressure to adopt new and different discourses (Willis, 1977). We posit that the requisite knowledge and use of academic literacy (of which academic language and discourse are crucial subsets) add significantly to the already heavy burden many minority students face when trying to navigate through the foreign environment of the academy. This difficulty, we believe, contributes to minority alienation from and eventual withdrawal from higher education in too many cases.

In this article, we also aim to supplement and refine John Ogbu's valuable though controversial corpus of work on minority student resistance to mainstream educational institutions. Ogbu has been charged with equating meaningful literacy exclusively as a factor in academic success and thereby categorizing other forms of literacy as handicaps to such success (Gibson, 2005; Street, 1995). In contrast, we embrace the New Literacy Studies' (NLS) central tenet that people are polyvocal and use appropriate literacies for specific circumstances. Rather than viewing literacy within a hierarchical structure, the NLS approach posits that there are innumerable, distinct, and context-appropriate forms of discourse. We acknowledge that the onus of the problem of "communication mismatch" (Hamann, 2004, p. 403)—specifically the mismatch in academic discourse and culturally based discourses—lies in large part in the narrowness of "what counts" in the academic discourse community and in issues of differential (and sometimes oppressive) power relations between users of different discourses. However, we also acknowledge Ogbu's (1995) and Delpit's (1995) respective contentions that there are "codes of power" that students need to achieve success in existing educational, economic, and political systems. Thus, our point in what follows is not so much to critique the narrowness of the academic discourse community (though that pursuit is a valuable one), but rather to help explain minority students' hurdles in learning and appropriating the distinct codes of power required for success in this environment. It is our belief—and our hope—that another tenet of the New Literacy Studies will eventually prove true: that, armed with these "codes of power," not only will more students be positively shaped by their interaction with the university, but that the institution will itself become increasingly shaped by the multiple forms of literacies and discourses that diverse students bring to it.

Therefore, the foci of this article are (a) the central role that literacy, specifically academic or "collegiate literacy," plays in student collegiate success (and, with such success, a feeling of integration into the college community) and (b) the primary reasons that many minority students do not learn or appropriate this discourse. We review the relevant literature for its contributions

to issues of academic literacy, the discourse community of academia in which it is situated, and finally the concurrent identity associated with each.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

To situate our review in the larger problem of student collegiate attrition, we first examine the problem of minority student attrition and the most commonly cited causes for this phenomenon. Numerous studies ([Ishitani, 2006](#); [Koenig, 2009](#); [Museus, 2008](#); [Tinto, 1996, 1998, 1999](#); [Tinto & Pusser, 2006](#)) have demonstrated that minority students face a far more difficult transition to college life and academics than their White, middle-class peers. Research shows that minority students leave college early (dropping out or failing) at rates that are disproportionately higher than the student body in general ([Carey, 2004](#); [Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003](#)). The most commonly cited reason is that minority students tend to be underprepared, compared to White students ([Zarate & Gallimore, 2005](#)). Inequitable school funding, tracking and ability grouping, deficit theory approaches to teaching, lowered teacher expectations, and punitive behavioral management (among other issues) negatively affect minority students more than White students ([Anyon, 1990](#); [Kozol, 1991](#); [Oakes, 1982, 1990, 2005](#); [Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006](#); [Slavin, 1987](#); [Solorzano, Ledesma, Perez, Burciaga, & Ornelas, 2002](#)).

Minority student attrition is also affected by students' perceptions that college campuses are foreign and sometimes hostile places, a perception that is backed up by many examples of overt and tacit racism on campuses ([Kent, 1996](#); [Quaye, 2007](#); [Schmidt, 2008](#)). Reinforcing this perception is the cultural mismatch between minority college students and their mainstream peers and professors ([Gonzales, 1999](#); [Kent, 1996](#); [Littleton, 1998](#); [Marcus, Mullins, Brackett, Zongli, Allen, & Pruett, 2003](#); [Nunez, 2009](#); [Ortiz, 1999, 2000](#)).

Also making minority students' transition to college and success there difficult is the fact that, except at historically Black colleges and universities, they seldom encounter large numbers of minority collegiate peers and minority faculty role models to whom to turn for advice and support (ACT Policy Report, 2002; [Perna, 2000](#)). Similarly, they are less likely to have college-educated relatives who can serve as academic/social mentors (ACT Policy Report, 2002; [Perna, 2000](#); [Rice, Cole, & Lapsley, 1990](#); [Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003](#)).

Finally, minority students are—like minorities in the general American population—more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than White students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009) and are thus more likely to face significant burdens in paying for rapidly rising college costs ([Conley, 2001](#); Council of Economic Advisers, 1998; [Finegold & Wherry, 2004](#)). There can be little doubt that minority student attrition is related to each or all of these reasons (and to many other factors that are context specific).

Yet this body of research does not go far enough: It ignores the central role that language and literacy (and associated discourse communities) play in students' integration into and success within the academy.

Although language, literacy, and identity are inextricably linked with culture, researchers on minority students' experiences in mainstream colleges and universities have not focused on how linguistic differences negatively affect minority students' success in college. While cultural difference theorists have shown that K-12 minority students often have discursive styles that clash with those expected within schools (Heath, 1983; Willis, 1977), they ignore the fact that these linguistic styles do not merely disappear during a student's K-12 schooling. Rather, this line of research tends to ignore the role that cultural reproduction theory (Willis, 1977) and resistance theory (Erickson, 1987; Huffman, 2001; Ogbu, 1987; Pottinger, 1989) play in perpetuating culturally based discursive styles throughout schooling, often in resistance to the more dominant and "official" discourses of schools. Despite repeated though passive exposure to academic discourse in the K-12 environment, minority students are apt to cling all the tighter to culturally imbued discursive patterns throughout their K-12 experiences. Such insistence on retaining their own language is often undertaken as a form of resistance to the monolingualistic, homogeneous, and sometimes hegemonic discourse that their teachers model (Apple, 1995; Erickson, 1987; Giroux, 1982; Huffman, 2001; Ogbu, 2004; Willis, 1977). Because of the strong link between language and identity, many minority students equate the appropriation of academic discourse with "acting White," and thus as a negation of their own cultural identity.

Ignorance of and resistance to academic discourse result in far too many students remaining outsiders to and often dropouts from a powerful means to greater academic and personal success: the university. It is not surprising, then, that many minority students are underprepared for college; they are unfamiliar with and unwilling to employ the linguistic "cultural capital" (Ladson-Billings, 1995) needed for success in higher education.

LITERACY, POWER, AND DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

The school of New Literacy Studies (NLS) has provided a different lens by which literacy can be explored as a sociocultural process. NLS first posits that true literacy is far more complex than the simplistic definition of being able to read and write (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002; Street, 1995). Though decoding skills are a foundation for and a precursor to many other forms of literacy, they are (at least by NLS definitions) insufficient for describing the scope and power of being truly literate. NLS posits that literacy is more usefully understood when examined as a tool for (and function of) relationships between people, within groups, or in communities rather than as a set of

individual skills (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gutiérrez, Hunter, & Arzubiaga, 2009; see also Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002; Lemke, 1989, 2002; and Street, 1995 for work on literacy as a social semiotic). Central to NLS is the tenet that, to understand literacy, it is necessary to examine how literacy practices “are embedded within specific social practices” (Gee, 2003, p. 159) and specifically within “domains of practice” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). NLS amply demonstrates that valid conceptions of literacy cannot be divorced from the social practices patterned by cultures, institutions, and power relationships (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996, 1998, 2002).

In contrast to earlier notions of literacy, sociocultural approaches to literacy posit that the meaning of a word (and subsequently the combination of words) is, like language itself, never static (Eagleton, 1997). Meaning is socially constructed through the active use of language; it is negotiated and constructed by each of the participants in an exchange (Halliday, 1985; Hymes, 1971; Saussure, 1959). Like a spoken utterance, the written word requires a writer *and* an audience to have meaning; without a reader to interpret a text, the written word has little inherent meaning (Gee, 1996, 2000; Halliday, 1985; Nystrand, 1982; Street, 1984). According to this view, literacy is not an ideologically autonomous communication process; rather, it is a process that is always situated in contexts involving power relationships (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Similarly, literacy practices and associated meanings change depending on the context in which they are employed. The meaning of any form of communication—a written or oral word or set of words, a gesture, eye contact, even silence itself—depends on the context in which it is/they are being used (Eagleton, 1997). Therefore, literacy is not a skill devoid of ideological and cultural meaning (Street, 1984). The formerly dominant view of literacy as a neutral or technical skill (e.g., Goody, 1968, 1977; Olson, 1977) is inadequate; it fails to recognize that literacy is an ideological practice that is enmeshed in power relations and situated in specific cultural meanings and practices (Gee, 1996; Street, 1984).

NLS theorists have shown that different forms of literacy cannot justifiably be categorized hierarchically. One form of literacy is not inherently superior to any other form. Rather, literacy is contextual, fluid, and dependent on the power structure in which it is being used (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 1996, 1998, 2002; Street, 1995). Cognitive and neuro-linguists have shown that the processes individuals use to create meaning (the creation of “frames,” the cognitive images or metaphors that correspond to words or concepts) depend on specific uses of language and the relationship among individuals using this language (Lakoff, 2008; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; White & Lowenthal, 2009). The development of “frames”—and thus meaning-making—is determined, at least in part, in relation to the power of the different players within a dialogue (Eagleton, 1997; Gee, 2002; Street, 1995). Meaning-making in any discursive exchange, therefore, is seldom determined by individuals in

a two-fold way (Heidegger, 1971); rather, meaning is made in the confluence of individuals' respective background experiences and the power dynamics at play between and among discursive participants.

Those in positions of power have an exponentially greater ability to influence what a given discursive event means and the associated semiotic images participants take away from such an exchange. Thus, while literacy can be a tool for empowerment, it can also be an agent of oppression and hegemony (Bennett, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1981). Specific environments and situations require specific kinds of literacy; relationships of power in these contexts affect literacy uses and the meaning resulting from them (Bizzell, 1982; Corson, 2001; Gilligan, 1993; Heath, 1983, 1991; Hymes, 1971; Medvedev & Bakhtin, 1978; Nystrand, 1982; Pratt, 1998). This characteristic has important implications for minority college students: To achieve academic success, they must adopt a form of discourse that originated in and often perpetuates oppression. Research on minority student attrition makes clear that feelings of cultural alienation contribute to some students' disengagement from peers, from classes, and eventually from school itself.

NLS highlights the fact that what counts as literacy is not the same in all contexts; different domains of life require specific kinds of literacies. Such domains constitute discourse communities—places in which “groups of people are held together by their characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting and using . . . language” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 14). Discourse communities require “distinctive ways of ‘being and doing’ that allow people to enact and/or recognize a specific and distinctive socially situated identity” (Gee, 2002, p. 160). In short, specific communities require specific kinds of language use and literacies—sometimes called “registers,” “codes” (Bernstein, 1990, 1996), or “social languages” (Gee, 2002). All people occupy at least one discourse community; most move among a number of discourse communities. However, this fact is seldom explored in K-12 or college settings. Rather, the practices of given discourse communities become normalized. People either adopt a new discourse or remain outsiders to that community of practice.

Full acceptance of and/or integration into a community of practice requires members to know the rules for and have the ability to practice the specific kinds of language unique to that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This theory of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) holds that newcomers to a community of practice earn admission into a discourse community only through increasing practice with and use of the rules and conventions governing that specific kind of discourse; people wishing to be full members in a community of practice must start at the periphery of that culture and, with greater knowledge and use of a discourse, gain increasing legitimacy in that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Knowing how and when to employ specific literacy practices in the different domains of life

is, this research shows, a prerequisite for full admittance to and success in communities of practice such as the university.

Because specific kinds of literacy are not neutral and are not equally shared across peoples and cultures, discourse communities are more often than not exclusionary. Just as issues of power affect the meaning that can be made from discursive events, so they affect membership within discourse communities. Not everyone is equally permitted participation within a particular discursive setting, whether it be social, political, or academic. Rather, to be fully functioning within and accepted as a member of a discourse community, one must first know the specific conventions of that linguistic style as well as the rules for when and how to employ them (Gee, 2000; Gilligan, 1993; see also Bernstein, 1990, 1996). Generally, newcomers attempting to enter a discourse community make their way in slowly—from the periphery to the center—as they appropriate and successfully employ the literacy practices privileged within that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Conversely, distance from or resistance to the normalized discourse in a given community can result in alienation from that community.

For example, when examining how the fields of psychology and psychiatry engage in a specific and often exclusive discourse pattern, Gilligan (1993) showed that modern psychological theory has, largely because of language usage, tended to ignore females' perspectives while normalizing males' perspectives. Gilligan found that cultures—in this case, a professional occupation—create and maintain their own discourse communities with the result that they exclude individuals who have not mastered the hidden rules of such discourse. Schools are by no means immune to this phenomenon. Like any other profession, educators (K-12 teachers and professors) work in and maintain their own discourse communities that are, for the uninitiated, exclusionary.

SCHOOLS AS DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

Researchers have applied theories of cultural and linguistic difference, discourse communities, and power dynamics of literacy to explain how different uses of language may conflict with the forms of language expected in American K-12 schools (Au, 1980, 1986, 1991; Bizzell, 1982; Corson, 2001; Gee, 1998; Gutiérrez, 1995). Hymes (1971), in one of the first attempts to discount deficit theories as a central reason behind poor minority student K-12 performance, argued that cultural differences resulted in significant linguistic and behavioral miscommunication between students and their teachers. Heath (1983) followed up on this line of research by positing that minority students' culturally imbued uses of language and thus the means through which they make sense of contexts, differ significantly from the primarily White discursive patterns (i.e., the "official" discourse) of K-12 schools.

Central to this research is the well-established tenet that the discourse style of American schools (both K-12 and higher education) mirrors, in general, the discourse pattern of White, middle- and upper-class America in which it originated (Tyack, 1976).

The American educational system was created largely to "Americanize" those from foreign cultures; it is no coincidence that compulsory schooling coincided with a huge influx of eastern European immigrants (Fitzgerald, 1993; Gulliford, 1996; Tyack, 1976). One of U.S. schools' main tasks was to assimilate young immigrants into the language, culture, and values of middle- and upper-class Americans of western European backgrounds (Bass, 2005; Tyack, 1976). Policymakers and educators assumed that linguistic homogeneity would lead to a relatively homogeneous culture and would simultaneously provide diverse students with greater access to this culture and thus to the American promise (Fitzgerald, 1993). However, proponents of this educational goal largely ignored the ability of cultures to reproduce themselves and their congruent ways with words. Despite the most strenuous efforts of educators—which sometimes bordered on cruelty (Gulliford, 1996; Robbins et al., 2006; Tyack, 1976), students tended to reproduce many of the cultural traits, including literacy habits, of their parents, peers, and greater cultures (Heath, 1983; Tyack, 1976; Willis, 1977). Educational approaches to assimilating a polyglot student body to a more "American" style of behaving, thinking, and speaking ignored the fact that learning language is a sociocultural process and is thus inherently complex (Gutiérrez, 1995).

Similarly, despite vast changes in schools over the last century, many of the assimilative norms established during the emergence of compulsory schooling more than 100 years ago remain; school culture, like other cultures, reproduces itself (Bourdieu, Passeron, & de Saint-Martin, 1993; Mills, 2008). Minority students, regardless of the time they have spent in mainstream K-12 schools and regardless of their exposure to academic discourse, are unlikely to adopt that discourse. Many arrive at college without having learned the conventions of language that they will need to employ to be heard and thus accepted within this community. Their native ways with words go unrecognized or, worse, are pathologized.

THE CLASHING OF DISCOURSES

The merging of different discourse patterns (i.e., those common to a particular socio-cultural group and those common to mainstream schools) sometimes proves problematic. For instance, Willis (1977) has shown how poor and working-class youth are socialized into adopting their parents' working-class language and literacy. Refusing to adopt the discourse and behavior expected by the school, they develop a counter-culture and resistant attitude toward all things "official," resulting in a linguistic code that is

largely antithetical to that expected in academic environments. Similarly, Heath (1983) explored how schools expect students to use a specific (i.e., middle- and upper-class White) form of discourse that minority students have not had the opportunity to learn. Further, Heath found that such discursive expectations are seldom fully explained, addressed, or taught to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Rather than fully explain or teach the specific form of discourse they expect in the classroom, teachers often assume that students have—prior to beginning school—the language and accompanying communication skills required for academic success (Delpit, 1997, 1998; Heath, 1983). Elementary teachers in particular, because of their responsibility to teach literacy through basic decoding skills, tend to assume a binary approach to literacy (Goody, 1968, 1977). The recent push for phonics-only instruction (Coles, 2001; Manzo, 2003; Margolis, 2002) only serves to privilege all the more the viewing of literacy as a one-to-one correspondence of a word (a signifier) and a concept (something that is signified) (Derrida, 1978; Eagleton, 1997; Saussure, 1959); this view divorces literacy from the contexts in which it is used and from which it makes sense (Gee, 1996, 2000, 2002; Street, 1993, 1995).

Students who develop a socioculturally based literacy style that differs significantly from the literacy style used in schools start their academic careers at a major disadvantage. This acknowledgement is not a suggestion of deficits in these children's diverse backgrounds. Rather, schools—as willing agents of mainstream cultural linguistic (re)production (or worse, as agents of linguistic hegemony)—typically do not value the diverse socioculturally based literacy styles these students bring with them and see such literacy practices as deficits and barriers to learning (Hymes, 1971). As a result, children not versed in the literacy used in schools are forced to adapt and change their literacy practices or face academic failure and social alienation.

Undoubtedly the literacy children learn at home affects what they learn in mainstream (predominantly White) schools (Snow, 1990, 1993). Children learn literacy primarily from hearing and participating in discussions at home (Snow, 1993); they then reproduce these kinds of talk, adopting them as their own. Thus, the transmission of literacy and discourse styles from parent(s) to child is virtually assured (Edwards & Newcombe, 2005; Hurtado & Vega, 2004; Taylor, 2007). In fact, the transmission of discourse styles from parent (or culture) to a child is both natural and largely unconscious (Bakhtin, 1981). It is only with great conscious effort and a sensed need—a life-changing paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962)—that the cultural reproduction of discourse patterns is subject to change (Taylor, 2007). Children naturally adopt, become conversant in, and internalize (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) the language and literacies of their parents and their respective culture(s). Thus, virtually all children enter school with forms of literacy that are practical for their home/cultural needs; yet such literacy practices often clash with the dis-

course style(s) found within mainstream schools, thereby leading to cultural and linguistic confusion, misunderstandings, and cultural conflict (Delpit, 1995, 1997; Gregory, 2005; Heath, 1983; O'Connor, 1989; Taylor, 2007).

Schools value and privilege specific forms of literacy; K-12 and college-level educators tend to expect all students, regardless of their culture or background, to be experienced in the specific, ritualized, and formal form of discourse/literacy common to most academic environments (Heath, 1987; Snow, 1991). For example, while teaching native Hawaiian students basic reading and writing practices, Au (1980, 1986, 1991) found that mainstream American pedagogical traditions were ineffective because the socioculturally influenced linguistic styles of Hawaiian children differed significantly from those used in mainstream schools. Hawaiian children, Au discovered, are raised to talk and discuss topics in a manner that is relative and distinct to that culture; their methods of communication and thus their methods of learning did not lend themselves to traditional academic pedagogical practices. Au concluded that there is no guarantee that a child's home or cultural background will prepare her or him for the narrow academic discourse expected in schools. Instead, schools tend to adopt a rigid view of acceptable literacy practices that is both foreign to many students and effectively silencing to them.

Minority students, who increasingly find themselves in segregated public schools (Blanchett, 2009; Frey & Wilson, 2008; Paulson, 2008), are also less likely to encounter teachers who overtly teach or even regularly use the kinds of discourse expected of college students (Chavez, 2006; Delpit, 1996). Rather, teachers in predominantly minority schools tend to place more value on their students' native discursive styles; doing so makes sense culturally and pedagogically (Foster, 1997), as well as linguistically (Fordham, 1996; Labov, 1972, 1982). Students are expected to adapt their ways with words to that of their school despite rarely ever receiving direct instruction in the language and associated rules of school discourse.

Even when students do learn a discourse that helps them find success in the K-12 environment, such discourse may not prepare them for the discourse community of the university. Though K-12 and the university are both formal school settings, each requires different skills (including respective literacies) for success. This observation should come as no surprise. Success in high school, though important, is not directly correlated with success in college (Conley, 2001; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008, 2009; Margolis, 2001). According to Conley (2008):

Because college is truly different than high school, college readiness is fundamentally different from high school completion. . . . To be successful in college, students must be prepared to use an array of learning strategies and coping skills that are quite different from those they developed and honed in high school. (p. 5)

Not only do students face new and tougher academic demands at the college level, but they must also learn and employ often tacit or hidden “rules” (Margolis, 2001; Margolis et al., 2001) for college success. Among these seldom-taught rules are time management, study skills, communication skills, and a “contextual awareness” of the university setting itself (Conley, 2008; Margolis, 2001; Street, 1996; White, 2007). In examining programs that try to bridge the gap between high school and college, Hoffman, Vargas, and Santos (2008) demonstrate how students who routinely practice or “rehearse” the role of the college student (including communication styles common to college students) find the transition to college far easier than those who do not.

White students, who are more likely to have parents and other role models who attended college (and who come from a culture around which the university was built), are more likely to have grown up practicing and then employing many of the university’s tacit rules and linguistic codes (Anderson, 2005; Delpit, 1995). Minority students, on the other hand, tend to have far fewer chances to practice such rules and far fewer obvious reasons to want to practice such discursive norms. On the contrary, they are likely to have learned a number of culturally imbued discursive habits that developed over time as resistance to the oppression represented by White culture (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In short, not only are minority students often not taught the forms of discourse expected in the university, but they also sometimes develop a counter-discourse to it (Corson, 2001; Ogbu, 2004; Willis, 1977).

The incongruence of culturally specific literacy and discursive patterns with the kinds of literacy expected in schools is complex and not easily rectified. The continued use of specific discourse norms corresponds for many with the survival of important cultural values (Corson, 2001). Asking students to change their native discourse patterns to more closely match those of the school may be tantamount to insulting their home culture(s) (Ogbu, 1995, 2004; White, 2003, 2007). Corson has shown that the unique discourse patterns of a culture not only sometimes clash with those of other cultures but may also create disharmony, misunderstanding, and even hostility between groups. The clash of discourse norms has historically led to the oppression or subordination of one discourse norm to another.

Several scholars have identified the pattern in which the discourse norms of subordinate or traditionally oppressed cultures are forced to adapt to those of the dominant (oppressive) culture(s) (Corson, 2001; Ogbu, 1992, 1995, 2004; O’Connor, 1989). This pattern certainly holds true in American schooling (Heath, 1983) where children from ethnically, socially, or culturally diverse backgrounds are either forced to assimilate their discourse norms to those of the school—which are themselves based on White western culture—or

suffer academic failure (Corson, 2001; O'Connor, 1989; Ogbu 1987, 2004). Yet because discourse norms are so deeply rooted in cultural values, forcing the change in discourse norms is practically the same as forcing a change in cultural values (Corson, 2001; Ogbu, 1987, 2004).

The research on cultural and linguistic differences between the home/native culture and that of the school has, so far, focused primarily on the early K-12 academic setting. Yet the academic discourse community that Corson and Ogbu describe (and the problems associated with it as such) is certainly not confined to K-12 schools. While some researchers have attempted to demonstrate that the university setting is itself a unique discourse community (Bizzell, 1982; Gravett & Petersen, 2007; Gutiérrez, 1995), few have examined how students entering it face many of the same linguistic and discursive issues as students entering the K-12 environment.

Because cultural and social alienation are closely tied to issues of minority student attrition (Nunez, 2009; Rendón, 2000; Tinto, 1987; White, 2003, 2007), examining issues of language, culture, and identity in the university seems all the more important and relevant to understanding student performance and happiness within this unique setting.

THE UNIVERSITY AS A DISCOURSE COMMUNITY

Universities, like all complex institutions, contain a variety of discursive styles. Different colleges, departments, and areas of study within the university maintain and perpetuate their own unique discursive style(s). Similarly, the discourse of the university can be further divided between the social and the academic, between students, faculty and staff, between regions, size of schools, etc. In short, there is no *one* university discourse. That said, linguists and educational researchers have acknowledged that the university does represent a definitive example of an academic discourse community complete with specific rules for participation therein (Bizzell, 1986, 1992; Gravett & Petersen, 2007; Williams, 2005). The university culture is, in short, a unique community based on discourse (Bizzell, 1982; Gravett & Petersen, 2007). Correspondingly, full participation within this academic discourse community requires that individuals learn and adopt its distinctive discourse pattern. Bizzell's (1982) work in particular found that traditional, four-year colleges and universities constitute a unique culture in which participants must employ certain kinds of discourse and adapt themselves to a specific and corresponding set of values and identities unique to that setting. Entrance into this discourse community—because it is culturally and linguistically exclusive—is, therefore, sometimes problematic for those not versed in the unique forms of literacy and language required therein (Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990).

In the academic discourse community, members are expected to share accepted intellectual, linguistic, and social conventions. In turn, these conventions govern spoken and written interactions (Prior, 1998). Because the ways of thinking and communicating of an individual's culture may differ significantly from those of the academic discourse community, ideological and linguistic conflicts arise (Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990). Such conflicts can range from simple misunderstandings to hostility and subsequent alienation from the academic community (White, 2003, 2007). Yet each, in turn, negatively affects students' sense of belonging and their perceptions of themselves as capable of success in this community.

Suggesting a way to eliminate such conflicts, Elbow (1998) states that *all* college students need to be versed in the discursive style of this community. Elbow contends that students will inevitably be expected by their professors to communicate in specific and prescribed ways. Similarly, other research found that social success and students' feelings of acceptance in the college social community required specific forms of discourse unique to this setting. However, the literacy skills required by the university discourse community are often inexplicit and mysterious to many students (Street, 1984). Both Elbow and Street acknowledge that, without specific instruction in the language of the academy, many students will be virtually doomed to academic failure and social alienation at the college or university.

ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Though there are many kinds of discourse on any college campus, the dominant discourse (i.e., the kind of speech, writing, and nonverbal communication that defines the college as a discourse community) is largely academic in nature. Students may find social, athletic, or even work-related success on a college campus in a variety of discourse styles which are themselves subject to change depending on the context in which the student finds herself or himself. Yet as Elbow (1998) points out, for students to find academic success at the university, they must at some point master the dominant discourse unique to this setting. Like most discourse communities, the university has rigid conventions for language use as manifest in choices of words, genre, and style. To be successful in the university, students must understand and be able to employ these conventions (Kutz, 1998).

Learning the dominant academic discourse in the university requires that students learn style shifting (Kutz, 1998) or what other literacy and linguists have termed "code switching" (Baynham, 1993; Flowers, 2000; Godley & Minnici, 2008; Turner, 2009). Students are not required to change their manner of discourse permanently; rather they must be able to code-switch between discourses. Kutz (1998) explains: "What we are really asking students to do as they enter the university is not to replace one way of speaking or writing with

another, but to add yet another style to their existing repertoire" (p. 85).

For students to shift into academic discourse, they must first know and understand the characteristics that define this discursive style. Yet too many of these conventions remain part of the hidden curriculum; teachers in the K-12 setting and especially in the college setting simply assume that students entering the university have mastered (and are ready and willing to use) academic discourse when, in fact, these relatively specific conventions have never been fully examined or deconstructed in the K-16 classroom. The work of researchers in academic literacy, who have explored many of the characteristics that define the academic discourse community (Chiseri-Strater, 1991; [Elbow, 1998](#); [Macken-Horarik, 1996](#); [Spellmeyer, 1998](#)), has largely remained in the realm of research and thus has not reached teachers and students.

Nonetheless, examinations of academic discourse tend to focus on a number of essential components: verbal assertiveness and voluntary participation, formality and explicitness, binary agonism, objectivity, specialized jargon, elements of display, and selectivity ([Elbow 1998](#); [Gravett & Petersen, 2007](#); [Hindman, 1997](#); [Tannen, 2002](#); [Turner, 2003](#)). Each of these components of academic discourse is unique, and almost all of them are based on White, Western linguistic norms ([Elbow, 1998](#); [Scheurich, 1993](#); [Sleeter, 1993](#); [Turner, 2003](#)). As described above, these discursive conventions are largely foreign to many minority students; and some, moreover, run completely counter to specific cultural linguistic/discursive norms.

In one study (White, 2003), minority freshmen college students showed resistance to employing the conventions of academic discourse because they had learned a different—and conflicting—cultural discursive norm. For example, one student, a Native American, had been told prior to leaving for college to “be careful what you do, because what you do, people—the upper, the majority—will look at you, and what you do or what you say is going to reflect on us” (p. 111). He went on to say, “That’s what they always said to me. That kind of stuck into my head, you know, ‘remember not to say too much; they [White students and professors] might think you speak for all of your people. . . . They won’t understand’” (White, 2003, p. 111). This student, like many others, avoided the academic discourse convention of frequent and assertive participation in class. Similarly, he had learned not to take an argumentative/agonistic stance—an essential element of college classroom discourse (White, 2003). He had been told not to argue but instead to listen to others’ arguments and to learn from their views—the very opposite of academic agonism ([Tannen, 2002](#)) and the demonstration of an “element of display.”

The work of Snow (1993) and [Au \(1986, 1991\)](#) demonstrates a similar cultural communication mismatch between cultural norms and school norms at the elementary level. This Native American student—like many

others in the study—was so unversed in using academic discourse that he believed he came to college knowing less than his mainstream peers: “You know,” he explained, “I’m still wet behind the ears and I don’t know much, man. I came from a place where I hardly even knew that this system [the university] existed” (White, 2007, p. 278). He went on to say, “I just don’t want to participate [in class] because I don’t want to be judged. I guess if I was more confident, like, in how I talked, if I felt safer, I would talk more” (p. 286). Instead, he sought safety in silence. The class to which he referred was “Race and Oppression,” a course focused on topics about which this student obviously had plenty of first-hand experience. Yet he felt alienated and intellectually inferior because he equated his peers’ use of the discursive conventions of academic discourse with actual knowledge. In addition, his grades suffered because he refused to participate in class.

Never having been taught academic discourse (and how to “code-switch” into it), many minority students misjudge themselves, their peers, and the overall college experience. Ironically, however, even had this student been explicitly taught academic discourse in his K-12 experience (or in a college orientation experience), there is little guarantee that he would have had ample reason to use it. The New Literacy Studies and other research in the sociocultural nature of discourse highlight that language is tied to cultural identity; thus, changing a discursive style often brings with it numerous cultural conflicts.

THE ACADEMIC DISCOURSE COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

Cognition and metacognition develop largely through the use of language (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Gee, 2002, 2003). Language serves as the primary scaffold for cognition; without well-developed language skills, humans are largely incapable of developing high-order thinking (Vygotsky, 1986). Similarly, because language is requisite for cognition, it affects identity (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006). People come to understand themselves and their respective place in the world largely through language (Vygotsky, 1986). It is not surprising, then, that changes in language often bring with them concurrent changes in identity (Gee, 2005); through repeated and extended interaction with communities of practice and their associated uses of language come changes in how individuals perceive themselves and their respective roles both within a discourse community and in the culture(s) outside of that community (Gee, 2000). In short, people begin to identify themselves through the various communities of discourse and practice of which they are a part.

Similarly, sociolinguists and psychological theorists as a whole point out that identity should be viewed as dynamic rather than as a static, unchanging

entity. (Côté & Levine, 2002, and Côté & Schwartz, 2002, provide an in-depth comparison of psychological and sociological approaches to identity.) People develop multiple identities depending on the context in which they find themselves (Gee, 2003). Some theorists (Dei, Karumanchery, Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Wertsch, 1991) have turned to the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and the concept of a dialogical self to help better conceptualize multiple identities. Other theorists (Nasir, 2002; Nasir & Cobb, 2002) have focused less on language and more on the social practices people engage in (Côté & Levine, 2002; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Brione, 2006; Wenger, 1998) and how identities shift and are influenced by cultural practices (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

Gosine (2002) cautions against an overly simplistic understanding of identity by emphasizing the difference between people's collective/communal identities (e.g., racial identity) and the underlying multifaceted individual identities or subjectivities that collective identities often mask. All people are polyvocal and have shifting identities; nonetheless they self-identify with the most dominant contexts in their lives at given points. The need to shift to different contexts and vocalities can, of course, result in conflicting or sometimes even opposing identities (Davidson, 1996; Park, 2008). Therefore, faculty need to recognize how intricately connected language and identity are and find ways to help students develop an academic identity while still maintaining and possibly even reinforcing their other shifting identities.

ACADEMIC IDENTITY

The development of a positive academic identity is correlated highly with academic success (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2000). Adams, Ryan, and Keating (2000) concluded that students possessing a strong sense of academic identity find ways to become involved in a wide array of college experiences. They make efforts to learn and grow, and they begin to interact with both faculty and fellow students in productive ways. Likewise, Berzonsky and Kuk (2000) found that students with a strong sense of academic identity were likely to seek out, evaluate, and use self-relevant information. Successful students tend to become increasingly skeptical about their self-constructions and willing to test and revise aspects of their self-identity. Moreover, these researchers found that a strong academic identity correlates highly with self-reflection, problem-coping ability, cognitive complexity, vigilant decision-making, and openness. Given the research on discourse communities and identity, these findings are not surprising. As students increase their "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 14) in the academic discourse community, they further develop their academic literacy as well as their academic identity.

Conversely, researchers conclude that lacking a strong academic identity tends to correlate with avoidance of work and problems, self-handicapping, outward or other-directedness, and poor decision-making strategies. Such a lack is negatively correlated with self-reflection, conscientiousness, and persistence in cognitively demanding tasks (Berzonsky, 1994, 1998). Thus, students with the least-developed sense of academic identity are far less likely to succeed at the college level than students with a strong sense of academic identity. However, developing a strong academic identity is viewed by many as unappealing because “becoming the sort of contentious person that the academy rewards seems to mean turning oneself into a snob or a nerd, quite possibly alienating oneself from one’s friends, relatives, and romantic partners” (Graff, 1999, p. 141).

ALTERING IDENTITIES

Even though a student brings to school a certain academic identity, this identity is subject to change either positively or negatively depending on the student’s experiences in the academy. Adams and his associates (2002) found that educational environments that promote a supportive intellectual environment while also offering critical and analytic awareness of societal issues help to facilitate positive academic identity development.

Certainly, a positive academic experience may help foster a strong academic identity. Research on African American participation in historically Black colleges and universities supports this contention (Dinwiddie & Allen, 2003). The unspoken and converse relationship suggested here, though, is that an unfriendly environment—real or perceived—may hinder the development of a positive academic identity. Though some researchers have examined how a positive academic experience affects positive identity formation, research is lacking in how interventions may be used to foster a strong academic identity in less positive environments.

Wertsch (1991) developed the notion of mediated action based on the belief that, through interactions with an environment or with other people, we transform ourselves and change our identity. Wertsch suggests that people may be taught—directly or indirectly—the specific language/literacy required for a specific setting. Through a developed understanding of the sociocultural factors (especially linguistics) that influence identity, we may be able to help others create new identities. We may, in other words, be able to help people make the transition to new environments and cultures by instructing them in the socioculturally based language and literacy of those cultures.

Finally, some minority students will continue to choose to maintain their sense of identity in the face of what they perceive as a painful choice between allegiance to “them” or “us” (Delpit, 1992). When given a choice between assimilation to what they perceive as an oppressive system (and

with it a consequent loss of identity), many students become understandably resistant to change; or as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) describe, they develop an oppositional identity. Simply pressuring students to change their discursive habits/patterns is, this research shows, insufficient for the purpose of preparing them for college life and is ultimately insulting to them. Such an approach presents to students a dichotomous and untenable choice: adapt the language and culture of the university and leave behind one's native culture or resist adopting this form of discourse and forever forego the dream of a college degree. Tierney (1999) has described this approach as tantamount to "cultural suicide" for minority students. He therefore argues for an approach to learning the parlance of the academy that helps students foster and maintain their respective cultural identities while also providing them with the discursive resources they need to be "full participants" in the university setting.

While we agree and acknowledge the importance of helping students maintain their cultural identities when entering college, we also acknowledge Gosine's (2002) point that individual identities are messy and fluid. Individuals' personal identities are complex, continually developing and changing as they move in and out of discourse communities (Gee, 2002; Gosine, 2002). In addition, learning involves change. We suspect, and hope, that college graduates are not the same type of people when they graduate as they were when they began college. Because learning requires philosophical, epistemological, and personal change, and because learning and language are inextricably tied to identity, it is imperative that students understand the important role that identity plays in college success. And as Schwartz, Côté, and Arnett (2005) point out, we should be concerned about the "forgotten half" of adults who do not attend college and who therefore lack this opportunity to form new identities. As Elbow (1998) has pointed out, "Life is long and college is short" (p. 146), so we must continually ask ourselves how the academy and academic discourse prepare students for life beyond college.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

In addition to addressing many issues that affect all students' transition to college, educators and administrators must also begin to focus on issues of language, academic literacy, and identity. More than a decade ago, Delpit (1995) highlighted the necessity of directly teaching minority students the codes and language patterns that they will be expected to know and use in the K-12 academic environment. Fifteen years later, we similarly argue that secondary and postsecondary educators need to understand the role that codes of power and academic discourse play in student collegiate success and that they need to teach these codes to students in culturally sensitive ways.

Far too often, the role of language and discourse in academic success remains unacknowledged both in pre-collegiate programs and in entry-level college classes and programs. With a few notable examples, few college preparatory programs address the issue of academic discourse at all. Minority students often complain that these programs, though preparing them to fill out college applications, did little to prepare them for college life. Similarly, these same students note that many college orientation programs tend to be about “team building” rather than substantive programs designed to help students understand the academy of which they are now a part. The literature reviewed here shows that educators need to help make this implicit and hidden curriculum explicit and visual to help ensure that all students, especially minority students, can be successful in college and beyond.

However, as our review article illustrates, making the hidden curriculum visible is more complicated than simply teaching students to write or to speak in a certain manner. Simply teaching standard English to K-12 students falls far short of preparing them for success at college. Academic discourse is, as the research above shows, a distinctive and relatively exclusive subset of standard English—a subset that is absent from most K-12 curricula.

Similarly, secondary and postsecondary educators need to realize that asking (or, more problematically, tacitly or overtly demanding) that students change how they speak, even for brief periods of time, is complicated by the strong ties of language to culture and identity and is further complicated by issues of “official” authority and resistance to this authority. While addressing issues of academic literacy, educators must also respect students’ native ways with words; they must celebrate the culturally imbued discursive styles that students bring with them to school and use those styles as the basis for teaching students how to code-switch. Above all, the New Literacy Studies highlight the fact that no one form of language or discourse is inherently superior to any other. Rather, discourses are almost always situated; they serve a particular purpose in a particular context.

When teaching the conventions of academic discourse, educators also need to acknowledge the greater power structure from whence academic discourse (and other exclusionary discourses) arise. Teaching academic discourse while ignoring the numerous power dynamics that take place in this discourse only perpetuates inequality. It is tantamount to an act of hegemony. We posit that students are more likely to engage in examinations of and the eventual use of code-switching when the artificiality and arbitrariness of academic discourse (and its normalization as “official”) are deconstructed and examined more closely. Once the mystery of academic discourse and the system it represents is lost, students are more likely to attempt learning and using it.

As these approaches to teaching academic discourse suggest, educators should, we believe, encourage students to see the adoption of academic discourse as a component of code-switching rather than as a rejection of other

forms of communication. Students need to be taught that adding academic discourse is, much like learning any new language, an additive process. Code-switching is a process that gives students the tools they need to enter a new culture and society—in this case, the academic discourse community—and achieve success in it. Through such an approach, students can, of course, always “go home” by switching back to their native discourse at any time. In fact, we believe that they should be encouraged to do so to avoid charges of “acting White” and suffering cultural alienation.

Finally, educators must help minority students gain the skills and power that are required to change the system itself. There can be no doubt that the academic discourse community is linguistically exclusive; it privileges one form of knowing and being over all others. In so doing, it excludes myriad diverse and divergent voices, thus hindering many new forms of knowledge. To borrow from mathematics, we hypothesize that there is also a transitive property of language, identity, and discourse communities: Individuals and the social structures of which they are a part coalesce around a sense of identity. Identity is, in turn, reflected in language. Language is culturally based. Discourse communities are, therefore, influenced greatly by culture. However, once they achieve the ability to move between discourses, students from diverse backgrounds will be more likely to develop a stronger academic identity and succeed in the academy. As the makeup of the participants in the academy begins to change, so will the language of the academy. To borrow from yet another analogy, code-switching to academic discourse may provide students with the Trojan horse they need to enter academia. Once inside, they can better work to change it. Currently, however, too few minority students have the tools they need to achieve these goals, allowing linguistic and cultural hegemony to persist.

Based on the research above, on the findings of the New Literacy Studies, and on our own practice in the field, we suggest that college-level educators (and those teaching college orientation programs and seminars) engage in specific activities to help students make the transition to academic discourse. First and foremost, we must deconstruct the conventions of our discursive practices with our students so they can better understand and appropriate our unique codes (or registers). Engaging in such examinations of discourse might also serve three other relevant purposes: (a) They will remind college-level faculty of the inherent power in students' native discursive practices, (b) They will illumine the sociocultural challenges that come with code-switching, and (c) They will make all of us more aware of our own uses of language in our academic practices.

Toward these ends, we posit that deconstructing with one's class/students the most common aspects of academic literacy can go a long way toward demystifying this form of speech. We advocate that instructors directly address such issues as:

- The subjective nature of language itself, stressing that one form of language is not inherently superior to others
- How meaning is made through discourse, communication (and in the cases of texts, through the reader's interaction with and interpretation of a text) rather than being transmitted from one entity to another
- The agonistic nature of academic discourse
- The use of—and sometimes reliance on—jargon and acronyms in academic discourse
- The polysyllabic and often arcane vocabulary common to academic discourse
- The tendency of those using academic discourse to emphasize points with statistics, which they treat as mathematical facts
- The rhetorical flourishes common to classroom debate
- The tacit rules of academic discourse (e.g., how to question peers and professors appropriately)

This list is by no means exhaustive; however, a conscious and concerted examination of these issues in college-level courses (especially those most frequently taken by newcomers to the university) can help demystify academic discourse for the students who find themselves alienated from the academic and cultural milieu of most college campuses (White, 2003, 2007). Simply acknowledging the fact that the university *has* its own communication norms—and then examining some of these norms—can help assuage some feelings of discursive/communicative alienation.

Such instruction can take numerous forms, both direct and indirect. The forms that individual faculty and staff use should depend, we believe, on the instructor's particular pedagogical style. Although we two employ hands-on, participatory activities and find them effective, they may prove less valuable to instructors in fields outside education and those with more traditional, teacher-centered pedagogies. Many students will benefit from lectures on the conventions of academic discourse, especially when such lectures include examples of academic discourse being used (e.g., case studies) and allow for questions and discussion.

In our own practices, we promote experiential, student-centered approaches to learning academic discourse. For example, the first author, John White, reports the frequent use of code-switching activities in class as a prompt for language differences and the nuances of academic discourse. He has students translate various "English" texts into "academic" discourse (e.g., the prologues to *Beowulf* and *Canterbury Tales* respectively, a selection from Martin Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971) and pop culture references such as Tupac Shakur's song "Me Against the World" (1995), examining while doing so (a) how different kinds of English produce different messages, (b) how particular kinds of discourse are used for different audiences, (c) how language and meaning are culturally based, and (d) how

different contexts require different forms of English. He uses this exercise as a starting point for discussions about academic discourse, its appropriateness for certain circumstances, and its inappropriateness for others.

Modeling academic discourse is tantamount to teaching about academic discourse. Educators must model appropriate uses of academic discourse while also explaining—often *in medias res*—what this particular form of communication is and why and how they are using it. A good sense of humor is requisite for such modeling to work effectively, since otherwise modeling can appear pretentious. Educators must be willing to poke fun at the more elaborate conventions of academic discourse and their own use of it for such lessons to resonate with students. White, for example, tells his students how, as a youth growing up in the American South, he learned about code-switching by hearing his father deliberately deepen a southern accent in some social interactions. As a long-haul trucker all over the Southeast in his first post-college job, White found that he greatly improved his chances of getting accurate directions and fitting in at truck stops by using a strong southern accent. It also brought easy acceptance in the local bait shop, the barber shop, the auto parts store, etc. Yet he also learned to speak without a southern accent in academic and other formal settings—for exactly the same reason: easier acceptance.

In classroom settings and personal interactions, White also readily acknowledges his inability as a middle-class White male to understand or use the many discursive styles unique to the newer generations and other cultures. For example, he makes fun of his inability to understand text-messaging shortcuts and his ignorance of pop-culture references. The point of such demonstrations, accompanied by “see what happens here” commentary, is to stress that everyone has discursive strengths but that different circumstances require learning new discourses and that doing so is a manifestation of intelligence and social power. Using humor to help acknowledge the stiffness and formality of academic discourse—and how inappropriate its use can be in non-academic settings—can help break down personal and cultural barriers to its use. We can, for example, show how certain meanings can get lost in translation. Shakur’s poetry inevitably loses much of its power when translated into academic terms.

Similarly, all students can benefit from detailed feedback on the quality of their written work. We expect students to use academic discourse in such work (Elbow, 1998; Gee, 1998; Prior, 1998; Street, 1984); but too often, students receive feedback on their written work that only confuses them further. Comments such as “awk,” “vague,” or “ambiguous” do little to clarify what the problem is or how the passage can be improved. Thus, providing students with concrete suggestions on ways to improve their academic writing—or better yet, using the methods common to the “writer’s workshop” and the “process approach” to papers (Andrews, Torgerson, Low, & McGuinn, 2009;

Bruton, 2009; Niven, 2009; Maxwell & Meiser, 2004)—can help students develop stronger academic verbal practices as well.

While there is no one right way to address the issues above, creating “rules” for participation with students at the beginning of a term can be a good time to go over some of the conventions of academic discourse while also setting parameters for appropriate discussion. Furthermore, including students in the rule-setting also gives them “buy in” to the classroom community. Freshmen-level classes, orientation seminars, and classes that include many transfer students are the most practical places in which to engage students in discussions of academic literacy.

Because adopting a new discourse—be it a new language or a new dialect—is fraught with stress, teachers must demonstrate patience and circumspection in demanding its use. For example, we must be careful about calling on students to participate in discussions. Though we wish to have a multiplicity of voices in our class discussions, some students may be less ready to voice their opinions, in part because of language issues. A means of giving these students’ voice—and modeling how they might in the future speak for themselves—is to have students write out their reactions to readings, class issues, lectures, etc., prior to class. The teacher can then read and, if necessary, rephrase the question using academic discourse that is common to the entire class but leaving the author of the question anonymous. We must encourage our students—and sometimes even pressure them (White, 2003, 2007)—to use academic discourse; however, we must do so with patience and good nature. Otherwise, students are likely to resist appropriating or using what is, to them, a foreign form of communication (Ogbu, 2004; White, 2003).

Finally, academic advisors and student services personnel can also serve an important role. Because of their proximity to individual students—especially those who are struggling in the college environment—these professionals can and should gauge students’ levels of proficiency with academic discourse. One can obtain a wealth of data from individual counseling sessions with students (White, 2003, 2007). Building on Care Theory (Noddings, 2005), White found that, because of the strong ties of language with identity, students were more willing to acknowledge their deficits in academic discourse and then work to build stronger academic discourse practices once they had created a trusting relationship with an individual advisor. Advisors may also use numerous tools (e.g., simple writing tests with rubrics, university-sponsored tests such as the English for Academic Purposes Test or TOEFL tests, and mandatory midterm feedback from students’ professors about their performance and participation in class) to gauge students’ proficiency with academic discourse (White, 2003). From a variety of sources, this information can then serve as prompts for appropriate interventions.

Of paramount importance in each of these endeavors is good communication between programs, departments, and instructors, and advisors/

counselors to ensure that students receive this important information. We must take systemic steps to ensure that we are not overlooking those students who are historically most likely to fall into the cracks by assuming that they are receiving this crucial information elsewhere. We suggest the following:

- Introduce students at the beginning of the year to academic discourse.
- Discuss the theory that meaning is constructed rather than transmitted.
- Discuss power differentials in communication.
- Discuss different communication styles, acknowledging the power of each.
- Engage in activities or games of code-switching to demonstrate the effective use of language registers in different contexts.
- Poke fun at academic discourse conventions to alleviate some of the stress about using it; show how its rules and stiffness can limit students and professors in their expression.

Though the suggestions above do not prescribe a specific means of reaching the laudable goal of demystifying and, in some ways, disempowering academic discourse, they do provide a strong theoretical rationale for, and in some ways suggest practical means toward, teaching students the discourse of the academy. At a minimum, we hope that, by disseminating this information, educators working with college-bound minority students might begin focusing on the important role that language, specifically academic literacy, plays in a student's chances at college success.

CONCLUSION

The academic discourse community as a whole can only benefit and grow from having a multiplicity of voices. Sadly though, a multiplicity of voices in the academy will begin to emerge only if students (as well as faculty) from diverse backgrounds get into the academy in the first place and go on to acquire influence there. Requisite to these goals is adopting the institution's literacy skills—its "codes of power" (Bizzell, 1986). Paradoxically, for the academic discourse community to become less exclusive—for it to undergo a true paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962)—those with different and diverse native styles of communication must learn the conventions of academic discourse to have any reasonable chance of changing it.

We conclude by acknowledging that this research and the practical implications outlined above cannot, by themselves, address all of the injustices that have occurred and continue to occur in our K-12 and postsecondary schools. We agree with Ladson-Billings (2006) that an educational debt has accumulated and that "equality, that is, sameness, would not create equity" for people of color (Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007, p. 180). But we do

think that explicitly teaching all students—but especially minority students—about the importance of language, discourse communities, and identity can serve as an important step in the right direction.

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