

THE CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PRACTICE OF METACOGNITIVE STUDENT-TEACHER EXCHANGES

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Imagine stepping inside a typical classroom of an American middle or secondary school. You might see rows of beige chairs facing the whiteboard at the front of the classroom and a series of pristine posters situated along the walls. These might enumerate essential characteristics of essay writing and hang above neat stacks of grammar workbooks that feature techniques for clear and effective compositions. Such a tidy and well-resourced classroom, one might think, would be indicative of a prepared and thoughtful teacher.

Yet would there also be sufficient space for students' personal dialects rather than imposed grammar structures, as proposed by the participants at the 1974 Conference on College Composition and Communication? Would the teacher be inviting authentic speech rather than singular modes of conventional communication? Would writers be producing sufficient *expressive* (Britton et al. 141) or *reflexive self-sponsored* writing (Emig 3), rather than traditional five-paragraph analytical essays, which have been defended by scholars like Byung-In Seo and Edward White?

Schools too often demand students' compliance rather than focus on what Django Paris terms *culturally sustaining pedagogies*. This approach goes beyond *culturally relevant* or *culturally responsive pedagogies*—terms popularized respectively by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay—in that educators even more actively affirm students' home identities and invite multiple discourses, rather than simply respond to them. Such acts deliberately integrate

student voice and multicultural dimensions of knowledge embedded in home communities, including the often silenced everyday discourses and preferred languages of students.

This piece urges for a bold disruption to outmoded pedagogical models that predetermine assessments, which should more precisely reflect students' true strengths rather than their anxieties or assumptions about teachers' wishes. Educators should expand opportunities for metacognitive reflections in order to better understand writers' needs and encourage a more participatory composition process. Metacognition and culturally sustaining pedagogies activate student reflections, to which teachers can respond directly. Rather than presuming deficits in young writers, teachers should instead employ metacognitive strategies to acknowledge diverse authorial voices, various writerly motivations, and distinct modes of expression.

First, I will begin by outlining important developments in metacognitive pedagogy, building on several writers who have commented on the need for metacognition in composition studies, connecting this line of inquiry to culturally sustaining pedagogy. I then discuss the significance of meta-awareness during writing conferences, offering pragmatic suggestions for practicing teachers. Finally, I elaborate on the use of metalinguistic written reflections as a co-generative practice, supplementing this commentary with an example of a classroom scenario.

Meaning-Making with Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

In the past few decades, student demographics have shifted dramatically. According to the 2015 United States Census Bureau, over half of babies under the age of one in the U.S. are racial or ethnic minorities, and figures for non-white populations continue to grow (Pew Research Center). At the same time, the U.S. Department of Education has noted recently that eighty-two percent of elementary and secondary public school teachers in 2016 were white. In light of this disjuncture, I propose that schools

emphasize more spoken and written exchanges between students and teachers to uncover metacognitive processes that reveal writers' authorial intentions and empower them to become self-aware learners.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Metacognitive Discourse

James Paul Gee has argued that meaning-making depends on fluctuating practices, diverse contexts, and competing interests (43). Cultural norms are constantly negotiated and contested in discursive spaces, and although they may appear fixed, words also reflect complex and changing meanings that require nuanced evaluations. However, if teachers do not share the same cultural backgrounds as their students or if they undervalue learners' capacities, educators may be missing greater subtleties in their writings. Metacognitive conversations can thereby help expose deeply encoded systems of meaning and expose greater agentic possibilities for students.

A careful "contemplation" of one's own composition (Emig 44) can help reposition students as critical reviewers of their own work. It is important for writers to engage in dialogical exchanges about their visions and aims with teachers, who then address individual questions and ideas accordingly. Rather than requiring writers to make corrections based on instructors' own beliefs about conventional writing, schools should include metacognitive dialogue to disrupt a transmission model of education, in which red markings drive student corrections but do not require extensive thought or analytical reflections. By encouraging students to identify issues of personal importance, take bold risks without the fear of suppression, and argue for unconventional choices, teachers truly actuate culturally sustaining practices.

Scholars such as Donald Murray, Timothy Lensmire, Muriel Harris, and Judy Parr have commented on the need to value students' voices throughout the composition process. I intend to build on this tradition by connecting a form of radical democracy to the act of honoring students' artistic and personal identities. However, it is no longer enough for a teacher to listen without

judgment, ask open-ended questions, observe progress, model strategies, and explain principles, as Muriel Harris suggests (55-69), but also to accommodate students' own language preferences and rhetorical styles in the evaluation process. Through culturally sustaining pedagogies, teachers value students' contributions and communicate feedback that incorporates writers' own communicative norms and creative visions.

Admittedly, Harris has referred to a number of writers on culture and education, such as Edward Hall and Robert Kaplan, who have respectively claimed that Arab students tend to use over-exaggerated prose and that "Oriental" students often write tangentially rather than directly (Harris 89-90). While her aim to emphasize the existence of communicative differences between cultures is well-intentioned, it is dangerous to categorize students as certain kinds of learners because of the identity groupings to which teachers perceive they belong. Individuals are complex beings with fluctuating and intersecting social identities, and those who share ethnic affiliations cannot be assembled into a monolithic group. For instance, as a Korean-American who grew up in Delaware, I am a different kind of learner from my mother, who immigrated to America at the age of 34 with a high school degree, and from my grandmother, who passed away in South Korea after the Japanese occupation and the Korean War. We have had distinct experiences as Korean women in the world, and no teacher committed to culturally sustaining pedagogies could anticipate the kind of writing we would produce simply based on our ethnicities.

Through metacognitive exchanges, teachers better understand students' unique voices, backgrounds, and sets of knowledge. To be anti-essentialist is not to oppose affiliations entirely, but simply to be vigilant about how the act of categorizing can be (ab)used by those with and without power (Narayan 92). Ultimately, greater agency in student writers can arise from hospitable conferences, which allow student compositions to be assessed with greater personalization, humanity, and respect, as Glynda Hull and her colleagues have argued. During conventional one-on-one meetings, teachers often direct the revision process and enforce formal

conventions, whereas a hospitable conference, in contrast, inspires genuine and active partnership between teachers and students to identify areas of concern and potential strategies together.

Meta-Talk in Student-Teacher Conferences

Having taught English literature at American schools in New York, New England, and international contexts, I have been able to work with diverse populations whose needs have varied. Through my experiences with these students, I have increasingly oriented my instruction around a culturally sustaining approach and supported pluralistic identity expressions in the classroom. Specifically, metacognitive exchanges have allowed me to better understand and respect students' individual motivations, unique sociocultural realities, and creative strengths as artists.

In a large metropolitan city on the east coast of the United States, I recently coordinated a middle-school writing project over the course of several months. Nineteen students' poetry pieces, personal narratives, and short fiction were drafted, refined, and distributed in a print publication. One student in particular, Adrianna (a pseudonym), was reluctant to start a poem modeled after George Ella Lyon's "Where I'm From." I saw that she had not started her draft after some time, and I kneeled next to her and asked her for a chat. Our conversation quickly revealed that she was not a reluctant or struggling learner but in fact a widely-read individual who aspired to be an artist. Adrianna expressed that she had done a similar writing project before, and so we settled on creating a new, special prompt that she could help develop instead.

What hobbies did she have? What were her ambitions? What did she love to do, and what did she enjoy most about it? She shared that she had dreams of becoming an R&B singer, and we tailored the assignment to fit her interests in songwriting. After discussing what she wanted to highlight, she worked diligently to write a beautiful poem about her envisioned future as a performer on the stage. Literary elements such as anaphora, assonance, repetitive diction, sensory imagery, and personification emerged from her work organically, and she demonstrated a natural sense of flow,

rhythm, language, emotion, and playfulness. By having a two-way exchange informed by culturally sustaining practices, she was able to redirect her energies into a sophisticated artistic production.

Questions that teachers could ask students during hospitable conferences include the following:

- What do you hope to get across to readers?
- What particular questions are you working through as a writer?
- How does x detail add to your central aims, rather than distract the reader?
- How can x phrase be restructured to be even clearer or more effective?
- How does your unique voice and style come through in x section?
- How do your choices as a writer create a certain kind of effect? Consider literary devices such as controlling idea, purpose, details, organization, tone, style, diction, etc.

Such questions restore students' sense of agency, for rather than enforcing a single method of academic writing, teachers aligned with culturally responsive practices dialogue with writers to investigate structural designs, rhetorical elements, and conceptual aspects of the work together. By allowing students to communicate metacognitive reflections and personal aims, instructors enhance students' capacity for self-expression, advocacy, and imaginative creations.

This argument supports a type of powerful, egalitarian communication between student and teacher advocated by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, in that both the reader and author can be right. There is no one perfect way to write, no ideal way to utter a thought. Rather, it is the discussion between two skilled readers and writers—the negotiation of linguistic, rhetorical, and artistic choices—that is most pivotal. Students are the most knowledgeable about their own ideas, and once the teacher is positioned as one of many well-educated readers, the act of composing becomes more about informed choices and ongoing processes rather than prescriptive

or rigid standards determined by supposedly all-knowing assessment designers.

Adrianna did not end up writing about singing because I, as an instructor, presumed that this young African-American girl loved to sing. Such essentialist moves may reflect good intentions but in reality perpetuate damaging microaggressions and harmful assumptions that continue to subjugate our most marginalized youth. Instead, Adrianna wrote about singing because she was a lover of music who knew all of Beyonce's songs, sang gospel at church every Sunday, and possessed multiple identities that drew her to music early in life. Through intentional student-teacher dialogue about her personal interests, this passion for music could be translated onto the page.

Critical Consciousness through Written Reflection

While I value discursive exchanges in the context of one-on-one conferences, I also recognize that there are some students who are more comfortable in nonverbal learning situations. When encouraged to participate in written reflections throughout the composition process, writers can have meaningful exchanges with instructors, who then view them as legitimate artists with valuable insights and important concerns.

Last spring, I taught at a large high school in New Hampshire, where I worked with English students on personal narratives. One student, Donna (a pseudonym), wrote a narrative about a family member's medical condition and the ways in which it had deeply affected her as a child. I reviewed her working draft and provided extensive in-line commentary, offering particular suggestions, but also invited her to defend any artistic choices in the final draft. My feedback spurred metacognitive reflection, as Donna was able to revisit her piece to experiment with alternative versions but also make executive decisions as to what would remain in the final essay.

In her rough draft, Donna had devoted one long passage to articulating an inner conflict that arose while attempting to

reconcile her feelings of sympathy and anger towards a loved one. In my written feedback, I had questioned the inclusion of this section and pointed out that she had shown, rather than told, these very sentiments earlier in the narrative through illustrative dialogue and scenes. I had written, “I wonder about the inclusion of this passage, as your earlier descriptions and direct quotations already seem to express your sense of internal conflict beautifully. This lengthy section feels a bit reiterative to me—does it advance your primary aims as a writer?” In her follow-up to my written feedback, Donna added supplementary author’s notes at the end of her final draft, at my invitation. She mentioned, “I edited carefully for wordiness and repetition, and while I’m still not completely sure about the shift between action and reflection, I decided to keep the long passage because it helped convey my sense of internal stress that I felt wasn’t portrayed explicitly enough in the earlier scenes.” Here, she shared that she made several corrections based on my comments, such as condensing the opening scene and selecting more powerful diction at crucial moments, but she also stated that she felt compelled to retain the long passage in question because of the way the narrative segments worked in conversation with one another.

She used her creative license to defend her decision to include a passage I had initially questioned, and when assessing her work, I respected her prerogative to do so. Honoring her decision to organize her essay in this way, I instead directed my final comments to other edits and commented on the extent to which I felt she had been able to convey her intended themes of familial love and coming-of-age in distinct ways.

Donna demonstrated that she had thoughtfully considered not only the *what* but the *why* in her writing; in other words, through the metacognitive process of written student-teacher exchanges, she conveyed her ability to think deeply about the composition process and to address my feedback appropriately while preserving her artistic voice. As a result, I did not penalize her for taking the initiative to keep certain components, and I instead commented on

other aspects, such as characterization and tone, and how they functioned in the final piece.

Scholars like Peggy O’Neill have commented on the need for conversational feedback, and I would extend this recommendation to add that instructors not only allow for self-reflection but also recognize the fullness of students’ personal experiences and capacities. By adopting a culturally sustaining pedagogical stance, instructors respect the intersecting identities of individual students and their continually repositioning writerly gazes. I use the term “writerly gazes” to indicate that student writers are required not only to compose their work from their own perspectives but also to respond to it as critical readers. They digest comments provided by instructors or peers, then re-examine their own work from the position of another reader. If they still wish to preserve certain stylistic, rhetorical, or compositional elements after thoughtfully reflecting on their work, teachers should support students in their efforts to carve authentic artistic voices and provide helpful commentary that elevates the impact of their writing overall.

While it is never easy for learners to articulate their intentions, participating in written metacognitive exchanges allows for culturally sustaining pedagogies, for teachers can appreciate students’ choices and make appropriate assessments around authorial justifications. This practice promotes greater student accountability during the construction of final assignments, which should incorporate “multiple forms of excellence” (Ladson-Billings 481). Once students develop the habit of critical self-evaluations instead of unthinking compliance, their intentional contributions can be more explicitly underscored and respected.

Composition and Identity Formation

In her research on developing writers, Cheryl Smith has noted that the act of meta-talk might be an imperfect and arduous one, but it is a worthwhile endeavor, especially if teachers are given the institutional support that affords time and space for these activities (674-75). Structural investment is crucial, for large class sizes and the pressure to prepare for state tests limit the efficacy of these

pedagogies. Teachers must be afforded the ability to give personalized attention to students and see them as individual writers, not just standardized test-takers or monolithic groups.

By encouraging metacognitive exchanges, students gain experience as generative and reflective writers, and schools are able to integrate multiple perspectives into curricula in place of teacher-determined content, standardized grammar conventions, and fixed rubrics. There is no single correct way to write, and students cannot be expected to discard their vast and complex identities when composing in academic environments. To accommodate more culturally sustaining pedagogies, teachers should encourage metacognitive practices and critical reflections of drafts as well as feedback.

Writing can have a humanizing purpose, one that transgresses notions of a generalized subject—such as the English Language Learner, the struggling writer, the disadvantaged student—and imagines multiple impulses and positions. Rather than viewing students as “receptacles” trained to deposit information upon passive absorption, effective teachers value learners as self-constituting agents with the capacity to co-generate curricular content and name their own truths (Freire 72).

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