SNOW WHITE AND LANGUAGE AWARENESS

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During the 1983 summer semester, I was asked to conduct a grammar workshop as part of a closely-supervised special program for about thirty-five highly-motivated black students. All had graudated from high school that same spring, often only days before college classes began and had been recommended for the program by their high school advisors. The eighteen students required to take the grammar workshop had tested into the basic writing course, which I was also teaching. Placing a minimal emphasis on grammar (asking that students be able to correct only the most basic errors), the basic writing course instead stresses thesis, paragraph development, essay structure, and logical thought. However, since many Summer Challenge students understood these concepts or caught on to them quickly and often had placed into the developmental course only because of grammatical problems, a workshop emphasizing grammar both in writing and speech seemed warranted. Perhaps reviewing the grammatical rules in the workshop while also dealing with larger essay elements in the writing class would lead to an overall improvement in the students' writing. In fact, their writing did improve that summer: 84% passed the essay exam qualifying them for the freshmen composition course. However, I am convinced that the grammar workshop played only a limited role in that improvement.

Given recent studies on the connection between writing proficiency and grammar, it is hardly surprising that the grammar workshop failed to improve significantly the students' writing. In fact, I soon discovered that most of the students (certainly the fifteen who passed) knew the rules. As a kind of pre-test, I presented the students with a long series of grammar exercises—subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, fragments—which they worked through orally. When the exercises were there in front of them, the students could

not only correct the errors quite easily but also explain why the corrections were necessary. However, when identical problems appeared in their papers or even, as happened later, when they wrote sentences on the blackboard, they were unable to see, much less correct, the problem. That is, the same student who knew why "The dog run" appearing as a mimeographed exercise needed correction would turn in an essay with several similar sentences. Or, students who knew the "it's" rule still would write "Its a boy" on the board. Clearly, the problem was not a lack of understanding but rather carelessness or inability to *see* the problem in their own writing. By the end of the summer, many students could find and correct some of these errors in their own essays. But their success rate was no greater than that of students taking only the basic writing course during the regular semester.

However, the workshop participants did learn during those eight weeks—and they learned what may in the long run prove more beneficial than knowing where to place an apostrophe. They learned about language.

According to the three advisors who administered the summer program, my workshop goal was not to teach students to use standard dialect only in their writing but also in their speech—not an easy task, for what was I to do when in response to a question about a missing student's whereabouts a chorus of voices assured me "He be coming"? If I stopped and immediately countered, "No. He *is* coming," I lost their trust. They would become ill at ease, and, in my worst imaginings, eventually stop speaking to me except in monosyllables. I knew enough theory to realize how harmful and insulting it would be to try to convince these students that their language—idiom—was "incorrect" whereas mine was "correct." Besides, who was I, only recently able to conquer such regionalisms as "warsh" and "muskacholi" for "wash" and " mostaccioli" and still unable to substitute "congratulations" for "congradulations"—who was I to insist, "He is coming instead of "He be"? I suppose I could get over "congradulations" if I tried—but I'm not sure I want to. It shows where I come from, connecting me to a multitude of other native Missourians, just as these students' speech connects them to a multitude of others.

My solution, while not necessarily ideal, taught them the appropriateness of language. We began by discussing how language changes when we speak to a friend or to a college dean, for example. Simple enough. But then their distinctions, and others for-

mulated along the way, were put to practice. One day, as in an old Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney movie, I suggested, rather unexpectedly to the students I think, "Let's put on a play to show that we can switch back and forth between dialects when we want to." Through popular vote, the students decided to work with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (eventually they became nine dwarfs, a kind of chorus).

After we had read and discussed the fairy tale, adding parts and deciding which version they wanted to use (Grimms' was the final solution—bloodier and thus more fun), I assigned parts, and for the next two workshop sessions students extemporized while I taped them.

I transcribed the tapes, and, with scripts in hand, the students began the long, often chaotic process, of revising. The purpose was to get them to decide when black or community dialect was in order and when standard dialect was appropriate. Eventually, they would perform the play for fellow students, advisors, and instructors.

Besides the fun we all had, the students benefitted in three ways.

First, although it is difficult to say how much of this learning has carried over into their own writing, the workshop participants learned about tone, style, word choice, and sentence revision. Two demonstrations of their increased awareness occur early in the play. In the improvised version (and the students were truly improvising; they had all read the story, but the performers faced me, the tape recorder, and the class without the story or notes in hand), the Queen, Snow White's mother, soliloquizes:

> I would like my daughter or my princess to be tall as a baby oak tree; figure as an hour glass; the color of the wood of an oak tree; long, black, silky, thick hair; large, pretty brown eyes; red cheeks—redness as red as pearls—whatever—teeth white as snow.

Taking into consideration Linda's nervousness, she did a good job; at the least she demonstrated an understanding of metaphor, even if those metaphors sometimes got confused. Nevertheless, in answer to my question, "Is this speech okay?" Linda and the rest of the class agreed that revision was necessary. After much discussion, the final version took this form:

I would like my daughter, or my princess, to have a complex-

> ion as smooth and brown as a sanded oak; an hour-glass figure; hair as long and black as the richest linen found on this earth; big, brown eyes; cheeks as red as my blood on the snow; teeth as white as the rarest pearls.

Although the soliloquy changed substantially, I will discuss only one revision: "figure as an hour glass." To my question, "*As* an hour glass?" Linda quickly responded, "No. 'Of.' " Eventually, I offered my only substantial revision: "Maybe you could say 'an hour-glass figure.' " Everyone agreed, and that change was written into the script.

For the performance, the actors and actresses were encouraged to use their written scripts, but Linda became flustered; also, she hadn't done a careful job of revising her written part. Interestingly, though, she remembered the "_____ as _____ as _____" formula; and, even more significantly, even though she forgot the "hour-glass figure," she went back not to "figure as an hour glass" but to "figure of an hour glass." Obviously something from the revising process had stuck with her.

In Scene 2, immediately after Linda's speech, Larry, her "husband," soliloquizes on her death. His speech begins:

> My beautiful wife has died. I don't know what I am going to do. And all she's left me is this—this child, this immature little babe . . . .

Larry was one of my best students and a good extemporaneous actor, so the speech needed little revision. However, the other students were bothered by these lines although they couldn't at first say why. One of the first revisions suggested was removing "immature": according to one student, "If it's a baby, of course it's immature." But this led to a discussion of tone. When Larry first improvised the part, that particular line got a big laugh from the rest of the class. They decided to play the line straight, and to enforce the serious tone, substituting "princess" for "babe" and "my" for "this"—"this" sounded, they said, too impersonal. Eventually, the line read, "And all I have left is my little princess." "I have left" also seemed more personal and caring than "she's left me." If sensitivity to language is one of the first steps in the revising process, the students had begun to develop that sensitivity.

The two other benefits were less utilitarian. First, students

became quite interested in when community and standard dialects were used. The students decided early on that the King, Larry, would switch to community dialect when he was angry because he had less control then. But this led to discussions of which dialect he should use with his servant, of which Snow White herself would use and of which the Dwarfs would use and when they would change. Snow White, they decided, would also be able to switch back and forth, as her father did, because she would hear both at home. Some students objected at first to her using a standard dialect at all because of her age, seven in the first version but later raised to sixteen to allow more freedom with sexual advances. However, her age was raised *after* the students concluded that a community dialect was not a childish speech pattern but a learned one. The Dwarfs—living alone in their woodland cottage—spoke almost exclusively in community dialect. But the students granted them the ability to change when at the play's end they talked to the King. All this discussion, some of it heated, led one student during a particularly intense editing session to challenge me: "But, Ms. Larson, you don't switch dialect when you're angry. I'll bet you always use standard." Essentially, she was right. However, I could point to some changes in my dialect that seemed inconsequential to me: "kep' " and "slep' " and an occasional "warsh" when I'm with my family. We also discussed a good friend of mine from out-state Missouri who speaks standard dialect beautifully except with his family. Then his speech is scattered with "he don't" and "ain't." These two examples seemed to convince the students that they were not somehow anomolies.

Two other dangers arose during these discussions. First, community dialect was sometimes identified too strongly as "informal." That is, it became equivalent to the *vous-tu* distinction in French. I suspect that to those who regularly switch between a community and standard dialect the reasons for switching are not quite that clean cut. But I did little to discourage that particular distinction. It served a purpose and seemed easier, in the limited time I had to work with the students, than exploring subtleties. Second, community dialect was often associated too strongly with slang. One reason for this again had to do with time; there simply was not enough of it for a thorough discussion of what specifically constitutes black community dialect. So, in the final performance, some students changed verbs to standard forms while retaining slang as an indication of community dialect.

This latter point leads to the third benefit of the workshop: students did develop the ability to modify their speech, becoming in the process more aware of what they were saying.

This increased awareness took several forms. Donna, who turned out to be the best writing student and the only *A* in the basic writing course, played Snow White. But I had chosen her to play the part not because of her writing abilities, not evident to me at the semester's start, but rather because she seemed conscientious, because she was sometimes excluded from the activities of the very close-knit group, and because she almost always spoke in pronounced black dialect. One of her parts in its original improvised version reads:

> Oh, tomorrow is my birthday. I'm gettin' me some flowers, and I'm gonna decorate my room. And I know my daddy's gonna get me something real gorgeous.

After much revision and practice, the final version was

> Oh, tomorrow is my sixteenth birthday. I'm getting some flowers to decorate my room. I know my daddy is going to get me something gorgeous.

In general, Donna benefitted from both the workshop and the writing class. She did well (*B*+) in her freshman composition class and is carrying close to a straight *B* average. However, her performance of this part exemplifies the virtues and failures of the grammar workshop. All the changes in her short speech were suggested by her or her classmates, but there was some dispute about which changes should be made. For example, Donna and several others wanted to change "daddy" to "father"; the latter seemed more formal and more appropriate to Snow White's basically standard dialect, especially after her age was raised. Others objected that they called their fathers "daddy." This was one time when I tried to distinguish between community dialect and an informal word choice. A consensus of opinion forced Donna to stay with "daddy." Other changes involved the elimination of "me" from "I'm gettin' me some flowers," and one student, unprompted, suggested eliminating "and I'm gonna," substituting instead "flowers to decorate my room." "Real" was eliminated as unnecessary, but perhaps we should have discussed alternatives because in the performance version, Donna, while retaining the much-practiced "getting" and "going to," brought back "real" and, incidentally, changed "daddy" to "father." The differences

between Donna's improvised speech, her final rehearsal version, and her performance version are dramatic. Despite her return to "real gorgeous," she managed to incorporate distinctly pronounced verb endings with her original dramatic enthusiasm.

The Dwarfs' performance experience is even more interesting. Some of the Dwarfs' problems were purely technical. In deciding parts, I had managed to combine members of two major cliques, and therefore the nine performers often had problems working together. In the improvised performance, the Dwarfs had spoken as the situation moved them; often two or more spoke at once. In transcribing the tape, I tried to include all even faintly intelligible lines, but then reassigning those lines and preserving the same spontaneity were nearly impossible. Furthermore, the Dwarfs were unwilling to do any work outside class to arrange their parts.

Despite these problems, however, at least one Dwarf's part reveals a significant process. Tina, a very vocal student and a good writer, did the most to advance the story line. In the following transcript from the improvised version, Tina's lines are marked by an asterisk.

Snow White:	Oh, a house! I am so tired. Oh, some food! Oh, I am so hungry. Oh, and some wine. Oh, I am so thirsty. Oh, I feel so sleepy. I think I'll take a nap. [Enter nine dwarfs]
Dwarf:	What is this?
Dwarf*	Who's been eatin' my food?
Dwarfs: together	Oh, no.
Dwarf*	They's somebody in this house!
Dwarf:	What you doin' in my bed, girl?
Dwarf:	What's your name?
Dwarf:	What's your name, little girl?
Snow White:	Leave me alone.
Dwarf:	What's your name, little girl?
Dwarf:	Are you lost?
Snow White:	Leave me alone.
Dwarf:	What's your name, little girl?
Dwarf:	Are you lost?
Dwarf:	Leave her alone.
Dwarf:	What is your name?
Snow White:	My name is Snow White.

Dwarf: Where do you come from?
Snow White: I come from out of the forest.
Dwarf: Go back.
Dwarf* Don't you know better than go walkin' in people houses when they not at home?
Snow White: I was tired.
Dwarf*: And eatin' they food?
Snow White: I was hungry.
Dwarf*: And drinkin' they wine?
Snow White: I was thirsty.
Dwarf*: And messin' up their beds?
Snow White: I was sleepy.
Dwarf*: But that's my bed!
Snow White: I'm sorry. I was sleepy.

Unlike Donna, Tina, at least when she spoke to me, almost always used standard dialect. However, in this scene, hamming and coming close to stealing the scene, Tina spoke as I assume she speaks around her friends. Of particular interest is her substitution of "they" or "they's" for "there," "their," or "there's."

As I mentioned, the class decided that the Dwarfs would use community dialect, but when Tina saw this scene, she objected strenuously: "I didn't say that!" I offered to play the tape for her; she declined. Again, unlike Donna, Tina could never quite get back during rehearsals the energy of the original lines. Her "They's somebody in this house" became stilted, the "they's" too clearly and distinctly pronounced. During the performance, however, consciously or unconsciously, she moved to standard dialect. Thus, "They's somebody in this house" became quite distinctly, "There's somebody in this house"; "eatin' they food" and "drinkin' they wine" became "eating our food" and "drinking our wine." Even though the majority of the audience consisted of her peers, Tina was apparently uncomfortable enough with the original version to make a switch.

The performance was not a resounding success: too many performers got stage fright, forgot lines and cues, or continued to extemporize, thus throwing the other performers off. However, the workshop as a whole, while perhaps not accomplishing its intended purpose, introduced students to the flexibility of language. They made several sophisticated revisions, taking into account tone and audience. They learned about the appropriateness of language.

Perhaps most importantly they learned that language and language play can be fun. Furthermore, because no one except their peers judged their speech, they came to trust me and consequently feel free, freer than any student's I've ever taught, to greet me with "Hey, Ms. Larson! How you doin'?"

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