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Nonstandard Dialects and Writing Instruction in Adult Literacy Settings: Issues and Implications

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**Nonstandard Dialects and Writing Instruction in Adult Literacy Settings:
Issues and Implications**

**A Master's Degree Project
by
Sherry Russell**

**Submitted
In Partial Completion of the Requirements
for a Master of Education
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Problem Statement

Many adults in adult literacy settings are speakers of nonstandard dialects. The teaching of Standard American English to speakers of nonstandard dialects is a highly politicized issue. Language is inseparable from identity. The native language, and therefore dialect, one speaks is shaped by one's culture. Inherent in it is a particular way of viewing and acting in the world, through its use we create and recreate our world and are in turn created by it. Language is embedded in social context. Learning a new dialect, a new language, is not simply a technical act devoid of social and cultural implications. It is the act of learning a new culture, of taking on a new identity, of repositioning oneself in the world, and in turn being repositioned by it. The teaching of language, therefore, is a political act, because it is an act that transmits culture and the values and beliefs inherent in that culture. It informs, and is informed by, existing sociopolitical realities.

In the United States, the ability to write and speak Standard American English allows one access to goods and services that might otherwise be unavailable, including jobs and education (Wolfram, 1991, Mims 1986, Atkins, 1993). It serves a gatekeeper role. Spoken Standard American English, in its many varieties, is the dialect spoken by the mainstream. The Standard American English which is written down in grammar books and dictionaries is based on the language of writers who have legitimacy in the mainstream culture. Nonstandard dialects are those that are spoken by groups who are outside of the mainstream culture. How a dialect is perceived is in relationship to the status and power of the group who speaks it. The lower status a group has in society, the more highly stigmatized will be the dialect spoken by that group. The perception that the dialects spoken by these groups is somehow inherently inferior is not only inaccurate (Wolfram, 1991), but is also damaging in that judging the language of a speaker is also to judge the speaker.

For the past thirty years, linguists, educators, activists and others have debated the question of whether or not Standard American English ought to be

taught, and if taught, how the teaching of it ought to be approached. Traditional approaches have focused on attempts to replace the native dialect with SAE, assuming that the native dialect is inferior and therefore deficit. Others have advocated bidialectalism, which assumes that the native dialect is not inferior, and though SAE ought to be taught, the native dialect should be maintained and not replaced by SAE. Still others believe that SAE ought not to be explicitly taught at all. The belief is that change needs to occur in the attitudes towards language diversity, particularly of those in the mainstream as they are the power brokers of society. Respect for language diversity will decrease the role of SAE as a gatekeeper, and existent power structures can be changed. Though this may be true, and efforts to create respect for language diversity in this country must be ongoing, the fact is that in the current sociopolitical reality, the ability to write Standard American English provides one with access to opportunities which may otherwise be unavailable.

Access to Standard American English cannot be denied to adult learners as we wait for the day when we live in a more equitable world where language diversity is valued and no longer stigmatized, nor the groups who speak it. Yet how we approach teaching it, and how we talk about it, are the critical issues. Our perceptions of these issues position us in relation to the power structures existent in our society. As educators, we take a political stance whether or not we consciously name it. Therefore, a better understanding of what the issues and implications are for teaching Standard American English to speakers of nonstandard dialects will help us to become more responsible educators.

Purpose and Guiding Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the issues and implications surrounding writing instruction for speakers of nonstandard dialects in adult literacy settings in the United States.

Primary Question:

- * What are the issues and implications surrounding writing instruction for speakers of nonstandard dialects in adult literacy settings in the United States?

Secondary Questions:

- * Should Standard American English be taught to speakers of nonstandard dialect?
 - * What are the current and ongoing debates about this question?
 - * How do attitudes towards nonstandard and standard dialects inform this question?
 - * What are the political issues surrounding this question, and how do they inform it?
- * If it ought to be taught, what are the issues inherent in teaching it?
 - * To whom should it be taught?
 - * What are the purposes for teaching it?
 - * Are adult literacy settings appropriate places to teach SAE?
 - * How do written and spoken language inter-relate?
 - * What are appropriate methodologies for teaching written SAE?
 - * How do learner goals relate to the teaching of SAE?
 - * What are the political implications in the teaching of SAE?
- * What are the implications and recommendations for writing instruction of speakers of nonstandard dialects in adult literacy settings?

Methodology

The findings of this study were informed by field research, a literature review and the assumptions, participation and reflections of the author. These processes overlapped, influencing and guiding each other. All are integral pieces of the project, and none can be entirely separated from the whole.

Sources of Data

There are two primary sources of data. The first is a literature review, and the second is field research conducted at an adult literacy center. The literature review used journal articles, books, unpublished manuscripts, and papers presented at conferences to review themes relevant to the topics. These included the nature of dialect, the politics of language, sociopolitical analysis of education, writing methodology, adult literacy, and language acquisition theory.

The second source of data, the field research, includes three components: participant observation, group discussions with staff, and group discussions with learners at an adult literacy center. The adult literacy center is located in a small city in the NorthEastern United States, and is housed in a public library. The program is staffed by paid teachers and supplemental volunteer tutors are also used. The field research was conducted with staff and learners of the program's bi-weekly morning classes. The focus of the program's morning classes is literacy, and does not include GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree), pre-GED or ESL courses. The staff are three White women from various regions of the United States, and range in age from late twenties to late thirties. All of them have been teaching at this center for several years, and teach together during the morning classes.

The learners at the center are adults from a variety of racial, ethnic, class and language backgrounds. The learners who participated in the group discussions are described below:

- John: A man in his fifties who is originally from Jamaica and came to the United States twenty nine years ago.
- Sam: A man in his forties who is originally from Jamaica and has been in the United States for at least ten years.
- Paul: A White man in his thirties who is from Western Massachusetts.
- Ruben: A man in his thirties who is originally from Portugal and has been in the United States for at least ten years.
- Jerri: An African American woman who is probably in her mid to late thirties who is from Western Massachusetts.

In addition, participant observations were conducted at the adult literacy center by the author. The author has been a volunteer tutor at the adult literacy center one morning a week for over a year. The author is described below:

- Sherry: A White woman, thirty years old, from the United States but not one specific region, currently a graduate student, and also a volunteer tutor at the adult literacy center.

The rationale for describing the race, age and ethnicity and regional backgrounds of participants, who include the author, the staff and the learners, is that it is relevant to the analysis of the data. The viewpoints of the participants are informed by their culture, race, and ethnicity, as well as other aspects of their personal backgrounds and identities which will emerge, where relevant, in the presentation of the data. The names of all participants, where referenced, with the exception of the author, have been changed.

Procedures for Collecting Data

The literature reviewed for this study has been done in conjunction with coursework the author has taken during her master's degree program of study. Literature reviewed for a series of courses in literacy methods, literacy issues,

language acquisition theory, writing process, and sociopolitical aspects of writing instruction, have informed the author's understanding of the topic. In addition, a separate literature search was conducted to review literature specifically relevant to the themes of the study. The cumulative literature reviewed has provided the author both with a familiarity of relevant issues and a sound theoretical framework.

The participant observations have been ongoing at the literacy center for over twelve months. A written journal has been kept to record anecdotal accounts and for exploration of issues, methods and events through reflection. The observations were participatory because the author is also a volunteer tutor at the literacy center, and is therefore actively involved in the classroom interactions. Involvement as a volunteer tutor has been critical to the understanding the author brings to the study, and in fact is the source of the initial question.

Group discussion with staff were conducted at the author's request. A series of four meetings were planned. Each was a half an hour in length, and were held at the end of the morning class once a week, every other week. During the initial meeting, the author introduced the main question, and her purposes and rationale for conducting the study. Staff agreed to meet to discuss the question, and a set of subquestions was generated by the group. The subquestions were generated jointly because it was the author's hope that the discussions would be relevant to all members. Although the initial question was set by the author, the discussions were participatory in the following regards:

- * the subquestions were generated by the group;
- * discussions followed the general themes of the questions, but were not conducted in an interview format;
- * the author's role in the discussion was both as facilitator and participant.

The discussions were tape recorded with the participants consent and the tapes were then transcribed by the author. Written consent was not given to use the transcriptions in this study, but verbal consent was given to use specific quotes and reference them to the group. The four participants, including the author, were present at all of the discussions. An outline of the questions for the staff discussions follows.

Outline for Discussions with Staff

General purpose:

To explore issues of language use, spoken and written, as they relate specifically to instruction in an adult literacy setting.

I. Questions about Standard American English usage

- A. Should we teach Standard American English language usage?
- B. What are the purposes for teaching Standard American English language usage? How do these relate to learner goals?
- C. In what ways is it taught at Read/Write/Now? In other words, through what sorts of explicit activities, and how is it taught implicitly?
- D. What are some questions and concerns about teaching Standard American English?

II. Questions relating to voice

- A. What is voice?
- B. In looking at student publications, have we brought out students voices?
- C. How does one bring out voice?
- D. What are the factors that affect the expression of voice?
- E. How does voice vary in different genres of writing?

III. Questions relating to the role of the teacher

- A. What is the role of the teacher?
- B. How is the role of the teacher related to authority and power?
- C. What does teacher authority mean?
- D. What are some expressions of teacher authority?
- E. What are some questions about the use of this authority?
- F. Is teacher authority the same as teacher privilege?
- G. What is teacher privilege?

- H. When (in what situations, at what times) do you find yourselves questioning the use of authority, power, and/or privilege?
(eg.: What is my role in encouraging students to write about a specific topic or subject? How much should I push?)
- I. Are there any aspects of these issues that you find yourselves discussing with learners, or would like to?

IV. Questions relating to Read/Write/Now's philosophy

- A. What is the philosophy of Read/Write/Now regarding the teaching of writing?
- B. What aspects of this philosophy are clear in relation to practice, and what needs clarification?
- C. How is the philosophy of Read/Write/Now informed? How are changes made?

This outline was written by the author as a result of the first meeting. One change was made to the outline after it was presented to the group at their request. Question I. A. was changed to read: *How* should Standard American English usage be taught?.

The group discussions with the learners were also initiated by the author. Group members were self selected. The author presented the issues she was interested in discussing, and her reasons for wanting to do so, during the mid-morning meeting at class. Six learners indicated interest in meeting.

The discussions took place for a half an hour in the mornings before regular morning classes at the adult literacy center began. There were a series of five discussion, which occurred weekly, for a period of seven weeks. There was a hiatus of two weeks between the third and fourth discussions, and between the fourth and fifth due to school holidays. Of the six learners who indicated interest, five came to at least one discussion. Of these five participants, two, John and Sam, were present at all discussions. Paul was present at three of the discussions, the first, second and fifth. Ruben was present at two of the discussions, the first

and second, and Jerri was present at one of the discussions, the third. Ruben was unable to attend the last three meetings because of his work schedule. Paul did not attend one of the meetings due to illness. Jerri was unable to attend the last two meetings because she got a new job and disenrolled from the program.

Discussion 1:	March 8, 1995	Sherry, John, Sam, Paul, Ruben
Discussion 2:	March 15, 1995	Sherry, John, Sam, Paul, Ruben
Discussion 3:	March 27, 1995	Sherry, John, Sam, Jerri
Discussion 4:	April 12, 1995	Sherry, John, Sam
Discussion 5:	April 26, 1995	Sherry, John, Sam, Paul

The discussions were structured slightly differently than those held with the staff. The initial outline for the discussions was generated solely by the author. The outline was created to serve as a guide, and not as a set of formal interview questions. This was done intentionally in order to leave room to incorporate participant input as the discussions progressed. The fourth discussion session was set aside specifically to address questions generated by the learners. The nature of the discussion questions was also different. The assumption was that we had to first develop a joint framework for talking about language issues. With staff, however, it was assumed that we shared a similar vocabulary for talking about language and instructional issues because we are all trained teachers. In the analysis of the data these assumptions will be explored in greater detail.

The author saw her role in the discussions as both facilitator and participant. However, because the relationship between the author and the participants was formed initially in the context of tutor to learner, rather than tutor to teacher, the dynamic was different than in the discussions with staff. This influenced the extent to which the discussions were truly participatory. In fact, they can probably best be described as loosely structured group interviews.

The discussions were taped with the consent of the learners. The taped discussions were transcribed by the author. Verbal consent was given to use quotes from the transcriptions, but the names have been changed to ensure the

participants' privacy.

An initial outline of the discussion topics follows, as well as the reflections following the first discussion. The reflections show the process by which the outline changed and developed over the course of the discussions.

Initial Outline of Discussions with Learners

General Purpose:

To discuss issues related to language and language usage, both spoken and written, for the purpose of exploring beliefs about language, and how these beliefs relate to and inform learners' experiences at the literacy center, and practices at the center.

Possible topics and questions for discussion:

Topic I

I. Language and identity

- A. Describe ways in which people speak differently
- B. What are some of the things that influence the ways that people speak?
- C. Do people speak differently in different situations, and if so in what ways, and what are some of the reasons why?
- D. Does the way that people talk change over time, and why does or doesn't it?

Topic II

II. Attitudes and assumptions about language and dialect

- A. Are there some ways of speaking that are better than others, and why or why not?
- B. What types of judgements are made about the way a person talks, the dialect or language someone speaks?
- C. What is a dialect?

- D. Who do you know who you think speaks particularly well, and why do you think so?
- E. Who writes grammar books and dictionaries? Do the contents of these books ever change?

Topic III

III. The relationship between writing and speaking

- A. Do you write differently than you speak? In what ways, and when?
- B. How are writing and speaking the same, and how are they different?

Topic IV

IV. Attitudes and beliefs about writing and methodology

- A. What types of writing do you enjoy most, and why? Least?
- B. What methods are the most and least helpful in learning to write
- C. What is writer's voice?
- D. Which writers do you think have a strong sense of voice?
- E. Do you feel there's a sense of voice in your own writing, and is it influenced by the type writing being done?
- F. What types of writing do you do outside of class?

Topic V

V. Goals

- A. What are your goals for being here?
- B. Describe how they are or aren't being met.

Topic VI

VI. Authority, power and school

- A. Do you tell the teachers when you'd like them to do things differently, or when you'd like to do something differently? Examples?
- B. Describe past school experiences
- C. In what areas do you feel comfortable expressing yourself here?

Notes from Discussion I with Learners: Example of how the process of inquiry was informed and changed by the cycle of participant input and reflection

Did I understand what people meant?

Summary of general themes in the first discussion:

-[...] believes that standard American English is not a matter of accent, but of using the right words. Everyone talked about how many different accents there are in the U.S. alone. *Do people agree with [...] that the accent is not what tells whether the English is proper or not?*

He said that he thought Jamaican English was broken English. He said that the way that he speaks has changed since he's been here. *(this program, or the U.S.?)*

He said one of the reasons he's at Read/Write/Now is to learn the proper words.

It's not a matter of spelling, it's a matter of using the right words in the right places. And of learning certain words. *What words? Or is it the place that they go (grammar and syntax)?*

-[...] said that another difference is that some people speak a little louder, some a little softer than others. He said he didn't know for sure what was proper English. *Whose voices are the loudest in this country?*

-[...] said that he thought that British English was proper English.

-[...] agreed, then said he wasn't sure what exactly was proper English. He said that he felt that his problem was that he wrote differently than he spoke. That everyone does. *Why is this a problem?*

Questions arising:

- * [...] believes that there is a certain way to speak English and that this is the way it should be spoken. What do others think?
- * What are the purposes for wanting to learn to speak this standard American English? Does it interest anyone to talk about how a certain language gets to become the standard? Who that you know speaks it? How do these people learn it? What are the factors that affect the language that you learn to speak?

- * Do you change when the way that you speak changes? Why or why not?
In what ways?
([...] said that he speaks slower to his boss, to people who don't speak Jamaican dialect. Does he feel he can express himself more clearly in Jamaican dialect? Or more easily? When he's speaking to someone who doesn't speak Jamaican dialect does he feel that he can communicate everything that he wants to say?)
- * Is it as important to speak it as it is to write it?
- * How can it best be learned? For speaking? For writing?
- * How is the way that you speak different from the way that you write?
- * Do you write differently when you are writing different types of things? Give some examples. (Dialogue journal, applications, stories, essays)
- * How does to whom you're writing effect how you write (audience?)? Do you think about who will be reading what you write when you write it?
- * What do you feel most comfortable writing? What types of things?
- * How has your writing changed since you've been at the program?

Other possible questions for next time:

What questions do people have at this time?

Does anyone want to look at some pieces of writing to see what's changed?

Background information

The questions arising were incorporated into following discussions, and the process was ongoing.

Limitations

The primary limitations of the study are as follows:

- * the author has had little previous experience with field research of this nature.
- * the findings cannot be generalized to a larger context because research was limited to one site.
- * the findings cannot be generalized to all learners within the site because data collected was specific to the individuals interviewed, and because the learners interviewed did not comprise a representative sample of all learners in the program. For example, there was only one woman in the group, and she was unable to attend most of the meetings; and the two men from Jamaica are the only two people from Jamaica in the morning program.
- * not all learners were able to attend all meetings because of job changes, illness, and busy lives.
- * interpretation of the data is influenced by the biases, assumptions and theoretical frameworks held by the author because it filtered through her lenses before reaching this paper. This is unavoidable, particularly with qualitative data.
- * as a participant in the discussions and as a volunteer tutor, the data itself is inevitably influenced by the author's presence.

Assumptions and Bias

The primary assumptions are:

- * inherent in language are issues of power.
- * teaching, and especially language teaching, is political.
- * educators have the responsibility of understanding that teaching is a political act.
- * as educators, we are trying to work towards a more equitable world.
- * talking about what we are doing, with each other, with our students, as students, is a good way of attempting to understand who we are, what we do, and how we can do it better.

Literature Review

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, a debate has raged in the United States about issues of language rights, dialect rights and the roles and responsibilities of educators and our educational system in relationship. The purpose of this discussion is to review a selection of the available literature in order to understand the implications in terms, specifically, of writing instruction and nonstandard dialects in adult literacy settings. The literature review will provide a framework for examining these implications through a discussion of the following themes:

- * terminology used in the debate;
- * the historical framework of the debate;
- * attitudes and politics related to nonstandard dialects;
- * existing educational efforts aimed at language instruction for speakers of nonstandard dialects, issues and implications;
- * implications for writing instruction in adult literacy settings.

The purpose of this review is not to provide specific recommendations for educators in adult literacy settings, but rather to provide a backdrop for understanding the themes, attitudes and issues relevant to nonstandard dialects and writing instruction.

Definition of Terms: Dialects, Standard and Nonstandard

It is important to clarify terminology used to describe language diversity. The very label one assigns to describe a language, or language feature, can have implications for one's own conception of the issues, as well as for the perceptions of others engaged in the dialogue. In the case of standard and nonstandard dialects the discussion surrounding the terminology underscores the political nature of the debate. The terms used (whether consciously chosen or not) underscore and influence theoretical frameworks for understanding the nature of language, and

the role it plays in our society.

First, what is a dialect? The term dialect is often used to describe only those varieties of a language spoken by those outside one's own social grouping. It has also been used to describe all varieties of a language that are not considered standard. In its common usage, then, it is a term which implies social and value judgements. From a linguistic standpoint, however, it is a, "neutral label [used to] refer to any variety of a language which is shared by a group of speakers" (Wolfram, 1991, p. 2). All languages have dialects. Any speaker of a language, is also a speaker of a dialect. "...the perception that only other people speak dialects turns out to be a provincial and ethnocentric one, as one group's commonplace turns out to be another group's peculiarity" (Wolfram, 1991, p. 3). Dialect variation can occur at any of the structural levels of a language, in its phonology, semantics, grammar or pragmatics. In general, however, dialects can be characterized more by their similarities to each other, than their differences. In other words, "...there are more rules that dialects have in common than there are rules that distinguish dialects" (Farr and Daniels, 1986, p. 21). No dialect is inherently better than any other (Kizza, 1991).

Each social dialect is adequate as a functional and effective variety of English. Each serves a communication function as well as a social solidarity function. It maintains the communication network and the social construct of the community of speakers who use it. Furthermore, each is a symbolic representation of the historical, social and cultural backgrounds of the speakers. (Wolfram and Mims, 1986, p. 4)

Nonetheless, social judgement is inherent in the common usage of the term dialect. Stigmas are attached to certain dialects, and assumptions are made that socially favored dialects are inherently better than socially disfavored dialects. Although this is not the case, it is this commonly held assumption that is both reflective of, and has a significant influence on, the power dynamics surrounding language issues. Wolfram, 1991, has observed that, "For the most part Americans do not assign strong positive, or prestige, value to any particular native

American English dialect. The basic contrast exists between negatively valued dialects, and those without negative value, not between those with prestige value and those without" (p. 9). This is not the case in England, for example, where certain dialects do have prestige over others, such as the Queen's English and Oxford English. It is important to clarify this distinction because it is within this framework that definitions of Standard American English can best be understood.

Farr and Daniels (1986) have asked, "Is [Standard English a dialect] identifying a group of speakers with particular linguistic features? Or, more plausibly, does Standard English simply refer, for most people, to language use that avoids those stigmatized features that are identified with nonstandard dialects?" (pp. 21-22). Wolfram (1991) adds, "Standard American English seems to be determined by what it is *not* more than by what it is...If a person's speech is free of structures that can be identified as "nonstandard", then it is considered standard" (p.9). What then, is this Standard American English? In the United States (unlike, for example, in France or Spain), there is no national language authority responsible for codifying and prescribing Standard English. Grammar books and dictionaries which prescribe usages for formal, written Standard English, "tend to be based on the written language of established writers..." (Wolfram, 1991, p.7). There does exist, therefore, general agreement over usages for written Standard English. It is, like all languages, subject to change. "Present-day Standard English reveals that many of today's regular forms were yesterday's irregular forms..." (Wolfram, 1991, p. 34). Change is, however, slower to come to the written Standard than the spoken. There are, in fact, very few, if any, *speakers* of the formal Standard English as written in grammar books. Spoken Standard English has many variations, so many so that Farr and Daniels, 1986, question the notion of one spoken variety, "The notion that there is a single Standard English is considerably weakened by the fact that there are so many different versions of such a standard" (pp.21-22). Both former President George Bush, and T.V. personality Oprah Winfrey, for example, can be described as speakers of Standard American English. Though they have distinctly different

backgrounds as well as different regional accents, their use of grammar fits into the commonly held perception of the Standard. Spoken Standard American English, therefore, exists more as a judgement made in the mind of the listener, than it does as any sort of rigidly classifiable structure. It is this characteristic of the use of the term Standard American English, that is what makes it clear that no discussion of it can be free from both political and social implications.

The varieties of terms used to describe Standard American English are clearly indicative of its political nature. Geneva Smitherman (1995), in one of her most recent articles, has referred to it as Edited American English, as well as, The Language of Wider Communication. It has also been called Broadcast English, Cash English (Clarke, 1991), Standard English, Standard American English, Mainstream English, Edited Written English, Proper English, Correct English and Formal Standard English, among other terms. Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, in A Pedagogy for Liberation, have dubbed it, "Upper Class Dominating English" (Clarke, 1991, p. 85). William Gilbert, 1980, has called it, "the white ruling class dialect", because, "[it] deprives the concept of much of its factitious glamour. This synonym reveals both the power base that lends the dialect its prestige and the politics inherent in teaching it" (p. 3). For the purposes of this paper, the term Standard American English, or SAE will be used. This term has been chosen both for ease of reference and deliberately. Although it is clear that there is a great deal of variety within SAE, especially spoken SAE, it is the belief in its existence that keeps it alive. It is this belief in the existence of a single standard that helps to perpetuate many of the myths commonly held about language. These are the beliefs which are central to this discussion. Calling the Language of Wider Communication, 'Standard American English' signals the assumption inherent in the term (that there is a standard), as well as society's firm commitment to preserving it, and therefore, the power struggles involved. I am not attempting to contribute to the myths surrounding SAE by using this term, but merely to indicate that it does exist, it exists because we, as a society, believe that it does. If there were no conception of a standard, valued above other dialects, this discussion

would be irrelevant.

Dialects other than SAE will be referred to as nonstandard dialects. Nonstandard dialects also have a number of terms, including the common term, "the vernacular". "The term vernacular is used here simply to refer to those varieties of the language which are outside the standard dialects...." (Wolfram, 1991, p. 96). Wolfram goes on to say that, "Unlike standard dialects, which are largely defined by their *absence* of socially stigmatized structures of English, vernacular varieties seem to be characterized by the *presence* of socially obtrusive structures" (p. 11). Farr and Daniels, 1986, have said, "It is important to remember...that 'nonstandard' ways of using language are stigmatized because they are associated with dialects of lesser political, economic, or social value, not because they are any less adequate linguistically" (p.24). Nonstandard dialects have also been inappropriately called slang. Slang is a term used to describe the informal and deliberate use of language to signal, for example, group identification or familiarity (Wolfram, 1991). The line between what is slang and what is not is often unclear, but slang is not a term which can be used interchangeably with nonstandard dialect, though it is commonly misused in this way. The dialects of African Americans have been studied more than any other in the United States in the last several decades. Innumerable terms have been used to refer to African American dialects. For the purpose of this paper, the term Black English Vernacular, or BEV, will be used. It is the term currently used by linguists and language theorists, including Geneva Smitherman (1995), who has been active in the debate about dialect and education, and in researching BEV, for several decades. The term is used with the understanding that there are many inherent variations in BEV, just as there are in SAE, but that it is the term used to describe, "the highly consistent grammar, pronunciation and lexicon that is the first dialect learned by most black people throughout the United States..." (Farr and Daniels, 1986, p. 15).

History of the Debate: Nonstandard Dialects, SAE, and Education

Since the late 1960s the debate over whether or not SAE should be taught in the schools, and if so, how ought it to be taught, has centered around three basic viewpoints. The first is eradication, or replacement, that is, that the native dialect should be replaced by Standard American English. The second is bidialectalism, and this position states that the native dialect ought to be preserved while at the same time, Standard American English is learned. The third position is what shall be referred to here as the dialect rights position. This position states that the focus ought not be on the *explicit* teaching of Standard American English at all. They, "reject the idea that language prejudice is significant and inevitable" (Dumas and Garber, 1989, p.8). There are variations within each position, and all three will be discussed in greater detail in this section. Walt Wolfram, 1991, has summed up the central question in the debate, "...the crux of the Standard English debate ultimately seems to involve balancing the inevitability of dialect diversity and standardization with the sociopolitical realities that confer the status of nonstandardness on nonmainstream, vernacular speaking groups" (p. 215).

Eradicationists support the belief that SAE has value greater than that of native dialects which are nonstandard. This is the deficit model. It assumes that speakers of nonstandard dialects are deficient in language skills and therefore must be taught Standard American English usage, both in speaking and in writing. The vernacular dialect is viewed as a corruption of the Standard, and not a legitimate linguistic system in its own right. The ultimate goal of this approach would be the eradication of nonstandard dialects as a whole.

The second approach, bidialectalism, came as a response to the eradication movement. It assumes, firstly, that nonstandard dialects are not deficit, but merely different. This assumption rests on a great deal of research conducted in the late sixties and early seventies, which continues today, on various nonstandard dialects, particularly BEV, (Labov, 1970; Baratz, 1970; Shuy, 1969; Jensen, 1969; Eereiter and Englemann, 1966; Dillard, 1972; Smitherman, 1981; and on

Appalachian English, Heath; 1983) showing that all dialects are legitimate linguistic systems, "equally efficient as systems of communication," (Smitherman, 1995, p.23). The second assumption is that it is possible to become proficient in more than one dialect. A bidialectal individual will have the capacity to choose between two entirely different systems, and to switch back and forth, much as does a bilingual speaker of two different languages. James Sledd (1973) has been one of the most vocal critics of this approach.

Bidialectalism is the attempt to require black children in the schools to learn middle class white English for use on all occasions which the middle-class white world considers worth its while to regulate, so that by mollifying their white masters, young blacks may achieve the upward mobility in the mainstream culture which otherwise the whites will permanently deny them. The bidialectalist does not argue that one language or dialect may in itself be better than another. Instead, he imagines a nightmare world in which white prejudice must remain as an eternal obstacle to black advancement unless black children consent to remake themselves in a white image. (p.770)

Howard Mims (1986) adds, "It has been said that efforts to teach Black children a form of Standard English is just another way of robbing Black people of pride, dignity and identity" (p. 75). Geneva Smitherman, 1973, points out that bidialectalism, "is concerned with the situation of *ethnic* and *class minority* students. Don't ever think for one minute that anybody is talkin bout makin white and/or middles class kids 'bi-dialectical'" (p. 774). With bidialectalism, therefore, the burden is placed squarely on the shoulders of the vernacular speaking student, rather than on the educational system, educators, or society.

Criticism of bidialectalism led to a movement whose philosophy was articulated in a position statement published in 1974 by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC):

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is

unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the rights of students to their own language.

Passed by the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), November, 1972, and by the CCCC Membership, April, 1974, pp.2-3. (Fitts, 1991, pp. 4-5)

The following excerpt from the background information published by the CCCC highlights their pedagogical position:

...dialect...plays little if any part in determining whether a child will ultimately acquire the ability to write EAE [Edited American English]....Since the issue is not the capacity of the dialect itself, the teacher can concentrate on building up the students' confidence in their ability to write...the essential functions of writing [are] expressing oneself, communicating information and attitudes, and discovering meaning through both logic and metaphor..[thus] we view variety of dialects as an advantage....one may choose roles which imply certain dialects, but the decision is a social one, for the dialect itself does not limit the information which can be carried, and the attitudes may be most clearly conveyed in the dialect the writer finds most congenial... [Finally] the most serious difficulty facing "non-standard" dialect speakers in developing writing ability derives from their exaggerated concern for the *least* serious aspects of writing. If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write. (1974, p. 8) (Smitherman, 1995, p. 23)

Following this publication, the CCCC formed a committee which spent four years compiling materials, lessons plans, classroom activities, and lectures to help educators in implementing the "Student's Right to Their Own Language" philosophy in their classrooms (Smitherman, 1995). Unfortunately, this document was never published, due largely to the increasingly conservative political climate of the 1980s.

The debate continues. There has, as yet, been no cohesive, clear policy articulated, on a national level, to answer the questions: "What should the schools do about the language habits of students who come from a wide variety of social,

economic, and cultural backgrounds?", and, "Should the schools try to uphold language variety, or to modify it, or to eradicate it?" (Smitherman, 1995, pp. 24-25). The CCCC, however, issued a call for a "National Language Policy". The plan was adopted in 1988, and states that:

There is a need for a National Language Policy, the purpose of which is to prepare everyone in the United States for full participation in a multi-cultural nation. Such a policy recognizes and reflects the historical reality that, even though English has become the language of wider communication, we are a multi-lingual society. All people in a democratic society have the right to equal protection of the laws, to employment, to social services, and to participation in the democratic process. No one should be denied these or any other civil rights because of linguistic and cultural differences. Legal protection, education, and social services must be provided in English as well as other languages in order to enable everyone in the United States to take full advantage of these rights. This language policy affirms that civil rights should not be denied to people because of linguistic differences. It enables everyone to participate in the life of the nation by ensuring continued respect both for English, the common language, and for the many other languages that have contributed to our rich cultural and linguistic heritage. This policy has three inseparable parts:

1. to provide resources to enable native and non-native speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication.
2. to support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in the mother tongue will not be lost; and
3. to foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language. (Smitherman, 1995, p.26)

In other words, students at all levels of education, would be required to, "develop competence in at least three languages...the Language of Wider Communication ...the student's mother tongue-eg., Spanish, Polish, Black English, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Appalachian English...[and] at least one totally foreign language....We're now in the period of a new paradigm shift, from a provincial, more narrowly conceived focus to a broader internationalist perspective. We thus are being forced to address the issue of multiple linguistic voices, not only here, but in the global family" (Smitherman, 1995, p.26). Although this policy addresses concerns for

non-native speakers of English, as well as speakers of nonstandard dialects, it clearly has implications which are concurrent with the original "Student's Right to their Own Language" policy. One wonders, however, if the statement cannot be interpreted as a call to resurrect bidialectalism. Is the promotion of tri-lingualism somehow different? If this policy were to be adopted, how would it be implemented? How would it look when applied? Does it call for the explicit teaching of SAE? How can one, "ensure that proficiency in the mother tongue will not be lost"?

Among policy makers, educators at all levels, community organizers, and linguists, consensus has not yet been reached on whether or not SAE should be taught, and if it ought to be, how. As recently as 1991 Immaculate Kizza, has asked, "Am I advocating bidialectalism as was advocated in the early 70s, only to be rejected as ineffective and difficult? If it can help, why not. The argument that it can't be done or is difficult bothers me since often times the people making such an argument are themselves bidialectals; they know very well when to switch codes" (Kizza, 1991, p.7). Dumas and Garber (1989) summarize the conflicts:

To accept bidialectalism invites the criticism of traditional educators and language purists on the one hand and of the more outspoken members of minority communities and their allies on the other. Taking the position that Standard English should not be taught or that nonstandard dialect should be taught means being resisted by all those who for one reason or another believe in the importance of Standard English in American society. (p.9)

Both Kizza (1989) and Cronnell (1991) believe that most linguists and educators still espouse bidialectalism. Wolfram (1991) continues to critique it, "While the dialect rights position may seem overstated and unrealistic to some, it rightly points to the unequal burden placed on vernacular speakers. The need for linguistic adjustment is placed squarely on vernacular speakers, when there should be an equally strong moral responsibility placed on the mainstream population to alter its prejudices and respect dialect differences for what they are - a natural manifestation of cultural and linguistic diversity" (Wolfram, p. 214). Yet, what are

the possible alternatives? No widely acceptable, coherently articulated answer has yet been formulated in response to James Sledd's 1973 question, "after bidialectalism, what?".

Language, Dialect and Attitudes

"To be means to communicate [Bakhtin]." (Kamberelis, 1992, p. 364)

"Language, as common as the air we breathe, is the one medium from which we human beings all create and recreate ourselves, our environment, our world, and our perceptions of it." (Davis, 1995, p.35)

Language cannot be separated from identity. It is through language that we explore and create ourselves and our world. We are, in turn, created by language. The language that one speaks is integrally tied to one's culture, ethnicity, social class, gender, age, family background, education, and life experiences. The moment an individual begins to speak, judgements are made about all of these characteristics. In our society, language is often used to identify and categorize people, to label them. What are some of the prevailing attitudes towards language and dialect in this country? How does the language one speaks both reflect and serve to recreate the larger sociopolitical context?

We know that we are all speakers of dialects. We also know that, in the United States, dialects generally have either neutral value, or are socially stigmatized. Socially stigmatized varieties of dialects tend to be those that are spoken by minority groups, or those groups which are not representative of, or represented by, the mainstream. "Although there is no inherent social value associated with the variants of a linguistic feature, it is not surprising that the social values assigned to certain groups in society will be attached to the linguistic forms used by the members of these groups." (Wolfram, 1991, p.91) Therefore, although no language system, or dialect, is inherently better than any other,

stigmatized versions of dialects *are* commonly believed to be inferior. This judgement about a speaker's language extends to the speaker. "To judge someone's language is to judge the person." (Clarke, 1991, p.3) Speakers of nonstandard varieties of English, particularly those nonstandard varieties which are the most highly stigmatized, will themselves be judged to be inferior and deficit. In this sense, language is used as a rigid marker of social class.

The most highly stigmatized varieties of English are those spoken by groups whose position in society is perceived to have low status. Low status groups are those who have the least power, politically, economically and socially. That the dialects spoken by these groups are stigmatized in turn stigmatizes these groups. In other words, perceptions of language extend to the speakers of that language or dialect, and are both reflective of, and help to recreate and maintain, the existing social order. "Since both formal and informal standard varieties are associated with middle-class mainstream groups, they are socially respected, but since vernacular varieties are associated with the social underclass, they are not considered socially respectable. This association, of course, simply reflects underlying values about different social groups in our society and is hardly unique to language differences." (Wolfram, 1991, pp. 12-13)

In 1969, Howard Mims conducted a survey the purpose of which was to assess four hypotheses:

- 1) Listeners who reject a certain dialect also tend to reject its speaker.
- 2) Listeners tend to make judgements about a speaker's occupational competence based on their attitudes to that speaker's dialect.
- 3) Listeners tend to react to speakers on the basis of their association of the speakers dialect with stereotypical attitudes.
- 4) Speakers tend to resent criticism of their language patterns and regard such criticism as personal attacks. (Mims and Wolfram, 1991, p. 3)

He found all four hypotheses to be true, and concludes that, "...there's evidence to support that rejecting a speaker's dialect is a rejection of the speaker's social class and also the speaker's culture and thus his manner of perceiving and adapting to reality" (p. 6). These perceptions can, in a very real way, affect the distribution of

power in our society.

Atkins (1993) conducted a study to determine whether or not employment recruiters discriminate on the basis of nonstandard dialects. She focused primarily on Appalachian English (AE) and what she has termed Black English (BE). "The majority of ... respondents represented business and industry Also, the majority of the respondents were men (63%), Caucasian (83%), and college graduates (78%)." (p. 111) She found that,

... although respondents considered speakers of Appalachian English to be trustworthy, sociable, approachable, interesting, optimistic and agreeable, they also perceived them to be uncomfortable, disreputable, dependent, unorganized, not creative, unemployable, incompetent, uncertain, lazy, unintelligent, inferior, negative, naive, and unprofessional ... [And] although respondents perceived Black English speakers to be sociable, interesting, and trustworthy, they also perceived them to be pessimistic, contrary, disreputable, unorganized, unemployable, uncertain, uncomfortable, dependent, not creative, incompetent, lazy, unintelligent, naive, inferior, negative, and unprofessional recruiters gave negative ratings to 58% of the Appalachian English variables and 93% of the Black English variables. They also judged nonstandard grammar more negatively than nonstandard pronunciations (pp.115-116).

She concludes with the following statement:

Finally, although individuals with different dialects should not be penalized, this research supports that of Shuy (1972) and indicates that such penalty does exist in hiring. Recruiters who state that they do not discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, age, national origin, or handicap seem to be discriminating on the basis of nonstandard dialect. (p. 117)

Howard Mims (1986) also concluded that employers discriminate on the basis of dialect. He surveyed studies done to assess attitudes to nonstandard dialects by Markel, Eisler and Reese (1967) and Buck (1968), and found that, "It seems that as the dialect assumes a lower status in the opinion of the listener the speaker of the

low-status dialect tends to be regarded as being less acceptable for certain occupations" (pp. 2-3). Walt Wolfram (1991) states that, "On the basis of status differences, speakers may be judged on capabilities ranging from innate intelligence to employability and on personal attributes ranging from humor to morality" (Wolfram, 1991, p. 90).

It is evident, therefore, that discrimination on the basis of language does occur. It is perhaps in this sense that one can see most clearly how the distribution of goods in our society is controlled by rigid social codes which reinforce the existing social order. It is not only access to jobs, but access to education which is affected by one's social status, and in turn, the dialect one speaks. Ann DiPardo (1992) in a survey done of writing group leader's perceptions in a college composition course, recorded the following group leader quotes about their students: "...Hispanic students' ' weird grammar problems', and African-Americans' 'severe dialect'. [and they] Regard[ed] black English as both a 'sub-standard' mode of speech and an important marker of a separatist 'sub-culture'" (p.21). She quotes one University staff member, referring to nonstandard dialect speakers, "They were unfortunately educated ... if they would only forget their feelings about written English and learn it and do it, they would be so much happier" (p.14). Elizabeth Fitts (1991), when talking about African-American students in schools, says, "Because their form of English is seen as inferior and repeated correction does not result in their learning Standard English, they are assumed to be retarded in cognitive development and are not expected to achieve.... Because they do not learn Standard English, and because they are seen as inferior by those who speak Standard English, they are denied social mobility" (p. 3). Those who do not speak standard dialects are subject to discrimination in school where they are often seen as deficit, and outside of school, when competing on the job market.

Atkins (1993) who conducted the research on nonstandard dialects and employment recruiters, concludes that, "Because nonstandard dialects seem to have a negative impact on the employment process there may be justification for

teaching standard English. The idea of teaching standard English is supported by many who want only one national dialect and who reject any verbalization that is not standard English (Adler, 1987)" (p. 116). Once again, the discussion has circled back to the question: *Should* Standard American English be taught in our schools? And, the subsequent questions: If it ought to be taught, how ought it to be taught? If it ought not to be taught, what are the alternatives? Is it possible to change society's perceptions about dialects, to influence judgements made on the basis of dialect, to address issues of prejudice, bias and discrimination through education about language diversity? The next sections of this paper will explore these questions, focusing specifically on writing instruction.

Revisiting the Question: Ought Standard American English be Taught?

Nay truly, it hath that praise that it wanteth not grammar: for grammar it might have, but it need it not; being so easy of itself, and so void of those cumbersome differences of cases, genders, modes and tenses, which I think was a piece of the Tower of Babylon's curse, that a man should be put to school to learn his mother tongue. (Sidney, 1970, p. 85) (Willinsky, 1986, p. 37)

Should Standard American English be taught? It is useful to revisit this first question in order to summarize some of the major points underlying the debate. On one side are those who say that Standard American English ought to be taught because it is inherently superior. There are others who do not believe this to be true, but feel that it ought to be taught because given the current structure of society, one must have command of both spoken and written SAE in order to become socially mobile. Denying minority students access to SAE is to deny them access to the goods and services of our society. While native dialects must be valued, students must also have the opportunity to learn SAE. Others feel that

change needs to occur throughout our sociopolitical systems, towards the valuing of language diversity so that SAE loses some of its power as a gatekeeping edifice maintaining the status quo. These last two positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as efforts to implement both can occur concurrently.

Howard Mims (1986) quotes Walter Loban as saying, "Children need to perfect or acquire the prestige dialect, not because Standard English is correct or superior in itself, but because society exacts severe penalties from those who do not speak it" (p.1). Mims cautions that although there is some truth to this view, it places the burden, "... on the speaker to avoid what may be false assumptions of the listener about the personality and competence of the speaker" (p.1). Wolfram and Mims (1986) agree, however, that, "...society has adopted the linguistic idealization model that Standard English is the linguistic archetype, Standard English is the linguistic variety used by government, the mass media, business, education, science, and the arts. Therefore, there may be nonstandard English speakers who find it advantageous to have access to the use of Standard English" (p. 4).

Through time, and the continued efforts of activists and educators, society's views towards language diversity may change. As minority groups become more vocal, gain more power, and gain more legitimacy in the eyes of mainstream groups, so to will the languages they speak. The less stigmatized these groups become, the less stigmatized their languages, and visa-versa. It is not until a restructuring of power in our society occurs that this will happen. One of the means through which minority groups gain more power is by engaging in discourse within the existing structures. Learning to speak the language of the majority allows one to move through that world, gain power in that world, and change that world. Minority groups cannot be denied access to that world because enlightened members of the majority believe that all languages are valid and the language of the mainstream therefore ought not to be imposed on all groups. Until these groups have voice, voice that is heard by those in positions of power, the existing social order will not change. Therefore, to deny students access to SAE in our current

society, is to deny them the opportunities available to those who do speak it.

Maya Angelou, Geneva Smitherman, James Sledd, Walt Wolfram, all those who have done an enormous amount of work in changing society's attitudes towards nonstandard dialects, who have called for the valuing of language diversity, who advocate students rights to their own language, all of these voices speak in Standard American English. Intonation, accent, pronunciation, use of vocabulary, all may vary, but the underlying grammatical structure is SAE. Through their work, and the work of others who will come after them, one day we will perhaps live in a country where language diversity is not used to build fences, but rather is celebrated, as other aspects of cultural differences are celebrated. There is a lot of work that needs to be done before that day comes. In the meantime, we do not live in such a world. We live in a society where the language one speaks, the dialect one speaks, either confers power, or limits access to it. Until this changes, the question is not ought SAE to be taught, but how, when and where ought it to be taught, and how ought we be talking about the teaching of it.

Why have past and current efforts to teach SAE failed?

Most students who begin school as nonstandard dialect speakers leave school without acquiring standard written English despite the fact that they have spent up to twelve years in a context in which it is taught. (Farr and Daniels, 1986, p. 24)

There are many reasons why efforts to teach SAE in schools has failed. Understanding some of these reasons may help in developing workable alternatives. Some of these have to do with perceptions of nonstandard dialect speakers as deficit rather than different, and with the resulting inappropriateness of methods used. They relate to inadequate knowledge of how, why and under what conditions second dialects are acquired. They have to do with the inherent mismatch between home and school cultures, and misunderstandings of the

interplay between the two. Finally, they have to do with relationships between language, identity and power, and how language is used to signify membership in particular groups, resistance to joining others, or how one group attempts to maintain control over another. These reasons will be examined in greater depth in the following discussion.

Standard American English has been taught in our schools for decades. The traditional approach to speakers of nonstandard dialects in school has been the explicit teaching of SAE to these students, in speaking as well as in writing. The message these students have received is that their native language, or dialect, is deficit, there is a need for correction and remediation. Often times, these students are placed in the lowest track of classes, of reading groups, of writing groups. They do not fit into the mainstream system, and until they are 'fixed', they will be perceived as being not just different, but substandard. The dialect of the student, as well as the student, and the student's culture, are rejected. Farr and Daniels (1986) citing what Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) work has so clearly shown, state that, "Instruction in literacy, then, for those students who do not come from mainstream culture, is partially a matter of acculturation to mainstream culture" (p.31). Conflicts and mismatches between home and school cultures are often not recognized as such, and the burden of failure continues to be placed on the student.

In addition, the explicit teaching of written SAE to speakers of nonstandard dialects often focuses on error correction. The very methods that have been rejected by current research in language acquisition theory, are used to teach these students.

If we know that the study of formal grammar does not enhance student writing performance, then there is no reason to spend much time on such activities in writing programs for students of any linguistic background. Unfortunately, there is a tendency among school officials to believe that students who speak nonstandard dialects are especially in need of such instruction. Perhaps this insistence on teaching formal grammar is really

more a part of what Goodlad (1984) and others have called the 'hidden curriculum', the implicit set of lessons schools teach about the approved values of the mainstream culture." (Farr and Daniels, 1986, p.75)

Andrews (1995) uses the analogy, "teaching grammar only (syntax) has failed ... it's like only teaching Anatomy to medical students" (p. 29). Focusing on error, rather than on content, is not only pedagogically unsound, it incorrectly assumes that there is no inherent logic in nonstandard dialect usage. It perpetuates the deficit model of nonstandard dialect, and this deficit status is thus conferred to the student.

Besides the ineffectiveness of traditional methods of teaching written SAE to nonstandard dialect speakers, there are other reasons that schools have failed in the teaching of SAE. Research has shown (Farr and Daniels, 1986, Labov, in Chambers, 1983, Wolfram, 1991, Gilbert, W., 1980) that in order for a second language or dialect to be acquired, there has to be a strong motivation on the part of the learner to acquire that language, along with intensive interaction with speakers of that dialect. "Apparently, underlying grammatical patterns of standard English are learned through 'meaningful' and intensive interaction with those who already use standard English grammar, not 'simply be exposure in the mass media or schools' (Labov and Harris, 1983, p. 22) ... even if four to eight hours is heard each day.... instead, it can only happen when negotiation in that language regularly takes place." (Farr and Daniels, p. 35). "Like second language learners, students of a second dialect perform best when they believe that their command of the dialect will be rewarded by opportunities and participation in the foreign culture." (Gilbert, W., 1980, p. 7) It is easy to see why speakers of Standard American English do not shift to Black English Vernacular, for example, or to Appalachian English, even if a significant amount of time is spent with groups who speak these dialects. Because both of these dialects are socially stigmatized, there is little motivation for nonnative speakers to acquire them. Vocabulary and pronunciation may be borrowed back and forth across dialects, but underlying grammatical structures are not likely to shift from a nonstigmatized dialect to one that is highly stigmatized.

Dialect is used to signal group identification, as well as rejection of certain groups. "It is a truism that one of the primary ways an individual defines herself is through her use of language" (Gilbert, W., 1980, p.6). Kamberelis and Scott (1992) discuss this aspect of language:

...we use the styles and texts of other individuals and groups with whom we wish to be affiliated, have power over, or resist. With respect to affiliation, much of the sociolinguistic work on regional dialects and vernaculars of various sorts has shown that the cohesion of social groups is accomplished largely through shared forms of discourse. With respect to resistance and power, Labov (1982) and others have shown that African-American and Puerto Rican adolescents in inner-city American schools have institutionalized resistance to the norms, ideologies, and practices of school systems through particular discursive practices. This resistance seems to be rooted in cultural and political conflicts between vernacular speakers and school authorities, and the linguistic behavior of peer-group members is a practice that is a reflection and a symbol of these conflicts. (p. 363)

Walt Wolfram (1991) has argued that the teaching of SAE to speakers of nonmainstream dialects is perhaps least successful with adolescents, for whom peer group identification is particularly important. Attempts to teach SAE to *any* group, however, who has neither a direct motivation for learning it, nor the desire or opportunity to engage in meaningful negotiation with that dialect on a regular basis, will be unsuccessful.

At the same time, even for those who have a strong desire to learn to speak and write SAE, the ability to maintain two separate dialects is difficult. The acquisition of SAE may in fact mean replacement of the native dialect. Wolfram (1991) says that bidialectalism cannot be equated with bilingualism. Dialects are characterized more by their similarities than their differences. In this sense, learning to speak a separate language may be easier than learning to speak and maintain two different dialects. The systems are too similar. "Available evidence suggest that the vast majority of speakers has trouble controlling both a standard

and a vernacular dialect grammar." (p. 153). Farr and Daniels agree, "Learning standard English, then, is not learned as a second dialect, it is a substantial shift, or change in one's 'home' linguistic system, toward the features of standard English" (p. 35).

If it is difficult to learn and maintain SAE as a separate linguistic system, then what we are asking of our students, is to make the shift to a new dialect, at the very real risk of losing their facility in their native dialect. We are asking our students to take on a new culture, and a new identity. We are giving the message that the native dialect is inferior, and therefore the home culture, the culture in which the native dialect was acquired. We cannot assume that our students will be able to switch back and forth, as the need arises. What we are asking our students to do is to radically alter their identities. We are asking them to do this without discussing the implications. We are asking them to do this without offering choices. We are asking them to do this without being consciously aware, ourselves, of what exactly the nature *is* of this task we've set before them, and what the repercussions will be. Anne DiPardo (1992) quotes one of her students, "As Sylvia described her sense of being caught between languages, she inevitably described her sense of being caught as well between worlds: 'It's like I have two different cultures,' she maintained, 'but I can't choose.'" (p. 27).

Much of the research done on efforts to teach SAE have been conducted in formal school settings, such as in K to 12 classrooms, and in undergraduate writing courses at the University. Very little research has been done on efforts to teach SAE in adult literacy settings. Still, implications for writing instruction in adult literacy settings can be extracted from the research conducted in schools. In the following section, implications for pedagogy will be explored. The focus will be on adult literacy settings in the United States.

Implications for Writing Instruction: Focus on Adult Literacy Settings

...all teaching, especially all language teaching, is political. The very choices of what to teach and how to evaluate learning are political decisions because they reflect the power of teachers over students. When this power imbalance mirrors the power imbalance in the society at large, the politics of education stand out starkly. Thus, pedagogues cannot escape politics. The danger in their attempt to escape is not that they might succeed -they can't - but that trying to wriggle out of politics will hide assumptions and processes that ought to be examined. (Gilbert, W., 1980, p.2)

In a cultural climate characterized by racial and cultural divisiveness, respect for linguistic variation is desperately needed. Perhaps if we can appreciate our linguistic differences, we can learn to appreciate each other. (Lockhart, 1991, p. 57)

Adults who enter adult literacy programs in the United States are from various linguistic and class backgrounds, are representative of many races, and ethnic groups, are both men and women and range in age from sixteen to sixty, and over. The overwhelming majority of adults in adult literacy programs, however, are representative of ethnic and racial minority groups (Hunter and Harman, 1979). Adults enter into literacy programs for many reasons. Some are required to by various agencies or programs. Welfare checks, for example, are sometimes contingent on enrollment in vocational, ESL or literacy courses. Many adults are there voluntarily. Most are there to improve their reading and writing. Some want to improve reading and writing skills for the purpose of getting a better job. Others want to write letters to friends and relatives who live far away. For some, it is a place to go to meet with community members and others, to talk, to exchange information, to be quiet. There are many different types of adult literacy programs. Each program is designed based on a set of assumptions about: literacy, its

nature, its function, its uses; theories of language acquisition; adult learners; and, adults in literacy programs. Whether stated explicitly or not, all literacy programs are reflective of certain political stances in the sense that all teaching, and all language instruction is political. A program's political stance, if not stated explicitly, can be seen clearly reflected in program design, program philosophy, pedagogical beliefs, and attitudes of staff to learners, and learners to staff. One of the areas in which the political agenda of a program can be seen is in its orientation towards the teaching of Standard American English.

Any adult literacy program which seeks to engage in a democratic pedagogy whose aims are to promote social justice, to empower learners, and to work towards a more equitable society, must examine its approaches to the teaching of Standard American English. There are four implications for the teaching of SAE in adult literacy settings which will be explored: a) the need for an approach based on learner goals; b) the need for teacher education about dialects, and issues and attitudes surrounding dialect diversity in this country; c) the importance of a meaning-centered approach to writing instruction; and, d) the implementation into the curriculum of a metacognitive component: talking about what is being taught and methods used; talking about language, acquisition, diversity, and dialects. It is through the metacognitive component that the creation of spaces to talk about the power issues inherent in any setting where language instruction and learning are taking place can occur. The importance of this will be discussed in more detail in this section.

Adults, as opposed to children, are in the position to clearly articulate their goals. Some adults, in adult literacy programs, very clearly state that they are interested in learning to speak and write 'proper' English. Others do not state this explicitly, but may be very clear about wanting to learn to read and write to get a better job, or to pass the GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree). It is easy to see that access to written Standard American English, for these learners, must not be denied, but the methods used to teach it, and how the teaching of it is discussed, and negotiated, are still the critical issues. Other learners in adult literacy programs

do not articulate their goals for language learning in such focused terms. This may be because they are new to a program, and need time to assess the program and the staff before they feel comfortable expressing themselves. Or, it may be that the language to talk about language has not been learned. Sometimes, articulating goals becomes a question of having the exposure to the options, and to the means for expressing language goals. In any case, both for learners who clearly articulate their goals from the start, and for those who don't, or have not yet, the critical issues remain the same.

First, we will look at implications for writing instructors of, and writing instruction for, speakers of nonstandard dialects. Many learners in adult literacy settings are speakers of nonstandard dialects. Much of the research done on dialect and writing has focused on how speaking a nonstandard dialect impacts on the mechanics of learning written Standard American English. Cronnell (1983) suggests that, "... although all students may have difficulty learning to write, students who do not speak Standard English may have more trouble learning to write than students who do speak Standard English" (p. 1). Farr and Daniels (1986) state that, "... for many mainstream students, learning to write essentially involves coming into the mature and sophisticated use of their own native dialect, whereas for nonmainstream students, learning to write means mastering the sophisticated surface features, semantic structures, and discourse patterns of another dialect" (p.59). The relationship between spoken nonstandard English and written SAE goes deeper than the simple mechanical construction of the language.

Geneva Smitherman (1994) has done a great deal of research on the relationship spoken Black English Vernacular and writing. Her findings conclude that the relationship is much richer than can be described simply by discussing syntax. She has categorized significant features of African American discourse styles which are independent of BEV grammar. African American discourse in writing, for example, is more likely to have field dependency, or, "involvement with and immersion in events and situations; personalizing phenomena; lack of distance from topics and subjects" (p. 87), and "rhythmic, dramatic, evocative language" (p.

89). She found that in assessing students' performance on essays, their scores in the NAEP's (National Assessment of Educational Progress) study of writing were higher when the students used black discourse style, irregardless of the amount of BEV grammar present.

This is significant on several levels. First, it indicates that emphasis on expression, on making meaning, in writing is more important than a focus on grammar. If the focus is on clarity of expression, on audience, on conveying meaning, rather than on grammar, students of writing will have the freedom to find their own voice in writing, one consistent with their own cultural backgrounds, their own identities. Their writing can become a powerful and personally meaningful vehicle for expression. If the focus is primarily on grammar, this can inevitably handicap a students ability to write clearly in their own style. As was discussed earlier, methods which focus primarily on grammar tend to focus on error correction. These methods have not been effective. Second, it has implications for writing instructors. Writing instructors must become familiar with to which their students belong. Without this familiarity, a writing instructor may be unable to recognize, appreciate, and encourage students' abilities to express themselves clearly in writing. Geneva Smitherman recommends that writing instructors, "capitalize on the strengths of African American cultural discourse; it is a rich reservoir which students can and should tap [and] .. design strategies for incorporating the black imaginative, storytelling style into student production of other essay modalities (...)" (p. 95). This cannot be done unless the instructor herself is familiar with these discourse styles and features.

Walt Wolfram (1991) supports Smitherman in saying that, "Obviously, spoken language can have influence on written language. However, the relationship between spoken and written language is not always as simple and direct as ... [we] might [be led] to believe" (p.257). He adds, however, that, "Writing failure, like reading failure, is a complex issue that goes far deeper than the surface differences of dialect forms. Nonetheless, a writing instructor who is aware of the way in which dialect may surface in writing is certainly in a better

position to improve writing skills than one who has no awareness of potential spoken language influences on the written medium" (p. 260). Gilbert, W., (1980) also supports the need for teacher education in regards to nonstandard dialects and writing, "The educator needs to get educated so he can avoid the pitfall, pointed out by Robbins Burling, of mistaking a systematic difference for an error" (pp. 8-9).

The implications for the need for teacher education are clear. The ability of a writing instructor to facilitate her students' expression through writing will be enhanced if the instructor is familiar with both the grammatical features of the dialects spoken by her students, as well as aspects of various discourse styles. Once an appreciation is gained for the students' language, for the fact that the language a student brings with him or her is a legitimate, coherent means of expression, the focus on skills, particularly at the beginning of the writing process, becomes less meaningful. Information alone, however, does not influence attitudes. In fact, many studies have indicated that one of the most important factors influencing students' success in any educational setting, is teacher attitudes towards students (Auerbach, 1994). "Teacher attitudes towards students is the most important thing when thinking about effective writing instruction [they cite a four year study done by Perl and Wilson (1986) on 'writing teachers at work']. " (Farr and Daniels, 1986, p. 48) The most theoretically sound methods for instruction may be used, but if there is no respect for the learners, appreciation of their knowledge, their language, their culture, then the methods will be empty and ineffective. Farr and Daniels (1986) are very articulate on this point:

We take our principle here from James Britton (1970), among others: human beings must feel safe to share talk or writing before we can expect them to shape what they have said or written. This is especially the case for students who have lacked practice with written language and who have become accustomed to having their vernacular criticized by outsiders: they must first develop confidence in themselves as writers. Therefore, the first instructional goal in a writing program for such students must be fluency: the relatively free, comfortable and copious production of written discourse

on subjects of real meaning and importance; without penalty for the forms of language used (p. 52).

Any writing instruction program in an adult literacy setting must include a metacognitive aspect, talking about what is going on, and talking about that, too. Bringing discussion of dialect diversity into any school setting is important, and with adults, it can be discussed explicitly. Exploration of issues surrounding dialect diversity in the United States can facilitate respect and appreciation by staff and learners for their own dialects and those of others. It can facilitate the learning process by encouraging students to feel pride in their own language, and to clearly understand some of the processes involved in acquiring a second dialect. Kizza (1991) says that:

Most African-American students do not, or rather, cannot differentiate between Standard English and Black English.... They have to realize they are making mistakes in a dialect other than their own, otherwise they will think that we are confronting them and questioning their ability to use their language. And, as one of our colleagues ... pointed out, if you question an individual's ability to use one's language, you are questioning that individual's human experience (p. 3).

Understanding how language works, can have positive effects for writing, but also for self-esteem. By creating spaces within the program to talk about language issues, and rationales behind methodology, many misconceptions can be avoided or cleared up. Programs will become stronger by incorporating recommendations made by learners, or discovered jointly through dialogues between staff and learners, into program and curriculum design, content and methodology. Finally, an avenue can be opened for discussing the political nature of language instruction, language learning, and language use in our society.

Discussion around the politics of language will allow learners to have greater power in determining their own language choices. The more clearly learners are able to articulate their own language goals, the better teachers will be able to help them be met. The power issues inherent in language instruction will have room to

surface, to be addressed, rather than staying always just below the surface, present, shaping all interactions, but never acknowledged. Learners equipped with the ability to discuss the politics of language, in whatever form these discussions may take, are in the position to inform, and shape language policy on a larger scale. In this sense, they will be in the position to directly influence and change the power structures existent in society. The answer to James Sledd's 1973 question, "After bidialectalism, what?", may be this, creating the means in our classrooms to hear our learners voices, to address and explore together ways in which we can work towards a more equitable world.

Conclusion

Language learning, language teaching, issues surrounding language are political. The politics of language are the politics of power. The most important implication for writing instruction for speakers of nonstandard dialects in adult literacy settings is the creation of spaces for this aspect of language to be explored. The methods used are important, but what is more important is how issues of power are approached. Writing instructors must educate themselves about nonstandard and standard dialect usage, about discourse styles, and about methods for facilitating writing based on a meaning-centered approach, but most importantly, we must educate ourselves about the politics of language. One of the ways that we can do this is by opening doors in our classrooms for discussions of these issues to occur. Respect for language diversity cannot occur unless we begin talking about the power issues inherent in language use. Recognition that discrimination based on language use exists has not entered mainstream consciousness. It will not until we start talking about it in all of our classrooms, in all of our schools, in all adult literacy programs, in all places where we are going about the business of literacy. Change occurs through the ongoing cycle of dialogue, reflection and action. As educators, we must take the first step, we must listen.

Description and Analysis of Data

The description and analysis of the data will not be treated as two separate sections. The data was gathered from group discussions in which the author was both a participant and a facilitator. Therefore, the data cannot be presented without the bias of the author. The identification of the emergent themes in the data is in and of itself analysis. This section will be organized in the following manner: comments made by participants will be grouped according to themes and analysis of the data will follow each theme. A final analysis of the data will include a summary of the findings.

The themes in the learner discussions have emerged as a result of the combined discussions, and have not been grouped in accordance with the order of discussions. The themes in the staff discussions were predetermined, and are grouped consecutively by discussion. The transcriptions of the dialogue have tried to remain true to the pronunciation and grammar of the participants. However, they have been done by the author, who has had little previous experience with transcriptions. The author submits her apologies to the participants.

Key to reading the data description and analysis:

- italics* = author's words added after the discussions took place
- * *italics* = italicized writing preceded by a star indicates authors analysis of the data
- () = something said in the middle of a monologue by someone other than the primary speaker
- [] = something said that was not heard clearly by the author

Discussions with Learners

Theme: Attitudes and Beliefs about Language and Dialect

All of the participants described differences in the way that English is spoken. Differences include pronunciation, accent and word order.

John:

In our country, which is Jamaica, rule under the British, they sound the letters differently... and maybe you might ask you something like a, be sounding like a, be sounding like a c, sss, ss, no c sound k, s sound c, so maybe our sounding after letter is differently and I might use different word.

Sam:

So much. Just, just, just ... in this country, almost every state, you know like you go down go South they speak a little different than people up North here People in Pennsylvania certain speak like Dutch like? It's a little different, you know? So.

Paul:

A lot a accents. Portuguese, Jamaican, Spanish. Korean. Like, uh, Bostonians, do cah, in pahk the cah and all that.

Sherry:

Right, and what about your accent, what would you call your accent?

Paul:

Mine? Western Massachusetts. (laughter from everybody) Over here we speak all right. (chuckle) Well, at least you know what we're saying, I mean, you know, pahk the cah...what the hell. Well, it's in, it's in, [this state] you'd think they'd speak the same way, you know?

Sam:

Some people peak a little louder than some, some peak a little softer.

Jerri:

Sometime my English is is you know is, every time a say a word, I stop, you know, and I stutter sometimes. I don't know, I been like that for a long time, when I was growin up, yeah...I did, I did when I was in school. (Sh: Did it start when you went to school?) Mhmm. (Sh: how come do you think?) I don't know. I say a word that zzzzzz like this, my family do that.

There are different types of accents within other languages too.

Ruben:

'Cause I have a good example. Portugal and Brazil, they both speak Portuguese,

but Brazil speaks different. Different accent.

We talked about what Standard English is:

Sherry: By proper, do you mean, what do you mean by proper?

John: Proper English!

Sherry: Spelling?

John: No, I'm not talking about spelling, no. Proper [houtliining] in that word.

Sam: Like, like, what Paul said, Western Mass. (laughter)

Paul:

Well, I think it's i, i, the English are supposed to be proper, right, I mean, y'know, the English? The British. (Ruben: yeah, they are though) They're supposed to I mean but but then you go come in the United States and we took a little bit off and a little bit on or and we don't have that little English brogue.

Ruben:

Well, I don't know which is the proper English. I don't know. I think in England they speak the proper English. To me, to me.

Paul: Well, they get that uppity tone there.

Sherry: In England they do? And American English isn't proper English?

Ruben: I don't think so.

Sam:

I think the British they more more more a proper way a English. Like you know her in America they speak English, but I think it's more, a different English.

John:

All the countries, they speak different accent. They might have the English [...] but it's different accent. So they not dealing on the accent, [...]? You're not dealing on the accent?

Sherry: About what makes proper English, and what doesn't, you mean?

John:

No, they not dealing on the accent, [we] dealing on the English language. I don't mean the English, I mean the English, the tone of voice that you speak,

Like, if you listen to somebody speak in New York they speak completely different from, I don't mean their what you call it (Paul: accent) (Sam: accent) (John: accent) (Sh: yeah) accent, [ee] speak completely different, and listen to a person Massachusetts, the accent is completely different, but it's the same English.

Sherry:

So, there's a difference between...the accent, and..I mean, you can still speak proper English even if you speak in different accents?

John: Yes.

Sherry: So what makes it proper?

John:

The wording. *emphatic* Yeah, the word [...] big you know that [they's not] they using big word to the one that don't go up to that high standard you know they use word where that you can understand. So we're here to learn some of these words. Yeah. It's more the words than the accent. You can repeat the [rightum] accent, but still that's, you might speak the right English, how you should put it in the right word, but [...] the accent is different. Accents is completely different from speaking.

Is it important to speak Standard American English?

John:

I think so. That's the [way] in the learning process, we come to learn, come together to learn....eh, I, I, I would say the American ways. Just like how the Americans are (laughter from Sam) just use the right English, use the English properly.

Sam:

Not really, like I said before, I know the way I speak I don't feel it's can hurt to learn more, to speak different, or speak the way I speak, or speak the way she speaks, or the way the other guy speaks, if I can maintain up in my head it's okay. Then from here, I'm writin my letter, doing something there, making a sentence, i know to put it together so..I'm here you know just would rather when I speak to you or one of the tutor in there they understand what I'm trying to say to them. So long as they understand, it's okay with me. Right.

Jerri:

It takes time to speak English. Well, um, when people come from other places [indistinguishable] You know, like my cousin, she crazy...when she talk I don't understand a thing she's sayin...[hard to hear!]I don't understand a thing she's sayin.....ya'll from down there, I'm from up here....some people I can understand

what they're sayin, like Jamaicans, sometime I can understan them too, just a little bit, take time for [em] to speak real good. It take time.

John:

Okay, since 1967, since my first boy born, I've never talked this way, no more. I don't want him picking up this kind of language.

and later,

John:

I want you listen what I say. And being practice it [*Standard American English*] from [...] mon until 1967 you know you kinda go and put those words together the right, not say the right, but you wanta make a sentence, like I say, I'm going downtown. And I can't even make that sentence, [which is] I want to put down I am going downtown, for I feel that is the proper way to do it. Then I cannot make it.

I asked who they knew who they thought spoke well, and then we continued the discussion about what it means to speak 'well', and what standard English is and whether it's important to speak it.

John:

I think of Sherry. To me. I can think of [my teacher]. I satisfied with that.

Sam:

Who do I pick? You!

Sherry:

And why, can you say why.

John:

Well, I do understan your speech, I understan what you say, and no special thing, but I just understan.

Sam:

Because they, when they put the word together, you understan what they sayin'. You know they not muffling to speak, they speakin' out, you understand what they sayin'.

Sherry:

That's what's important, to understand.

Sam:

Yeah, right, to understand what they're sayin. You not aksin yourself, say, I didn't know what the heck he say, you understan'.

Sherry:

What about anybody from the television that you particularly like the way that they speak?

John:

Oh, there's a lot on those...Oprah... Sally, Sally Jesse Raphael.

Jerri:

Jerry Springer.

Sam:

Oh, quite a few. I mean, um, I guess if they can put the word [...] have them up there in the first place. Ted Koppel..those guys, they speak good English.

John:

If I could go back, way back to Jamaica, I would call a man by the name of Roy Reed, radio announcer, well, he speak good England and they do they education there and college and they come back to Jamaica, you know nothing unturned, not how we speak and do the thing. That's why we mostly say the right way cause like we, we talkin to a friend who speak broken language, rush, rush, rush, rush, speak broken language, but they learn, they don't supposed to miss, they got to speak slower or whatever, speak properly, so you heard me say mention many time properly, that's what I mean by properly.

Sherry:

Why is that considered to be broken English instead of proper English?

John:

Well, you didn't taught that in school.

Sherry:

You don't? What do you get taught in school?

John:

Proper English. Yeah, that from England.

Sherry:

Do you consider Jamaican English to be broken English too?

Sam:

Well, that they way they speak there, and um, when, before my father passed away, I go home and um, I'm tryin' to me an my Dad have a conversation, and because I was livin' in America for quite a while, I go back, I was start a speak little bit American, and he would tell me to stop and talk the way we usually talk,

best he could understand what I'm sayin', so I don't know, that's the way they...we wouldn't know it broken English until you come to America, or go to some other country, so they satisfied with what they got there, so just...

John:

Well, I give you, I can give you lot a instant, I was in Jamaica, there is a white man come from America and come to Jamaica. I would call this a string, a string (takes the wire of the tape recorder) okay, you know I speakin' like in Jamaica, a string, could you bring that string to me, or give a piece? I heard a white man call this a string. I heard a white man call this a string and I couldn't understand him. Because he didn't speak it, I couldn't believe he would use it as a string. I could never understand it. I wouldn't expect him to use string, but he come there adapted and like we were working and he say, bring a string up here, I couldn't understand. Didn't expect him to use the word a string. So this is how things could mean, for we know he uses the cord, and we would use it as a rope or so on, not a string, I couldn't accept, couldn't understand. Yeah, so if you use the wrong word to me, I wouldn't believe you would say that, I maybe not even understand what you say.

Sam:

...if he meet his Jamaican buddy, from the same place, they would, em, speak clear, they would really [stress] and speak to his buddy like that, because he understand what he saying, and both of them understand one another. But speaking [here] we gotta slow down a little bit, when we talk with a friend we tend to speak a little faster, they understand, you know.

John:

We accustomed in that manner way, to speak, you know, as I say, instead I say where are you going, look like it too slow, so you know, just say, where ya a goin? And he understand.

Sam:

I guess it all depends who you talkin to. You know. If I'm talkin to you, I wouldn't really come up and [...] talk my Jamaican to you, because you may not understand it. If I'm talkin to him, I would talk, you know, in my Jamaican [...] he understands it. So, it all depends, who you, who you speakin to.

John:

[...] in Jamaica it was ruled, it was French before, that's how I get it and they speak French there but we [grow] and it seems like we try to speak some French, but when we go to school and learn they teach us English. And when you leave school you try to pick up ss words, and we just, they call it broken English and we talk to one another but going [and we come...] like from England and speak to ... and every word, and so if I come to speak to you, I know definitely to slow down,

and speak properly as best as I can, that you can understand.

Sherry:

Okay, how do you feel you talk when you talk to your friends different from how you talk when you talk to your boss.

Paul:

Well you probly w w wwouldn't use, you probly use a lot of slang, a lot of swears and stuff like that maybe, that's what, you know, yeah, you know we we you know talk, and we, we put some swears into it, or we just you know easy with each other so we don't have to really use any good words, you know, or y'know, and with your wife which I ain't married you have to talk you know not the not the same but you know you can get into different things and then your boss you have to be yes sir, no sir, that kind of stuff. That's all I'm gonna say.

Sam:

Yeah, mhm, well if I'm talking to my friend, you know, other Jamaican, most Jamaican around, I would maybe intend to talk a little faster because they gonna understand me, if I'm talking here I may have to slow down a little bit, this way [...] understand what I'm saying. Uh. Same thing with my boss, if I'm trying to ask him for something, or say something, [I may have] talk a little slower to him [...] I'm talking to my Jamaican friends, then, you know. My wife, I, you know, talk [...] ha, you know, slow down, I mean, um, same way I talk with my friends. That's about it.

John:

....I wouldif I'm talking to Paul right there I would talk a little bit fast but if I go there to look at jobs I meet the boss there to fill out an application *(he ask....) I talk v e r y slow and try to put my English in the right way that he can understand. To get a job.

and later,

John:

Like you would say to me, I gotta go to work now. This is something completely strange to me. I would say, I have to go to work. I have to go to work. I wouldn't say I got to go to work. So, it's little bit different. Sometime it give me a hard time to put a sentence together for this is pop up in my mind, and that is pop up, which one is right?

** People speak in many different ways, even if they are speaking the same language. Pronunciation, accent, and word order are some of the ways language varies. Speaking well is to speak so that you can be understood. All agreed that certain media figures could be understood well by all of them. John and Paul both said that they thought I could be well understood. Jerri said that it's harder to understand other people, like her relatives from the South, and some Jamaicans.*

She then said that it takes time to learn to speak "real good". So, speaking "real good" is learned, not naturally acquired (if you don't grow up in a community that speaks "real good", that is). It's interesting that Jerri seemed to say that she began stuttering only after she got to school.

* Standard English is referred to most often in the discussion as "proper English". Paul and Ruben thought that British English was clearly the "proper English". John said that now that he's in the United States, the way that Americans speak English is what he wants to learn; this is the proper English. John talked a lot about how you can tell what Standard American English is. It is not so much the accent, or how many big words are used, but the "wording", how the words are put together.

* The most important thing is to speak so you are understood. When John or Sam are speaking to their Jamaican friends they speak in Jamaican dialect, because that's how they can best be understood. When Sam is talking to either his father, or his friends, or his tutors, he wants most to be understood. He changes his way of talking accordingly, slowing down, or speeding up. John and Sam both said that when they spoke to their bosses, they "slowwwwwed" down; it's important to be understood by one's boss. Paul said that he didn't use slang with his boss, he had to make sure to use "good words". It's interesting that John said that switching gets confusing sometimes. It's difficult to keep two dialects separate. Sam referred to this as well, "as long as I can maintain it up in my head, it's okay". John also said that he's been trying to learn to speak this Standard American dialect since 1967, and he feels he can't do it. It is hard to acquire a new dialect as an adult! He said that he has tried not to speak in his Jamaican dialect, ever since his son was born. He wants his son to grow up speaking the dialect he has been trying so hard to learn.

* As an interesting note, John brought his own tape recorder during the second discussion, in order he said, to, "listen how I talk". "I wanna listen how I do these things, okay?", he added.

* Part of understanding what somebody says is your expectations of what they are going to say. John couldn't understand the White American man who came to Jamaica and used a word from Jamaican dialect. Understanding the meaning of language depends on the context.

* John spent some time in school in Jamaica, whereas Sam did not. Their perceptions about standard English are very different. It seems that John acquired many of his beliefs about the value of standard English in school, where he was taught "Proper English". The schools which John attended in Jamaica in the forties and fifties were undoubtedly very rigidly structured. The ways that schools are structured in a given society are often reflective of the dominant class and power structures existent in that society. In England, the class system is more rigidly defined than it is in the United States. The dialect of English one speaks is an indicator of social class. The dialects of the upper classes have prestige value (Wolfram, 1991). This attitude towards language is reflected in instruction in schools. It is thus no surprise that, having spent time in the British school system

in Jamaica, John believes that Jamaican English is broken English, and that it is critical to speak and write proper English, the "Proper English" that was taught in school. That Sam does not share these beliefs may be a result of the fact that he spent very little time in the formal education system in Jamaica. As he says, "we wouldn't know it broken until you come to America...so, they satisfied with what they got there".

Language and culture are inter-related. When I asked directly in what ways they were related, I got the following answers:

John:

No, I just tell you before, you know, we used to this ere, in America, here, this is along with that we see here. If people talkin' you notice, people [could] butt in, butt in and cut the conversation like, even T.V. you can see people do that. That's like bad manners to me, to us, so I didn't mean to cut in. We learn that.

Paul:

Well, if you don't have language you won't have a culture, right?

Sam:

Culture and language, they work together.

Then we began talking about bilingual education, language and culture. I began with the following statement.

Sherry:

Well, this ties into a lot what people are talking about, bilingual, like kids who come to the United States who speak Spanish, and they um are going to have to learn English one day, but people are saying now they ought to study in both English and Spanish because if you just take those children and make them learn only English, in a way, you're taking away they're culture.

John:

It's too bad. It's too bad. (somewhat sarcastic)

Sam:

I think it's good if they, they should leave them with they, because if sometimes people can speak, one, two, three, different languages (J: that's glory, that's good for them) if they speak more than one language that's good, because what if say, you get fed up with America and you wanna go to Puerto Rico, you already know how to speak they Spanish, so you don't have to learn that. And if you go to France, ere you learn French in school, if you go there to France, you already know it, so that's good.

John:

That's too bad. You have confusion. If you wanna live in the Spanish country, you go and change to Spanish. If you live in the Chinese country, you go and change to Chinese. If you want to live in the English country, you go and change to English. That's how I see it. You can't change along (..) some people. It was already there that we all speak the same thing and some thing happen and it's automatically change. Since it's changed by the creator it should stay the way it is. Because fightin, makin, makin, we're just fightin ourselves.

* *John believes that if you come to a new country, you must adapt to the ways of that country, including learning to speak the language. Part of his belief is based on his religious background. He has been, or is (?), a preacher. He believes that language difference exists because of our own folly (he has referred to the Tower of Babel story) and we are stuck with it. It is not something to be celebrated, necessarily, but something to simply accept, to bear. Sam, on the other hand, talks much more about the value of language diversity, of having command of several different languages, and how there are many benefits to that. John agrees with him that this is good, "good for them", but that the most important thing is to first adapt to your new environment, and culture. I wonder if, again, this is an attitude influenced by his time in school in Jamaica. My sense is that in school the message he got was that his own culture, his own language, was inferior. The way you move up is to leave that behind, and hurry up and take on the new culture and language (in this case that of the colonizers).*

How does language change, or does it?

Sam:

[...] because you know what I mean, people use so [...] greet one another, early in the morning, they keep changin, you know. You know, people, like the younger guys, them out there now, um, eh, what's happenin', man, that's how they say it, they always do. Before it wasn't like that. Good morning. Good morning. Good morning, sir. Now, they, eh, what's happenin'. [...] change.

Paul:

They got that slang dictionary over there.

John:

I don't know if I'm in the right context, you say, English, you answer English change a lot. And if we look back, we should appreciate people who speak different, while you can understand [...] you can understand or not. In the olden days, there was only Hebrew and Greek, and in those days, they only have one language. One language. And after a while they try to build a tower (Sh: oh, the tower of..) Babel, and they try to build it way up to heaven, and God saw that they tried to do this, and they change their language, God has changed the language, so

if I say to you, could you please pass that hammer, you stay there lookin around, you don't know what to pass, and the language was changed. So, when people speak different languages, it's not because they want to do it, it's because that [day] like that. And the words God spoke, it goes on a scroll, God speak and wise men them write it on a scroll, so after a while they translated it in Hebrew and Greek, and then from Hebrew and Greek, the American or the English, I think the English, translate it in English, and then we speak English. Yeah.

Theme: Goals

One goal is to learn to improve reading and writing.

Sam:

Tryin' increasing my reading and writing, tryin' to improve in that. I need quite a bit of help in that. (sh:yeah) Reading books and um pronunciation big words breaking down the syllable put it back together.

Are goals being met?

John:

Slowly. I'm writing better. I do a little more better writing. to put the words how I would like it, how I heard it on the street. I do, I do better. I would like to learn more.

** Asking about goals directly was often met with comments about wanting to improve reading and writing. An understanding of learner goals was informed by topics discussed throughout discussions. Asking directly seemed not to be the best way to determine learner goals.*

Theme: Expectations for the Discussions

John:

What I thought you know sometimes we write in our dialogue. Write a note. And the right wording, I can't find it to put in there. So I thought, you know, as you speak a little bit different, I thought we, you was teaching, like, you know, outline, if I, instead I say 'on', I would say 'there', and write proper words to fit in that sentence. And that's what I think you was talking about.

Sherry: Okay, so that I would be teaching during this time?

John: Yeah.

and later, during the second discussion:

John:

So I thought we was doing this you know to put the sentence, you teach us how to do the sentence, the proper way like how you would do it. I'm live here, so all I need, I don't need no more, I don't need England English, I need one we have here. So, I'm not going to say mine is good, or mine is bad, I just want to know this one here. I am going and how you speak it here.

We were talking about meeting again. This is the final comment of all of the meetings. John expresses the same interest as he did at our very first meeting.

John:

No, no, we don't need no donuts, we need, what I need is, next time, what I do is to teach me how to make paragraph, and writing. paragraph and writin'. (Sh: You want specific lessons, that's what you said in the beginning.)

** John is the only one who articulated his expectations for the discussions. It is evident that he expected, and continues to want, explicit instruction in spelling and grammar. Working on writing skills is clearly more important to him than talking about what it means to work on them.*

Theme: Questions

During Discussion Four when time was set aside to address learner questions, Sam said:

Sam:

Most of questions ask that I am figure it out myself. You know, em, the reason why we are there it's to improve on our reading writing. So, I don't got too much question. I'm just great[were wishing] it were faster for me. I could learn more faster than this pace I'm going.

** He's very focused on this goal. Discussing issues of language and dialect and power directly may be irrelevant. Power may come from meeting his goal.*

John wanted to know why I was "taking this survey":

John:

Yeah, maybe I have a lot of them but the [computer] maybe [locked] against them. I have a computer. And sometime it lock, automatically lock, and sometime it's open. But I tink a few question is open right now. I would like to know why you take this survey.

Sherry:

Why I'm doing this? (s:mhmm) There's several different answers to that that thing. The first is that I've always been interested in things about language because language is like to me it's a part of who a person is, it's a part of society, and it's a part of politics, it's all together in one. To my mind, language is not some kind of technical skill that we learn. At the same time that we're learning about reading and writing, we're learning about people, society, different aspects of society, and I think it's political too. And, um, so I've always been interested in that. Number one. Number two, here is a place where everybody is sitting around doing things around language all of the time, so I wanted to find out some of the things that you thought about language were. And then, third, I'm a graduate student at UMass, and I have to do an inquiry project, a question, uh, kind of like a master's project, and uh this is what I chose to do it on because this is what I'm interested in.

John:

So that simply mean its help you in your study in UMass. It's not for just just for [this center].

Sherry:

Well, that's my hope. I mean I hope that some of those things I've talked about with you, and some of the things I've talked about with the teachers can help to change some of the things that go on at [this center], or not necessarily even change, but inform some of the things that go on. Otherwise, it's not very useful, you know?

John:

Yeah, and to get to get some understanding what we would like to learn to get we ahead more a little bit faster. Yeah. And that also would help you in your study at school . That is you goal.

** It's important to talk about what we are doing, and to talk about it again. I thought that I had made myself clear about why I was "taking this survey". Obviously, I had not. Also, the fact that John perceived it as a survey is significant. This coupled with his initial reaction, that my primary purpose in doing this was for my own studies, for my own benefit, makes me question what his purpose was in participating. He stated both at the beginning of the discussions that he had expected this discussion group to be a time when I taught him "how to write proper". He said at the end of the discussions that he hoped we could do this again, and that next time, I could teach him some grammar. I wonder why he remained in the discussion group? Does he believe that this "survey" has helped him to "get ahead"?*

Theme: Teacher/Learner Roles, Choice and Decision-Making

The participants talked about what they felt comfortable expressing to the teachers in terms of methodology and instruction:

Sherry:

How would you, if you had something that you wanted to say to one of the teachers here, or in any program, about the methods, or the ways that you were learning, how would you say that?

John:

Well. I wouldn't say to the teacher, unless she aks, like many time they ask you ere to bring a paper, ere what would you like to do, what would you like to do, and you tell her you would like to learn to spell, or break down word, and so on. But I wouldn't just get up in the class like you and say well I would like to learn to spell, and no, I wouldn't do that.

John:

No. If I can't, maybe I would leave after a while, but I wouldn't really get up and say well I, you's teachin [...] and I would like to learn to read and you know and break down word, I wouldn't do that.

Sam:

Um, say, same way I'm talking to you, you know. Say, he or she gave me a book, and it was over my head, I would say, no I don't think I can handle this book, I think I need something more lighter book, this is too heavy. Some book you try to read, and you can't get nothing out of it, I mean, you you know some words, but just pick out a few of the words don't give anyone a picture what you're reading. You see, so, you know, to me, that book is way over my head. So I don't understand it, so I would tell teacher, say, this book is too much for me, I'm read it, I don't understand what the heck it is about, so so, I would say, you know, I can't handle this book, it's too much for me, could you find me another book, or help me find another book to read.

Sherry:

And that's not difficult for you to do.

Sam:

No, no, that's, no that's not too difficult for me. Like trying to spell something and I can't spell it. I'm going to dictionary and I can't find out you know I'm going to the teacher and I'm aks how am I spell this word. You know help me to spell this word. You know, so [...] well what you think this word start with, well, let's ... you know you maybe can come up with it maybe first word, but sometime that vowel get in there, so that can throw you off, so you know you may can't say th

first vowel, could be an e, could be an i, you know, or a, so. Once, before I [...] shy to ask them how [...] heck, I ain't gonna bother them, I'm gonna just do the best I can here. But now, I aks. That's no problem, I don't think I'm rude to them, so

John:

Uh, well, when I say I wouldn't do that, I don't mean about the book, for I would tell her or him that I can't read the book. What I mean if they teaching something, this where I mean. If teaching something and I feel like I can't get ahead with that. No. I can't get ahead with that, I wouldn't say that, but reading a book, I would tell them definitely I can't read it, but to get ahead with something what they teach, really, they maybe [...] that's they method of teaching to say I can't do that, I want this to be done, no, I wouldn't do that. No, but it's like she bring the paper out, and say what would you like to help us in teachin', I say well we, I need spellin', I need to break down words, you know, but to tell her that in the class, I wouldn't do that.

Sherry: (to Sam)

If it's something about a lesson, or a method, do you feel you can say how you feel about it?

Sam:

Yeah. I think so. (Sherry: If you like it or don't like it?) Yeah, sure. You know I was going to a program before and this lady she keep pushing this book at me, honest, and I *don't like the book*. And but she keep, I don't know why the heck, but she keep giving me this book and I'm reading, and I don't know what the hell I'm reading about, this is my language, but she you know um say but this book will help you Sam I say this book not gonna help me because I don't know what the heck I'm reading about. So I told her I don't like it. I don't want the book, I don't want it. That goes over my head. Way over my head. so, to me the way they teach here is pretty good. I mean, you know they got so many different little books in there. In here they throw one at you they find out you can't handle it, they, okay, we help you find another one, they give you another one, they say, what you think about this one. This one is much better. But some tutor they, I don't know, their brain is way up in the air there, my own is way down here. They speakin' to me up there and so. That because maybe I'm old. (laughter) You know, it's not, so you know, um, you don't know anything. Sometime we need a little more *basic*, more basic, before we get up there, you know. Want something to [...] us down here then can go up the ladder. And so, um, like I said, if there some book there they gave me, I can't handle it, I'm gonna tell them, you know, don't make sense. I'm reading. I don't know what the heck I'm reading about. Because I think when you read a book, if I read a book, and then you come and you say, hey, Sam, what you just read about, I should be able to tell you maybe not all of it, but some of it, without look back in the book. And some book you read, you could

say, what you read about, I don't know (laughs). To me, that's not, you know, reading.

John:

I'm gonna bring myself back to the.. yeah. I [do] use that already, when I said I wouldn't have to tell a teacher what to do, or how to teach, for I think they have a method of how to teach, like, I do use this word before, like, they say write, write, just write, write, write, write, write, don't matter how you spell the word but write, I can't find any sense in writing and don't know how to spell the word [I] can't make no sentence to me. I would never tell the teachers well you can't do it like this. This is their method. If I feel like write something where I can explain myself with I'm going downtown I have to take the bus and the driver was complaining and the driver drive slow and stop every time and so I would write that, write what I can, but I just can't see myself write paragraph, write this here, can't spell the word, just dot dot dot dot. I feel very shy in doing this, so I just don't do it.

** Both John and Sam feel comfortable telling teachers what kind of books they'd like to read, and Sam said that initially he felt shy to ask about spellings of words, but that now he doesn't. When I asked him if he felt comfortable talking to teachers about lessons, he brought up reading again. It was obviously very frustrating for him in his previous program, when the tutor wouldn't listen to him about the book choice that had been made. The fact that he has choice in this program about the books he reads is very important to him. He clearly feels that his voiced opinions about the books he reads are heard. In this area, he has choice, and his choices are respected. In his previous program, although he was able to voice his opinions, they were not heard. In effect, therefore, he really had no voice.*

** John clearly does not feel comfortable telling teachers how he feels about their teaching strategies. He feels strongly that in order to learn to read and write, he needs some explicit instruction in spelling and grammar. He does not feel like he can say this directly to the teachers, however. He said that what he can do is, "maybe...leave after a while", or "just don't do it".*

John:

I could give you one instant. In my country, no matter how young you are, at a teacher, we learn that we should obey the teacher and have respect for teacher . You can't know more than the teacher. They already learn what they have. So we go to learn. So we have to submit to the teacher, no matter how young. Just like in the gospel. No matter who you are, they are doing something, the Bible [say I should] subject to that person. So we just have that between us all the time. So you don't feel scared to say well you are the teacher and you gonna teach us today. Some people might frown, but we don't, frown about that, we take it as it is.

Sherry:

What about you Paul? Did you go to school in Jamaica too?

Sam:

Ah, a little bit. We don't have any school, the most... Yeah, I went to school but not the way I should. Things was tight, hard, so I have to most my time helping my dad in the field, grow the crops, raise the animals. I went, but not, not much.

** John's beliefs about the roles of teachers and students seem to have been formed by two things: the time he spent in the formal school system in Jamaica, and his religious beliefs. Teacher's authority ought not to be questioned, no matter how frustrated one might feel. Talking to the teachers about their methodology is to question their authority.*

Sam did not spend much time in the formal school system in Jamaica. This may be one of the overriding reasons why their beliefs about teacher authority are expressed so differently.

Theme: Beliefs about Instruction and Methodology

Describe other programs you've attended:

Sam:

Yeah. I try a few other program.... used to go there, but there was not too much out there because there was too many people in the one, one little circle here, and everyone was on different level, and it's hard for one tutor to em help all these people, sometime like 25, 30 people, one little place there, where everybody not reading out the same book. It would be easier if everybody reading out the same book, it would make it easier for the tutor. People maybe have like 12 different levels, so it wasn't enough time to get around to everybody, so [...]. night, you never talk to the tutor, because they don't have time to talk to you. So, it was too much out there. I mean, and um, you go there for help, I mean.....

John:

Now, as Sam talk about school, I been to school already, but, uh, I think this will [here], this can help you, too. I been to school in Canada but in the night time, they have school from 7:30 to 9:30. But they have a class, they have a registered teacher. We call a registered teacher, like you go to college, and you teach maybe in the daytime. Well, they have in a class, and the teacher do all her thing on the blackboard, teacher like in school, and at that time you have to pay ten dollar to enroll in the class and you sit like when you go to school, at school here, government school, we all sit and she do what she have to do, and we get some homework too. That help me a lot, too. That help me a lot. This is why I can read

and write, and rea..do a little. When I left Jamaica I was nothing like that. I could sign my name on the plane, I could, you know, do that, but I could do not much. Which I come to Canada and I do, and this is why I move up so fast, I'm still lookin to move up before I die, so this is why I'm here.

* *What's important to Sam, it seems, is being listened to, having time to talk to the or teachers, and time for individual instruction. What John seems to have liked in his past program was the structure of it, the traditional role of the teacher in front of the blackboard. It probably matched the school environment he was used to in Jamaica. School is a teacher standing up in front of the class teaching, and the students doing what she asks them to do. This structure is one with which he's familiar, and the one in which he seems to feel most comfortable.*

Theme: Voice

Sherry:

Have you heard of the expression voice in writing, a writer's voice? Have you heard that expression?

John:

Say, a writer's voice? What you put on papers? Explain your innermost being?

John gives an eloquent description of voice, and then says he's never heard of that expression.

John:

I never heard that expression, but Friday I was talking to a man and he was saying to me what you put on a paper it's more than what you speak (?) something like that. I think it's all in the same word and he say that when you put something on a paper and it get in to somebody then it kinda freak the brain. You know, you put it on a paper so properly and when somebody else read it, it get right into their innermost...yeah...I think that's the way he was talkin. You can put things on papers and it gets to people so much that they believe every words that is on paper. That is why [...] writer's voice. Yeah, that power that comes out on paper, and pen.

Sam:

It's similar same thing, yeah. You know, where I come from writer's voice is like uh bring me that book, or somebody say, give me that book, the more command, so it's more heard. Um. For instant, I am, I learned this my friend something once. 'Piece a tool'. And I told him after a year I said I need my tool. Okay, Sam, I bring it to you. I said, I need my tool. Three time. He didn't give me my tool. So I said, this guy playing games. So I went to my lawyer and I be write my letter. And when he get the letter, I just read in the letter. Boom. He drive [it to] and

come to my house and said Sam here's your tool. Man [ee] thank you. It take you this letter to bring my tool. I was real mad then, honest, real angry. I said, I don't need it now. You better bring it to the lawyer. The lawyer charged me to write the letter. So [I will let he] bring the lawyer and let he pay the lawyer to write. I said that [learn you] lesson. He said Sam, you gonna let this piece a tool break up our friendship? I said, it's not the tool, man. It's not the tool gonna break up our friendship. I say, you, is the one. I say the tool didn't walk out of my house and go to your house. You come and get my tool and I aks *several* time, I need my tool. You didn't want to give it back to me. So I say, it's not the tool, it's you. So that letter. Boom. Yeah. Mm. You know because like I say I went to this guy house several time and say I need my tool and e, but he didn't, you know he laugh, ha ha ha, but as soon as e get the letter. And [...] if I write it, maybe he would never bring it through, but you see this lawyer write it and e, boom.

John:

I'm gonna let you conclude meeting with the writer voice. You didn't explain to me what the writer voice mean. But it's the same thing what I'm talking about. To write here, it don't matter how you spell the word. That writer voice that you talkin' about cannot express in my writing [...] it can't express in my writing. For I can't get to my express myself, that you can read it to see what I'm saying when the word don't spell right. That my right, write my voice down. It take time, as I say it take *time*. But we gotta have some method to learn that before we can write.

Sam:

What I think John trying to say, well, what we tryin to say. Sometime you KNOW what you tryin to say but on the sheet you cannot put the right word on the sheet but talkin to you maybe say the right thing. But if you could put the right word on the sheet and send it to somebody they would know exactly boom boom boom. But sometime you better just put the closest word to the word you want to put right there. You put something close to it. That's not the word you want to put there, but you put something close to it because you cannot spell the word you want put right in that little area there.

John:

And when that word, when it come to YOU, when it come to YOU, you [...] when you don't know what I'm saying. So this is not the voice of word. You can't understand it. You gonna say, what he's talkin. You gonna read try to read it now. And you gonna read and try to put in the word but my voice not out there yet. No I didn't spell it right so you think it's different. So that my voice don't hear out there yet.

We talked again about voice during another discussion:

Sherry:

For example, do you think that there's much writer's voice in the dictionary?

Paul:

Sure. Well, they gotta do the meaning, [...] meaning. You look at it in different dictionaries they're not the same meaning, it's the same word but not the same meaning, you know same word

** Paul's comment about voice in the dictionary is interesting. Even in the dictionary, which is supposed to be standard, there are variations. The same word is defined differently. So, voice can be seen in the way words are defined.*

Sherry:

Do you feel like when you're writing that your voice is coming out when you write?

Sam:

Yeah, I do. Yeah, I do. Well, some not all of it, but in majority. Like writing in my journal, explain myself, telling whomever I write with the way I feel, the way I feel now, or the way I feel before, and the way I would feel in the future.

Paul:

What? I don't know. Sometimes good, sometimes bad, I don't know. (Sh: Do you feel like you're able to get your voice out?) Not really. (Sh: never?) Well, once in a while, but not really. (Sh: Can you think of one thing that you've written that has that you feel has a really strong sense of your voice in it?) nah. (Sh: really? That's interesting. Why do you think that is?) I don't know. I don't know. Cause I'm uh raw. (Sam chuckles) (Sh: raw? what do you mean?) You know, dirty words and all that. (Sh: and you don't think that expresses) No, I just don't write it. (Sh: Oh, so you keep that back and you don't put it on paper) Yeah. (Sh: So you're not really writing the way that you would) I'm stu..Not even to write that stuff, but that's the way I am if you really...(sh: get right down to it. s, why don't you put that stuff down) Oh it's not needed. There are other words you can use. I'm trying to get away from it. It's one of those things you can't always (laughs) can't do. (Sh: But you don't feel like you can express your voice...) I can express myself but you know you need the words too. I mean, sometimes if you write something you can hear yourself talking, but sometimes you just well mumble mumble.

Sherry:

Do you feel like sometimes when you're writing it's really hard to get your voice out?

Sam:

Yeah, um, with me yes, because there are certain things I would like to put down on the paper. In the back of my head, I know what I want to say, but it don't want to come to the front, so I don't know how to really express myself down on the sheet, I put some down but thinkin I could do a better job by explaining myself more but sometime I don't know how to go about, to get it down [...] if you take it up you know what the heck I'm talking about. A little bit [of it is] a spelling, and a little bit the way you could you know like somebody who doing this for all his life, he could explain it more better than I do.

* *Voice is in the power of the written word, "that power that comes out in paper and pen". It's so powerful, that if you write it "properly" people "believe every words that is on paper". However, in order to have a powerful written voice, you must be able to write down the words properly first. According to both John and Sam, you must know how to put the words that are in your head onto the paper, and part of this is practice and part of this is knowing how to spell. If you can't get the words out so that others understand their meaning, your voice can't be heard, "...my voice don't hear out there yet,". The writing won't have power, the power that Sam describes as , "Boom. Boom boom boom,". Sam also talks about the power of voice being in the power to command. Being able to command others to do things is powerful. He says that the letter written by his lawyer had the power to do this. If he had written the letter, his friend wouldn't have paid any attention. He paid the lawyer to write the letter for him, to borrow the authority inherent in his writing. The lawyer's authority is backed up by the fact that he is a representative of the legal system, whose words, in turn, are enforced by the penal system. Voice is power, and having access to those whose voice has power lends power.*

John's first definition of voice, "explain your innermost being" , is important as well. Sam says he feels his voice is clearest when he's writing in his journal, talking about himself, his past, his present his future. Paul's comment is very interesting. He does not feel that his voice is in his writing. He doesn't express himself in his writing because the words that are inside him are too "raw". They are words that he believes are not acceptable to write down. He says that sometimes when he's writing he clearly hears his voice talking in his head, other times it just a mumble. So, in some ways, for Paul, he has to hear himself before he can write, and if what he hears are the words that are he believes are inappropriate, he can't write himself down onto paper. The power of written voice, then, is in it's ability to command, in it's ability to persuade, and as a vehicle for the expression of one's self.

Theme: Attitudes and Beliefs about Writing

Sam:

I think the little bit I see, writin is just like readin. Writin is um if there's somethin interest you you put more stress to bring it out. Like when you're readin a book, if the book is not too much interest you, don't want to be bothered to read the book. But if there's somethin where you want to get into your [read] get into, that is the same thing with you writin'.

I asked what kinds of topics they enjoyed writing about, and what kinds they didn't:

Sam:

Uh. I write sometimes, about my job, um, everybody don't get the same treatment on the job, on the job place, I mean uh, you be doing your work, you do better than the other guy, but treat him different than you, other guys treat him better than they treat you, so they actually got to do twice the amount for them to see it, so you hate to write about it. I don't think it's right I don't know.

Paul:

Deceased people...gives you the creeps, you know.

Sam:

Well me, I'm enjoy writing about myself, all I know about me. It's not all the things what I write about myself, I enjoy writing, because I live so busy a life, I hate to remember those things, I still write about them.

John talked about reading.

John:

I go first. A couple weeks ago I read a book and you was one I suppose a discuss the book with you. So writer's strong, writer voice, and I say well I wouldn't wanna discuss this book. The reason why, we're here to happy. And many things I learn in the book I don't learn it and where I come from it's not anything like here and why we are so happy and I have to come before you and talk about white and black and you couldn't buy a soda a soda and the white lady bend down and say [stage whisper] oh we don't sell colored soda. You know I don't want to get into these. I want to get free from these. This is so simple. I don't want to discuss this. You know, I don't feel too comfortable in discussing this. I don't know about it. I don't learn about it. I don't want to learn about it. [John's voice is very emotional] I come into a happy place. I see you [...] sit down and talk, I don't want to go back to the past. I don't want to go back to the past. So that's why. I don't want to go back to the past. Be too nice in school now to go there and talk about these things. I don't want to get into that. That's me.

* *Motivation is important in learning to write. If you have a purpose for writing, something that is meaningful, then there will be a much greater desire to write. Writing about topics that are meaningful include being able to write about yourself. It also includes, however, having the choice not to write about things one is not ready to write about, or interested in writing about. Sam mentioned that he didn't like to write about job stress, or his stressful life. I know from talking to him that one of the things that bothers him at his job is the discrimination and racism he sees. John said that he didn't like to read about racism in the United States, or at least not to talk about it at the center because "it's a happy place". For these two learners, the center may represent a place where they can get away from some of the stresses in life, from the daily pressures of an inequitable society. Also, all of the staff are White women, and this may very well be why it is uncomfortable to talk about some of these issues with the staff and myself. We have had very different experiences in the United States being White, than John and Sam have had being Black.*

I asked about what they liked about writing:

Jerri:

I love writing. I just love it. I love to write.

Sam:

I find myself writin more since I start to write in my journal. (Sh: really?) Yeah, you know, I hate writin', honest. I hate writin. I give you the reason why I hate it. Because a lot of time when I write, and I try to read it back to myself, it don't sound right. I make a lot of mistakes, so I hate writin'. But now I found myself doing more writin'.

John:

Yeah. That's a pretty good way to practice.

Paul:

(Sh: What kinds of things do you like to write about?) I don't know. (Sh: dialogue journal?) Huh? (sh: dialogue journal?) un, you have to write that. (Sh: do you enjoy it, or do you hate it?) Sometimes you enjoy it, sometimes you don't, you know it's like well, I (don't?) like that question bit, how you have to ask them a question, oh no, what do I say, well, how's, life is good, or what's up? You know. (sh: yeah, it's hard to think up a question) You can do that maybe about four or five times until they say gee maybe (..) should give us another question.

I asked what they didn't like about writing:

John:

No. Yeah. (laugh) I just don't do quite what I would like to put on paper. I can't

write here, miss out there, miss out here, I can't get the sentence [which] in my head, you know what I would like to put down, I can't get it, so I just can't get it.

Sherry:

So you don't do it.

John:

Not's all the time. But I have to write something [way] I can. What I *can* do. What I can do that I can ask a couple words how would you spell, but I can't write, [listen what happens] I can't write this statement [which] don't spell this right, don't spell this right and continue to write that statement, I can't do it, not say I don't want to do it, but I can't do it. Yeah if she [come with] paper and aks me, I tell her I say, not say I don't want to do it, but within my brain or head, I just can't do it, without it sound right to write this on there, student here, I don't know, student going to Massachusetts and they learn to do something then I know student Massachusetts [and] miss out here and you know I just I just can't do it. No. I don't like writing time. Should I explain that? [it took some talking back and forth before John would explain what he meant, he was hesitant] You know, I would like to explain it but I don't know how far it go. The reason why I don't like writin' time, I like to write in the journal, but I don't like writing time, and this is mine, explanation, not for everybody. She will tell you, don't matter how the words spell, just write, (J: do the best you can) I hate that. For everybody around the class lookin still in the dictionaries, so no one like it. Everyone still, you can't put a sentence down, I am going to work, and you put w for work. It doesn't sound right. You know. We need a method to help us to, to spell words. Method to spell the word. I would like to method to spell the word instead of write and don't matter how you spell the word, and no one do it. If you write and it doesn't sound proper to leave out the sentence can put together and you see everyone still lookin' in the dictionary to spell the word or aks and the teacher still tell you to do that. You see you can't split the class up just for me for you'd have to do it for everybody, maybe there's somebody is like it, and I don't like it, e like it, you know you can't just split, you got to have a (standard)

Sam:

One more thing, em, towards em what John was sayin. Way I'm gonna explain that [....] you know that [...] I think the reason why the tutor tell us that do not worry about the way you spell (J: just spell the best way you can), just write it the way you think it spell. They want to detect where you have a weakness. I think that's what they want to do, where is your weakness. And that weakness, they gonna try to help you there. The way you use, you sound the word out, you spell it, they theyself think no it's wrong. But they want to know if you know. So they tryin' to help you on that weakness you got. That's the way, that's the way I see it.

Sam:

I thought sometime because if you spell it one way and it's wrong, you gonna keep on spell it that way round, because maybe sometime teacher don't really come up and say you know that word there it was wrong you didn't spell it right, so then you gonna think to yourself say it's right because he or she didn't say nothing to me about it.

* *Both John and Sam say they enjoy writing in their dialogue journals. Both of them talk about how difficult it is to write when you feel you're always making mistakes. Perhaps this is why writing in the dialogue journals is seen as such a good way to practice. In the dialogue journals you are free from the stress of worrying about making mistakes. Even John feels this way, and he hates all other types of writing. In all other types of writing he feels he has to write "Proper". However, I think that he sees the journals as somehow separate from "real" writing. When it's time to really write, i.e. during writing time, he hates it, and one of the reasons he hates it is because he can't spell and write the words like he want to. He gets frustrated, and he gets frustrated with the methods the teachers are using. He believes that if he were taught grammar and spelling explicitly, this would help him to write the way that he wants, properly. Paul doesn't think the journals are so-so. He gets tired of all the questions. He talked earlier about how he doesn't like to, and it's difficult for him to, put himself down on paper, not the words, but himself.*

* *It's very interesting to hear their perceptions of the reasons why the teachers use the methods they do. John doesn't like them at all, and when Sam explains why he thinks these methods are used, it sounds like conspiracy theory. First of all, it is clear that some clarification is needed. This points again to how easily miscommunications can occur. John has said that it is difficult for him to voice his opinions about methodology to the teachers. However, his frustration is so evident that somehow a way must be found to open spaces in which he would feel comfortable voicing his feelings. Dialogue between staff and learners around this issue would, I think, be useful for both, as well as for the program as a whole. Also, perhaps if John's opinions about how he best learns remain the same, then options could be thought about for ways in which he can best meet his goals (alternative methods, or trial runs of different types of plans).*

Speaking and writing are inter-related.

Ruben:

That's my problem. I have a problem with that. That's my problem. I write differently, we all do write differently the way we talk.

Sam:

The way you write is the way you speak, the way you speak is the way you write.

Paul:

I think you do change. (Sh: In what ways..) Oh yeah, yeah, just smaller. I don't want to burn someone's ear off, you know. I just say it, you know, write a couple words, and [stay away]..

John:

...I do believe that I speak a lot different than I write. I do believe that. But you, I'm here about 21 years now, 21 here, 8 in Canada, so [...] I back up myself a lot, and I don't speak that kinda way for about 29 years now when my first boy born. I don't do that [....]. This is why I tape, to see how I sound. But I do believe... *and later,*

John:

Because (....)would give me the statement what I want to put more I feel is more properly put. (...) It's give me a hard time to put a statement together. (Sh: A statement?) Yeah, not a statement, a paragraph together, it give me hard time to put it together. Sometime maybe the word's up there and I say this one is not right. You know, it give me a hard time to put them together. I can able to write this where are you going, I am going downtown, but as for me, I can't write where are you go. So this is a figure of speech. This is way we speak up, and talk, like this, quick, quick, quick, quick, but when we gonna write a letter, we gotta put it in the right place [cause] this is what they teach us at school, to use the proper English.

Jerri:

I write differently. (Sh: than you speak?) Mhmm. (Sh: in what way?) Well, sometimes, writin' (...) and sometimes, you know, I use the England English... and sometime, when I be writing, I write too fast.

John:

Now there are only two of us here, who talk different, who write different Two of us, in this class, write talk different and write different. For many years, I was in Florida, and we going to [contract] together. We go to [contract]. And when we want to [recruit] back, we write a letter to the boss which is white, and then he could [...] write us back and request us back to the contract, that's 1962. So when we are in the orange grove, we talk and talk and talk, and he can't understand us, but when we write the letter, I say we cause they lot of us, he understand us and if you go back to Am., come back here, and he say how come when you talk we can't understand you, when you write, he understands us.

** Everybody except Sam felt that written language and spoken language are different. Sam said that he writes like he talks, and visa-versa. Ruben said that the fact that writing and speaking are different is a problem. Talking is much easier than writing. Paul said that the one way his writing changes from his speaking is that he writes smaller. He doesn't like to "burn someone's ear off". He is vocal in*

class, but he has mentioned before that it is difficult for him to get himself down onto paper. John seems imply that because he's been here 29 years, he's done a lot of work on his spoken American English, he's "back [him]self up a lot", and so his written English may be less different now than his spoken. It's interesting, too, that John feels that there are only two of them who speak differently and write differently, the two of them from Jamaica. Jerri seems to say that sometimes she writes the "England English", which I take to be the more valued way to write (given past conversations), and other times she writes too fast. She's talked before about how she speaks too fast, so perhaps what she's saying is that when she writes like she talks she doesn't feel that's good writing.

* At the same time, written language can be understood even when spoken language can't be (although at other times, participants talk about how difficult it is to make themselves understood in their writing as well). In this sense, there is power in writing, the power to be understood. Also, in John's example, being able to be understood clearly in writing meant being able to get a job.

John:

(...) catch on that part right ere. Um I'm gonna aks something from you if you have the time. On a piece of paper, I would like you to get out all the words that you can think about send a survey off and get all the words you can think and put it on a piece of paper give it to me please. (Sh: all the words I can think about...?) Yeah, and what you can get. ALL the words from it right up to why. (Sh: Oh, that would take me years) No it don't take you so much. What you can, I say, what you can. (J: Take the rest of your lifetime) (Sh: Can you imagine, it probably would) Then what I do, when I am writing a letter, I would have a lot of words where I can look up (J: and put in there) That's it. That's what i would like to do. (Sh: But isn't that what a dictionary is supposed to do?) (P laughs) I don't like it. (sh: why not?) *My teacher* give me some words [...] give me a lot, two pieces paper, fold it here, but there's a lot more words out there. (Sh: There are, but people write for years to write down all the words they know, that's why look at how fat that dictionary...) and that would be you know the dictionary just tell you definition of word, definition (Sh: and spelling too) the right spelling, but it don't give you like a, a write down with all the a words, write down c over here, b over here, e, you know, long lists. (Sh: did you start your own book of words?) I don't start it. *My teacher* give (...) she give me (...) (Sh: maybe we should start a book for you of words) yeah you could do that (and every day I'll write like twenty) and write every day (sh: and then slowly through time) even if it takes six, even a year, if I pass away that's different, but if (...) somewheres you can mail it to me. I leave that to you. No, that's how you work your job. My teacher give me some words, but that's yours. You know you see books. You go to school up the University, you see books, you take out some words [...] let those words out.

* John believes that if he can have access to words, a book of words, he will be able to write better. When I asked him about using the dictionary, still wanted

his own list of words. His last comment is interesting. It's my job to write down these words for him. They are up there at the University, I should "let them out". John made this comment at the last meeting after we had talked about how I had hoped these discussions would inform what's going on at the center as well as help me in my own studies. He is giving me a direct message. Bring all that power and knowledge that's held up at the University out, give me some of it. Power and knowledge is in the keeping of words, the holding and knowing of them.

Theme: Writing Done at Home

What writing do you do at home?

Sherry:

What about writing letters, do you do that much?

Paul: No.

Sam:

No I don't do that much writing letters. Most writin I'm doing now is since I'm in class here, so I don't, once in a while I may write my friend. I would love to write im more, but I don't know if I'm saying the right things so I stay away from that.

John:

I write my name every day, and date, for the job that I do. Everyday I have to write my name, and date, my number, every day. And after you finish the job you fill it out, you delay, what delay, you gotta fill out, you get order by fork, every day you have to do that sort of thing, you have to write it out. (Sh: and what other types of writing do you do, on the evening, or weekend? Letters?) No. It's too much work. (Sh: No? Do you leave notes for people ever, I'm not home, I'll be back soon, or) It's still too much work. But I would like to spell the word, some of the word, if it's easy. I'm here. I was here. No one home. Yeah. That's easy. (Sh: and what about checks?) Yeah, I write checks. I write a lot a checks.

Sam:

outside a.. [...] much writing like e say, do a little on the job, you get paperwork come with the job, after you finish it, you gotta put down you finish and um punch it out with your computer, pick up another piece and then write[...] put together number there work number put on there date, that's about it, sometime I um I have a little sheet and do um math, I do a little bit of that, that's about it, like I say, I don't write letters, cause I'm not good in at write letters so I don't (sh: write them much) yeah (sh: do you get to leave notes?) I don't leave no notes [...] knows me on that. (laughter) I don't leave no notes. My wife do that.

Theme: Changes as a Result of the Discussions

One of the participants felt that as a result of these discussions, changes were occurring in the classroom. He said this during the fourth discussion.

John:

I notice, I noticed, we have a very good start at school now. And I think that would help us. It might be slow. But I think we start out pretty good now. And [caughtin'] up words, soundin out letter, long a, short a, I think we start out pretty good since these few meetings, or maybe before, but we start out good and I, we make some headway. yeah, I think we...

Sherry:

Since these meetings, you mean, or in general here?

John:

Since these meetings. I don't know if they were ahead before us, but I notice (S:who? the teachers?) in my class, yeah.

John:

Yeah, in my class. If you do it to help out this class here, or you do it to help your education background, that you may, you know.

* *One of the learners said that felt that as a result of these discussions some changes had been made in his class.*

Summary: Discussions with Learners

This summary reflects the key points made by the learners who participated in these discussions, and can not be generalized to all learners in the program, or all learners in adult literacy centers in the United States.

Power and knowledge is:

- * in the holding and keeping of words.
- * in being able to read and write.
- * in being able to be understood clearly in both speaking and writing.

Being able to write to be understood clearly means:

- * being able to spell words 'properly'.
- * being able to write the words down in their 'proper' order.

Attitudes and beliefs about Standard American English are:

- * informed by religious background, regional background, country of origin, and native language and dialect spoken.
- * informed by previous experiences in school.
- * informed by how well one feels one can make oneself understood in speaking and writing in various contexts.

Attitudes and beliefs about teacher roles, student roles and teaching methods:

- * are informed by religious beliefs.
- * are informed by previous experiences with school.
- * are informed by cultural beliefs.

Written voice is:

- * the expression of one's "innermost being".
- * the power to command through writing.
- * the power to persuade through writing.
- * closely linked to the voice one hears inside oneself.
- * powerful.
- * inhibited if one can't write the words down so that they'll be understood by others the way one hears them in one's head, or speaks them out loud.
- * inhibited by not being able to spell.
- * such a powerful expression of self that it can make one vulnerable.

Writing:

- *requires motivation.
- *is easiest when writing about oneself.
- *is difficult when you feel you're always making mistakes.
- *is easiest during dialogue journal time.
- *is when grammar and spelling are taught explicitly.
- *is different from speaking.
- *is the same as speaking.
- *is harder than speaking.
- *can sometimes be more easily understood than speaking.
- *can be frustrating when one is always misunderstood.
- *is best when one has the choice about what to write about and what not to write about.

Goals:

- *concerning instruction can be difficult to articulate.
- *are primarily to improve the ability to read and write.

Writing methods currently used at the center:

- *are not understood clearly.
- *are frustrating.
- *are used by staff to subtly detect error in student's work.
- *should not be directly questioned.

In a literacy program, it's important:

- *to be listened to.
- *to have choice about what to read.
- *to have choice about what to write.
- *to have time to talk to and work with teachers individually.
- *to feel that instruction is responsive to needs, goals, and preferences.

Discussions with Staff

Discussions with the staff were pre-organized around three themes. They are presented consecutively in order to show the evolution of ideas and issues during the discussions. All dialogue which is not preceded by the author's name came from the staff. The dialogue is divided up into blocks for readability, and also when necessary to indicate changes in the direction of the discussion.

Theme: Attitudes and Beliefs about Teaching Standard American English

During the first discussion when we went over the outline of discussion questions, the group felt that I should change the question: Should we teach Standard American English language:

I don't think the question is should we teach it, but how should we approach the Standard American English usage question. I mean I think in general we are teaching, but then I think it's how we approach teaching it.

How should it be approached:

It kind of helps best to think of learners, I mean because I don't think we have any policy, I mean, we believe, like in this idea of preserv..., I mean when it comes to publications we have this idea of preserving their voice, and we certainly have publications here where that kinda wasn't done, wasn't done in the same way, and you know, I don't know, it's just a constant thing. [Teacher's name] will be at the computer, okay, you know, do I change was to were, you know am I gonna add this past tense ending, it's here in this sentence, it's not here in this sentence, I think a lot of our decisions are kind of arbitrary, I mean at this point....

I think it's interesting because I don't think that I personally ever answer this question in my mind, so every time I'm faced with a new learner, it's always a brand new question, I mean, I don't think that it's a right or wrong, it's just always this sort of continuum and you're somewhere on it, and every time you're faced with this question, you've gotta come up with a different way of handling it, and I think that the one thing that we do is respect what the individual learner desires. And we definitely err on the side, if I'm erring, of preserving voice and staying away from standardized English, unless some learner pounds into my head that that's what they want, and I make them do it over and over and over again, and ask them why, and then you know if they're saying, you know, I need this for a job application, I immediately go into, okay, then we'll work on standard English. But if they're doing any sort of fiction or life story, I push them into preserving their voice.

...it really depends on the learner and where they are. The more high level learner, the more that I'm going to bring up some of these issues, but for a lot of these folks, where just writing words down is a challenge, it doesn't make any sense at all to be pushing standardized English when they're just working on spelling, or how do I get a thought down, or how do I organize my thoughts, so....I might approach it more directly working with higher level learners.

I think encouraging them to write has to be the first thing that we do. And we can't encourage them to write when we have to deal with the use of standard grammar and English. With these folks writing is a major obstacle at times, and just getting them to sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil and actually commit words to paper is a challenge in itself. And we encourage them and say you're doing a great job, and this is terrific, and look at all you've done, and then to go back and tear it apart, and say well, you wrote six sentences, but not a one is right, you know, you've got mistakes all over the place, would be contrary to our philosophy of it's important for you to write, so let's just write, and we'll go back later and take a second look at it, but I would never think of tearing it apart, making it standard English.

I don't know if you'd have to tear it apart to do it that way, it could be ... a question of ... if you were going to address certain spelling mistakes, we'd have the option, or we could,, or we might have the option, [....] addressing grammatical things at the same time, you know. I mean I don't feel like we tear it apart when we go back in and look at their spelling, but I don't think nor do we go back in with a grammar agenda like we have a spelling agenda.

It's interesting the way the learners themselves react to our philosophy. I mean, I think that's probably the most interesting thing....in the night class I know we've got this guy [name] who's just been coming for a while and we'll have readings, and even when we're reading from [*published book of learners' work*], when people are reading nonstandard English, he either comments, or looks, or says something...about...how dare we let people write like this when it's nonstandard English that he thinks shouldn't be written....if somebody's speaking slang of any sort whatsoever, he's mad, because he wants to learn, you know, sort of the way [*name of learner*], in the morning class, wants to learn everything correctly, and you know, I think we have a right and a responsibility to those folks to help them do what they're trying to do, but to preserve the voice of other folks who just want to get their ideas down.

And then there's this funny thing where we think we're preserving the voice, but maybe we're not. I mean, [*name of teacher*] transcribed [*name of learner*]'s story...and then I'm going over it with him, and it had...written in it throughout, "I'm gonna do this", "I'm gonna do that", and [he] would come to that and get really confused, you know, and in his mind it was "going to", and it comes out as

"gonna", but he reads it as "going to", and it was really confusing to see this word "gonna", where we think oh, we're preserving his voice, when speaking and written, I mean, it's really a lot more complicated I think. Than it seems. Because I went back through and I changed "gonna's" to "going to" and he would come to it and read it kind of as "gonna" but in his head it's "going to" and out of his mouth it was "gonna".... he knows the words are "going to", but how he might say them is different from how he might read them.

What are learner goals for wanting to write SAE?

Sherry:

...do you think that learners think that learning to write Standard American English then gets them something, some tangible thing...like if I can write Standard American English I can get a better job?

I don't think that it's conscious except for the folks that we've mentioned who've mentioned it to us. Because I think that a lot of people just think they're doing it right. They know that they have trouble spelling. They know sometimes the words don't sound right, but I don't know. I think that there's this desire to do things the right way, meaning the way that's out there in the newspapers, or the way that's out there in advertisements, that kind of thing.

I think that it's as varied as all of our learner's are.

The group asks me what I think SAE is:

That's a question of what you mean by Standard American English. I mean, you're talking about verbs, I mean I'm asking you, are you talking about verb-subject agreement, are you talking about endings on words, or you know being able to use the right tense at the right time?

Sherry:

...I think that linguists would say that Standard American English has to do with grammar and syntax and spelling and all of those things, [and] when I was talking to John about [it] I think he believes the same way. He thinks the most important...thing is word order.... And, I don't know what I think about SAE. I think English is particularly interesting because it's an international language, and what's standard in this country is very different from what's standard in Britain, or Australia, or South Africa...

I did not ask staff for their definition of SAE, but instead asked a question about the discussion of language issues in the classroom.

Sherry:

Languages are constantly changing...[I wonder if] in teaching writing these questions become more explicit, or these ideas about language become more explicit, would that affect how the writing instruction occurred...?

I think in a GED class it would because they have to write for a specific purpose, they have to write an essay, to pass that GED English test, and so SAE has to be taught in a GED class in order for them to successfully complete that component, that essay. In our class, you know, our goal is not the GED, our goal is to get them to write whatever they want to write about. And I think our purpose is to encourage them, any way they can to get it done.

The one thing I've noticed too is that a lot of times we have this ability that we can take for granted, or you know like have a critical eye, oh, Standard American English, or lots of other ways, this is something that we can do that other, that these folks can't and to kind of presume that oh you might not need this because everything counts when it's something that they see a lot of folks have, is, there's something wrong with that also. To you know kind of have that presumption or privilege.

Well and we come into a lot of, the teaching that we do, and I think a lot of our philosophies are coming from a position of privilege. And, I think, really often, whatever we're discussing, politically, or education oriented, in this class, we are the very sort of liberal inclusive ones, and many of the students we're trying to include, are very conservative in their views of what they want, you know because they don't know, because they're not, they don't think they're reading, writing and speaking Standard English. They think it's this one thing, like you were saying, this thing that comes from God, or cannot be touched, and I don't know if there's anything that we can do to dissuade them of that when we have the privilege to know it, and to know all these different voices, and to cherish these different voices. But for them, they see it as an untouchable kind of thing, and we're coming at it from totally different perspectives.

Well, I think that [name of learner]'s ability to tell a story far outweighs my ability by a mile. I mean I can't tell a story like [name] can tell, and consequently write a story because I don't have that talent, but I can write American English, but that doesn't make me a story teller.

Sherry:

I was just wondering if when you're talking to any of the learners if questions, or direct talk about language itself, comes up.

I mean, one thing, with [name of learner], when any of us are working with [name] on her own writing, I think that it's so wonderful to see her voice exploding really,

to see her getting her ideas out in whatever way she, or we, can get them on paper, I think that we all try and preserve that, but when she came in, and she was concerned about being evicted from her apartment, I sat down with her, and had her dictate information to me, I explained to her why we were going to write this letter, why it wasn't important for her to take the time to go through and learn to spell these words, this was some piece of bureaucratic b.s. that she needed to do, let's talk about it, let's go through, I put it in Standard English and talked about what I was doing, read it to her, said is this, does this convey the information you want, we just went on, because I thought it was such a waste of time, to spend precious class time you know teaching her how to go through and write this very technical business letter [...] is that how you mean?

I don't think we have these philosophical discussions in my group about language. I think we're always talking about language, but more obliquely, or subtly. It comes up a lot whenever I teach something on poetry. I mean, that's the most obvious example, where we really talk about different uses of language, or if we've read a story, and then we're going to read an article, we talk about uses of language, different ways that you read different material. So in that sense it's talked about. There are different kinds of writing and you read different ways to respond to that kind of writing.

Sherry:

... I was just thinking of that example, [name of tutor] was telling me of an example when [name of learner] was asking for the word "grubbin", how do you spell "grubbin", and I didn't know what "grubbin" meant to tell you the honest truth, [name of tutor] told me it means to eat a lot, and I ... was thinking if [name of learner] had asked what that word, how do you spell that word, and you know, you work out a way to spell it, but if language was talked about on an explicit level, would it be possible to talk about why, for example, it's not in this dictionary, not only would it be possible, but would it be interesting, would it be important, what would...?

I betcha it would be really interesting. I mean, we have dictionaries of slang, idiomatic dictionaries all over the place, that I sometimes use, the idiomatic ones...

Sherry:

Yeah, because how does [name of learner] feel when he looks in here, and it's not in here (pointing to the SAE dictionary), but it's a word that he uses all the time, he knows it's a word, he's understood when he talks to his friends and family using that word. I was just wondering about that, you know.

I guess you'd have to ask [name of learner]. I don't think it's gonna blow him away that much, you know? I mean, just my personal opinion is that I mean, he's from the South and he's a story teller, I mean, I don't know, I, I don't know, if

that's gonna make him question his language, or his access to language, I mean maybe I'm underestimating the effects of that, there's so many words, because of the limit of that dictionary, that folks, I was thinking that there are tons of words that people ask us that aren't in that dictionary, but words that are more common, and not slang words.

And I think with somebody like [*name of learner*] who on a good day, you know, can come out and ... spell "heard" for somebody else, and on a bad day can't get some really basic words. But he's so overwhelmed that like to have the privilege of thinking about this word "grubbin" and why isn't it in the dictionary, and how do you spell it, and why didn't you know how to spell it, I've never talked to [*name of learner*] about this, but I can only imagine that to not know so many words that's not gonna be the priority, whereas for us, analyzing language, it might be the priority, because it's THE interesting word for us. Whereas for him, if he's having a hard time with "was" and "the" and whatever, it's so overwhelming. I don't know.

With him, I think it's, I've got so much to say, how do I find a way to tell the story and get it on the paper as opposed to a theoretical question.

Sherry:

But I do think about it, and I think...that the reason why grammar books and dictionaries get written in a certain way, is that the people who happen to be in a position of wealth, or power, and/or, at that time, write down their language, the one that they happen to speak, and disseminate it. That's how a language becomes standard....and I never knew that before, I honestly thought that there was some inherent value in this way...why it was written that way... and I was wondering what [the learners] thought about it.

We certainly look at that, just in regard to spelling. We have one of those books Discovering Language, and it will show you words throughout the ages, and it will show you words, and how their spelling has changed, like book hasn't always been spelled b-o-o-k, the evolution of that, and um, I'm not sure if that responds to what you're saying, but there's a certain arbitrariness that book is spelled like it is, and why didn't they stop in 1500, and say hey, this is fine. But you know, I think this idea of what's a language that everyone can speak. I mean, my take on grammar, okay, let's say, a certain group of people won, that's the one where, that's standard, it serves a purpose to facilitate meaning among a bunch of people who might have a lot of differences, and so if you're going to be speaking a language, what can we agree on so that we all can understand each other, and I see it most acutely with punctuation, well, there are certain standard punctuation marks, and when they're not followed, people get really lost. And I see it in their writing, when they try to read, or I see it when they don't know and I haven't taught them how to read punctuation, that meaning gets lost. You know because

they stop at the end of a line, or they don't stop when they see a period, or there's no inflection at a question mark.

Well, people don't question punctuation, it's kinda interesting, people question language, they question grammar, but do you ever hear people debating over, you know, is the period really something that we should be using. You never hear people discussing that, it's like that is the one standard.

What is the relationship between speaking and writing?

I can just relate that to the time I was teaching GED in prison. And, prison language is very different from standard English. And these guys were able to learn standard English to pass the GED test, but it did not effect the way they spoke. Their speaking and writing skills were very different. But they were able to learn when to use different from instead of different than, because it was something they needed to learn for the test.

I think it's two very different things, very different.

Final comments of the first discussion:

On a very simplistic level, when my children misuse the language, or don't speak grammatically correct English, I will correct them, because I want them to know it, because I know they're going to have to grow up with it, and in order to do high school and college well, they're going to need it....

And I know from teaching freshman comp., there would be papers that would be unintelligible, they weren't using standard English, I don't know what they were using. But, you know, I, to me the papers would be a picture of their mind, and how their mind worked. And maybe it didn't have to be perfectly standard English, but something was going on that didn't resemble anything, you know, that I was familiar with. And in my mind, I thought, wow, these folks, don't know, haven't learned nuthin'. [*somewhat tongue-in-cheek*]

* *There is no consistent, clearly articulated policy about the teaching of written Standard American English at the literacy center. The staff indicates that it is taught, but that approaches vary depending on specific cases, "every time I'm faced with a new learner, it's always a brand new question,". "Higher level" writers will have more explicit instruction than beginning writers. Explicit instruction includes grammar, spelling and punctuation. Spelling of words is talked about earlier, more often, and more consistently than grammar. It is important to make writing instruction relevant to learner's goals. The importance of SAE usage is also dependent on the type of writing, its purpose and its audience. SAE is necessary when writing job applications, for passing examinations such as the*

GED, and when writing formal letters, such as the letter written by one learner to her landlord in response to an eviction notice. In these instances, it is clear that writing in Standard American English allows one access to goods and services that would otherwise be unavailable, i.e. jobs, housing and/or education. The question of whether or not, and how and when, to focus on SAE usage in other types of writing, such as stories, autobiographies, and publications of learners' work is not as clear. What is clear is that in writing instruction, the focus should be on helping learners to convey meaning and to be understood. Certain conventions such as standard punctuation and spelling are important in this regard. However, knowing how to use Standard American English alone does not make a good writer, or necessitate a good piece of writing. Learning how to write, and learning how to write well, is much more than simply having facility with SAE usage.

* "I think encouraging them to write has to be the first thing that we do." This is the primary focus of writing instruction, helping learners to get started, and to provide opportunities for them to write as often and as much as possible. Focusing on the explicit teaching of SAE grammar and spelling would be at odds with this goal. It hinders fluency. The teaching of various aspects of SAE grammar ought to occur in the context of specific writing pieces, when needed for specific purposes, and when learners ask for and are ready for it.

* Although it is important to respond to learners' stated goals, this can be problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it is sometimes difficult for learners to clearly articulate their writing goals. Secondly, even when goals are stated, it is not always easy to determine what the appropriate response ought to be. Learner goals are varied. In general, however, there is a sense that once learners start talking about how their writing should look, learners want to do it "the right way", which is "the way that's out there in the newspapers, or the way that's out there in advertisements...".

* The term "preserving voice" came up very early on in the discussions. Initially it was used in a manner which suggested that "preserving voice" was the opposite of teaching Standard American English usage. As mentioned above, there are types of writing in which the need for SAE is clear, "but if they're doing any sort of fiction or life story, I push them into preserving their voice". Here "preserving voice" is juxtapositioned against editing for SAE usage. Staff then began to question what "preserving voice" really means. The group pointed out that some learners are aware of the differences in spoken and written language and can become confused when rereading their writing if it has been written in nonstandard grammar.

* The group talked directly about perceived benefits of being able to speak and write SAE. It's important for one's children to know it, because it improves chances of having access to education. Once in college, if one does not have facility with written SAE usage, one is going to be at a severe disadvantage. Making oneself understood in the academy involves being able to use its language, and that language is Standard American English. It was also stated that being able to speak and write SAE is a privilege. Deciding whether or not, and when and

how, to teach SAE is also a privilege. We discussed this in greater depth during the second and third discussions.

** Are issues about the teaching and learning of SAE talked about in the classroom? They are talked about in relation to the uses of different types of writing for different purposes. They are talked about when discussing how to read and respond to various genres of writing. Metacognitive aspects of language are not often discussed, in other words, the talking about the talk of language, and if they are addressed, it is only "obliquely or subtly". The feeling is that often times learners are so busy getting on with the business of reading and writing, that there is little time and interest for discussing what that means in a broader framework. One way that topics around language diversity and the development of language are addressed is by making use of the idiomatic and slang dictionaries, and a book on the history of language. Sociopolitical frameworks surrounding language usage are not often discussed. Staff does not seem to feel that this is of primary importance for learners. Again, the term "privilege" was mentioned. It is a privilege to have the time and interest to talk about the contextual issues surrounding language usage.*

** In retrospect, more time should have been given initially to defining key terms, such as "Standard American English", "nonstandard dialect", and "voice". The term "nonstandard dialect", for example, was occasionally used interchangeably with the term "slang". Defining the terms would have helped to clarify the discussions. The formulating of the definitions would have, in and of itself, facilitated understanding of the issues. There was a need to establish a common language which I wrongly assumed that, as teachers, we already shared. Had I not made this assumption, the discussion process would have been enriched.*

Also, my own role in the discussion might have been more clearly defined from the beginning. Was I an interviewer, an active participant, or some combination of the two? The process would have been served had some clarification on this point been established from the start.

Theme: Voice

Sherry:

Today we were scheduled to talk about voice, which we talked a little bit about last time. You said that there were some magazines that had been published where you felt voice wasn't preserved and I was going to ask you about that. Just I was thinking about preserving voice, what does that mean.

The group shows a piece in a publication of learners' work which was edited to reflect SAE spelling and usage.

As you read that, you would not know that that is [learner's name], right? I think that was a decision .. based on, who knows what, I mean maybe he was worked

with to get him to that point, but I think we've got other samples where we worked with him as far as we could til deadline time and then kinda left it.

Do you know why the choice was made to do it that way in this case?

Yeah, we've never talked about it. And yet we don't have formal policy about any of this. I feel like [*the new publication of learners' work*] was really, I mean you could hear people's voices in that. I mean we certainly went through debates about making tenses consistent, or verb/subject agreement, or that kind of stuff, but I think we tried really hard to keep it as much as like however we've gotten with those folks.

Sherry:

How were those...who went to the debates, you three?(Group:the three of us) and did the editing committee have some input about that, too, did they say anything about the..

There was an editing committee made up of learners and staff.

We couldn't. We started the board too late, and I think it would have been a huge task to read and edit other people's pieces, and the folks we chose were varied a level of readers, and it would have been really, really hard to have them edit pieces.

I mean they were constantly trying to give us more power in that process and we were constantly kind of trying not to, so I think something like that they would not have even wanted. I mean I spoke with this guy [*name*] or someone, and he talked about how they did their publication in [*name of city*] where they had editorial meetings each week, they would meet, and if there was a question then the writer would come to the group and you know read the and everything and that book is, I mean we definitely clean up punctuation, but in that book if the person wasn't ready to learn periods, then there wouldn't be periods in the pieces. It was just exactly where the learner was. But they had a different philosophy which I think was much more rigid than us. And we're not gonna teach this unless they ask it.

Sherry:

You say that the philosophy here is sort of , variable ... even so, what would you say that the philosophy is, about this sort of thing. Or maybe you want to speak from a personal point of view, I don't know.

Well I think my approach to the whole thing is to preserve as much voice as possible, a lot happens in terms of grammar, spelling and punctuation, but to make it readable for the other learners in the class, and not even, and sometimes I err on the side of not even allowing it to be readable for someone else but just readable in terms of folks that we've got here. But then, I mean for me, I'll be typing a story

and I'll say to *[one of the other teachers]* what about this, what do we do, and verbalize as we're going through each little piece and you know they'll jump in with their opinions of what should we do. Today I was typing up *[Name of learner]*'s story and he had chosen to put quotation marks around some of his speech and not around others, so I said, hey you guys what do you think about quotation marks, you know, *[name of teacher]* was saying some of my folks don't have quotation marks, but what if there's some, and her philosophy was, well, you know, they should be consistent, we try and keep this stuff consistent in one piece, but I change, every story I look at, I change, I flip flop back and forth. It's very hard.

And I think there's a big difference between when they're writing stuff they're going to read it in a group versus when we're getting ready to do a newsletter, and then I think we have almost an obligation to the other learners or other people who are gonna see this, to make it to work with them more on something, and my philosophy is just to get them writing, and that's what everyone almost is doing, and then the fixing up I think is very important also, and it's just really based on the individual learner. I mean I'm gonna work with *[name of learner]* on a level that I'm not going to work with *[name of second learner]* on, so it's not even, that's not even, there's no philosophy there, it's just kindness and practicality and how is this person going to learn best.

Sherry:

Right. On an individual case by case basis.

I think when they want it that's really important, I don't think we're doing anybody a service to say to somebody who says, I want this to be you know, perfect, I don't want to have any of my voice, and especially if somebody like *[name of learner]* thinks he doesn't speak well, he talks about that a lot, and if that's what he wants, he really deserves it. He deserves all that attention.

But I don't think we can conflate voice with nonstandard grammar. I mean I certainly know standard grammar and write it, and I have a writing voice, *[name of teacher]* has a writing voice, and I don't know about this, you know, oh voice means dialect, you know, voice means nonstandard grammar. I think they're different things.

What is voice?

I guess in my mind it's like whatever that person's gonna write, and decisions they make, consciously or unconsciously, the rhythm of language, like their speaking rhythm, or their breathing rhythm, or their moving rhythm, is on the page, and it's something that's singular, which is why we could all be saying the same sentence and sounding differently. And when I think of something without a voice, or with an institutionalized voice, it lacks that human, personality, or that identifiable

personality.

I sort of characterize it as the way you carry yourself on paper. And the very interesting thing about your voice as a writer is that it can be very different from how you carry yourself in person. You can be flexible, you can play with different voices, and I think it's fascinating to watch our students, I mean like [name of learner], she's in the beginning stage of writing, and she's playing with voice very very clearly in different pieces and it's fascinating to see that it's just something natural the way that we react in different situations in the world, we have a different voice when we write.

Sherry:

So in this publication from [name of city] you were talking about [*the one that was not edited for SAE usage*], did some of that get lost? I mean, you the reader not knowing the person reading the pieces.

Yeah, that's why I think a lot of free form poetry, unless you read it out loud, is really hard to read it. You know, what the person is trying to get at. But I don't know [...] this publication now. And you know, cause, their aim probably was just to have these people have their work in print, and just to be able to see those words on the page with the author's name.

Sherry:

How do you encourage, or bring out, help people to find, their voice?

It's nothing I really give a whole lot of thought to. And I think it's not something I consciously think about when I sit down to work with a learner. I encourage them to say what they want to say in a style that they feel comfortable expressing themselves, and we work from that. It's not a conscious thing at all.

Sherry:

What happens, if, for example, someone you're working with is not, everything seems like a mechanical piece, just doing it for the sake of it..

I don't see that very often. I think learner's get engaged in their topics because we encourage them to write about things that are important to them, or have personal meaning, or I see very little, I see [name of learner] who writes pieces that are very disengaged.

I can think of... I have two learners, and I'm really stuck with them, I don't know what to do. In [name of learner]'s dialogue journal, she writes very impassioned rants about what's happening in her life, very stream of consciousness, no punctuation, just one sentence. During writing time, she comes up with her own ten word stories, and there's actually poetic parts to her stories, but it does seem

almost mechanical. She has a great imagination and it's just using the ten words. With [*name of second learner*] who feels very poorly about herself as a writer and who knows what else, I find it very hard to hear her voice in her writing. Cause she will not engage emotionally with anything. Occasionally she'll [...] a poem, or she'll be so mad, that there'll be some feeling on the page, which I equate with a voice. Usually they're quite dispassionate ... accounts telling about [...] home, or a restaurant she went to, everything's nice or not nice. But I haven't done anything with her, because I don't know how.

Well, it's interesting because I think [*name of learner*] has gotten the message somehow that these rants in her dialogue journal, which do carry such a strong voice, are not appropriate for writing time and she, you know?

Or, she wants to get away from it, enough already. And what she thinks of is these imaginary places, these fantasy stories.

Something very removed. Which is fair, you know, the other thing I think, when I was teaching high school, I would always get kids to write from personal experience, and when you're working with kids who are living through a hell, they want to read and write about very basic things that are very safe and very simple because they're living hell, and it's almost from a position of privilege that you come in and say oh preserve your voice, write from your experience, tell us your stories, it's wonderful if somebody wants to do that, but to tell them to do that, you know, I don't know if that's right. And I think that we all have a tendency to err towards that.

Sherry:

I was thinking that when you were talking about [*name of learner*]. It's a huge risk to put yourself on paper like that, and you have to be ready to do it, and you have to feel safe, and you have to you know all those kinds of things, and I don't think you can, I think it can be dangerous to force someone to do that before they're ready, to force, I mean I think there might be ways to open avenues if, and make those available if the person chooses to.

Well, and we spend all this time talking about reorchestrating writing time, so we would have a group of women, who we would carefully select, and focus the issues around family and personal history, (gr: which is all the things they were talking about in dialogue journals and in group) but you know during writing time, none of them could write about this stuff, so we thought oh we'll have a group of women writers, and we'll do like a small women's writer's group here and then we'll get a group of men who are focusing on work issues and discrimination and you know the business world and that kind of thing, and just another group of people who are doing just some random things, but we could never make that happen because it's so forced. For us to come in and pick out these people and

say you know this is what we'll do with you.

The survey bombed. We had them do a writing survey, and we had four areas for them to check off, and everybody who we thought would check off family and personal relationships did independent writing. Another attempt down the drain.

You know what I was thinking recently. You know how you get so used to routine, I've always thought that it's really weird that *[name of other program]* does writing first, like how could somebody come in and just sit down and write, like you need time to just get used to your space, and so why don't we switch writing time to be the first thing because another thing that we do is set up this pressure for writing time, writing time will happen, they're so far from their journal, they've had reading, which in some way is more structured and we're doing these little spelling lessons which in some way is structured, and a little bit rote, and then we go into writing. You know, what would happen if we switched it around.

That's a good idea, because it's hard for them too to end their dialogue journal, and then do reading, and then go back to their dialogue journal.

You know, and really emphasize that what they're doing in dialogue journal is really where we want them to move with their writing, and then the more structured part would be toward the end.

(A few weeks later the class time is restructured so that writing time begins directly after the time set aside to do dialogue journals, first thing in the morning.)

Sherry:

I was just going to ask, back on *[name of learner]*... I mean we can go on after this... just audience, I mean she has a definite audience in her dialogue journal, and when she's writing during writing time, she doesn't have an audience that she's writing to? (Group: Not specifically) I wonder if that makes a big difference, in, I wonder...

What if you sat down with the two of them and said that they were writing for you, to you, that you were the audience

Well, that's what I said to do, in other words, with *[name of learner]* quite spontaneously, I mean she's sitting there with her dialogue journal she has about two more words to write and she just drags it out, and I'm always there looking at her, so then I had it today, and I pretended to be mad, you know, just you know, stop it, I want you to write, and I gave her this self-esteem talk, and I said put that away and write, and the first thing she wrote was *[name of learner]* is mad at me. And I said yeah, write me a letter like you wrote last time, that dear *[teacher]* letter, just write me a letter, and so then she did, and it worked.

Sherry:

That direct sense of audience.

and someone yellin at her. No, I think it was, no I mean not yelling, but like for months and months it's like well, okay, whatever you want, or what can I do to help, or oh, you've got a block, let's look at these pictures, let's make a list, she's you know, like, enough already. Yeah, I don't believe in yelling as a pedagogical technique or anything.

Sherry:

Okay, the next question I had written down was what are some of the factors that affect the expression of voice, I think we were just talking about some of them, are there any others?

I think [*name of learner*] is a really interesting case in terms of voice, and I think it's very clear when you look at the people who come up when we discuss this, I think it's much more connected to psychological issues than anything else, I mean, like someone like [*name of second learner*] who cannot get emotion onto paper cannot get emotion into his life, he doesn't carry that presence, and [*name of first learner*] is someone who will bring great voice into his writing only if you approach it from the side. I asked him a silly question in his dialogue journal, did you play sports in high school, and he came back with a very impassioned answer of how no, he couldn't, because his mother was sick, and ... nobody was there to take care of him, and blah, blah, blah, blah, and then I did a follow-up question and said that must have been really hard for you to have your mother be sick, and he was real angry, and his response, you know, do you understand that this is hard for me to write about and the directness of it, and I had no idea that asking about high school sports would bring out the truthfulness... You know and he's somebody who's very controlled about what he's willing to let go of on paper, and um, he spits stuff out in anger, or to be provocative and get a response, so, um, he's an interesting one.

Sherry:

Yeah, he is. I was trying to think for myself, too, when I write, what are some things that hinder or help, i mean, myself, yeah, I mean, emotional thing is part of it, if everything is tight inside, nothing is going to flow and come out easily.

I think we have to think of a task that is very, very difficult for us to do, and not, I mean writing is difficult for everyone, but we have facility with language and spelling which is what I think they're up against, I mean I try to think about knitting, how would I feel if I was supposed to come here and knit, and I couldn't very well if people were looking at me, and I had to knit something and show it to people.

Like in math. I liked math a lot. I hated writing. I always hated writing. I always had a hard time writing. I never learned to write til I was in college where I was forced to write papers that would get torn apart because they were grammatically incorrect and I had to take a remedial course in writing in college because my grammar and spelling and everything were just so, and I hate to write...

Sherry:

Is there any time you enjoy writing, or type of thing that makes you enjoy it.

The only time I enjoy writing is in my children's baby books, and I write them special little messages, and heart felt ... mother-child memoirs, it's the only thing I really care about in terms of my writing. I don't write letters, or and notes or pieces of work that I consider my writing, because I don't enjoy it, it's a real struggle for me.

Sherry:

How much of a sense do you have for the type of writing some of the folks here do at home, that's important to them, or in general what type of writing goes on at home.

[Some learners], I think, once they get into a piece about their lives, will take it home, bring it back, take it home, and they're like dedicated to this big project both inside and out of class which I think is really cool. I think that for most of our folks, unless they're gripped by something here, they don't do any writing at home.

* *The important thing, once again, is to be responsive, on an individual case by case basis, to learner's needs, and to work with learners starting from where they are. Although knowing and using written SAE is important, one can't overwhelm a beginning writer with grammar. The first thing is to help learners to begin writing. As a writer progresses, more and more explicit teaching about the structure of language can occur, as learners become ready for it. If a learner indicates that he or she wants to write in Standard American English, then the staff helps that learner work towards that goal. At the same time, discussion occurs about the need for different types of writing for different purposes.*

* *The group began to discuss the definition of voice. An objection was made to the use of the term voice to connote nonstandard grammar. In the ensuing discussion, the group described writer's voice as, "the way you move on the page", "the rhythm of language", "it's something that's singular". When asked how they help learners to find and express their written voice, this comment was made, "I encourage them to say what they want to say in a style that they feel comfortable expressing themselves, and we work from that". By encouraging learners to write about things that are personally meaningful to them, their voice has natural expression. It is with very few learners that the written voice seems somehow lost under a mechanical, two-dimensional kind of writing. This may be*

because a learner is not ready to take the emotional risk of writing themselves down onto paper, or it may be because there's an unclear sense of the audience. Other times, it may be that because some learners view their time at the center as time away from the stresses of daily life, there's a desire to stay away from emotionally charged issues in their writing. Although emotionally charged writing is not the only kind of writing in which one can see writer's voice, a purposeful disengagement from emotion on paper can lead to a flat written affect. As a writing instructor, one must carefully balance helping a writer to find his or her voice, with the need to respect the writers' readiness to do so. (Again, the term "privilege" was mentioned, this time in conjunction with being in the position, as a writing instructor, to ask learners to write from their own experience to, "preserve their voice". It seems that in this case, it was a cautionary note. Teachers should be careful of forcing their own agendas onto learners. However, a more detailed discussion of the use of the term "privilege" occurs in the final discussion.) In addition, voice is affected by learners' perceptions of what styles and topics are appropriate for writing. Some learners may believe that the type of writing they do in their dialogue journals is not appropriate for "real writing", the writing done during "writing time".

The staff talked about personal experiences with writing. On the one hand, it was felt that it may be difficult for us to understand how learners feel about expressing themselves in writing, because it may be something which comes easy to us. On the other hand, through reflecting on personal struggles with our own writing, it becomes clear that teaching writing through a focus on grammar can be destructive because it emphasizes error. The writer forms an opinion of him or herself as somehow incompetent. Certainly, no love for writing is fostered. What people do enjoy writing about, what motivates people to write, are things that are personally relevant and meaningful.

Talking about writing and voice, the staff was very open and honest about struggles they face, and evidenced a great amount of commitment to trying to find methods appropriate and meaningful for each individual learner. As a result of the conversation about voice and writing, and the pressure some learners may feel when faced with "writing time", the staff suggested changing writing time to first thing in the morning directly after dialogue journal time. This way, the shift would not be as abrupt, and some of the stresses around "writing time" could be diffused. The very next week, they implemented this plan.

Theme: Teacher Authority, Privilege and Power

Sherry:

The first question was what do you think the role of the teacher is, describe what some of the roles a teacher has here at [name of center].

We get to say when break is over.

A facilitator.

A preparer of information and disseminator of information.

We run things.

Curriculum development.

...do intakes. Order things. Order books. We deal with folks problems. Personal problems. (Gr:counseling) And referrals. We, you know, we are authority figures for them in matters where they feel they have little authority, which is reading and writing, so in that area, I think our role is, you know, to encourage, and to provide answers, and to encourage them to find answers, and to be patient and supportive.

I think we're role models for them in terms of reading and writing. We read and write as part of our job, and model for them how wonderful reading and writing can be, or try to.

We model looking things up in the dictionary because we can't remember how to spell anymore.

To get things wrong, to show em that we make mistakes.

It's not that hard to do.

We ask each other for help in front of them.

I think, um, our role as a team shows how cooperative efforts pay off, and um...

Sherry:

What are the places where the role of a teacher and the role of a learner might overlap?

Break.

I think it overlaps in reading group too. I mean a lot of the time things that I think, oh we're gonna talk about, it ends up they wanna talk about something else so they you know whereas before they're like oh we wanna learn anything well, sometimes they don't wanna learn anything but they don't know it yet, and so it overlaps when it comes time to figure out well what are we going to talk about next, figure out what we're gonna do next, what do you wanna learn next. I think in writing time also I mean there's more time in writing time to work individually with folks and really have a give a take of what they want to focus on and what we want them to focus on...

I think sometimes folks wants our role to be different than what we want it to be. I mean we do have authority and we do have power and privilege and all that but a lot of times ideally we don't want as much of that as maybe they want us to have, or a certain kind they want us to have. Which is you know the premise is we're all adults and yet because so many of them had not very good school experiences maybe they're like reliving what that school experience was like. But you know we don't want to be the heavy. We don't want to say yes, you have to write, or yes, you have to do this. But that helps some of them I think get to the table to do

what they have to do.

Sherry:

Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah, any other comments on that, what some of the students expectations might be of your role that either do or don't match what you might feel comfortable with.

Well, some of the students, have really tried to want us in front of the chalk board with a pen or a piece of chalk, teaching them things and feel that *that's* the way it should be done. And other folks have definitely sort of agreed with that, so they have expectations of the teacher from what they remember from school, and don't understand why we're not doing that. But that's very few of our learners, I think.

Sherry:

It's kind of hard to get at what some of these words mean, authority and privilege and power, but what are some things that come to mind when you think of the word authority in conjunction with teacher?

Decision-maker. Going by the book, the rules.

Or setting up the rules, you know. Like not pretending like folks are making more decisions than they are, but just sometimes, like, we're deciding what will folks decide and what will we decide. So, I mean, there's a lot of authority there. Oh, we're gonna do the newsletter this way, or oh, [*name of teacher*] came up with the title this time. Or, things that [...] we'll let the learners, we'll *let* the learners come up with the title.

Or even trying to plan activities for them to do that are learner-centered where we want the result to be a certain way, and then it's not, and [...] kinda stuck. Which is a weird thing.

I think that mostly the authority stuff is most obvious when like folks aren't keeping their part of the bargain. I mean we don't often talk about what part of the bargain are we not keeping, but more what part are they not keeping. You know, they're supposed to get here twice a week, and you know, try to participate as much as they can.

Yeah, and part of our job is like to contact people who aren't here and find out where they are or what's up or that type of thing. And then I feel like that's, cause then it's a set up, well, yeah, I could come to class, or you know, my kid is sick, or I can come to class, and my car broke down. It seems kind of silly.

Sherry:

Are there places where you have authority that you wish you didn't have as much, that you could give up some.

Well, something that we've been talking about ... is goal setting and having, I mean, I think our whole philosophy here is that folks are here because they want to

be here and they're gonna learn what they want to learn and they're gonna set their own goals and achieve their own goals and we're here to help them do that. [...] it's hard to[....] articulate these things, and we're in the position of perhaps influencing that or controlling that, or even our hands are just tied because we can't figure out what this person's goals really are, and how to help them achieve them and how to make them own the learning. And own their responsibilities for the learning, and we're here to help them do it. It's very hard.

Sherry:

In what places do learners have authority? Besides goals.

I think that's a big one, I mean when we do the learning contracts, a lot of times it's like we really want them to be, I mean, they know what they want to learn, or need to learn, more than we do, and I think sometimes they have a whole lot of authority and like that's, it's not too much, it's like overwhelming, or like folks don't know what to do with it, or like *[name of teacher]* was saying, it's very hard to set goals, and a learning contract, you know, we have to learn each time how to help elicit that information, and a lot of times it's like you know oh you, any book, just give me any book, it doesn't matter what book I read. *[name of learner]* will say. But it's not true. He either doesn't know, or hasn't taken that freedom to go and find the book that is really going to interest him. Or it's in group, whatever you teach us we want to learn.

Sherry:

In situations like that when in a way you're negotiating with students, what are the areas you feel the most comfortable with your own authority as a teacher, and what are the areas in which you might feel less comfortable, or clear...

They have authority to *[decide what they want to do during]* options. I mean, you know, like there's that tiny portion of the day when they can set their own agenda. Or with the computers if there's stuff they want to learn. Or when it's time to check out books or tapes. You know whatever they want to do.

They mostly decide what they want to write about as well...they have the authority to do it.

They have the authority not to answer questions if they don't like it, or think it's too personal, or you know, don't wanna touch it.

Sherry:

I remember last time, I think actually it was the first time we talked... you brought up privilege in the context of talking about editing students pieces on the computer. And you said, what is teacher privilege. How much, you know, we have a certain amount of privilege and how do we use it. And I was wondering

more what you meant now by that. What is teacher privilege.

Oh, I think it was when we were talking about voice. And I was trying to convey this idea that we have, or I'll speak for myself, I have the privilege of looking at a piece of [name of learner]'s writing and appreciating her voice, and even though there are grammatical problems in her writing, I can say this is [name of learner], and this is the way [name of learner] speaks and this is the way [name of learner] writes and I think this is beautiful poetic language, but is that coming from my sense of privilege, being able to speak and read and write in a different way than [name of learner] can and in what ways does that influence how we look at voice. That was what I was getting at. Because I know for me, I always err on the side of preserving voice as opposed to cleaning everything up in a piece, and I think we're different here ... than at a lot of schools. Many people err too much on the side of cleaning everything up and getting rid of all voice. I just wonder, you know, there have definitely been people who've come through here, who want, you know [name of second learner] wants every change made and once he voices that I go in and I help him make every change he needs to make, and [...] get grammatically perfect. But with other folks who aren't that clear about what they want, I wonder how much of our privilege gets in the way of saying oh this is a beautiful piece of writing when maybe they really want more specific help.

Sherry:

Okay, what do you mean by privilege, exactly, what are the things that make you privileged?

You have access to a use of language that, I mean that's one thing that we have that most folks coming here don't have. And whether it was like the advantages of education, or a family life that might have encouraged things, or innate smarts, or whatever, I think that all contributes to that.

And I think it's privilege because they trust us to do what's right, to do the right thing, in terms of their writing, what we're going to clean up and what we're gonna say is, this is you, we don't want to change it.

Which is why when we don't fix everything and they find out, we didn't tell them about one word, they'll call us on that. Oh, you didn't, [name of teacher] just looked at this last week, and she didn't say anything about this, or, yeah..

Sherry:

So privilege is mainly a result of formal education and um maybe socioeconomic background, is that what you're talking about, or is it other things. What you have access to...

I think it's just taking reading and writing totally for granted. You're able to read all kinds of things and exposed to anything you want to be exposed to.

Yeah, I think it is interesting, because I think of somebody like [name of learner] who is just a beginner reader, but he will pick up a piece where we have preserved the voice, and he'll go through and articles are missing, or where they shouldn't be, he gets really mad, well, this isn't right, you know, like, I know this, I know this isn't right, how dare you put this in a publication that I'm gonna read, you know, and, I guess, it's just interesting to acknowledge his perspective on it. We're all so concerned with preserving voice, with being open to everyone, everyone's language, everyone's experience, and then you know to have a learner like [name] I think, well, he's a white male and you know he said that so I'm not gonna respect that as much, but he has a right as somebody who is learning to read to voice his own...

But I think that's also part of his not, he might not know our system yet, he might not know what writer was that, was that a beginning writer, was it someone who's a more advanced writer, he, he, I mean, I think something like that deserves the response well, of let's explain how we work in process writing. That we all don't go from writing this one draft to making it perfect.

Sherry:

...can privilege also be what you don't say as well as what you say in the sense that you have information about grammar and about spelling and things, when do you decide to divulge that information or to not?

Partly that's our privilege, partly that's our teaching philosophy. I mean, we start off, and at least I tell my folks, I'm not gonna help you fix, or I'm not gonna fix everything in this piece, it's gonna be too overwhelming. We're gonna look at these two things. You could look at that as my privilege to decide, or you could look at it as like, oh, I'm a teacher, I know what I'm doing here, I know that the place to start with this particular person is spelling, and I'm gonna to leave out punctuation, grammar, paragraphing, sentence organization, you know, everything, and say, wow, we just need to work on basic spelling with [name of learner] for a while, and then we can get into other stuff. Partly privilege, but partly you make an informed estimation as a teacher as to what's best gonna serve this learner, and they're not gonna get frustrated, and they're gonna keep on working. So. I mean I think that idea of privilege comes in more with folks that are at a higher level of writing to begin with ... who's able to get words down on the page pretty easily.

Sherry:

Yeah, that's what I think, I mean it's fairly clear that with a beginning writer you can't do everything all at once, but what about that case of a more advanced writer who might be asking for certain things, and you choose not to work on all of

those at once, what is the line between privilege and your you know skill as a teacher and your knowledge as a teacher in deciding what's right for that student.

Well, I think as long as you tell 'em what you're doin', you know, I mean, it would be taking advantage to sit down with somebody like *[name of learner]* and say We're gonna work on this, this and this, and then your piece will be perfect and you're holding back this information that you have, but you know we wouldn't be likely to do that.

And *[name of learner]*'s an interesting case because she has another tutor who insists everything will be perfect, and *[name of learner]* will do a piece here and bring it to the tutor, and the tutor will find a zillion things wrong with it. Well of course we saw those things wrong with it, but our philosophy is different than what this tutor's is.

Sherry:

I'm still slightly unclear about what privilege is. And maybe that's because it's a hard concept to get at..

I think it's just choice, you know, and how you go about what you're gonna...

But I feel it's so weird, because if you're in a teacher/learner situation, obviously, people are gonna come here, are coming here, they don't feel that their reading and writing is up to snuff. If I went to get ski instructions, I wouldn't think oh that skier is privileged he isn't showing me how to do a slalom ski or whatever. I mean I don't know, I'm going to this person for help, and I think that's how a lot of our learners see us. Well, of course they're gonna know more, or of course they're going to be in a position to be able to pick up a book and just skim through it and so oh, I think this might be good for you.

Sherry:

Know more specifically about reading and writing.

Yeah, but certainly not how to fix cars or start a business or fix refrigerators or start a business or get through the welfare system or whatever.

Sherry: What might learner privileges be?

Well, I know *[name of learner]* who is a minister has that privilege of preaching and that's not something I'd wanna do, or be good at doing, but that's his privilege to....I think the skills, the occupational skills they come to class with are privileges I don't have.

See, I don't think that's the use of the word privilege that, I mean maybe we

should define that term. You know because, [*name of learner*]'s got a facility with oral language, and then a belief in God that he develops into being a preacher. I don't know if I would call that a privilege. I mean, a privilege, isn't a privilege something that you have that you don't really do anything for, you just kind of get it, I mean, I think that's important to define. And I'm wondering you know, if this idea of privilege is not even the right word, we should be talking about authority and maybe teacher assumptions or something. I don't know.

Sherry:

Yeah, I mean, that's a good point, that's part of trying to get at what is privilege about, and is it the right choice for what we're talking about. And the way that it first came up was just in the context of voice and editing and so in that sense, you meant in a way that you had access to something that the student didn't, i.e. grammar and uh those kinds of.. spelling, right? (Gr: right) Basically, and you were talking about how much should you impose, is that it? or how much should you not divulge, and that was your privilege in the sense that that was something you had the ability to decide and students didn't, is that what you meant?

Yeah, and how you go about presenting that to the students, you know how much you tell them, and how much you don't tell them, when you're talkin about.. I don't sit down, you know, all the learners that come through here, we have lots of folks who come in, and I don't sit down and explain the writing process with new learners as they come in as clearly as I should. I get really caught up in what's going on in the class. I was thinkin a lot about what [*name of learner in discussion group with learners*] said, you know, about how we underline, we keep track of the words they're getting wrong, and I can see how the learners would think that, because, for me as a teacher, I get so caught up in everything that's going on, that I forget to sit down with everyone and really explain the notion of writing process, and keep up with it as they're having a hard time. You know strugglin along, and so I think that that's just why it came up for me. I think two things. I think we do have some privilege here, because of our education, and I don't think we can, maybe it's not the right word, but you know, I don't think we can deny that we've got something. And not that it's a bad thing. I don't wanna, you know, we're teachers and we should have this privilege because it would be irresponsible if we didn't have it and we were trying to teach these people. But we do have something.

I'm not denying that we don't have privilege in our lives, but I think how it's being used in this discussion, I guess I just don't understand.

Sherry:

Yeah. I think that's right. I think there are specific ways that it has meaning, and other ways that we were starting to talk about it wasn't what the essence of privilege is at all, and it might be more appropriate to talk about knowledge, skills,

authority, ability, and assumptions as you say, but specifically as far as you know, access, having had education, and now access to certain types of information, that might be what privilege is in this context. That, and really nothing else, or maybe some kind of as you say home life, or upbringing or something like that.

I think one of the few privileges that they have is whether to play our game or not, you know, whether to respond to our questions in the dialogue journal, you know we're all into telling the personal narratives, but some of them might not want to tell personal narratives. I guess, again, I don't know if this would be a privilege or not, but they have the option of not playing by our rules. And a lot of them don't, or not a lot, but some of them don't.

Sherry:

Right. It might be interesting, then, to talk about power, for a minute, because we had privilege, authority, power, and, what are some of the powers that teachers have? I mean this is just a description and then I'll ask what power you feel comfortable with, and what you don't as much.

I think we have the power to lead the schedule, and lead the discussions.

And end the discussions.

I don't see the difference between authority and power I guess.

Now we're all confused.

Sherry:

That's a good question. What is the difference between authority and power?

Let's see, I think maybe, let's see, I think power is how you use your authority and authority is you know who's able, or who isn't able, to do certain things, and let's say maybe you have authority in the classroom as a teacher, but you may not wanna quote wield it, like, let's say you have the authority to begin or end discussion, but let's say you don't use that, so maybe you're giving up power to me, or [name of teacher], or the group, or something like that.

Sherry:

That's interesting. In that definition, authority is something you get by the role you play and the labels you have, and power is the action, of how you put it to use.

(Gr: I like that definition) And some people have power who are not in roles of authority, I mean that's the other part.

That's everyone in the class.

Well I think the whole dynamic, like if we're talking about group dynamics, [name of teacher] and I have often talked about there's like this *family* dynamic and *family* power going on, because in a weird way, we get so close to many of these

learners, that you get into that weird sort of relationship when you know a lot about this person, or too much about this person, you care a lot about this person, and it's just interesting to watch how, during reading and writing time, many of the learners will [...] the authority figures, and then during break times, often times, snide comments will be made at any one of the three of us in perhaps a loving familial way, or hurtful like I'm gonna get back at you for having any bit of power. Or knowing more than me. Or me havin to be in this position.

Sherry:

What are the places, I mean this is the same question I asked with authority, what are the types of power that you have that you feel comfortable with, and what are those things that rub and feel abrasive to you when you have to use power, you don't want to, wish you didn't have to.

I hate having to tell people to keep their voices down, and be respectful of other people, I mean, I think I'm sick of having to do that. People should just remember that this a big classroom and lots of things are going on, to be respectful of other learners, and so on.

... I hate it when I have to tell people to be nice, and to respect one another. And you know, I have so much respect for so many of these folks, and think they do of other people, and when somebody makes a stupid comment, I just HATE having to play the role of that's inappropriate, and pulling people aside, and having little talks with them about how they behave, I hate that, these are adults.

We were just talking about that ... I mean, that's really been one of our long term goals for a long time to just involve them more in the whole learning process. But to [...] do that and have the framework to do that has been really difficult.

And I would love it if they would police each other during the break, and one of them would do it nicely and say...

But do it, do it, nicely, I mean we do have people policing each other, but it's sometimes not [...] like, shut up, you know, that's a dumb thing to say, or just sit down, you know and that's

Promoting respect.

Sherry:

It takes a lot of time, it really does to get to that point, and you just made the shift from the other place, and getting adjusted to this place and all this stuff.

I mean, I think we were doing that with the book, [*the published book of learners' writing*], and I think that it's our plan, but it's just been really hard, for some

reason, to implement it.

Can you see any differences in the group here as opposed to there?

The dynamics. I can't even remember before the [change]. Like I think it affected me so drastically. That I can't remember what it even felt like.

I commented on what I felt some of the differences were.

* *What is the role of the teacher? A teacher is a curriculum developer, a facilitator, a counselor. Teachers "run things" in the classroom, deciding when one activity begins and another starts. Teachers do intakes, i.e. interview new learners who are interested in enrolling in the program. They order the books. Also, they have an important role when it comes to reading and writing. They are role models, modeling reading and writing skills and habits, showing that reading and writing can be enjoyable, and that even after years of doing it, one still makes mistakes. Teachers working together shows how cooperative efforts "pay off". Teachers "encourage, ... provide answers ... encourage [the students] to find answers, and [are] patient and supportive".*

* *In what areas do teacher and learner roles overlap? In reading group, during writing time, and during break time. Learners give input about the content of lessons, learners and staff negotiate decisions about writing topics together. Learner expectations of staff may have been influenced by time spent in the formal education system. Some learners, for example, may expect staff to take on traditional teacher roles and to be authority figures. Some learners may feel uncomfortable, especially initially, when these expectations are not met.. The teachers would like to find ways of increasing overlap in teacher and learner roles, but it is not always easy to know how to go about doing this. In addition, resistance from learners is often encountered. Roles overlap during break time. It is interesting that staff perceives that during break time, learners may find ways to express frustration with teacher authority, or with inherent differences in power in teacher roles and learner roles, "during break times, often times, snide comments will be made at any one of the three of us in perhaps a loving familial way, or hurtful like I'm gonna get back at you for having any bit of power....Or knowing more than me. Or me havin to be in this position."*

* *Teachers have authority. They are decision makers. They decide how much decision making power learners will have. They determine in which aspects of the program learners will be given the opportunity to make decisions. There's a recognition of the inherent dichotomy in this. Staff may want learners to have more input in decision making, but because this is a staff driven initiative, there are certain expectations and these may pre-determine the outcome. This predetermination is at odds with the original goal. It's difficult to know how this trap can be avoided.*

In addition, a certain power dynamic is established between staff and

learners from the start. An initial "bargain" is struck between the staff and the learners, in which learners agree to come to class twice a week and "try to participate as much as possible", and staff agree in turn to be there to help them to meet their goals. It's the role of the teachers, however, to ensure this bargain is being kept. If learners do not come, it is the staff's job to try to find out why not, and to eventually make the decision regarding whether or not that individual ought to remain in the program. The comment was made later, when we began talking about privilege, that, "I think one of the few privileges that they have is whether to play our game or not, they have the option of not playing by our rules. And a lot of them don't, or not a lot, but some of them don't."

* One of the ways in which staff believes learners can have more authority and control over their own learning, is through goal setting. Curriculum content, instructional methodology and programming decisions informed by a commitment to be responsive to learner goals will not only be more meaningful, but is also a way of sharing decision making power. The problem is that it's often times difficult for learners to articulate their goals, or for staff to help these goals be articulated without in some senses controlling the outcome, "or even our hands are just tied because we can't figure out what this person's goals really are, and how to help them achieve them and how to make them own the learning. And own their responsibilities for the learning, and we're here to help them do it. It's very hard." Again, there's this inherent dichotomy in place. The staff has an agenda, they want learners to have more control over their own learning, and one way to do this is for staff to be responsive to learner goals. Yet, this involves asking learners to set goals. Sometimes learners may feel overwhelmed when staff ask them to have more control, more authority, more power. They don't want this power the staff is "handing over".

* What is teacher privilege? When we began talking about privilege, we began talking about Standard American English. Being privileged means having access to the use of language, eg. written and spoken SAE which may have been a result of, "the advantages of education, or a family life that might have encouraged things, or innate smarts, or whatever, I think that all contributes to that." It is taking reading and writing "totally for granted." In addition, it's a privilege to decide when and where to edit learner writing for Standard American English. "... I think it's a privilege because they trust us to do what's right, to do the right thing, in terms of their writing, what we're going to clean up and what we're gonna say is, this is you, we don't want to change it. Which is why when we don't fix everything and they find out, we didn't tell them about one word, they'll call us on that. Oh, you didn't, [name of teacher] just looked at this last week, and she didn't say anything about this..." In other words, leaving learner writing unedited for Standard American English may be preferable to the staff for various reasons, eg., because the learner may not be ready to edit all aspects of their work, or because the staff may believe that learner usage more accurately conveys their meaning. Learners themselves, however, may object to this. "I wonder how much of our privilege gets in the way of saying oh this is a beautiful piece of writing when maybe they

really want more specific help."

There seem to be three factors influencing teacher decision to edit pieces for SAE, or to help learners to do so: 1) learner readiness, 2) the genre, audience and purpose of the writing, and 3) learner's stated goals. These decisions are informed by instructional philosophy, teaching experience, and a commitment to try to discover and respect learner's goals. Where does privilege come in? Perhaps privilege is inherent in native facility with SAE, in that this does allow one access to certain goods and services of society. Withholding knowledge and information about Standard American English from learners would indeed be a misuse of one's role as a teacher, and the authority that confers. Yet, it does not seem as if the staff in this setting does so, "it would be taking advantage to sit down with somebody like [name of learner] and say We're gonna work on this, this and this, and then your piece will be perfect and you're holding back this information that you have, but you know we wouldn't be likely to do that." The staff is committed to helping learners to meet their goals, and they do so in the best way they know how: by trying to create a learner-centered curriculum based on students' stated goals (even if these is difficult to determine at times); by encouraging learners to write in ways that are personally meaningful, emphasizing writing as a meaning-making activity; and, by exercising their judgement as teachers about when and how explicit instruction around the structure of language is necessary to help learners to meet their goals.

Conflicts will arise, this is natural. Learners may not understand reasons behind methodology, or have expectations based on past experiences with formal education different from what they encounter at the center. Staff may struggle with how to create spaces for learners to express frustrations, ask questions, and state goals; or how to respond appropriately to stated goals, or how to express their own goals and philosophies in clear, understandable terms. It's an ongoing process. What is clear is that the staff is committed to finding ways to move towards an increasingly learner-centered pedagogy. There is an underlying respect for the learner's needs, goals, skills, knowledge and identities. In this context, the staff may well be privileged in having access to reading and writing skills, and facility with Standard American English, the question is not whether or not this privilege exists, but rather what one does with the power and authority that confers in this setting. "Yeah, and how you go about presenting that to the students, you know how much you tell them, and how much you don't tell them, when you're talkin about."

In the past year, the center faced the repercussions of a disaster which destroyed the previous site. They lost most of their material resources, and had to move to a new site. It is important not to lose sight of how difficult the transition has been, and how this has affected time and energy available for implementing new plans and ideas for the program. At the same time, as a result of these discussions, and staff learning of students' lack of clarity about methods used, the staff has implemented a plan to include discussion around language and instruction in the next series of classes.

Summary: Discussions with Staff

Writing instruction ought to:

- *be individualized.
- *be based on learner goals.
- *focus on making meaning and being understood.
- *encourage learners to write about meaningful, personally relevant topics.
- *allow learners choice in deciding what to write, and what not to write, about.
- *not focus on error correction.

Written Standard American English:

- *is important because knowing how to use it can provide access to education, jobs and other goods and services of society.
- *is more or less important in a particular piece of writing depending on the purpose, audience and genre.
- *ought to be taught when learners are ready for it.
- *ought to be taught if learners express a desire to learn it.
- *ought to be taught in the context of making meaning, and as needed for specific purposes.

Issues of power and privilege:

- *and authority are inherent in language teaching.
- *are related to being able to take reading and writing for granted.
- *are related to having facility with written and spoken Standard American English.

Teaching philosophies and rationale behind methods ought to be discussed openly and often with learners so that misunderstandings can be clarified, or avoided, and so that learners and staff can work together to create a meaningful, relevant program of instruction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

There were many similarities in the beliefs of the learners and staff who attended the discussions, and in the themes which emerged. In both discussions we talked about power. In the discussion with staff, this emerged as a topic in the initial meeting, and was placed on the agenda for our discussions before we had the first one. For both staff and learners, power emerged in this context, as something which is related to one's ability to speak and write clearly, for multiple purposes, and be understood. Inherent in this ability is the ability to write Standard American English when necessary. It is necessary particularly when writing job applications, when writing formal letters, and when doing academic writing. In other words, it is necessary in places in our society where we negotiate for access to goods and services, where we negotiate for power.

The ability to write Standard American English is something that the learners and the staff both believe is important. There are differences of opinion about how and when it ought to be taught. Many of these differences come from learner's expectations based on previous experience with school, and from misunderstandings about the rationale behind existing methodology. At the same time, there is agreement between both staff and learners that writing instruction ought to: focus on making meaning; on writing about personally relevant topics; include choice in deciding on topics; and, vary depending on an individual's particular needs, goals, and preferences. Both agree that writing is most difficult to do when one is concerned with making errors. The primary concerns of both staff and students in these discussions relate to how one can best learn to write, and how access to written Standard American English can best be facilitated, is approached, is talked about, and is controlled. Writing is powerful. The ability to write clearly, to make meaning and be understood, gives one power.

From the staff and learners in these discussions, we also know that attitudes

and beliefs about Standard American English are informed by past experiences with school, by religious beliefs, by culture, by the media, by the larger sociopolitical context. Whether or not it is believed to be inherently better than other dialects informs how one perceives one's own native dialect. If one believes that one's native dialect is inherently inferior, this will not be the dialect one wants to write down onto paper. This belief inhibits the ability to write. Beliefs and values about standard and nonstandard dialects are therefore important to address in an adult literacy context, not only because they have implications for the wider sociopolitical context, but because they have a direct influence on the ability to write.

Conclusions drawn from a survey of existing literature on nonstandard dialects and writing instruction support the findings of these discussions. Inherent in language instruction are issues of power. Methods for teaching writing are important, but what's more important is how these methods are talked about, how access to language is perceived, approached, discussed and controlled. It is in this sense that teaching is political. Choices one makes, whether consciously or not, are either reflective of and serve to recreate existing sociopolitical realities, or work towards changing them. All educators are change agents. Whether one is working towards a more equitable world, or working to preserve the existing order, teaching is an act of creation.

Recommendations

- * Talk about language: create spaces in which an ongoing dialogue about language can occur.

In any setting where language instruction is occurring, and specifically in adult literacy settings, spaces must be created for talking about language. There are two types of talking about language that are important. The first is the talk about attitudes and beliefs about language, about what language is. The second is

the talk about how the teaching of language occurs.

Talking about attitudes and beliefs around language: can help to facilitate understanding about oneself and one's world; can inform practice, for both students and staff; can help to create a common language for talking about language; can help learner's and staff in setting clear and meaningful goals; can expand understanding about the functions and nature of language; and, can explode myths.

Talking about how the teaching of language occurs: can improve communication between staff and learners; can help to avoid or clear up misunderstandings; can help to create more meaningful, relevant, methodology based on learner's needs, preferences and goals; and, can create opportunities for frustrations about inherent or perceived power imbalances to be expressed and explored.

Talking about language will undoubtedly result in talk about issues of power, control, authority, and the larger sociopolitical realities, either directly, or obliquely. A forum for discussion of these issues is important, but at the same time, it is critical to respect the desires of those who do not wish to engage in conversation about these issues. It is not a matter of forcing an agenda; it's not about calling a meeting entitled, "Language and Power"; it's simply a matter of creating spaces in which voices can be heard, and then, listening.

- * A meaning centered approach to the teaching of writing is important for speakers of both standard and nonstandard dialects.

Writing is learned best by writing, writing as much and as often as possible. A focus on error correction inhibits one's motivation, as well as ability, to write. It emphasizes deficiencies in the writing, and therefore sends a message to the writer that he or she is deficient. This inhibits writing. A focus on writing to make meaning encourages writers to write about personally relevant and meaningful topics. This improves one's motivation to write. Also, in a focus on writing to

make meaning, clarity of expression is emphasized. It is in this context that one understands that different types of writing are needed for different purposes and different audiences. Standard American English, for example, in our current world, is necessary if one wants to apply for a job in mainstream U.S. society. It is not that that dialect is inherently better, or that one's own is inherently inferior, just that they are different. Issues around language diversity in a meaning-centered approach to teaching writing, focus on differences, not deficiencies.

- * Writing instructors for speakers of nonstandard dialects must educate themselves about dialect diversity.

Educators must educate themselves about dialect diversity for several different reasons and on several different levels. First, a familiarity with structural aspects of the dialects of one's students will improve one's ability to facilitate writing for clarity of expression. An understanding that every dialect is a legitimate, coherent, and cohesive language, in its own right, will decrease emphasis placed on error correction. Second, an understanding of the sociopolitical framework surrounding issues of language diversity in the United States will improve educators ability to make conscious choices in the classroom, and to assist their students in doing the same. Third, exploration of issues around dialect diversity will help to explode some of the dangerous myths that contribute to perpetuating inequalities in our society.

For a more in-depth discussion of the specific recommendations for writing instruction to, and writing instructors of, speakers of nonstandard dialects please see the bibliography, specifically Wolfram (1991), Wolfram and Christian (1989), and Farr and Daniels (1986).

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