

# The Role of Academic Discourse in Minority Students' Academic Assimilation

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## Abstract

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*Many minority students enter the university without the discursive “codes of power” that they need both to find academic success and to self-identify as scholars. High schools and college preparatory programs too often ignore the role that academic language and literacy play in success at the college level. Even when academic language is specifically taught, it is often resisted by minority students. Because language is so strongly rooted to culture and identity, many minority students see the adoption of academic discourse as “selling out” or “acting White” rather than as a temporary code-switching practice. This paper presents four case studies of first-generation minority college students and how academic discourse (also referred to as academic literacy) played a part in their respective success or failure academically and socially. The paper also suggests research-based solutions for high school teachers, college counselors, and others interested in helping students adapt to the discourse community of the university.*

In recent decades, major economic and sociological shifts have made a college degree an ever-more important stepping stone for reaching and maintaining a middle- or upper-class lifestyle (Dinwiddie & Allen, 2003; Murray, Tanner, & Graves, 1990; The College Board, 2005). Consequently, enrollment rates at colleges and universities continue to grow at staggering rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Concurrently, demographic shifts in the national population have brought changes in the makeup of the national

collegiate student body. Students entering college over the last decade are increasingly diverse in culture, religion, ethnicity, native language, physical ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and family background as well as levels of academic preparation, (Ishler, 2005; Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

The steadily increasing numbers of minority students entering colleges and universities suggests that high school college preparatory programs and university-based attempts to recruit and retain minority students (among other factors) have succeeded in diversifying the national collegiate student body, but high minority attrition in college continues to counteract many of these successes. Attrition rates for minority students continue to outpace those for White students (White, 2011a; Daempfle, 2004) with much, if not most, of this attrition occurring during or immediately after the freshman year (<http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/CollegeForAll/completion.html>).

This paper first focuses on the role of language practices in minority student attrition and then offers secondary practitioners suggestions on how to help their students understand and be able to “code-switch” into academic discourse. We describe four case studies that highlight how an initial lack of academic literacy affected minority freshmen’s ability to succeed and feel welcomed in the academy. More specifically, this research highlights the importance of language practices to academic performance in college classes and to students’ sense of themselves as budding scholars; it also explores the theory that language use is intricately tied both to social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and to individual and cultural identity (Vygotsky, 1986).

### Review of Literature

Researchers over the past two decades have posited myriad theories to explain disproportionate college failure among minority students. Tinto (1987, 1996, 1998, 1999) has focused his entire career on these issues, and the factors he has outlined have been examined in greater detail by other researchers. This literature has focused on three theories: The first is that minority students’ academic preparation for college is inadequate. (Anyon, 1990; Crawford, 2010; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Kozol, 1991; Oakes 1982, 1986, 1990, 2005; Oakes & Keating, 1988; Slavin, 1987; Solorzano, Ledesma, Perez, Burciaga, & Ornelas, 2002; Zarate & Gallimore, 2005).

A second theory for minority student failure is the lack of appropriate college-educated mentors (ACT Policy Report, 2002; Ortiz, 1999; Perna, 2000; Rice, Cole, & Lapsley, 1990; Swail, Reed, & Perna, 2003; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Young, 2003). The third theory focuses on minority students’ cultural alienation from, and thus their resistance to the White college culture (Ogbu, 1987, 1992, 1995, 2004). These lines of research have proven highly informative; however, they stop short of fully examining the central role that literacy plays in students’ collegiate success. More specifically, they

overlook the academic language that is required for “full participant” status in the discourse community of the university (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and the importance of successful development of an academically literate identity in students’ collegiate success.

This paper acknowledges prior research showing that minority students’ norms for discourse differ from those of middle-class White students upon whose culture K-12 schools and colleges were created., resulting in minority students resisting the language of “the man” (Ogbu, 1987, 2004; White, 2011a). In focusing on the struggles of minority students to understand and survive what they perceive to be a discursively hostile world, we explore discursive “codes of power” (Delpit, 1995) that are required for college success. We situate language practices in the culture of education (Bruner, 1996) and examine the role of language in a collegiate community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). After grounding student voices in a theoretical framework, we then use students’ insights, their own classroom knowledge, and research in the field to offer practical suggestions for practitioners.

### Method

This paper draws from four semester-long case studies of first- generation freshman minority students at a major, predominantly White, public university.

- Simon, a Native American male was from a large reservation in the American southwest. One of four of the reservation’s 700 high school graduates go to a four-year major university. Like most people “on the res,” Simon’s family was very poor.
- Latricia, an African American female, was from a large western city. She attended a diverse inner-city high school while living with her grandmother, whose insistence was a primary reason why Latricia applied to and then enrolled in the university.
- Alex, a Hispanic closeted gay male, was from a large conservative western city.. He considered himself a “double minority.”
- Maria, a Hispanic female, was from a small rural and farming town in the southwest Rocky Mountains. She had a large extended family system and felt pressured to live up to their collective but long-deferred dream: earning a college degree.

Each of these students was on academic probation due to a first-semester Grade Point Averages that had fallen below a 2.0 (Simon: 1.67; Latricia: 1.51; Alex: 1.9; Maria: .333). All were facing possible dismissal from the university if they failed to raise their respective GPAs. We came into contact with these students when they sought help from the University’s Student

Academic Services Center, where he was working part-time as a study-skills specialist and advisor.

Research data were layered to facilitate a multi-level analysis. Data were collected through: a) weekly one to two-hour meetings with individual students throughout the semester, b) pre and post interviews, c) samples of student work and class-notes, as well as d) from formal and informal correspondence with professors/instructors. In addition, the university's student services database provided access to academic records, which revealed each student's academic history, academic standing, personal and demographic information, use of campus resources, and mid-term comments on performance by professors.

We kept detailed field notes, including audio recordings, of all meetings with students. Students kept journals throughout their participation in the study. Journals, students' written work, comments from and correspondence with professors/instructors, and students' personal class notes were photocopied for analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed. Throughout the research, students were encouraged to discuss their problems in adjusting to the university, their academic progress, and their general feelings about being college students.

Data were initially examined via an open coding strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To further refine the data, we used domain, componential, and taxonomic analyses (Spradley, 1980). Findings were discussed with the participants to assure accuracy, mainly by clarifying assumptions about students' thought processes, feelings about particular events, etc.

## Findings

Each of the participants exhibited the issues commonly cited as reasons for poor minority collegiate academic performance: lack of academic preparation, cultural incongruence, and isolation within the university. Although these issues were very significant to each student's context and experiences, they fell short of explaining each student's feelings of mismatch, academically and culturally, with the university. Rather, our findings revealed that each suffered from a basic misunderstanding of the university system itself, a lack of institutional literacy:

- Each had a poor understanding of academic literacy and discursive practices (reading, writing and speaking) in the academic discourse community.
- Each lacked familiarity with strategies of academic reading and fluency with the "hidden codes" of academic note-taking, test-taking, and essay writing.

- Each was unfamiliar with cultural codes of academic talk in communication with professors and peers and,
- Each felt discomfort with being expected to “act White” in their styles of academic and social communication.

Combined, these findings reveal how collegiate academic success was predicated on understanding the rules or “codes of power” (Delpit, 1995) of multiple intersecting discourse communities. They highlight how these codes appeared inexplicable and inaccessible to minority students, thereby calling into question the null curricula that educators may take for granted. The situations described below highlight how important kinds of literacies can remain hidden to those who are not traditionally included within specific communities or cultures, such as a university (Street, 1984). Ironically, study participants were not aware that they lacked the requisite literacy needed for survival in the university system. Consequently, they had no way of knowing exactly what that they needed to learn.

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

None of the participants was familiar with the discursive practices expected of them at the university. As a result of culturally-based linguistic differences, these students had distinct problems understanding what was expected, navigating the texts they were expected to read, taking ‘essay’ tests, taking notes, speaking to professors, verbally participating in their classes and talking with their college peers. They censored and silenced themselves because they lacked the linguistic skills they needed to speak affectively and with confidence. This, in turn, affected both their academic performance and their feelings of alienation from their peers.

**Academic reading.** Administration of the reading assessment portion of *Accuplacer* (College Board) and professor feedback on early assignments demonstrated that each student’s reading skills were inadequate for the level of the readings assigned in their classes. Additional layers of data, including an examination of notes taken while students read various texts and student counseling sessions, indicated that these students were largely unable to distinguish between different forms of reading for different kinds of texts, and they largely ignored the internal text structures that authors of academic texts use to help readers make meaning from the text. Though they were capable of reading what Maria described as “normal” texts (mass fiction, magazines, etc.), they struggled to understand and manage their academic reading.

Each of the students approached reading academic textbooks largely the same way he/she did reading novels: slowly, word for word, and largely ignoring the many internal and external textual features that clue good readers into the most important points in a text. Alex, exasperated complained that

"it's [the reading assignments] just too much to do and remember all of it... it's impossible." Simon skipped over figures, tables, graphs, examples and vignettes claiming that "I guess that, like, they're just extra information and not too important...I stick to the regular [normal printed text] stuff." Maria, who liked reading outside of school, said that it was anathema to her to 'skim': "No. Uh-huh. I might miss something that way...if I don't read [word-for-word], how can I know what's important?" Further questioning quickly showed that these students had not been taught effective reading strategies in their pre-collegiate experiences. Instead, each tried to read academic texts as they would a novel or a magazine.

**Note-taking.** Effective note-taking was a challenge for all of the participants. Only one student, Alex, attempted to take notes on his reading. His note-taking strategy was, however, inefficient, because he had a habit of highlighting greater than 50% of the text. All of the students struggled with taking class notes. They were unable to 'read' the verbal clues that their professors gave concerning what was important lecture information. They had vast amounts of superfluous information in their notes. (Maria had simply given up on taking notes, claiming that it was "too much work." Instead she tried to remember what professors had said or tried to copy other students' notes). Their lack of fluency with note-taking meant that their notes provided little useful information for upcoming tests.

**Finding 'the answer'.** Students' reading habits were inefficient for answering questions based on readings. Rather than employ the common academic reading practice of 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, p. 75) to find answers, they read the text in its entirety and then attempted to answer questions from memory. They also became discouraged when the answers to professors' questions were not literally answered by the text. They struggled to memorize all of the texts and did not understand the concept of higher-order questions. As a result, they lost points for "superficial" answers (Latricia's professor's comment on an assignment).

**Test taking.** When studying for exams, participants tended to "reread everything for the tests" (Maria). They did not know how to discern the more important areas to study, and so, although each worked hard to prepare, they were inefficient, overwhelmed and frustrated by the process of studying for tests. Alex explained that his strategy was to "study my ass off" and "try to write everything I know on it [the topic]." Simon noted, "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." This lack of understanding was reflected in all of the participants' poor grades.

**Essay writing.** When writing long or short essay questions, participants did not know how to focus on relevant points. In addition they misread their instructors' intent and took the implied directions for answering "short an-

swer” sections literally, by answering anywhere from a few words to one or two sentences. For example, answering a question about the culture of the Anasazi people, Alex wrote “Lived around 1300 AD and grew squash, beans and corn and lived in multistoried homes.”

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. Alex commented, “In high school, they’d give you multiple choice tests, stuff that wasn’t so...like general, like um, asking anything from the readings and class...it’s more confusing here. You don’t always know what to answer.” All participants shared similar anecdotes. Each student was suffering from the fact that many of the rules, the “hidden skills” (Street, 1984), associated with successful academic writing had never been discussed.

### Academic Talk: Communicating Orally in Classrooms.

All of the students expressed a fear that if they spoke in class in their own discursive styles (their native voices) they would be judged negatively. Alex said, “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.” Fears of appearing “stupid” (Maria) or “ignorant” (Simon) silenced these students and prevented them from sharing their understandings.

Not surprisingly, these students were unanimous in their preference for large lecture classes (despite their trouble taking notes and concentrating and their dislike of the pedagogy) because lecture classes reduced the risk that they would be expected to speak and participate. Alex explained, “I like bigger classes, ‘cause you get picked on in smaller classes... like...I don’t like being singled out or asked to talk like that.”

It is telling that Alex referred to class participation as “getting picked on,”. Alex explained that he felt he did not “...have the language, you know, the vocabulary” to be able to speak in class. Each student expressed how they feared that their respective lack of “college-like talk” (Maria) would cause peers to “look down on [them] as stupid,” (Alex) thereby adding to their sense of inferiority and alienation.

### Social Communication: Language, and “Acting White”

**Language.** Students’ literacy and discursive difficulties were not limited to their classes. Each student remarked on how to be heard and respected in mainstream social situations on campus, they had to “talk White” (Latricia) or “act White” (Maria). Maria complained that, even in social situations, many of her fellow students talked in a way that was meant to, “show how smart you are.” She went on to explain how this was silencing to her. Though she was relatively smart, she did not have the vocabulary that many of her



peers did: "A lot of them like use big words all the time...I just don't talk like that." When asked about the discursive style of her mainstream peers, Latricia rolled her eyes, laughed, and said, "Yeah, they're so fake. They're always trying to get everyone else to think they're smart...they try to act like professors." She reflected on this, "It's like I'm supposed to talk like them [in class]. I just don't, I'm not used to acting like that."

The students in this study spent most of their non-class time with friends whose linguistic backgrounds were similar to their own. Maria explained, "when I'm with them, we can like talk normal...We don't have to like act all smart and stuff." She defined talking "normal" as using everyday language and even slang. Latricia also noted that with friends she did not have to "act all stuffy and stuff, like so many of the people here [on campus]...you know, not worry about what we say and how we'd say it". These young women, like their male counterparts, felt that to be accepted by their mainstream peers and to be involved in broad collegiate social life, they would have to alter their discursive styles.

**Acting White.** All of the students expressed that they felt a social pressure to "act White." Part of "acting White" was using "big words" and "like, try[ing] to impress people with how you talk." For example Maria claimed that she "know[s] how to act White" but equated this with "selling out." She complained that fellow minority students "try to be like them [the White students], so that they'll like them, so they'll fit in." She then suggested these students were not being true to their own cultural identity in trying too hard to be accepted by their mainstream peers. She explained, "I'm not like them. I don't want to be like them." Similarly, Latricia noted, "to get taken seriously here" it was necessary to "talk like they [her White peers] do." Although she claimed that she could appropriate a "White" form of discourse, she too was reluctant to do so because, "it just doesn't feel right...I shouldn't have to change who I am, or the way I talk to make them happy."

Maria and Latricia expressed that they felt ill at ease with and resisted the common dominant discursive styles that surrounded them. In turn, each became further isolated from the university's social milieu. Alex and Simon, on the other hand, made repeated attempts to find ways to fit in with their peers, including actively code-switching to a more formal, academic discourse even in the social realm. They wanted social acceptance on the campus, though they too complained about the need to "have to talk different" (Simon). For more information and analysis on this, see White, 2005, 2011a).

## Discussion

The students whose experiences are described in this study lacked an essential form of cultural capital that they needed to succeed at college (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). These case studies also suggest that academic literacy and discourse are too often a part of the "null curriculum" (Flinders, Noddings &



Thornton, 1986); the discursive practices required for “full inclusion” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the college academic community are too often lacking from the high school curriculum. At the same time, our work shows that the discourse norms common in high school classrooms can be dissimilar from those that students need at the university, thereby creating situations where students are disempowered.

The collective experiences of the students in this study, reveal how success in college life requires the understanding of, and adherence to the ‘rules’ of a distinct “discourse community”. These rules for interaction, in both the formal and informal discourse communities of collegiate life, are both *specific* and *unspoken*. They rest on an assumed familiarity and fluency that hides the privilege of those who do not have to learn to “speak right” (i.e. White). Meanwhile, they highlight the linguistic disequilibrium of minority students whose language practices, though legitimate, fluent, eloquent and vibrant in their home communities, are misplaced, frowned upon, silenced and disempowering in the university setting.

It is important for secondary and college educators to note that the students in this study had found relative success in their high school settings. However these students’ discursive/literacy experiences in their K-12 settings were insufficient to prepare them for the kinds of language usage expected of them in college. Their common experiences lend credibility to the claim that the discourse that helps them find success in the K-12 environment did not correspond well with the discourse community of the university.

Though K-12 and the university are both formal school settings, each requires different skills (including different literacies) for success. This should come as no surprise because success in high school, though important, is not directly correlated with success in college (Conley, 2008; Hoffman, Vargas, & Santos, 2008, 2009). At the college level, students not only face new and tougher academic demand, but also the need to learn and employ the often tacit or hidden ‘rules’ for college success. The importance of what is not taught and of the need to initiate students into the discursive norms of academic life cannot be overstated.

The implications of this study highlight not only specific practices in the null curriculum but also the fragile and complex connections between identity and language. The students in this study came to school not only looking different than their mainstream peers, but also “not talking like everyone else” (Simon). They did not see that their peers’ use of “big words” and “exclusionary language” did not necessarily equate with superior content knowledge, (or that these students were simply versed in a discursive style that intimates knowledge whether or not such knowledge actually exists.) Their sense of inferiority alienated them from participating in communities of practice that would allow them to learn the rules.

In addition these students began to mistrust their knowledge. They were, for example, reluctant to speak of race and oppression even though they

understood the lived reality of these. Not being a part of college discourse communities and looking different, they feared essentialism (Latricia noted with concern, "I don't want them [other students] looking at me whenever there's like some issue about black people... I can't talk for us all." They took on a huge responsibility: representing "their people" whenever they spoke.

White students, are more likely to have parents and other role models who attended college (and who come from a culture around which the university was built), and they are more likely to have grown up practicing and employing many of the university's tacit rules and linguistic codes (Anderson, 2005; Delpit, 1995). The discursive rules for college closely mirror their 'norms.' Minority students, on the other hand, tend to have far fewer chances to practice such rules and far fewer obvious reasons to want to practice such discursive norms. On the contrary, they are likely to have learned a number of culturally-imbued discursive habits that developed over time *as resistance* to the oppression represented by White culture (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). So, not only are minority students often not taught the forms of discourse expected in the university, they also sometimes develop a counter-discourse to it (Corson, 2001; Ogbu & Wilson, 1990).

Language, and thus identity (Piaget, 1959; Vygotsky, 1999) played a large part in these students' respective choices to disassociate themselves from their White university peers. It is not surprising, in light of cultural reproduction theory (Willis, 1977), that these students found comfort in the ways with words common to their respective cultural heritages; sadly this further isolated them.

The experiences of the students in this study reveal how educational institutions are embedded in culture, in the grip of value systems and heavily involved in rewards and punishments (Bruner, 1996). By showing the various overlapping sites of language that presented struggles for minority students, this study uncovers that which is tacit, normative, and easily taken for granted by mainstream students and educators. It highlights how culturally rich "ways with words" (Heath, 1983) can work against minority students whose discursive practices may differ from those expected in the collegiate communities of practice. This research points to the need for secondary educators to rethink the very concept of meritocracy with regard to the role that cultural ("White") language biases may play in college life and college preparation. Most importantly it illustrates the need for educators interested in equity on college campuses, to explicitly prepare students in their classes.

### Suggestions for practitioners

Based upon the experiences of the students in this research, our time working with struggling minority college and high school students, and our collective research and teaching in the area of sociolinguistics and multicultural-

alism, we can offer suggestions for secondary educators who are working to assist students with the transition to academic discourse. We hope that educators will adapt these suggestions to their specific contexts, add to them while working with their students, and assist their students to develop their own lists of needs and means of achieving those needs.

### **Know your students' discursive skills**

Rather than the almost myopic focus on helping minority, poor, and disenfranchised students take the courses they need and create the applications that will get them accepted into four year colleges and universities, high school teachers, college-preparatory counselors, and the creators of packaged college-readiness curricula also need to devote significant attention to helping those students understand the culture of college. Knowing the culture of college must include explorations of the language and discourses (and the biases associated with both) that those with power in the academic college culture expect. Fully understanding a student's linguistic practices is the first step in helping them succeed. Teachers can obtain a wealth of data from individual counseling sessions with students (White, 2005). They may also use numerous tools (e.g., simple writing tests with rubrics, university-sponsored tests such as the *English for Academic Purposes Test* or *TOEFL* tests) to gauge students' proficiency with academic discourse (White, 2005). Of paramount importance is good communication between instructors, counselors and the students themselves.

### **Deconstruct and Demystify Academic Discourses**

Deconstructing common aspects of academic literacy can go a long way toward demystifying this form of speech. These aspects include its agonistic nature, its use of jargon, its polysyllabic and often arcane vocabulary, its frequent use of acronyms, its tendency to emphasize points with statistics, its rhetorical flourishes, its imperative that students question peers and professors appropriately, and its requirement that students actively participate rather than observe. Creating 'rules' for participation with students can be a good time to go over some of the expectations of academic discourse while also setting parameters for appropriate discussion. At the same time, this will give students 'buy in' to the classroom community by including them in rule-making. We posit that students are more likely to engage in examinations of academic discourse and eventual code-switching when the artificiality and arbitrariness of this discourse (the normalizing of this form of discourse as "official") are deconstructed and examined more closely. Once the mystery of academic discourse and the system it represents is lost, students are more likely to attempt learning and using it.

## Teach the “Hidden” Rules

The rules for success in the academic world were not clear to the students in our study. These students benefited greatly from instruction on academic practices that were “hidden” or taken for granted. Strategies for listening to instructors’ verbal clues, reading academic texts efficiently, and taking effective notes are integral to academic success. In addition, becoming literate in a few of the “tricks” for better test taking can help students understand implicit assumptions about meaning that may have remained hidden to them. Teaching students how to use the Internet effectively, how to highlight, how to address professors and how to find help when navigating unfamiliar ground can help students who may not know to ask.

There are, of course, numerous forms that such instruction can take, both direct and indirect. Some students benefit from direct lecturing especially when such lectures include case studies or other examples of academic discourse and allow for questions and discussion. Because academic texts correspond closely with academic discourse (Elbow, 1998; Gee, 1998; Prior, 1998; Street, 1984), students benefit from detailed feedback on the quality of their written work. Methods common to “writer’s workshop” and the “process approach” to papers, can help students develop stronger verbal practices.

## Respect Multiple Literacies, Teach Code Switching, and Celebrate Code Meshing

Introducing students to the strengths and merits of multiple forms of English, such as Ebonics, Shakespearean English, or legalese, can encourage students to respect different linguistic forms. Code switching activities in class can then highlight culturally-imbued language differences including the nuances of academic discourse. For example, teachers can have students translate different forms of English texts into ‘academic’ discourse. Those texts might range from the prologues to *Beowulf* and *Canterbury Tales* to pop culture works such as Tupac Shakur’s song “Me Against the World”. While doing so, students can examine (a) how different kinds of English produce different messages and are produced for different audiences, (b) how language and meaning are culturally-based, and (c) how different contexts require different forms of English. These approaches encourage students to see the adoption of academic discourse as a component of code-switching rather than as a rejection of other forms of communication. Implicit in this approach is the idea that mastering academic discourse is, much like learning a new language, an additive process, and that the use of all language is situational. Through such an approach, students can always “go home” by switching back to their native discourse.

Finally, students may benefit from seeing examples of successful academicians engaging in what some linguists call code-meshing (Young &

Martinez, 2011): the intentional interplay of different discourses to create new and exciting hybrids. We believe such hybrids represent the inevitable future of academic discourse. As the academy becomes more diverse, multiple voices and discourses can increasingly come together to create exciting and malleable new academic speech (analogous in some ways to the adoption of hip hop discourse by middle class White males). This hybridity may also mark for students a more obtainable “middle ground,” because it does not, even superficially, seem to represent the abdication of culturally-based and “cool” ways of speaking. Black scholar Michael Eric Dyson, for example, provides plentiful and rich examples of speaking “academically” while also speaking “soulfully”; he consciously exemplifies his points on cultural studies by moving seamlessly between the highest levels of academic speak and the lyrics of popular hip-hop music. He shows that by being well informed, intelligent, and confident, it is possible to make an even stronger point, in the academy or elsewhere, by using the strengths inherent in multiple discourses.

### Create Opportunities for Practice

In order for students to begin to develop strong skills with academic literacy, they need chances to practice it in a nonthreatening but realistic manner. 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” status (Ibid., p. 29) in any discursive community. Opportunities for practice can be organically woven into classes, allowing students opportunities to individually and collectively try out academic speech, writing, e-mail, note-taking and reading. Students can do this in homework assignments, in using rubrics to grade their own work, in group writing activities, in code-switching games, in role play scenarios, and through classroom discussions.

With reading and writing so closely tied to speaking, many of the approaches recommended for helping students become stronger readers may also help them become stronger speakers. More specifically, teachers can help students appropriate academic discourse by “chunking”: by asking them to translate everyday discourse or jargon into academic speech in small, manageable segments (rather than asking them to do so constantly or for giant projects). This approach, widely lauded for teaching students how to read academic texts (Stevens, 1981), works surprisingly well for teaching students how to speak academically. It also helps teachers avoid taking on the pedagogically unsound role of “language police” (White, 2011b).

Another simple approach to helping students form stronger bonds with academic discourse is to encourage them to revise written work, again in relatively small chunks. By using thesauruses, teachers can ask students to “up” the readability of their writing and speaking by replacing simple words with

polysyllabic and more nuanced words. This activity can also help students learn that the nuance of a word is more important than the complexity of the word. A common problem for many college students is misusing words in an attempt to sound more academic. Content area teachers can help students improve their vocabulary and discourse by focusing on widely used Latin and Greek root words, prefixes and suffixes and encouraging unique mixes to discover “new” words.

### Talk About Power

When teaching the conventions of academic discourse, educators need to acknowledge the power structure surrounding it. Teaching academic discourse while ignoring the numerous power dynamics that take place within it only serves to perpetuate inequality. It is tantamount to an act of hegemony. In addition, in order to reduce minority student resistance to “acting White” by learning the academic discursive practices, it is important to acknowledge power differentials. For example, Adrienne Rich’s famous remark, “this is the language of the oppressor, but I need it to speak to you”, (as cited in Hooks, 1994, p. 167), opens the door for conversations about how power circulates in a society. And though we lament the exclusionary linguistic nature of academe, we also recognize that standing outside of its austere gates and complaining will do little to change it. We prefer instead the metaphor of the Trojan Horse. To change academe, we must first get increasingly diverse fighters to take on the battle from within. It is also important to note here that discussions that explicate the relationship between language and power are not just valuable for minority students, but equally so for mainstream students, as they call into question the nature of privilege that allows for some discursive practices to be valued over others.

### Be Reflexive

As educators, we are all particularly immersed in communities that affirm *our* professional language practices, render them invisible, and encourage a deficit perspective about those who speak differently. If we are to be credible in our efforts to assist minority students, we must acknowledge the construction of our own identities and language practices and view these as situated rather than “normal”. Educators can then model appropriate uses of academic discourse while also explaining, often *in medias res*, what, how, and why they are using this. Not surprisingly, a good sense of humor is helpful (otherwise modeling can appear pretentious). The conventions of academic discourse are not sacrosanct. Using humor to poke at and acknowledge the stiffness and formality of academic language, and how inappropriate its use can be in non-academic settings, can help break down personal and cultural barriers to its use.

Finally, because adopting a new discourse, be it a new language or a new dialect, is fraught with stress, we encourage teachers to demonstrate patience and circumspection in demanding its use. For example, though we wish to have a multiplicity of voices in our class discussions, some students may not be as ready to voice their opinions as others, in part because of issues of language. An alternate means of giving these students voice, and modeling how they might in the future speak for themselves, is to have students write out their reactions to readings, class issues, or lectures, prior to class. Teachers can then read these responses anonymously to the entire class while, perhaps, rephrasing them using common academic discourse (White, 2011b). Although we must encourage and sometimes even pressure our students to use academic discourse (White, 2011b), it is important to the whole learning community of our classrooms that we do so with patience, in a good-natured manner, and with sensitivity.

### Conclusion

Far too often, the role of language and discourse in academic success is the null curriculum, unacknowledged both in pre-collegiate programs and in entry-level college classes and programs. The student voices presented here highlight the need for secondary educators to recognize that success at the university level requires *specific* understandings of the rules of a particular discursive community, and furthermore that these rules may not be familiar to minority students. The challenge, then, is for educators to recognize how academic discourse is a unique and relatively exclusive subset of English, and to ensure that all students are well versed in this discursive style.

This work also suggests that secondary and postsecondary educators need to realize that asking (or, more problematically, tacitly or overtly demanding) that students change the manner in which they speak, even for brief periods of time, is complicated by the strong ties of language to culture, language to identity, and by issues of 'official' authority and resistance to this authority. It is important that educators respect students' native 'ways with words', celebrate the culturally-imbued discursive styles that students bring with them and teach code-switching.

Finally, educators must help minority students gain the skills and power that are required to change the system itself. There can be no doubt that the academic discourse community is linguistically exclusive; it privileges one form of knowing and being over all others. In so doing, it excludes myriad diverse and divergent voices, thus hindering true many new forms of knowledge. As the makeup of the participants in the academy begins to change, so can the language of the academy. Such a paradigm shift is unlikely, however, so long as those with a 'different voice' remain outsiders to the university. Currently, however, too few minority students have the tools they need



to gain entry into or to stay in the academic discourse community. As such, linguistic and cultural hegemony persists.

This research and our suggestions can by no means address even a fraction of the injustices that have occurred and continue to occur in our K-12 and post-secondary schools. As Ladson-Billings (2006) stated, after years of educational injustices, an educational debt has accumulated (as cited in Brayboy, Castagno, & Maughan, 2007). However, recognizing collegiate linguistic practices and explicitly teaching all students, especially minority students, about the importance of language, discourse communities, and identity (and starting early and in a non-threatening manner) can at least start to give voice to those who have been silenced for far too long at the university setting.

We also hope that practitioners and the students they serve can and will actively and confidently serve as ambassadors of "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981) by eloquently expressing themselves in culturally appropriate and authentic ways that are either code-meshed with (Young & Martinez, 2011) or sometimes used in lieu of academic discourse. Today's diverse student body has the power to take "academic" language to new places and, by so doing, affirm Chomsky's refutation of the inherent hierarchies of languages and discourses (1956).

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