

SOCIOLINGUISTIC CHALLENGES TO MINORITY COLLEGIATE SUCCESS: ENTERING THE DISCOURSE COMMUNITY OF THE COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

A significant body of research has examined the reasons behind high minority collegiate attrition. All of this work has contributed to our understanding of the unique challenges minority and first generation college students face in the difficult transition to the often new culture that is the college experience. One area that has gone virtually ignored in the literature, however, is the relationship of language, discourse, and literacy to collegiate success. Because the university comprises its own “discourse community”—with its own “ways with words”—those wishing to help minority students in their transition to college should not ignore students’ levels of academic literacy. Rather, differences in language use contribute to many students’ feelings of alienation from the academic and social culture of the academy. Fortunately, results from this study support the thesis that students lacking academic literacy may be able to learn it—and have a better chance at academic success—through the efforts of college-preparatory programs, college-level student academic services programs, pre-collegiate “bridge” programs, and college mentoring programs.

RATIONALE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

An abundance of studies has demonstrated that minority students face many obstacles in addition to those faced by other students entering the university (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1987; Chavous, 2000; Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Johnson, 1986; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000; Rodriguez, 1994; Rowley, 2000; Tinto, 1987). High attrition rates for minority students would

seem to add credence to the belief that these students face a far more difficult transition to college life than do their majority peers (Gonzales, 1999; Tinto, 1999; Zea, Reisen, Biel, & Caplan, 1997). Statistics from the site of this research study confirm that minority enrollment and retention are highly problematic. The University of Colorado at Boulder, like many other large public universities, has a large but fairly homogeneous undergraduate student body. In 1999, for example, 4,521 freshmen enrolled at CU Boulder. Of this total number, only 602 (14%) were minorities/students of color (7% Asian, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 2% African American, and 1% Native American) University of Colorado at Boulder (2001).

Similarly, though the University of Colorado claims as one of its goals to foster learning through an academically and socially diverse student body, it also faces the common and persistent problem of high minority student attrition. Thus, countering efforts to recruit, enroll, and graduate a large number of minority students for its Boulder campus is the fact that a disproportionately high number of minority and nontraditional students tend to leave campus before earning a degree (see Table 1). Thus, the University of Colorado at Boulder—the site for this research study—faces a problem endemic to many large, public universities: enrolling and maintaining a diverse student body.

Many plausible reasons have been put forth to help explain why minority students face a more difficult transition to college (and therefore why many of

Table 1. Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity, University of Colorado at Boulder

	Graduate by 4th summer (1995)*	Graduate by 6th summer (1996)*
All	35%	64%
Students of color	21%	49%
Other	37%	67%
Asian American	26%	54%
African American	13%	46%
Hispanic/Chicano	19%	47%
Native American	16%	32%
White	37%	67%
Other	39%	70%
International	40%	45%

University of Colorado at Boulder (2001) www.colorado.edu/pba/records/gradrate.htm.

them leave college prematurely) than other students. Some of the most commonly cited reasons for high minority collegiate attrition are: that many minority students are academically unprepared for the challenges of college (Anyon, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 1990; Oakes & Keating, 1988), that minority students may perceive that predominantly white college campuses are unwelcoming or even hostile to them (Allen, 1981; Bennett & Okinaka, 1989; Fleming, 1981; Just, 1999), and that the families of minority students—because many had not themselves experienced college—offer less practical and emotional support for these students (ACT Policy Report, 2002; Crump, Roy, & Recuperero, 1992; Nettles & Perna, 1997). Research suggests—both directly and indirectly—that the transition from high school to college is, for most freshmen, a significant cultural transition. Yet, when entering large mainstream universities, minority students are, in many ways, entering a society modeled upon a white, western tradition (Fitzgerald, 1993; Tyack, 1976). Their transition to the university is, therefore, complicated by the fact that they must adapt to a foreign culture (and one that represents a part of society that has historically demonstrated significant hostility toward minorities).

Though the research cited above has helped educators understand many of the unique challenges minority students face when trying to find social and academic success at mainstream universities, it has largely ignored an important aspect of cultural transitions: differences in discursive styles. This is important because sociolinguistic theory suggests that culture and cultural identity are closely associated with specific uses of language (Gee, 1990, 1998; Vygotsky, 1999; Wertsch, 1991). Changes in cultures often bring with them—or require—changes in discursive and literate practices (Gee, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). There can be little doubt that when they enter the university, many minority students are under-prepared in a strict academic sense. What should not be ignored, though, is that many minority students are not familiar with the linguistic styles or “academic discourse” required by the university. The university, like many other cultures, has its own unique and specialized discursive practices; as such, it is a “discourse community” (Bizzell, 1982, p. 7). As a discourse community, it is a place that “has its own language, its own forms and devices for that language, and its own specific laws for the ideological refraction of a common reality” (Medvedev & Bakhtin, 1978, p. 87). Thus, to be accepted as a member of this community—or any unique discourse community—one must both know and practice the kinds of discursive characteristics expected therein (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, 1984).

While sociolinguistic and cultural difference theorists have put forth ample evidence showing that minority students bring with them their own linguistic styles to their K-12 experiences—and that these socioculturally based linguistic styles often clash with those expected within schools (Au, 1980, 1986, 1991; Heath, 1983; Snow, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1993)—they ignore the fact that these linguistic styles do not merely disappear during a student’s K-12 schooling.

Rather, cultural reproduction theory (Willis, 1977) suggests that the opposite is the case: students propagate and perpetuate specific linguistic styles throughout their schooling (Au, 1986, 1991; Ogbu & Wilson, 1990). Thus, the same linguistic challenges that some minority students face when entering the K-12 educational system may, this research suggests, add to these students' difficulties when trying to make the transition from high school (and their respective home cultures) to the college. In short, because some minority students come to college lacking literacy in academic discourse, they also lack the "codes of power" (Delpit, 1995, p. xvi) that they need to be "full participants" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 105) in the academic discourse community.

Thus, this study expands upon the research on minority collegiate attrition by examining how language plays a part in the transition to college. It also examines how mediation—specifically in the form of instruction in specific academic practices and habits—may help traditionally under-served college students attain higher levels of college level academic success. The cases presented in the following pages provide evidence on the efficacy of attempts to mediate, in the form of instruction in academic literacy and "study skills," minority students' transition to the academic environment and culture.

METHODOLOGY

Evidence for the study was collected from students at the Student Academic Services Center (SASC), a part of the University of Colorado at Boulder's Student Services. All of the four study participants were first-generation, minority students from lower-middle class backgrounds. Students selected for the study were those who stood to benefit most from instruction in academic literacy and "skills" mediation. Academic need was determined through the SASC database,¹ through consultation with the Intake Coordinators (who work directly with students), and through consultation with the student her/himself.

In order to provide the specific context of each student and our work together, I employed case study methodology. Case study methodology lends itself to answering the contextual nature of the research questions and allows for multiple methods of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1981; Yin, 1984). Similarly, because the goal of a case study is to examine an instance of some concern, issue, or hypothesis, selectivity (rather than random sampling) of study participants is warranted (Merriam, 1988).

¹ The database provides for all registered students' current grade point averages (GPA), previous and current class schedule(s) and course grades, demographic information, and staff comments on students' academic strengths and weaknesses as determined through individual meetings/consultations with the student(s).

In this study I acted as a participant observer—in Spradley’s “active” sense of the term (Spradley, 1980, p. 58)—while working individually with the study participants as a tutor. More specifically, because I had extensive experience in the area of academic literacy and “Study Skills” assessment and instruction, as I collected data I also used the knowledge I had gained from these experiences to provide each study participant with instruction in academic literacy, study skills, and other related academic areas.² Through individual tutoring sessions that took place on a weekly basis, I collected data from the students about their experiences while I worked with them on academic literacy and study skills-related issues. Detailed fieldnotes, including verbatim student accounts of their activities, thoughts and behaviors, were collected during individual meetings. I supplemented the information I gathered in these meetings through formal pre- and post-study interviews. Similarly, periodically throughout the course of data collection I reviewed with each student their written work, their test results, their class notes, and any other pertinent information for the classes/topics in which they were having difficulties. When appropriate—and with the student’s permission—I photocopied said materials for further review and for inclusion in this study. Throughout the data collection process, I also asked students to keep a personal journal in which they described the nature of the academic difficulties they encountered, their feelings about being students at the university and about the work they were required to do therein, and their reaction to academic mediation and the effects they witnessed from this instruction.

To analyze the data collected through the means above, I employed James Spradley’s (1980) models of Domain Analysis and Componential Analysis. I reported the data in the form of vignettes and “realistic tales” (Van Maanen, 1988). Drawing from both the information gathered through domain and componential analyses as well as from an ongoing review of fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I included in the “write-up” particular information and examples that add credence to the topic at hand. To present the material in a readable fashion, I transformed the data into a narrative form.

THE CASE³

“Simon”

Simon was an 18-year-old Native American male and first-generation college student from a large Navajo reservation in central New Mexico. Simon had, during his first semester, earned a 1.65 Grade Point Average (GPA) on a 4-point

² I worked for two years as the Study Skills Specialist at the University of Colorado.

³ All names are pseudonyms and various aspects of their personal histories have been changed to protect their identity.

scale. He was on academic probation and therefore facing a possible dismissal notice if he failed to bring his GPA to a 2.0 or better in his second semester. Similarly, he was threatened with the loss of his reservation scholarships, which provided his only real hope of being able to afford a college degree. In our first meetings, Simon repeatedly complained both that he felt like an outsider in his classes and that he lacked the knowledge and skills it would take for him to be a good college student. Because of his previous academic experiences and his cultural heritage, Simon had never learned to value the kinds of verbal displays of knowledge that in many ways define the collegiate academic setting; he was not literate in the discursive traditions common to most mainstream freshmen. As a result, he felt lost—like an “outsider”—in the academy.

“Alex”

Alex was a lower-middle class 18-year-old Hispanic freshman from a large city in Texas who came to the study needing help bringing up his GPA. Like Simon, Alex had been placed on academic probation following his first semester as a college student (he had earned a 1.9 GPA in 13 credit hours of what he called “easy classes” and was facing dismissal from the University if he failed to bring his GPA up to the minimum level (2.0). Like Simon, Alex felt that his own discursive practices did not match well with those expected in his classes. He mentioned on numerous occasions that “I just don’t talk like them [his peers]” and that, at least in part because of language differences, he felt like an outsider on the campus. He seldom participated in any of his classes and even made efforts to avoid contact with his fellow students and professors because, he said, “I worry that they’ll judge me because of how I talk.” Adding to Alex’s feelings of alienation from his college peers was the fact that he was a homosexual on a campus that he said “talks a lot about diversity, but is really pretty conservative.” Not surprisingly, Alex admitted that he preferred to “stay to himself” both in classes and socially.

“Maria”

Maria was an 18-year-old middle-class Hispanic freshman from a small industrial city in southern Colorado. She explained to me that she was at the university largely because “my parents expected me to go to college” rather than out of choice. During her first semester, she had attempted 12 credit hours (four courses) and had earned a GPA of only .33. She therefore had one semester to reverse completely her academic performance and bring up her GPA before she would be dismissed from the university. Maria was a commuter student—she lived in a neighboring town—and seldom associated with her university peers. Rather, she chose to spend most of her time “partying” with her roommate and other friends from home. She did so, she said, because with her friends she could “talk like I normally do . . . we can be all ethnic and stuff.”

When on campus (or at college social events), on the other hand, Maria complained that she had to “act all smart . . . you know, use big words.” Maria felt that success in the university required that she talk like her peers. This she equated with “acting white,” which for a number of cultural reasons was highly problematic for her.

“Latricia”

Latricia, a 19-year-old lower-class African American, was a third-semester freshman from a large mid-western metropolitan area. Like all of the other students with whom I worked in the study, Latricia was on academic probation and in danger of being dismissed from the university. Like Simon, she was also in danger of losing her “full ride” scholarship. She had, in only 13 hours in her first year, earned a GPA of 1.5. Though Latricia had done well in high school—she was on the honor roll every term and was a member of the National Honor Society—she had come from an inner-city school in which her peers “didn’t take school seriously” and in which her courses were “not as demanding as they probably should’ve been.” Upon arriving at the university she was surprised to discover that she was “not prepared for the kind of work they make you do here.” Part of her academic difficulties were—like they were for the other students in the study—a result of differences in language use and a lack of understanding of the university system.

DISCOVERING AREAS OF ACADEMIC WEAKNESS

To determine the topics we would work on throughout the semester, I asked each student to describe areas in which he or she wished to improve. The issues they mentioned ranged from doing better on tests (Alex and Maria) to being able to take better notes (Simon, Alex, Latricia), to reading academic texts more efficiently (Simon and Alex), to becoming more comfortable speaking in class (Alex, Simon, Latricia and Maria).⁴ The latter was the focus of much of the work I did with each student, in part because it is so closely associated with discourse and academic literacy. Nonetheless, all of these issues had, I found through my work with each of these students, affected their academic performance. They were also areas that were, at least tangentially, related to academic literacy and discourse; all of the academic areas above involved literate practices specific to the university setting.

⁴This is not an exhaustive list. Rather, they are the areas that were, generally, common to all of the study participants. For a more detailed description of each student’s weaknesses, their work in specific areas, etc., please see White, 2003.

Though all of the study participants admitted to having specific problems that they wished to work on during our time together, I quickly learned that discovering students' areas of academic weakness—and more specifically their problems with academic literacy—is a task complicated by a number of factors. Most notable was the fact that though all of the study participants were—to varying degrees—aware of the fact that they had academic weaknesses that needed attention, it was also apparent to me that each had academic weaknesses of which he or she was not even aware. Coming from an environment that is in most ways quite dissimilar from the culture of the college, they had no way of knowing that they needed help in various other areas if they wished to improve academically. For example, each student had trouble maintaining a schedule and studying wisely and efficiently. This, in turn, affected their class attendance, their understanding of the topics discussed in class, and their ability to stay focused on academic issues. Time management and study skills were topics we would tackle early on in our work together. These are also, research suggests, the basic foundations on which academic literacy—and subsequently success in the academic discourse community—are based (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2000).

Finally, early in my work with these students it also became apparent that they lacked a basic understanding of the very workings—a kind of institutional literacy if you will—of the university system. They were all caught up in a bureaucracy they did not fully understand. Similarly, they did not know how to navigate the diverse discursive spaces and the corresponding ways of talking and being common to the university community. Simon's comment in many ways represents the feelings of all of the students in the study. He said, "You know, I'm still wet behind the ears and I don't know much, man. I came from a place where I hardly even knew that this system [the university bureaucracy and its corresponding discourses] existed" (interview). The students described in this study came to college unaware of the shared intellectual, linguistic, and social conventions that define the discourse community of the university system (Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990). Lacking this understanding of the operation of the university system—a kind of basic academic literacy—had caused and continued to cause these students significant problems and frustrations. For them to find success on a large university campus, they first needed to know the basics of how that system operated and how they were expected to interact with it. Thus, not only did Simon, Latricia, Alex, and Maria need assistance developing a proficiency in specific academic areas, they also needed help understanding the most basic levels of academic literacy and discourse—how the system works and how to operate (and communicate) effectively within it. Developing academic literacy was, I discovered, highly contingent upon students first having a more basic institutional literacy. There are, in other words, auxiliary literacies that are associated with and requisite for academic literacy.

FINDINGS

Basic Academic Literacy

As suggested above, I found early on in our work together that many of Simon, Alex, Maria, and Latricia's problems in adjusting to the university and to college classes came from a misunderstanding of the workings of a college campus and college classes. In this sense, these students lacked some of the most important information and skills—a kind of basic academic literacy—that they needed for success at the school. Like many minority students (ACT, 2002; Young, 2003)—and in contrast to most of their mainstream peers—these students had not been taught (by teachers, counselors or family) the basic skills they needed to succeed within the collegiate academic setting. Collectively, their experiences demonstrate, in many ways, that important kinds of literacies “remain hidden” to those not traditionally included within specific discourse communities (Street, 1984). Ironically, because the academy is itself so imbued with white western culture and therefore has a corresponding discursive tradition (Elbow, 1998), as an outsider to that culture these students were not even aware that they lacked the requisite literacy they needed for survival in the system. Each student was, in other words, unaware of his or her illiteracy in the academic discursive tradition. As such, they had no way of knowing that they needed—or any reason to advocate for—learning these skills and thereby becoming more academically literate. Rather, the discourse community of the university expected them to possess this kind of literacy—to know the rules of participation—prior to their entry into this system.

When these students entered the study, none had a conceptual understanding of their respective academic situations. For example, though Simon, Alex, and Maria all knew that they had not performed at a very high academic level and that this was the reason for their respective probationary status, none of them knew how to compute or predict grade point averages. As a result, they misunderstood what specifically it would take for them to get off of probation. Simon complained that “I never really know where I stand, like, grade wise” (meeting) while Maria had set for herself a goal for the semester—“nothing lower than a B” (interview)—that would fall far short of her getting off of probation. In short, because these students did not know how to compute a GPA, they were not fully empowered to take the steps necessary to get off probation.

Similarly, each student showed weaknesses in other areas that are crucial to success at the university level. For example, even after a completed semester Simon did not adequately understand how to use email. Similarly, Latricia “hated computers” (meeting) and was unaware of how to use the internet (she was, for example, unable to find the site for one of her classes, on which the professor had put assignment descriptions, sample tests, and his lecture outlines). Not knowing some of the more practical uses of their computers, these students

were, therefore, lacking an increasingly important academic tool and resource (Eisenberg & Johnson, 2002; Shelley, 1998). Similarly, Alex and Simon did not know to whom to turn for advice on getting student loans and neither knew where to go to get help when they each felt “stressed out” by their personal situations. Just as importantly, none of these students knew about the policy of grade forgiveness or how it might affect their respective GPAs or their academic record. Similarly, Maria, Latricia, and Simon all misunderstood the registration system (including how courses and course sections are listed). During his first semester, Simon had even mistakenly registered for—and was taking—two sections of the same course. In addition—and in spite of the fact that each student was in danger of being dismissed from the university following the semester—none of them were aware of the Continuing Education program and how, through it, they might both remain students and improve their GPAs so that they might re-enroll as matriculated students at a later date.

This lack of a basic understanding of the university system—a lack of a basic academic literacy and with it all of its ways of talking, working, valuing, and being—led to numerous and significant problems during each student’s first semester. Because they did not understand the workings of the university system—they lacked this “auxiliary” or basic academic literacy—they did not know how to navigate their way successfully through it. They did not have the tools they needed to “take charge” of their academic situations. Thus, soon after our first few meetings, we began to address these more basic areas of academic literacy.

Before we could address issues more traditionally associated with literacy and academic success (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2000), each student first needed to gain a better understanding of the university system and his or her respective place within it. Thus, we began our work by examining each of the issues above. In addition, I talked with the students—as appropriate—about the various resources available to them on campus. This proved to be especially useful to Simon and Alex, who were suffering from extreme stress and other psychological issues.⁵ All of these were lessons that seemed to provide each student with a means for taking control of his or her academic situation. Said Simon, “. . . at least now I can figure out what I gotta do to stay here” (meeting). Similarly, Alex said in our final interview that, without

⁵ Alex felt “alone” (meeting) as a homosexual on a campus that he felt was hostile toward gays and lesbians. He did not know, prior to our work together, about the Gay/Lesbian/Transgendered Center on campus, the possibility of getting a mentor through them, or the services and support groups available to him at the psychiatric/psychology center at the Student Health Center. Similarly, Simon was suffering from extreme anxiety, so much so that he was having problems sleeping and concentrating. Yet, being a relative outsider to the university community, he did not realize (again, prior to our work together) that such feelings were abnormal or that he needed to get help for them. Once he did seek out help, he was diagnosed with chronic depression and anxiety disorder. With medication and therapy, he showed remarkable improvement.

having this knowledge and finding the resources available to him, he would “probably have been out of here [the university] by now.” By learning more about the university system, and each student’s respective place within that system, Alex, Simon, Maria, and Latricia were in better stead to take charge of their academic futures. Instruction in this basic or “auxiliary” literacy helped these students improve their respective situations dramatically.

Similarly, it was apparently from a number of data sources—students’ grades, formal interviews, students’ journal entries, and from repeated and informal contacts with them—that all of the students in this study needed to change their respective study habits dramatically if they wished to improve academically. In this sense, they needed to develop an understanding—a literacy—of beneficial academic habits and also where and why they were making mistakes in their own practices. None of these students were studying well; rather, they studied only when it was most convenient to them, such as late in the night, early in the morning, and—when they failed to finish individual assignments before its due date—even during classes or class time. Like many freshmen (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Margolis, 1976; Sadava and Park, 1993), Maria, Alex, and Latricia were often and unwisely scheduling their study time around socializing rather than the other way around.⁶ In addition, and contrary to what Latricia, Maria, and Alex had claimed during the interview, it was also apparent that they were not studying often or for any duration. Thus, in our first few meetings, I discussed with each student effective study habits and attempted to get each to adopt a reasonable daily schedule (which included study time).⁷ Managing time—which includes studying at good times and for proper intervals—is, research suggests, highly correlated with success in any intellectual endeavor, including academic success (Barkley, 1998). It is one of the often “hidden” skills (Street, 1984) associated with academic literacy.

In summary, each student was, by the completion of the study, much more literate in the ways in which the university operated. Through learning basic academic literacy, each had added “yet another style” (Kutz, 1998, p. 41) of discourse to his or her existing repertoire, which is, many researchers suggest, a requisite for success in the academic community (Elbow, 1998; Street, 1984). Able to appropriate a new form of literacy, Simon, Latricia, Alex, and Maria were better equipped to become participating members of the discourse community in which they now found themselves. By learning and then beginning to appropriate

⁶ Simon was not suffering from a lack of studying. Unlike the other students, he was studying too much, albeit ineffectively. He was, he said “burning myself out” (meeting) because he was working so hard with very little noticeable progress. Nonetheless, he too needed to learn effective study habits/techniques in order to improve academically.

⁷ We discussed, in our first set of meetings, effective study habits as determined through research in this field (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2000), from psychological and “learning” research (Barkley, 1998) and from my own experiences both as a student and, more importantly, as an academic “skills” specialist and tutor.

a new kind of literacy—basic academic discourse in this case—these students were better prepared for the demands that they would face in the academic community; each was slowly gaining the knowledge and skills required to be a discursive insider in the discourse community of the university.

Academic Literacy: Reading, Writing and Speaking in the Academic Discourse Community

Though an important part of the work these students and I did together focused on more basic aspects of academic life and literacy, the majority of our work focused on areas more traditionally associated with academic literacy—reading, writing, and speaking—and academic success in their more traditional senses. Even though Simon, Latricia, Alex, and Maria had come to college with their own unique discursive styles (all of which were culturally based and had cultural and personal importance to them), they were not truly familiar with the discursive practices expected of them at the university. More specifically, I found in my research that each student had problems reading academic texts, taking “essay” tests in their classes, and—most importantly—speaking in their classes. As a result of linguistic differences between their own respective cultures and those expected in the university setting, each of these students had distinct problems understanding what was expected of them, understanding the texts they were expected to read, and each showed a palpable fear of speaking/participating in their classes. This, in turn, affected both their academic performance and their feelings of alienation from their peers.

Reading

Via discussions with these students, it became apparent that—as a whole—they approached the reading of academic textbooks largely as they did reading novels. They had, therefore, come to college lacking an important part of academic discourse: they were unaware that for academic texts they needed to read in a different way from that of everyday practice (Street, 1984). Rather, each student saw no distinction in the ways in which he/she should approach the two different kinds of text. Said Alex, “well, it’s all just reading . . . you just gotta do it I guess” (interview). A common complaint of all of these students was that “it’s [the reading assignments] just too much to do and remember all of it” (Simon, meeting). In an effort to help the students with their reading, we first discussed the difference in “academic” books and works of literature. This was a distinction that all caught on to quite quickly. Comparing their different courses and their requisite reading assignments, each came to see that different texts had different purposes and that they were consequently written in different ways. We then discussed how each student’s reading style should differ for the different kinds of texts. They should, we discussed, learn how to select what they need for particular purposes; they needed to learn to read in a way common to academics,

which includes going “from different parts of the text, using the contents page, index, chapter headings, etc. and moving backwards and forwards within that text and to other texts” (Street, 1984). We discussed “skimming” the text for important clues, we highlighted important concepts, looked for bolded or italicized terms, and examined the margins and photo captions for information. Reading textbooks need not, each student found through these discussions, be approached in the same way as reading a novel. The important information in the former could be found more efficiently often by *not* reading it word for word.

Just as importantly, these students and I discussed the importance of taking notes on the text. I felt it very important to convince each student that trying to read and “remember” everything that he/she read was an impossible task. A common problem I discovered when discussing each student’s respective academic difficulties was that each felt that he/she needed to read and “remember” everything that they had read. This proved problematic because: a) the amount of materials they were to read for their classes was largely beyond memorization; and b) professors did not expect their students to “know” everything that was assigned to them. These students were, in other words, misinterpreting their reading assignments and the very nature of academic reading. They assumed that because it was assigned, they were to “know it all” (Alex, meeting). Thus, early in our work together, I worked with these students on the nature of academic reading. Using myself as an example, I told them that though I had read a great deal of material in my many years of being a student, I certainly could not remember many specific details of individual texts. Rather, I explained, I took notes while reading both so that I could use them to study for tests and so that I could refer to them later if necessary. I then had each student take notes—in an outline format—of a chapter he or she was to read for upcoming classes. Through this exercise, the students came to understand that—by note-taking—they could more efficiently cover more material. They also found, much to their surprise, that future studying would prove to be easier when they could refer to their notes. They no longer had to go back and “reread everything for the tests” (Maria, interview 1) as they had been doing.

Test Taking

In a lesson similar to that described above, these students and I worked on test taking strategies. Alex, Simon, Maria, and Latricia had all complained in our first meetings that they were having problems taking tests. Generally—and again similar to their problems with reading—they claimed to have problems remembering and “knowing” all the materials required for answering test questions property. Said Alex:

. . . the exams here are like almost all short answer and essays, where you have to write on whatever they tell you. In high school, they’d give you multiple choice tests, stuff that wasn’t so, I don’t know, like general, like um,

asking anything from the readings and class. They, professors, expect you to give certain kinds of answers to readings and stuff, but they don't like really tell you before what to look for, what they want. So, it's more confusing here. You don't always know what to answer. (interview 1)

A large part of these students' problems with test taking was, we learned early in our time together, from their problems taking notes. As suggested above, each student was having problems discerning important information from that which was either used to support a main idea or that was relatively superfluous. As a result, their notes provided little information which would prove useful for upcoming tests. Correspondingly, when studying for exams, they did not know the more important areas to study. Rather, they would attempt to "know it all" rather than focusing on the more important points discussed in readings and in class. Similarly, when writing essays or short answers for tests, each student found himself or herself failing to focus on the specific points/topics referred to in the questions. Not surprisingly, this problem seemed to resolve itself once these students became more proficient at taking notes (and when they had other people's notes from which to study).⁸ When studying for finals, for example, each student (with the exception of Maria) had an abundance of detailed notes from which to study. These students' improvement in taking notes corresponded with an improvement in their respective test results.

Nonetheless, when examining each student's returned tests early in our work together, I found a significant problem with the way that they answered written test questions. For example, they would take the implied directions for answering "short answer" test sections too literally. Not being versed in the discourse of the university, they had no way of knowing specifically what "short answer" meant; they did not understand the irony that short answer questions often require somewhat extended answers. Though most of their answers to test questions would be technically correct, they consistently failed to answer the question as fully as necessary. Alex, for example, answered an identification question about the culture of the Anasazi people of southwestern Colorado with "Ancestral Pueblo people, lived around 1300 AD and they grew squash, beans and corn" (Alex, blue book test). Though there was nothing in his answer that was not correct, Alex did not provide enough details on the Anasazi people, their importance, the mystery surrounding their disappearance, or their major contributions to the History of Colorado. As a result, his professor gave him only six of ten points possible. Similarly, on his essay answers, Simon provided correct but brief answers. He too was losing points by not writing enough. His professor commented on his answer that it was, "overall OK, but brief" (Simon, blue book test). Each student was—to differing degrees—suffering from the fact that

⁸ I had suggested to each that, as an exercise in taking notes, they borrow and photocopy friends' class notes. From these, they could see how other students took notes, they could learn to emulate this practice and they would have additional information to help them prepare for their tests.

many of the rules—the “hidden skills” (Street, 1984)—associated with test taking had never been discussed. These rules were yet another part of academic literacy that had not been, either in their previous academic experiences or in college, taught to them.

I suggested to each student during our meetings that the answer to this problem was quite simple and required two things. First, they would need to know as many facts as possible for answering these questions properly. If they had good notes from readings and from class, they should have enough information to answer the question fully and correctly. All they would need to do is study and “know” their notes. As their note taking improved, so would their ability to focus on important facts for exams. Seldom, I said, do professors test students on information that they have not covered in class. Just as importantly, professors often give both overt and hidden clues as to what will be “on the test.” With practice listening and taking notes—and by reviewing other’s notes—each student would, I insisted, learn to pick up on these clues. Second, Simon, Alex, Maria, and Latricia needed to change the manner in which he or she answered questions. Just as they had learned to adjust their reading for academic texts, they needed to transfer many of these same skills to answering test questions. I encouraged each student to write more details and to elaborate on his or her answers with facts, dates, and if possible, connections to the theme of the class. One way of doing this, I suggested, was for them to write as much as they possibly could, in the time permitted. I even suggested that, from my own “insider’s perspective” as a student and instructor, it was not a bad idea to write down facts that were only tangentially related to the topic (especially when the student felt that he or she was weak in answering the particular question). The more information that each student wrote down as answers, the more possible points she or he might receive. Lastly, I suggested that, when thinking about answering the question, they write down in the margins all of the facts, connections, and ideas they remembered so that, during the stress of the test, they did not forget important information.

By the end of the semester, each student was attempting to use the information and lessons we had discussed. When “prepping for exams,” for example, Alex said that his strategy for answering short answer and essay questions was to “study my ass off . . . and really know the notes” and just as importantly to “try to write everything I know on it [the topic]” (meeting). Adopting this strategy paid off for these students in a number of ways. First, three of the four were able to do well on their finals. Just as importantly, though, this new knowledge also helped to boost these students’ respective levels of confidence about their academic abilities. Armed with more test-taking knowledge, each felt better about himself or herself as a student. This is reflected in Simon’s statement “I still struggle sometimes [with tests], but once I study, I can do good” (Simon, interview 2). Becoming literate in a few of the “tricks” for better test taking helped these students significantly, both immediately and for the future.

Learning this part of academic literacy—strategies and rules for taking tests—empowered each of the students in the study. Armed with a better understanding of this unique discursive practice, these students began to both improve academically and with it to feel more confident in their academic abilities. Said Simon, “learning how to get ready for tests and to take them . . . was something no one had ever shown me. I just didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing” (interview 2). Mediation—through direct instruction in this form of academic literacy—enabled each of these students to grow academically.

Overcoming Fears of Speaking in Class

I learned early in my work with these students that all of them were reluctant to speak in their classes, even though participation grades affected their overall grades and therefore affected their status as college students. All of the students expressed to me their fear that, by speaking in class—using their own native voices/discursive styles and therefore in a different manner than did their peers—they would be judged in a negative manner. Said Alex, “I just don’t want to [participate] . . . because I don’t want to be judged . . . I guess if I was more confident, like in how I talked, if I felt safer, I would talk more” (interview 1). Yet, because of their fears of appearing “stupid” (Maria, meeting) or “ignorant” (Simon, interview 1) by talking in class, each student had done his or her best to remain quiet throughout the semester (even though each was aware that remaining silent in classes was damaging them academically). These students were unanimous in their preference for large lecture classes—in which they all admitted they had more trouble taking notes, concentrating, and in which they basically disliked the content—to smaller classes because in smaller classes there was a far greater chance that they would be expected to speak and participate. Alex explained, “I like bigger classes, ‘cause you get picked on in smaller classes. I don’t like getting picked on” (interview 1). When asked to define what he meant by “getting picked on,” Alex responded with, “Picked on like . . . ask me questions and expect me to answer. They [professors] want you to talk in front of class, to answer stuff. I don’t like being singled out or asked to talk like that” (interview 1). I found it both interesting and representative of these student’s true feelings that they referred to either being called on or encouraged to speak in class “getting picked on,” a term which carries with it an obvious punitive sense.

In our first interviews and early meetings, these students cited many reasons for their respective reluctance to participate in their classes (which included feelings of racism from their peers and expectations that they be the “token” minority in their classes). Yet most important for the purposes of this study, each student complained that, as Alex put it, they did not “. . . have the language, you know, the vocabulary” to be able to speak in class (interview 1). Rather, they felt

that they did not have the linguistic skills—including the proper lexicon—to express themselves to their peers in the manner expected of university students. All of these students feared that their respective lack of “college-like talk” (Maria, meeting) would cause their peers to “look down on [them] as stupid,” (Alex, interview 1), thereby adding to their sense of inferiority and alienation. Such a fear of being judged as a cultural and/or linguistic minority on mainstream campuses is, research suggests, quite pervasive and often leads to a silencing of minority voices (Gonzales, 1999; Just, 1999; Wallace, 2002). The collective experiences of these students demonstrate how the college classroom serves as a distinct “discourse community.” As a discourse community, there are specific yet unspoken “rules” for participation in class discussions. The most important of these rules is knowing and employing a specific kind of language and vocabulary. Alex and Maria each termed the use of this knowledge and ability as “college talk,” which they described as using “big words” (Maria, meeting) and “high language” (Alex, meeting) to discuss both topics of importance and “even simple stuff” in class (Alex, meeting). These students easily recognized that “exclusionary language” (Elbow, 1998) was a part of academic discourse. Unfortunately, they did not trust that they knew the language of academics; rather, they thought that they lacked the ability to engage in college talk. Thus, they remained silent.

In order to help these students feel more comfortable talking in class—and to impress upon them the need for class participation—we repeatedly came back to class participation in our weekly meetings. With each student I consistently attempted to reinforce the importance of speaking in class; they had come to our work together, I realized, not fully understanding the reasons why many professors grade students on participation or how significantly their grades could be affected by a lack of participation. Therefore, together we went through their respective syllabuses to determine how much participation counted in their course grades. Through these discussions, each student came to see that a large part (generally a minimum of 15% of their grade) was determined through class participation. Improving enough to stay at the university was, each saw, dependent at least in part upon each student making attempts at participation. This seemed to give each additional reason for making an attempt to become more integrated in their classes. They felt an added pressure to make attempts to participate. This was, I felt, the first step toward their becoming more comfortable as participants. Learning through practice is, research suggests, “an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31) that is the first step toward “full participant” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29) in any discursive community. By making a conscious effort to say a few things occasionally, these students could, therefore, begin to practice some of the discursive practices common to the academic community and by doing so, start to integrate themselves into this community. Interestingly, having realized the importance speaking in class had on their very academic futures, each student

began—judging from our conversations and students’ mid-term reports⁹—attempting to participate more often in their classes.

To help these students better understand academic discourse—and thereby be better able to appropriate it for their own uses—we spent the better part of some of our early meetings discussing some of the components of academic discourse. We examined, one by one, many of the discursive characteristics that his peers used when talking in class. By examining each one, I hoped that Alex, Simon, Latricia, and Maria might see how their peers’ use of “big words” and “exclusionary language” did not necessarily equate with superior content knowledge. These students’ peers were simply versed in a discursive style that intimates knowledge, whether or not such knowledge actually exists. Rather, they came to see through a breakdown of academic discourse—as it is generally used in college classrooms—that it was through the manner in which their colleagues expressed their ideas that they conveyed the image that they were knowledgeable. They commonly used “exclusionary language” (Elbow, 1998), “author evacuated” (Geertz, 1973) statements, and “big words” to state their ideas. Their ideas, whether based in fact or simply personal opinions, took on an air of authority because they were stated using a specific discursive style. This style, moreover, was one that—with practice and conscious effort—each of my students could appropriate for his or her own needs.

Together, over the course of the semester, these students and I discussed how they might employ this form of academic discourse when speaking in class. Going over some of their respective ideas about various topics, we attempted the process of “style shifting” (Kutz, 1998) from vernacular—or what Alex called “normal, everyday speech” (meeting)—to academic discourse. Again, I hoped that through their work with me—by having them act as an “apprentice” in the learning and practice of academic discourse (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—they might begin to appropriate some of its “norms” for their own use. During these meetings (and following frequent reminders from me) each student began the practice of translating ideas from his or her own—often self-doubting—manner of speaking to the more authoritative style of academic discourse. Most commonly, I would “remind” each student when he or she would say things in a doubting tone. A common trait of all of these students was that they would often put disclaimers around their statements (“I’m not sure, but” or “I don’t know if I’m right, but . . .”). With time and practice, however, each seemed to become more comfortable making statements in a more assertive manner. With some encouragement from me—as well as from the suggestions I gave on how to alter specific statements—they began to become more versed in and comfortable using the conventions of academic discourse.

⁹ SASC solicits from professors mid-term reports on its students. These reports include grades as well as professors’ comments on students’ attendance, participation, and motivation.

This, in turn, led to greater participation in class. Alex explained how these lessons affected his feelings about speaking in class:

Well, now it's like I can, I don't know, I know better how to say things differently than before. It's not like what I'm saying is different, it's more like how I say it. I guess I'm a little more, I don't know, maybe confident, you know? I can say stuff and not be so worried if it's not exactly right. . . . I can say what I'm thinking. I don't have to know it all. (interview 2)

By apprenticing with me—a discursive insider in the academic community—these students began to learn how to “code switch” their own thoughts into a discursive style that was appropriate for classroom use. At the same time, they seemed to grow more confident in their respective abilities to speak in class. No longer were they self-censoring their ideas because of a fear of appearing stupid by the ways they expressed themselves. Rather, they were becoming a more integral part of their classes by using some of the linguistic tools common to academic discourse.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION: RESULTS OF LEARNING ACADEMIC LITERACY

Each of the students in this study changed dramatically over the course of a semester. All of them improved academically and subsequently; they all seemed to grow more confident in their abilities as students. They were studying more efficiently and therefore had more time to do the social activities common to college students. Most importantly thought, after learning academic discourse, they are all better prepared for lives as college students.

The most immediate and tangible effect of learning academic literacy—and with it the “skills” associated with and requisite for this literacy—was a change in academic performance. Alex and Simon both reached their primary goal of getting off of academic probation. At the conclusion of our work together, Alex was able to report a 2.92 GPA for the semester. His GPA had, in one semester, improved slightly more than an entire grade point. Alex's cumulative GPA had risen to a 2.45. Not only had Alex done well enough to get off of academic probation, he had earned enough grade points to insure that, absent a major catastrophe, he would not fall back into probationary status. By learning academic literacy and by subsequently changing some of his academic habits, Alex had earned more personal and academic freedom. Alex's improvement was also a large step toward his reaching “a good overall GPA, like a 3.0 or above” (interview 2). Simon's grades also improved over the course of a semester. His GPA went from a 1.75 the previous semester to a 2.55 for the current semester. Simon's performance during the spring semester brought his cumulative GPA to a 2.1, thereby taking him off academic probation. Simon no longer faced the threat of being ejected from the university based on academic performance and he was

able to move beyond the stigma and shame he felt from being on academic probation. He stated in our final interview that “now it’s over [the semester and academic probation] I can go home proud” (interview, 5/20/02). Simon even took a job— in the University’s Upward Bound Program—in which he used his new-found knowledge to assist future entering Native American freshmen in their transition to the university. He was using his new literacy to help other students from backgrounds similar to his own.

Maria and Latricia also showed academic improvement, though they did not improve enough to be removed from academic probation. Nevertheless, Maria improved exponentially. Her GPA went from a .33 after her first semester to a 1.71 GPA. Had Maria attempted and succeeded in getting an Incomplete in one of her courses rather than giving up on the course completely (she did not even sit for the final), her GPA for the semester would have been significantly higher at a 2.13. Similarly, had Maria not “given up” (meeting) in her Spanish class at the end of the semester (and therefore earned a D+), her GPA would likely have been high enough to warrant a reprieve from suspension.

Latricia also performed noticeably better while working in the study. She began the semester with a 1.51 GPA and had only 14 credit hours. She had, in her first semester, only completed five hours. Yet while working in the study, Latricia successfully completed 12 hours in which she earned a 2.15 for the semester. She improved her overall GPA to a 1.75. Had she applied for a reprieve from suspension, her improvement may have allowed her to have another semester during which she could improve her GPA further.

Though Maria and Latricia were both dismissed from the university, the lessons they learned in this study nonetheless helped them academically. Both students were, in part thanks to becoming more literate in the workings of the academy, working in the Continuing Education Program to stay in school and improve their GPAs (learning about Continuing Education as an option allowed each student to remain in school). Furthermore, both Maria and Latricia expressed to me their hopes that they might, through this program, continue to bring up their respective grades enough to be readmitted at a later date. Similarly, Maria and Latricia claimed—at the conclusion of our semester working together—that they were better equipped for the academic demands they were facing. In short, they were both employing many of the lessons they learned in the study to grow stronger as students.

By learning and “deconstructing” (Derrida, 1978) some of the most common components of academic literacy, Simon, Maria, Latricia, and Alex were each able to become more fully functioning members of the academic community in which they found themselves. Moreover, by learning these literary conventions, they all grew more confident in and more comfortable with being in this environment. The results of this study support the theses on which it is based. First, many minority students face additional challenges in their transition to the university because of differences in language use. The culturally-imbued

language patterns of students' home culture often clash with those expected within the academic discourse community. This leads to feelings of alienation from the academic community (as well as feelings that the cultural/linguistic heritage of each is not respected within this supposedly liberal community). Issues of difference in language and discursive styles are, this study shows, a major factor for many students in their attempts to find collegiate success. Second, the experiences of the students in this study show that mediation in academic literacy—both broadly and traditionally defined—may enhance some students' chances at finding academic success (and increased feelings of inclusion) in the college community. This has implications for pre-collegiate programs, college preparatory programs, and college-level mediation programs. Being versed in academic literacy is, obviously, an important part of being academically successful. It is an area that should not be ignored, especially in efforts at collegiate-level mediation.

Finally, results from this study demonstrate that connected with academic literacy is an associated "auxiliary" literacy: knowing and using specific academic or study skills in the college environment. Though knowing academic literacy—in its traditional sense—is highly correlated with academic success, such literacy is undercut (and difficult to learn) without students first having a strong skills foundation on which to build. Fortunately, the experiences of the cases presented in this article show that many of these skills can be taught. This, too, has implications for mediation services. Program directors, tutors, etc. should not assume that students entering the university have the kind of academic literacy and associated skills that they need for success therein. Rather, building a foundation—based on study skills and academic habits—may be a prudent place to begin work with many students (especially those who were not likely to have received such instruction prior to entering the college community).

FINAL THOUGHTS: A CAVEAT

The work that these students did while in this study goes far beyond the description as presented here. What appears above is, in many ways, an accurate but simplistic account of their semester. The work we did together would, if described in detail, comprise far too long a study for the parameters of this article. For a more detailed account, please refer to White (2003; the research study from which this article originated). Similarly, the students in this study deserve a great deal of credit both for the work that they did to improve academically through this study as well as for their courage in attempting to make changes that were, for many of them, tantamount to cultural changes. Though I was able—as an "insider" in the workings and literacy of the academic community—to help them in their transition to this community, their success is due in great measure to their own efforts and their desire to succeed academically. Finally, with changes in discursive practices come many cultural and personal conflicts.

Changing their “ways with words” (Heath, 1983) was for these students no simple feat. Rather, Simon, Latricia, Maria, and Alex each had to confront a myriad of conflicts (many of them cultural in nature) in their attempts to become more successful as college students. Asking students to change their discursive habits—even temporarily—is complicated by the relationship of language/discourse to cultural identity. Again, these are issues that must be taken into account in efforts at mediation (they are also issues that are discussed at length in the study from which this article comes).

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